

“Politics undermined our ability to control the virus”

An interview with Dr. Peter Daszak on the COVID-19 pandemic, the Wuhan Lab Lie and the defense of science—Part 2

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This is the second part of a three-part interview with Dr. Peter Daszak, conducted as part of the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic. Part 1 can be read here and Part 3 here.

Benjamin Mateus (BM): I went back to your social media post on X from December 31, 2019, New Year’s Eve, when you wrote, “There is some important and disturbing information coming out of China right now regarding severe pneumonia with similarities to SARS, and etiology currently not yet confirmed.”

It was a very prescient thread where you correctly provided the response needed to contain the outbreak, and you were very optimistic that we were going to be able to contain this. Then, obviously, over the intervening weeks the global response that you had called for never materialized. Going back to that day, could you put us in the frame of mind that you were in, maybe explain the idealism you harbored, and as things materialized, how your views changed?

Peter Daszak (PD): It’s an interesting way of looking at it. I remember that very distinctly. We actually knew that information the day before. We were told by colleagues in China that there was a virus 20 percent different to SARS-CoV-1 they found in two out of eight of these first patients.

I wish I’d just tweeted that out, put it out there. But I was more cautious because as scientists we are supposed to verify things. It was rumor, hearsay, at the time, even though respected authorities were telling us. It was correct. They were 100 percent correct. This virus—SARS-CoV-2—is 20 percent different to SARS-CoV-1. And it was not only in two of the patients, but in all of them in the end. So, at the time, I put out a cautious public statement that something was going on and we needed to pay attention. We were told then it was a coronavirus.

I knew that China had changed a lot since 2003 when SARS-CoV-1 emerged. They had done this with open cooperation with the West through WHO, with collaborations with the US government’s CDC, with Australia and with other countries. They had developed a very sophisticated strategy for quarantining and reporting early cases for anything like SARS. They were worried about SARS reemerging, and they started taking these measures quickly and did a decent job of it.

Now, there has been a lot of criticism of what they had done, with people asking, “Why didn’t they tell the world it was spreading through human-to-human transmission?” Because they weren’t sure, just as I wasn’t sure at the time it was a coronavirus. We thought it was, but we had to be very careful not to create a false panic.

In any case, as a precaution, the Chinese authorities and WHO acted as if it was transmissible between people. Everybody suspected that. And what they did was to quarantine patients. They shut down travel

dramatically. I think a couple of days before the Chinese New Year 2020, when the whole country travels, they closed Tiananmen Square, which was a remarkable thing to do. And then they implemented a ban on travel. They basically quarantined the whole of Wuhan.

Now if people think China didn’t do anything, what we found out later was they had 76 days of quarantine in Wuhan. These people weren’t allowed out of their apartments, let alone to take a trip to the shops twice a day. You were just in your apartment. Dramatic and restrictive, yes. But they were operating under emergency measures.

What wasn’t known at that time was that the virus could spread far more effectively than SARS-CoV-1 ever had. But, clearly, even those tremendous measures were unable to contain it, although it bought the world some time—several weeks, months, maybe?

But we also failed. I think the biggest failure really was in the rest of the world that watched this with eyes wide open and didn’t do anything. In the US, the CDC was fumbling with the testing kits. We had outright refusal to lead from our president in the US who undermined scientific advice about vaccines and earlier about quarantines, social distancing and masking. This was a public health debacle and led to an uncontrolled outbreak early on. And then of course, famously, the West had to respond in the same way China did, with archaic and medieval-seeming lockdowns and travel restrictions.

Sadly, what happened was there was a lack of support for those earlier measures and then open hostility towards China from the West—from the US, from the UK, Australia and a few other countries—that started to demand reparations and started calling COVID-19 the “China virus” or the “Wuhan flu.” They wanted to blame China. To say, “This is your fault! It is your fault our economy is trashed,” largely because we didn’t do anything to get ready for this virus.

Politics undermined our ability to control the virus. People used politics to benefit their own political agenda and at the same time undermine pandemic control. And they are doing that now with science.

