



apcss.org/nexus

# SECURITY NEXUS

A free, open access, international, peer-reviewed, online publication for the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies faculty and alumni.

Security Nexus Perspectives

## 2019-nCoV POLITICAL FRAMING AND BLAME-GAMING

By Dr. Srinivasan Sitaraman \*

### Introduction: Is COVID-19 a Bioweapon?

During the [Siege of Caffa in the 14<sup>th</sup> century](#), the invading Mongol armies began catapulting those dead from the Black Death Plague over the walled city to terrorize the inhabitants of Caffa in Crimea. Eventually the terrified citizens of Caffa fled the city, but the onward march of the Golden Horde Mongol Army was halted because the resulting plague also ravaged the Mongol soldiers and they could not pursue their campaign further west. Hurling the plague infested dead bodies using the catapult or trebuchet was one of the first known instances of [battlefield biowarfare](#).

Immediately following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the United States, [letters laced with Anthrax spores](#) were sent to several news media outlets and to the offices of U.S. Senators. The Anthrax attacks led to the deaths of 5 individuals and it infected 17 people. The Tokyo subway Sarin gas attack on [20<sup>th</sup> March 1995](#) by the Japanese religious cult—[Aum Shinrikyo](#)—caused the deaths of 13 people and nearly 6000 people were injured during a coordinated assault by this death cult.

The United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) defines bioterrorism as a biological attack that involves the “[intentional release of viruses, bacteria, or other germs that can sicken or kill people, livestock, or crops](#).” U.S. Defense Officials emphasize that they don't have the any credible evidence to demonstrate that 2019-nCoV is a weaponized virus, but they are investigating the possibility [that adversaries could use the novel coronavirus as a bioweapon](#). Experts are sounding the alarm on the seriousness of the threat posed by [biowarfare and bioterrorism](#) to the force structure and forward deployment of the armed forces.

---

\* Dr. Srinivasan Sitaraman is a professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) in Honolulu, USA. The views expressed in this article are the author's alone, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the DKI APCSS or the United States Government.

Particularly, there is growing concern with regards to the [intentional targeting of U.S. government personnel](#) and the ability of large-scale pandemics to overwhelm governance capacity, and cripple the health and economic infrastructure.

Despite efforts of governments to tamp down the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, the [sudden appearance and spread of the 2019-nCoV virus has generated substantial debate](#) on the origins of the virus and [whether any intentionality was involved in its contagion](#). Is [2019-nCoV a bioweapon](#) released with the objective of weakening the enemy and seeking strategic advantage? The argument that [2019-nCoV is a bioweapon](#) does not hold up with the available evidence because the use of bioweapons generally require that [antidotes](#) should be stockpiled and treatment options are immediately available to those deploying the bioweapon; otherwise the impact of a bioweapon is not containable outside the radius of its application. A country would not want to use untested biological weapons on unsuspecting populations because it would not want it [“to come back and make your own people sick.”](#)

Current information suggests that the virus spread through a zoonotic transmission at a wholesale seafood market in Hubei Province in Wuhan, China. After the initial transmission the 2019-nCoV virus mutated and spread rapidly via human-to-human transmission primarily facilitated by large-scale global air-travel. Since its early origins in November 2019 in Wuhan, the virus has swiftly moved to every corner of the world infecting over [3 million \(known infections\) and causing the deaths of over 200,000 people](#) (reported deaths).

### Wuhan Virus Origins

The current understanding is that the primary point of origin of the Coronavirus was at the [Wuhan South China Seafood Wholesale Market](#) or the Huanan Seafood Market located in the Jiangnan district in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, People’s Republic of China (PRC). The virus contagion is said to have started sometime in the [November/December 2019 timeframe](#) or maybe even earlier. About 10 miles away from the Huanan Seafood Market, across the Yangtze River, in the Jiangxia District, the [Wuhan Institute of Virology](#) is located, which is a part of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Hubei Engineering and Technology Research Center for Viral Diseases. The Wuhan Institute for Virology (WIV) is [China’s first biosafety level 4 \(BSL-4\)](#) laboratory that was established in 2015 to analyze and study zoonotic and other viral diseases. Surrounding the Huanan Seafood Market there are several district level Chinese Centers for Disease Control sites. Research teams from the [Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention](#) were involved in the early containment efforts.

This odd juxtaposition of the BSL-4 virology lab researching diseases not far from the Huanan wholesale wet market has generated much speculation on the origins of 2019-nCoV. The Wuhan Institute of Virology has operated as a Microbiology Research Center since 1956. One explanation for its location in Hubei Province is that that province has seen frequent eruptions of public health concerns, such as SARS in 2003 and other viral and pneumonic diseases, transmitted through different zoonotic mechanisms. But concerns were expressed in an article published in *Nature* in February 2017 with regards to the biosafety record of

the Chinese labs. The authors stated that it is critical to maintain an open culture to operate BSL-4 labs and they expressed concerns that openness, diversity of viewpoints, and a questioning mindset were not a part of the Chinese scientific hierarchy.

