



## **Safety lapse in U.S. and Chinese germ labs give rise to Covid-19 conspiracies**

**Dr Christina Lin**

**March 2020**

### **Abstract**

---

China and the U.S. have been promoting conspiracy theories that the Covid-19 virus originated in germ labs. While the Wuhan virology lab and Fort Detrick lab do have poor safety records that gave rise to these suspicions, scientists have debunked these fringe theories. As the world is reeling from the virus crisis, the two countries that can do the most to mitigate this global emergency should work together, and jointly protect their people from the attacks by the common enemy that is Covid-19.

### **About ISPSW**

---

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is an objective, task-oriented and politically non-partisan institute.

In the ever more complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, which occasions both major opportunities and risks, decision-makers in the economic and political arena depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, the economy, international relations, and security/ defense. ISPSW network experts have worked – in some cases for decades – in executive positions and have at their disposal a wide range of experience in their respective fields of expertise.

### **About the Author of this Issue**

---

Dr. Christina Lin is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Center for Global Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of "The New Silk Road: China's Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East" (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), and a former director for China policy at the U.S. Department of Defense.



*Christina Lin*



## Analysis

As the whole world is reeling from the Covid-19 crisis, the two countries that can do the most to mitigate this global emergency by working together, are instead trading conspiracy theories and accusations, and undermining international efforts to contain the pandemic.

How did China and the U.S. get from “G-2” to “Decoupling” and “Cold war” within a decade?<sup>1</sup>

### Backdrop of decoupling and new cold war

Over the past years, Sino-U.S. relations have deteriorated rapidly amidst trade war, increasing rhetoric of military conflict over Taiwan and the South China Sea, accusations of espionage and influence campaigns, and an all-out competition to define the norms and values underpinning the international order.

The decoupling had gotten so bad that in November 2019, Henry Kissinger was in Beijing for the Bloomberg Next Economy Forum, warning that the US and China are in the “foothills of a Cold War”, saying that conflict could be worse than World War I if left to run unconstrained.<sup>2</sup>

One month later in December, there was an outbreak of the Covid-19 in Wuhan, which resulted in worldwide panic and the de facto quarantine of the Chinese economy via city lockdowns, business shutdowns, and travel bans from the international community.<sup>3</sup>

Immediately in January and early February, this led to seemingly gleeful rhetoric from U.S. officials and pundits, with comments from Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross viewing China’s pandemic crisis as an opportunity to bring jobs back to the U.S., while hawks exerting “maximum pressure” strategy to boycott, divest and sanction (BDS) China accuse Beijing is committing bio-warfare via a virology lab in Wuhan, calls for the U.S. to deny medical aid and allow the virus to “rampage through the ranks” of China’s Communist Party, telling U.S. officials they are being used as unwitting agents of China, and to continue with trade tariffs and various sanctions on the Chinese economy while they battle the epidemic.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Richard C. Bush, “The United States and China: A G-2 in the Making?” Brookings Institution, October 11, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-united-states-and-china-a-g-2-in-the-making/>; “A U.S.-China decoupling would be a dangerous precedent”, *CNBC*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/video/2019/10/01/a-us-china-decoupling-would-be-a-dangerous-precedent.html>

<sup>2</sup> “Kissinger says U.S. and China in “Foothills of a Cold War”, *Bloomberg*, November 20, 2019,

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-21/kissinger-says-u-s-and-china-in-foothills-of-a-cold-war>

<sup>3</sup> James Palmer, “Is the Chinese Government’s Coronavirus Lockdown Working?”, *Foreign Policy*, February 5, 2020,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/05/china-lockdown-wuhan-coronavirus-government-propaganda-xi-jinping/>

<sup>4</sup> Ana Swanson and Alan Rappeport, “Wilbur Ross Says Coronavirus Could Bring Jobs Back to the U.S.”, *New York Times*,

January 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/30/business/economy/wilbur-ross-coronavirus-jobs.html>