BM: China’s ability to contain the virus by diverting all their resources to the aid of Wuhan was remarkable and particularly exemplary and instructive. Not only did they demonstrate how the pandemic could be stopped, but it also showed the importance and necessity for an international strategy to stop the pandemic and protect life and well-being. The *World Socialist Web Site* advocated for this strategy, later designated as Zero-COVID, from the very beginning of the pandemic, stressing that it must be global in scope.

Your account reminded me of that. Have you read the recent report in China’s *Global Times*? Reading that detailed account of their country’s response to the pandemic, at least until lifting Zero-COVID, and

contrasting that to the US, is compelling. The only aspect that I questioned was the issue of cold-chain transmission (through contaminated cold-chain products and packaging that allow the virus to survive longer in low temperatures and low humidity environments), which seemed to me as if they were trading in conspiracies. Your thoughts on that report?

PD: It brings back a lot of memories. They're right about the WHO part of that, the work that I was involved in. At a very sensitive time when the US had demanded reparations from China, Chinese officials openly invited and allowed the WHO to send a team to visit not only the true source of the outbreak where the first cases emerged—the Huanan Seafood market—which was sensitive because it was an old-fashioned wildlife market. But they also allowed the teams to visit the labs that were at the front and center of these conspiracy theories. So, they were open with us and provided us with new data. The conclusions we reached then were valid then and are valid now. And all of that was then undermined.

Now, the cold-chain hypothesis, in my opinion, was their way of fighting back politics with politics. Is there any logic to it? Yes, there were outbreaks in China that seemed to have begun due to cold-chain transmission. You can't criticize that. There is some good science done by people we work with on the China team who published in reputable journals about Xinfadi market in Beijing, where a frozen food outlet was clearly the epicenter of an outbreak in the capital.

The point though is that it's most likely that somebody infected with COVID-19 coughed and contaminated the frozen food. We know in the US that cold-chain workers in meatpacking factories had very high outbreaks of COVID-19 because they're in a cold environment, they're close together and the virus survives longer in that kind of environment. We know from laboratory work that the virus can survive a long time on frozen food, maybe two weeks or more.

But the one problem with the whole theory that COVID-19 was sent through cold-chain to the US is that it clearly originated within Southeast Asia or South China, because that's where the bats that harbor these viruses live, and there's good evidence for that now, and there was good evidence then. It didn't come from Norwegian salmon. It didn't originate in Norway. And all the data indicate that it did not originate in the US.

These things are political, in my opinion. But what China did early on in investigating this outbreak, in quarantining Wuhan, in dealing with the first patients, they managed to control successfully for China what could have been a horrific outbreak with huge loss of life with this big population in very densely packed cities.

Sadly, it got out and some countries did as well as China or better. Some countries did worse, and I think the US was one that did worse. During that first critical year of the COVID pandemic when we didn't have vaccines, when it truly was the risk of a lethal infection to most people, if you got infected. We were very scared at the time, and we allowed the virus to run rampant in many parts of the US by letting politics get in the way. Unnecessarily, people died because of it.

BM: Could you speak to your involvement in the WHO-China mission to investigate the origin of SARS-CoV-2. It was a critical period in the pandemic, shortly after Trump's failed January 6, 2021 coup. Despite the promises of following the science by former President Biden, the conspiracy theory would emerge more broadly into the political spectrum amid bipartisan efforts to legitimize the Wuhan Lab Lie.

There would be no phase two of the planned joint mission. The WHO would announce two years later they had abandoned these plans. Epidemiologist and WHO COVID-19 technical lead Maria Van Kerkhove told Nature, “The politics across the world of this really hampered progress on understanding the origins.”

PD: I think the public forgot or misinterpreted what that “mission” was. The WHO would try to be careful about correctly describing it when they talked to the press. It wasn't an investigation where this team was going to Wuhan and would come back with an answer to the origins of

COVID-19. It was as it was described in the report: a WHO-China joint study on the animal origins of COVID-19.

It was very carefully negotiated between China and the WHO. The terms and scope of the investigation were quite explicit. It certainly wasn't a detective-like investigation into China, which I think many in the media thought it was or should be. That's not how these diplomatic matters materialize; it's highly sensitive and political.

