

C.I.A. Now Favors Lab Leak Theory to Explain Covid's Origins

A new analysis that began under the Biden administration is released

The C.I.A. has said for years that it did not have enough information to conclude whether the Covid pandemic emerged naturally from a wet market in Wuhan, China, or from an accidental leak at a research lab there.

But the agency issued a new assessment this week, with analysts saying they now favor the lab theory.

There is no new intelligence behind the agency's shift, officials said. Rather it is based on the same evidence it has been chewing over for months.

The analysis, however, is based in part on a closer look at the conditions in the high security labs in Wuhan province before the pandemic outbreak, according to people familiar with the agency's work.

A spokeswoman for the agency said the other theory remains plausible and that the agency will continue to evaluate any available credible new intelligence reporting.

Some American officials say the debate matters little: The Chinese government failed to either regulate its markets or oversee its labs. But others argue it is an important intelligence and scientific question.

John Ratcliffe, the new director of the C.I.A., has long favored the lab leak hypothesis. He has said it is a critical piece of intelligence that needs to be understood and that it has consequences for U.S.-Chinese relations.

In the final weeks of the Biden administration, Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser, ordered a new classified review of the pandemic's origin. As part of that review, the agency's previous director, William J. Burns, told analysts that they needed to take a position on the origins of Covid, though he was agnostic on which theory they should embrace, a senior U.S. intelligence official said.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, questions have swirled around whether the two labs handling coronaviruses in Wuhan had followed safety protocols strictly enough.

The agency made its new assessment with "low confidence," which means the intelligence behind it is fragmentary and incomplete.

Even in the absence of hard intelligence, the lab leak hypothesis has been gaining ground inside spy agencies. But some analysts question the wisdom of shifting a position in absence of new information.

Mr. Ratcliffe has raised questions about politicization in the intelligence agencies. Mr. Ratcliffe, who was the director of national intelligence in the first Trump administration, argued in an essay for Fox News in 2023 that the C.I.A. did not want to embrace the lab leak to avoid geopolitical problems for the Biden administration.

"The real problem is, the only assessment the agency could make — which is that a virus that killed over a million Americans originated in a C.C.P.-controlled lab whose research included work for the Chinese military — has enormous geopolitical implications that the Biden administration does not want to face head-on," he said in the piece, which was written with Cliff Sims, a top aide. C.C.P. refers to China's Communist Party.

Senior intelligence officials in the Biden administration defend their process and methodology. They have said that no intelligence was suppressed and insist that politics did not play into their analysis.

These officials say that there are powerful logical arguments for both the lab leak and the natural causes theories, but that there simply is no decisive piece of intelligence on either side of the issue.

To boost the natural origins theory, intelligence officers would like to find the animal that passed it to a human or find a bat carrying what was the likely ancestor of the coronavirus that causes Covid.

Similarly, to seal the lab leak, the intelligence community would like to find evidence that one of the labs in Wuhan was working on a progenitor virus that directly led to the epidemic.

Neither piece of evidence has been found.

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