### Was Coronavirus Bio-engineered?

Did the virus accidentally jump or did it inadvertently escape from the highly secure Wuhan Virology lab? Another variation of this theory posits that the animals that were experimented on at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, instead of being destroyed, were sold at the Huanan Wholesale Seafood Market causing a viral eruption. The storyline of intentional or unintentional contagion has and it reappears as geopolitical tensions rise and countries blame each other for the global pandemic caused by 2019-nCoV.

Prevailing scientific evidence based on genomic data sequencing of samples and phylogenetic analysis suggest that the 2019-nCoV or the Novel Coronavirus/COVID-19 was not bioengineered. Genomic analyses shows [that the 2019-nCoV belongs to a group of betacoronaviruses](#) and it is a [very close relative of the SARS-CoV](#), which caused a comparatively smaller epidemic of acute pneumonia in November 2002 in the Chinese province of Guangdong. It spread to 29 countries in 2003 causing nearly 800 deaths. The [2019-nCoV is found among cave-dwelling Horseshoe Bats \(\*Rhinolophus affinis\*\)](#) that are natural reservoirs or animals that possess natural immunity, but the virus specifically lacks receptors that allows it to latch on to human cells. Hence, it is hypothesized that pangolins or the palm pivot may have served as intermediate hosts for transmission from bats to humans.

The journal *Nature* reported on 20<sup>th</sup> February 2020 that there was 99% genetic concordance in the virus discovered in the pangolins and the SARS-nCoV, potentially explaining the transmission pathway to humans. According to the results published on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2020 in [The Lancet](#)—by a large group of Chinese medical doctors and researchers, “[...\(66%\) of 41 patients had been exposed to Huanan seafood market](#)” but it is not yet evident what was the original source that infected these patients at the Huanan Seafood market. Authors of this scientific study, supported by various Chinese governmental organizations, were “[concerned that 2019-nCoV could have acquired the ability for efficient human transmission.](#)” Furthermore, the authors strongly recommended the need for “[Airborne precautions, such as a fit-tested N95 respirator](#), and other personal protective equipment” to prevent the virus contagion. The study’s authors highlighted the need to “prevent further spread of the disease in health-care settings that are caring for patients infected with 2019-nCoV, [onset of fever and respiratory symptoms should be closely monitored among health-care workers.](#)” In addition, the authors of the *Lancet* [study urged that testing of “respiratory specimens” and “serum antibodies” was absolutely necessary.](#)

**Dueling Narratives of Origin and Spread of 2019-nCoV**

Newly emerging studies suggest that [2019-nCoV may have been silently spreading unrecognized amidst other types of pneumonia in Wuhan](#) and [in other parts of China for several months](#) before its official identification in January 2020 and the closure of the Huanan Wholesale Seafood Market. It is hypothesized [that this virus may have been in circulation](#) as early as November 2019.

In the summer of 2019 a pneumonic plague was identified as the cause of death in Western Mongolia when two people perished due to the [consumption of the raw meat of a wild animal](#). In November 2019 [two individuals from Inner Mongolia](#) were treated for [pneumonic plague in Beijing's Chaoyang district](#). After the patients were shifted to another location, the hospital authorities replaced all the furniture in the emergency room, as a precaution. As news reports of pneumonic plague began appearing, [Russia began to tighten its border controls](#) and [Taiwan's Centers for Disease Control](#) issued a warning. The [Chinese provincial governments began regulating the available information](#) on influenza type disease in Wuhan. By late December stories began appearing in the [Western media of a SARS like influenza virus](#), but initial reports dismissed the possibility of human-to-human transmission—a position supported by the [World Health Organization](#)—and the [Chinese authorities attempted to suppress the flow of information](#) (Table 1). The hashtag [Wuhanvirus](#) or [Chinesevirus](#) that began trending on social media outlets in January 2020 began causing much consternation for the Chinese authorities. [Multiple counter narratives](#) on the origins of the virus started to flood online outlets to obfuscate the role of the Chinese government in the origination and disease contagion. A spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lijian Zhao, suggested that the virus was brought over the [American military athletes participating in the world military games](#) competition in Wuhan.

**Table 1: COVID-19 TIMELINE OF SPREAD and the POLITICS OF GLOBAL PANDEMIC**

Date	Action	Official Response	Political Action/Impact
17 Nov 2019	Patient Zero/But not initially recognized, subsequently analysis point to it.	Official Recognition of Patient Zero published <a href="#">in SCMP</a> on 13 March 2020.	This is termed as speculation.
26 Dec 2019	Spread of SARS like Virus identified in lab tests.	Narrative of events appears in <a href="#">Washington Post</a> on 1 February 2020.	Attempt to control the spread of this information when it first became known.
27 Dec 2019	Wuhan Health Officials Informed.	This became public only in <a href="#">March 2020</a> .	Information suppressed by government officials.