If countries are going to be blamed for outbreaks caused by natural events or because of trends in agriculture and trade, which take place all around the world daily, no one is going to report these. And this is a big problem with livestock diseases. Imagine an H5N1 bird flu pandemic where there is human-to-human transmission and there is a call to investigate the US on what really transpired. The international mechanisms to investigate these matters must be diplomatic and mutually agreed upon.

So, this was a mutually agreed upon study and this was the phase one. The idea was to go to China, work with Chinese scientists who were investigating the origins of COVID-19 and try and help them with any outside expertise we could offer, or recommend suggestions or analysis of the ways forward. The second phase of the work would then be an in-depth study of the most likely pathways.

In phase one we were supposed to jointly come up with an assessment of where and how the virus most likely got from bats into people. We sat together, we looked at different pathways and worked these out. We then visited labs, asked questions, looked at new evidence and new information, and assessed other information, coming to conclusions together on what was the most likely pathway. And that was successful. We did all that we set out to do in phase one.

But people still think it was a failed investigation; that we would return with an answer on where COVID-19 came from. We certainly came up with a likely answer—that the virus originated in bats, likely was transmitted to an intermediate host, and that Huanan Seafood Market was the epicenter of the outbreak in that city.

We also concluded that the frozen food hypothesis was somewhat political, and although we had evidence in support of it causing specific cases of COVID, it was less likely as an origin of the whole outbreak except for one important thing. We were shown direct evidence of frozen wildlife in those markets. Ferret-badgers were one of the species found in the freezers there and are commonplace in China and a known reservoir of coronaviruses. So, here we have a market that had frozen wildlife that could possibly have been a source of COVID from a wildlife farm.

What we found to be extremely unlikely was an origin from a lab. When we visited the labs, when we looked at information around the labs—I had a specific, deep understanding of what was going on and access to information that we used in the WHO team on the lab origin hypothesis—we found that there were no sequences similar to SARS-CoV-2, there was no evidence of COVID-like illnesses in the labs, and there was no evidence of a coverup in the labs. There was all this information and more.

Let's think about this. Consider the sheer small number of people that work in labs—a dozen or so at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV)—who are always wearing masks and gloves, compared to the Huanan Seafood market where about 10,000 people are walking through the place every day. Where do you expect an outbreak is going to happen?

Workers in wildlife markets handle live animals shipped from across China, often kept in crowded cages and unsanitary conditions. Many of these animals are stressed and butchered on site or taken home live and killed. All the evidence pointed to the Huanan market being a place known for its wildlife trade.

A well-documented report published just before the pandemic highlighted this. Visiting the market makes it obvious. It was clearly a wildlife market, filled with signs of animal trafficking, empty cages and

tanks for example. This trade involves farming and transporting live animals across China, with about 14 million people involved. These animals are kept in dense, mixed populations, creating extensive opportunities for animal-to-human transmission. In contrast, the relatively few people working in Chinese labs wear protective gear and did not show antibodies to SARS-CoV-2.

The difference was clear. Now, no one ruled out the lab leak hypothesis, but we just said it was extremely unlikely. And, as a scientist, you can never say that did not happen. But what you can say is, “How likely is it based on the evidence?” And that’s exactly how we laid out our report.

BM: WHO General Director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus blindsided the entire WHO team when he declared in July 2021 that the conclusions made in the report were premature in ruling out a link between the COVID-19 pandemic and a lab-leak. This completely undermined the investigation.

PD: Yes it did.

BM: Maybe you can speak to what happened behind-the-scenes on this.

PD: We were all shocked by the interference. It was inappropriate. From the start, we knew the mission would be highly political and bring intense pressure. I initially declined the WHO’s invitation, saying I’d only add to the controversy. But they persuaded me to join, assuring us that the group would be independent and that we wouldn’t represent our organizations. We were told the conclusions would be our own—not edited by WHO.

We conducted our work collaboratively with the Chinese team, voted on each pathway, and documented those results in the report. That process was solid and untouchable—it reflects the committee’s conclusions.