Jane Lytvynenko, “A site tied to Steve Bannon is Writing Fake News About the Coronavirus”, *Buzzfeed*, February 3, 2020,

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janeltyvynenko/a-site-tied-to-steve-bannon-is-writing-fake-news-about-the> ;

James Mills, “Hedge fund manager Kyle Bass refuses to apologize for deleted tweet that the U.S. should let coronavirus ‘rampage through the ranks’ of China’s Communist Party”, *Daily Mail*, February 10, 2020,

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7986727/Kyle-Bass-says-let-coronavirus-rampage-Chinas-Communist-Party.html>

; Ellen Bork, “China is using you”, *The American Interest*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/02/13/pompeo-to-governors-china-is-using-you/> ;

<https://twitter.com/GordonGChang/status/1228291653124984833> ; “U.S. House passes Uyghur law demanding sanctions

on China over Xinjiang camps”, December 4, 2019, <https://tiber.net/us-house-passes-uygur-law-demanding-sanctions-on-china-over-xinjiang-camps/> ; “U.S. house passes bill on sanctions against Chinese officials for meddling in Dalai Lama

succession”, *Economic Times*, January 29, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/us->



In March, China's Foreign Ministry official Lijian Zhao counter-punched by tweeting that based on a March 4 *Global Research* article, the 300 U.S. soldiers who participated in the October Wuhan military games may have inadvertently brought the virus with them, linking it back to the August 2019 forced closure of an army germs research lab due to safety/security lapse.<sup>5</sup>

When both countries' senior-level officials such as Senator Tom Cotton (R-Ark) and Lijian Zhao promote these theories, one begins to ponder if they actually have merits.<sup>6</sup>

### **Do Chinese and U.S. conspiracy theories have merits?**

It seems, there are historical reasons that provide grounds for these fringe theories.

From the U.S. side, the conspiracy theory is based on a January 26 *Washington Times* article by Bill Gertz entitled "Coronavirus may have originated in lab linked to China's biowarfare program", suggesting that the virus' outbreak could be linked to Wuhan Institute of Virology, with BSL-4 lab equipped to handle the deadliest pathogens.<sup>7</sup> It cited an Israeli intelligence officer Dany Shoham for this claim, which was later picked up by other sites and promoted by U.S. government officials such as Senator Tom Cotton and some members of the Committee on the Present Danger: China (CPDC).<sup>8</sup>

Deadly pathogens escaping from research labs is not without precedent. While there is no evidence in open source information that the 2003 SARS epidemic was caused by leaks from labs, the 2004 SARS cases were indeed caused by leaks from a Beijing lab<sup>9</sup>

In March 2004, two lab researchers were first infected by SARS which caused a small outbreak, but by May the WHO declared it was contained. In this case, Beijing punished five Chinese officials of the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for negligence over lab safety.<sup>10</sup>

Now, China hawks suspect Covid-19 is leaked from the Wuhan lab.

From the Chinese side, the conspiracy theory first began in a February 29 *Global Research* article and a few others, linking together a delegation of over 300 U.S. soldiers who participated in the 18-27 October Wuhan military game, the discovery of the first Covid-19 case just two weeks later, and the soldiers' possible infection

---

[house-passes-bill-on-sanctions-against-chinese-officials-for-meddling-in-dalai-lamas-succession/articleshow/73723531.cms?from=mdr](https://www.globalresearch.ca/covid-19-further-evidence-virus-originated-us/5706078)

<sup>5</sup> <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1238269193427906560?s=21>; Larry Romanoff, "Covid-19; Further Evidence that the Virus Originated in the U.S.", *Global Research*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/covid-19-further-evidence-virus-originated-us/5706078>; Denise Grady, "Deadly Germ Research is Shut Down at Army Lab Over Safety Concerns", *The New York Times*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/05/health/germs-fort-detrick-biohazard.html>