## 2019-NCOV POLITICAL FRAMING AND BLAME-GAMING

30 Dec 2019	Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital issues warning.	Dr. Li <a href="#">dies 6 Feb 2020</a> after contracting COVID-19.	Dr. Li and <a href="#">several other doctors are silenced by the government</a> .
31 Dec 2019	China officially informs the WHO.  <a href="#">Huanan Seafood Market Closed</a>	<a href="#">WHO Timeline</a> , but Chinese security services attempt to suppress WHO inquiry into the outbreak.	This is China's primary point of contention. That they told the world well ahead of time and they did not cover-up.
31 Dec 2019	Taiwan warns of human-to-human transmission.	Taiwan's <a href="#">warning is ignored</a> by WHO and not treated seriously.	Taiwan starts taking measures to counter the pandemic.
31 Dec 2019	Taiwan begins screening passengers from China.	<a href="#">Taiwan bans Wuhan residents</a> from entering on Jan 23 <sup>rd</sup> , suspends tours on Jan 25 <sup>th</sup> , and bans all Mainland Chinese Visitors on Feb 6 <sup>th</sup> . Taiwan also starts to actively secure PPE and increase manufacturing.	Taiwanese policies are criticized and eventually <a href="#">WHO director blames Taiwan for spreading rumors</a> about him. Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issues <a href="#">strongly worded statement</a> refuting Dr. Tedros.
1 Jan to 31 Jan 2020	Chinese government attempts to control the spread of information regarding COVID-19, while attempting to also prevent the spread of virus.	WHO tweets saying there is no evidence to suggest human-to-human transmission based on Chinese government sources.	WHO chief visits Beijing and meets President Xi and criticizes international travel restrictions aimed at Chinese travelers and praises top leadership.
1 Feb to 10 March 2020	China engages in aggressive diplomacy and co-opts the World Health Organization.	United States and rest of the world become aware that they are on the doorsteps of a global pandemic.	Chinese government engages in aggressive counteraction and medical equipment diplomacy.
March 10 <sup>th</sup> 2020 to now	China's efforts aimed at changing global tide of	U.S-China starts to trade charges of racism and politics. United States	Full blown political conflict along with a war of words China with many countries calling

## 2019-NCOV POLITICAL FRAMING AND BLAME-GAMING

	anger against China for its initial missteps.	<a href="#">freezes funding for the WHO.</a>	for an independent investigation.
--	---	--	-----------------------------------

Source: Center for Security Policy, 28 April 2020, <https://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/wuhan-virus/>.

China's damage control efforts to get out from under the global mess it created by mishandling and downplaying the virulent potential of 2019-nCoV has made matters far worse. Additionally, the attempt to counter the narrative by [coopting, controlling, and weakening the World Health Organization](#) (WHO) is a clear example of how much power the Chinese government has amassed that can be deployed to spread disinformation and reframe the global awareness of a novel threat (Table 1). The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated how vulnerable international institutions are to Chinese subversion and manipulation. Subsequent attempts to shift the blame to other countries for China's early missteps at information suppression has produced a full blown global pandemic of unimaginable magnitude that is showing no signs of abatement.

### Conclusion: 2019-nCoV Origin Story and the Politics of Pandemics

According to an American intelligence assessment, the conclusion that 2019-nCoV is "[not manmade or genetically modified](#)" is the current official position. However, intelligence officials continue to explore "[whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan.](#)" Several [governments](#) have called for [independent](#) inquiries [into the origins of 2019-nCoV](#) and [publicly](#) issued calls for re-examining economic and political relations with China. The Chinese government has aggressively reacted with [threats](#) against the European Union, Australia, United Kingdom, and Canada.

The enormous dependence on the Chinese manufacturing supply chain has made the politics of pandemics particularly complicated. The supply and manufacturing of critical PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) is dependent on the Chinese supply chain, and now the every country is scrambling to procure them ironically from the very same country from where the virus originated. Countries are hesitant to criticize China at this delicate time so as to be able to procure PPE from China. However, this has not dissuaded China from using the supply of [PPE as a propaganda tool to manipulate global public opinion](#) on the origins and spread of 2019-nCoV, while simultaneously attempting to present itself as the [savior of the world](#). This is a perfect example of the old adage "setting the barn on fire and then calling the fire station" and the fire station is also China. Unfortunately for China, the attempts at disinformation, false flag operations, and using the supply of PPE as a tool of intimidation and control are [backfiring](#). It is becoming evident that Chinese style of authoritarianism combined with digital surveillance and manipulation is not a sustainable model of political organization.

If anything, Beijing's reflexive authoritarianism, tendency to suppress information, and tendency obfuscate the truth to portray the actions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in a positive light, and rely on threats and incentives as tools to divert away from facts have exacerbated the explosive nature of the pandemic. Although a culture of political secrecy is pervasive within the Chinese state, we cannot yet term the 2019-nCoV contagion as being intentional, which would fit the official definition of bioterrorism or biowarfare. But all fingers point in the direction of the poor information management and lack of sufficient communication [during the early outbreak](#), and a good bit of hubris on the part of the Chinese government. Still, China furthers the damage this virus is causing by persisting in spreading false narratives and promoting misleading propaganda to deflect any blame and responsibility. The effects of 2019-nCoV have been staggering and it has truly exposed the enormous vulnerabilities and the high degree of unpreparedness of the intricately globalized world to pandemics.

*The views expressed in these articles are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of DKI APCSS, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.  
May 2020*