Then Tedros intervened, adding commentary from WHO that undermined our findings, right after the press release and even before the report was finalized. I believe he acted under political pressure.

Before our trip to China in January 2021, we had already begun meetings with the Chinese side. Meanwhile, Biden won the U.S. election and took office while we were in China. The previous administration tried to influence the results—just days before Biden assumed office, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a statement claiming evidence that lab workers were sick with COVID before the outbreak. I tweeted that we’d review any evidence, but none was ever provided, and it has since been declared to be false by the US intelligence agencies.

It was clearly interference from the intelligence sector to shape public opinion, and not science. There is no evidence that anyone at the WIV contracted COVID-19 during the initial outbreak. And had they, in September or October of 2019, the epidemiology of the entire outbreak would have been completely different and would have evolved much sooner than the current timeline.

When Biden took office, there was hope that the US would re-engage with WHO. Behind the scenes, there may have been pressure due to ongoing sensitivities over China, WHO’s credibility, and the origin of COVID-19. Biden had campaigned on a tough stance toward China, and perhaps Tedros thought keeping the lab leak theory alive would help politically.

What Tedros didn’t seem to understand is that our report never ruled out the lab leak entirely—we said it was “extremely unlikely,” because there’s no evidence for it. His comments just brought more politics into the process.

BM: Another critical point often overlooked is the significance of the data—environmental samples and details on infected patients from the various hospitals—collected by the WHO-China investigative team.

These data enabled renowned evolutionary virologists like Michael Worobey and Kristian Andersen to conduct detailed forensic analyses of the earliest known COVID-19 cases from December 2019—both within the Huanan Seafood Market and the broader Wuhan area.

Their findings were striking. Not only did they identify the market as the epicenter of the initial outbreak, but they were also able to pinpoint

specific stalls where SARS-CoV-2 viral genetic signals were most concentrated. Their work showed that the presence of two distinct viral lineages didn’t indicate a previous ancestor—as some had speculated—but rather pointed to at least two independent spillover events from animals to humans, suggesting additional spillovers may have occurred that were not successful.

Importantly, they also determined that SARS-CoV-2 was less adapted to human transmission than SARS-CoV-1, a key counterpoint to the argument used by former CDC Director Robert Redfield and others to promote the lab leak theory. These studies not only confirmed the conclusions of the WHO-China report but serve as an antidote to the lie that is still being peddled every day.

PD: Indeed. Couldn’t agree more.

BM: I’d like to turn to the critical work of the international team behind *The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2*, published in *Nature Medicine* on March 17, 2020. This paper has proven to be a foundational piece of scientific analysis that has withstood five years of scrutiny and attacks by the right-wing reaction.

For all the criticism Anthony Fauci has received, it’s important to acknowledge that he responded appropriately at a crucial early moment, when experts noticed unusual features in the genetic makeup of the virus. Rather than dismissing those concerns or overreacting, he convened a panel of leading virologists, including Kristian Andersen, Andrew Rambaut, Robert Garry and Eddie Holmes, to rigorously investigate the virus’s origins. This decision grounded the discussion in science rather than speculation and helped establish an evidence-based framework for addressing the conspiracy theories that soon followed.

Their analysis was informed by key fieldwork emerging at the time.

Research by Dr. Alice Hughes and her team uncovered SARS-CoV-2-related viruses in wildlife, and Dr. Tommy Tsan-Yuk Lam’s findings in Malayan pangolins were especially pivotal. These pangolins carried viruses closely related to SARS-CoV-2, including identical amino acids at five critical residues of the virus’s receptor-binding domain. This evidence directly addressed concerns about the so-called “furin cleavage site” and strongly supported the conclusion that these features were naturally occurring—not engineered in a lab.

Whether or not you were directly involved in that paper, I’d be interested in hearing your thoughts on its significance and how it shaped the scientific consensus around the origins of SARS-CoV-2.

