

Australian intelligence sources alarmed by US “Wuhan lab” claim

Mike Head
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According to various media reports, figures within the Australian intelligence and political establishment have rejected as dangerously spurious the Trump administration’s claims that the COVID-19 pandemic began with a leak from a Chinese laboratory.

The primary fear among some in these ruling circles is that the “Wuhan lab” allegations are so unsubstantiated and contrary to all the scientific knowledge of the coronavirus that they discredit the US confrontation with China, in which Australia is on the frontline.

“We can’t repeat the mistakes of the past. The WMDs fiasco was not that long ago,” one unnamed “former security official” told the *Sydney Morning Herald* this week. He was referring to the fraudulent US, British and Australian government claims of Iraqi weapon stockpiles that formed the pretext for the criminal and disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In other words, before instigating military conflict, more sophisticated lies are needed in order to overcome popular distrust and anti-war sentiment. As is well known in this milieu, a US-led attack on China would necessarily place Australia’s people in the firing line because of the country’s key US bases and integration into the US military and intelligence forces.

On May 3, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared there was “enormous evidence” that the virus originated in a Wuhan laboratory, adding: “Remember, China has a history of infecting the world.” During the ensuing week, President Trump escalated the anti-China propaganda, saying the pandemic was “worse than Pearl Harbor” and “worse than the World Trade Center.”

The unavoidable logic of these statements is that China has launched a biological war against the US, making a military confrontation unavoidable. Yet

neither man provided a shred of evidence to back these inflammatory accusations, which contradict statements by scientists globally, and even the US director of national intelligence, that the virus is not man-made.

The Trump administration’s allegations are clearly an attempt to deflect attention from its own criminally negligent response to the virus, which has resulted in more than 80,000 deaths in the US so far. But they are also based on the escalating drive of the US ruling class as a whole to overcome its relative global decline and restore its post-World War II dominance over its rivals by military means.

However, even Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who has closely identified his government with the Trump administration, has voiced scepticism about the Wuhan lab claim. “There’s been no change to the Australian position on this,” he told reporters last week, saying the “most likely” COVID-19 source was “a wildlife wet market.” At the same time, Morrison still pushed his government’s provocative demand for an international investigation into China’s handling of the pandemic.

Nervous concerns inside the ruling class seemed to reach new levels after the Murdoch media’s *Sydney Daily Telegraph* ran front-page headlines on May 2 claiming that a 15-page “dossier prepared by concerned Western governments” pointed to the Wuhan Institute of Virology as the source of the global pandemic.

The newspaper reported that the “research document” showed that China destroyed evidence of the coronavirus in laboratories and refused to provide live samples to international scientists who were working on a vaccine. In reality, as early as January 13, Chinese virologists posted the genome sequence for the virus on the NIH genetic sequence database, GenBank.

The article reported that agencies within the Five

Eyes surveillance network—the US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK—were investigating the matter.

“National security” commentators in the US quickly promoted the *Telegraph* story. Fox News, the Murdoch group’s cable broadcaster, said this was “the most substantial confirmation of what we have suspected so far.” Fox News host Tucker Carlson told viewers: “Because it is a multinational document I think it would be hard to dismiss it as a political document.”

Within days, unattributed Australian “security” sources denied that the “dossier” came from the Five Eyes alliance. They said the document was based on publicly available sources, not any intelligence gathering, and insinuated that the material had originated from the US embassy in Canberra.

Allan Behm, the head of the international and security affairs program at the Australia Institute, a business think tank, and a former senior defence official, told the *Guardian* that those pushing the Wuhan labs story were damaging Australia’s call for an international COVID-19 inquiry.

“It just doesn’t help Australia in pushing that, any more than fake intelligence on WMD helped the credibility of [Australian Prime Minister] John Howard in 2003, and I suspect that’s why the government is treading very carefully this time,” Behm said.

Medical experts also reiterated the lack of any scientific basis for the Wuhan lab theory. Dr Hume Field, an epidemiologist who worked on the multinational investigation into the origin of SARS, told the *Guardian* the molecular biological evidence demonstrated no evidence that SARS-CoV-2 was created or manipulated in a laboratory.

The *Guardian* said the deputy chair of the parliamentary intelligence and security committee, the Labor Party’s Anthony Byrne, was “incensed” by the “tricked-up document,” fearing the episode was reminiscent of the “weapons of mass destruction” debacle. That is significant because Byrne has close contact with the intelligence agencies and is one of the most hawkish pro-US members of parliament.

Backed by Labor, however, the Morrison government is pushing ahead with its demand for an inquiry into China’s conduct, including by raising it a G20 meeting on May 18. The Australian call includes an aggressive demand for greater World Health Organisation

inspection powers, recalling the demands made against Iraq before the 2003 US-led invasion. Australia’s proposal was initiated unilaterally last month, without any global consultation, making it clearly a US-backed operation.

The Trump administration last week stepped up pressure on the European Union to back Australia’s proposal, which would immediately target China’s alleged role in starting the pandemic. An EU draft motion was less explicit, backing an inquiry that would begin only after the pandemic had passed and focus on the “lessons learnt from the international health response to COVID-19.”

Any genuine inquiry would record the responsibility of major governments, not least the Trump administration, for the global disaster. As late as February 28, Trump declared that the coronavirus “is going to disappear” like “a miracle,” a claim he repeated last week, even as the US death toll continued to soar.

Beneath the alarm inside Australia’s intelligence apparatus are also conflicts in the corporate elite, sections of which rely heavily on exports to China, especially of iron ore and coal. Two Western Australian billionaires, iron ore magnate Andrew Forrest and media mogul Kerry Stokes, have publicly opposed the Morrison government’s moves to ramp up the confrontation with China.

An *Australian Financial Review* editorial on May 8 reflected these qualms, saying: “Australia’s security hawks also need to recognise that China’s industrialisation has also been the source of much of modern Australia’s prosperity, as has been access to global markets under a multilateral framework.”

The Australian ruling class is caught between its dependence on Chinese and related Asian markets, and its military-intelligence and foreign investment reliance on the US. Nevertheless, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike have increasingly aligned the country behind Washington, intensifying the danger of a catastrophic war.



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