<sup>6</sup> Alexandra Stevenson, "Senator Tom Cotton Repeats Fringe Theory of Coronavirus Origins", *The New York Times*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/business/media/coronavirus-tom-cotton-china.html>

<sup>7</sup> Bill Gertz, "Coronavirus may have originated in lab linked to China's bio-warfare program", *Washington Times*, January 26, 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/26/coronavirus-link-to-china-biowarfare-program-poss/>

<sup>8</sup> Yael Halon, "Steve Bannon defends Sen. Tom Cotton's controversial coronavirus claim", *Fox News*, March 1, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/steve-bannon-tom-cotton-coronavirus-origin-theory-china>; Wendy Wu, "Cold War is back: Bannon helps revive U.S. committee to target 'aggressive totalitarian foe' China", *Politico*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/03/26/steve-bannon-china-1238039>

<sup>9</sup> "WHO: Beijing Lab to Blame for SARS Outbreak-2004-04-26", *Voice of America*, October 28, 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/archive/who-beijing-lab-blame-sars-outbreak-2004-04-26>

<sup>10</sup> Zhang Feng, "Officials punished for SARS virus leak", *China Daily*, July 2, 2004, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-07/02/content\\_344755.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-07/02/content_344755.htm)



from the safety lapse and sudden closure of U.S. Army's germs lab at Fort Detrick back in August 2019.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, Fort Detrick, which also houses BSL-4 lab to handle deadly germs in its biodefense program, has a history of safety violations that gives fodder to Chinese conspiracy theories.

In 1992, Maryland officials investigated Fort Detrick for hazardous waste disposal violations by exploding chemicals with grenades, and in 1995, contractors found a leak in a sewer line just 100 feet from a steam sterilization plant, where waste water of deadly pathogens from 50 laboratories on the base is treated.<sup>12</sup>

Sloppy safety habits caused anthrax leaks from the labs in 2002, where it was described as a dirty "rat's nest" and personnel regularly failed to monitor or decontaminate "hot labs" where work was done on anthrax, and in 2018, operations in BSL-3 and BSL-4 labs were suspended due to flooding and leaks in storage tanks of hazardous waste.<sup>13</sup>

Again in 2019, the germ lab was shut down due to several "serious" protocol violations, and Diana Digangi from ABC7 WJLA obtained a list of the violations from CDC.<sup>14</sup> This includes an individual without required respiratory protection entering a room multiple times where researchers were infecting animals with toxins and select agents, risking pathogen exposure, and another incident of a laboratorian disposing hazardous waste without gloves on. CDC list of select agents and toxins include anthrax, ebola, botulism, hemorrhagic fever, smallpox and plague.<sup>15</sup>

Given the poor safety record of both the Chinese and American biodefense labs and against the backdrop of heightened Sino-U.S. tension due to decoupling, Washington and Beijing have reasons to be suspicious of each other. This is already manifested in a March 22 class-action lawsuit filed in Dallas against China for unleashing bioweapon on America, while on March 21, Chinese cyberspace continue to raise suspicion about the 300 U.S. soldiers in Wuhan.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Peter Koenig, "China is Confronting the COVID-19 Epidemic. Was It Man-Made? An Act of Bio-Warfare?", *Global Research*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/china-is-confronting-the-covid19-epidemic-was-it-man-made-an-act-of-of-bio-warfare/5705067>; "U.S. delegation arrives in Wuhan for Military World Games", *China Military*, October 15, 2019, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-10/15/content\\_9652122.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-10/15/content_9652122.htm); "Qualifying standards for CISM Military World Games", *Armed Forces Sports*, U.S. Department of Defense, April 26, 2019, <https://armedforcessports.defense.gov/Media/News-Stories/Article-View/Article/1824905/qualifying-standards-for-cism-military-world-games/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/05/health/germs-fort-detrick-biohazard.html>