PD: Looking at the big picture, the attack on *The Proximal Origins* paper, from the way that the NIH is being run presently under the Trump administration and the way they are targeting medical journals, accusing them of being biased in their research, represents a massive political interference in science and the institutions of scientific research who conduct their work openly and transparently. Science is done in the best way we can through the peer review process, in which independent researchers with similar expertise offer a robust critique of your work and review its merits and failings. It’s not perfect, but it’s a pretty good process.

The first point on *The Proximal Origins* paper is that people need to appreciate that this represents the conclusions of a group of scientists who were asked to come together—I think by Anthony Fauci, Francis Collins, Jeremy Farrar and others—to look at all the available evidence and reach a deliberated, scientifically-grounded conclusion, just as the WHO team did a year or so later, when even more evidence had come to light.

These are excellent, principled scientists that have worked for many years and established a reputation as the foremost in their field of work, virology. They were looking at the genetics of the virus. There was this finding early on when they were looking at the sequences of the virus and saw it had a furin cleavage site.

The furin cleavage site (FCS) in viral proteins, particularly the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2, is a sequence that acts as a cleavage point for

enabling the spike protein to better interact with host cells. This cleavage is crucial for efficient virus entry and is thought to enhance its pathogenicity and transmission.

Now, those furin cleavage sites have been found in influenza, and in many cases enhance their ability to invade and replicate in cells. Many other coronaviruses have these furin cleavage sites. We found a new alpha coronavirus not related to SARS in rodents in wildlife markets, hotels and train stations in China that had the furin cleavage site, and published that data in 2021. I think there are others that have been found since.

It's not so unusual, even though there is a lot of talk about it being the only SARS-related coronavirus with a furin cleavage site. Those cleavage sites evolve when the viruses are put under evolutionary pressure, allowing them to adapt to other hosts.

I was involved in the discussions on that paper. I had received an email from the National Academies explaining that the White House's pandemic preparedness team were convening a group of scientists to discuss the new coronavirus. I was very interested and agreed to participate. Ralph Baric had received the same invitation. These were well-known experts who had studied coronaviruses and were asked to take part in a meeting to advise politicians about the characteristics of the virus, what it meant, and if we should be worried about it. All this was happening in early February 2020.

What we didn't know as we began the call is that some in the group had sparked this by finding this furin cleavage site and had a pre-meeting with the intelligence community, Farrar, Fauci, Collins and others. We got on this call and that first group was also on that call and we discussed that furin cleavage site.

Now, I didn't know about the furin cleavage site until I was on that call. What we were told was that there was some concern that a furin cleavage site can sometimes arise in cell culture. And the fact that SARS-CoV-2 has a furin cleavage site may indicate it was cultured in a lab prior to becoming a pandemic. And I thought, "Oh my god, this is shocking if it's true." It would be truly shocking that we've got this virulent virus that came out of a lab. But of course, you don't let your emotions lead you to any conclusion. You don't think, "Okay, it must be true!" You think about it.

So, we started talking about it as a group and I made the point if furin cleavage sites can arise in cell culture because of the different cells that these viruses are infecting, putting evolutionary pressure on them to evolve, couldn't the same thing be true if a bat virus gets into an animal, intermediate host like a raccoon dog or a civet, or even in people? And we know from the original outbreak of SARS-CoV-1 that the virus circulated in people in South China for a few months prior to becoming pandemic. And it did evolve in that process. So, couldn't the furin cleavage site have also evolved in SARS-CoV-2 in a similar manner?

Ralph Baric agreed this was possible. A few others also agreed and pointed out that some viruses reduce their ability to bind to human cells when they are cultured in a lab. In the end, the conclusion was that just because it has a furin cleavage site, it doesn't indicate that it came from a lab. It could have arisen in nature.

In fact, on balance of things, because of the numbers game in terms of the number of wildlife being farmed, the number of people involved in that early chain of transmission, it's most likely that it did arise in some natural evolutionary process. That was the conclusion of the meeting; that was the conclusion of the *Proximal Origins* paper; that was the conclusion of the letter that we wrote from that meeting back to the politicians; and that is the conclusion today.

Read Part 3 of this interview here or go back to Part 1 here.

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