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Wheeler, "State presses probe at Fort Detrick Chemicals destroyed with grenades", *Baltimore Sun*, April 30, 1992, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1992-04-30-1992121087-story.html>; Brian Moor, "Fort Detrick Sewer Leak Raises Questions", *Washington Post*, May 14, 1995, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1995/05/14/fort-detrick-sewer-leak-raises-questions/c981c749-837d-4e36-b934-f227a2ab0ca8/>;

<sup>13</sup> "Sloppy safety habits caused anthrax leaks at Fort Detrick Army laboratory, Investigators find", *NTI*, August 20, 2004, <https://www.nti.org/gsn/article/sloppy-safety-habits-caused-anthrax-leaks-at-fort-detrick-army-laboratory-investigators-find/>; Stephanie Lizotte, "USAMRIID Temporarily Halts Activity at BSL-3 and BSL-4 Laboratories", *Global Bio Defense*, June 2, 2018, <https://globalbiodefense.com/2018/06/02/usamriid-temporarily-halts-activity-at-bsl-3-and-bsl-4-laboratories/>

<sup>14</sup> Diana Digangi, "Army germ lab shut down by CDC in 2019 had several 'serious' protocol violations that year", *ABC7 WJLA*, January 22, 2020, <https://wjla.com/news/local/cdc-shut-down-army-germ-lab-health-concerns>

<sup>15</sup> CDC, "Select Agents and Toxins List", <https://www.selectagents.gov/SelectAgentsandToxinsList.html>

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Krause, "Lawsuit in Dallas federal court accuses Chinese government of creating coronavirus as 'bioweapon'", *American Military News*, March 22, 2019, <https://americanmilitarynews.com/2020/03/lawsuit-in-dallas-federal-court-accuses-chinese-government-of-creating-coronavirus-as-biological-weapon/?fbclid=IwAR3Dt6QzNF4k7BsBH3iArKH1MmysMx8Ax66mXQz4t2YYhRsUUrojAvosjk0>; Thomas Hon Wing Polin: Wuhan Outbreak: China demands an honest accounting", March 21, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/947867908642430/permalink/2855048134591055/>

### Scientists debunk “escape from evil lab” theory

Nonetheless, scientists have determined the Covid-19 is not manmade nor escaped from a lab, and the Chinese ambassador to U.S. Cui Tiankai has publicly disowned the conspiracy theory the virus escaped from Fort Detrick.<sup>17</sup>

This is important because Cui distancing himself from his colleague’s statements sends an important signal from the top Chinese government official in the U.S., and more than a month ago on CBS’ “Face the Nation,” even before Zhao Lijian began to promote this conspiracy, Cui had already called the theory “crazy.”

Hopefully top U.S. officials would likewise disown Senator Cotton and others’ conspiracy theory, so both countries can begin to work together towards the common goal of confronting the pandemic and help the citizens of both countries heal. Just as King Solomon was confronted by two women fighting over a baby, he judged the fake mother is the self-serving one willing to kill and split the baby in half to get her way, while the real one showed unconditional love by sacrificing her wants so her baby can live.



Source: <http://ekironde.blogspot.com/2013/06/but-see-ye-first-kingdom-of-god.html>

Now, President Xi and President Trump can decide whether they will continue to be divisive, feed their ego, and blame each other for the crisis while their citizens continue to suffer and die, or they can set aside their pride and join together as true leaders, to save their own people from attacks by the common enemy that is Covid-19.

\*\*\*

**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

This article first appeared in *The Times of Israel* on March 24, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Jeanna Bryner, “The coronavirus did not escape from a lab. Here is how we know”, *Live Science*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.livescience.com/coronavirus-not-human-made-in-lab.html>; Jonathan Swan and Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “Top Chinese official disowns U.S. military lab coronavirus conspiracy” *Axios*, March 22, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/china-coronavirus-ambassador-cui-tiankai-1b0404e8-026d-4b7d-8290-98076f95df14.html>