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US Energy Department assesses Covid-19 likely resulted from lab leak, furthering US intel divide over virus origin

By [Jeremy Herb](#) and [Natasha Bertrand](#), CNN

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Biden's national security adviser responds to new report on Covid-19's origin

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(CNN) — The US Department of Energy has assessed that the Covid-19 pandemic most likely came from a laboratory leak in China, according to a newly updated classified intelligence report.

Two sources said that the Department of Energy assessed in the intelligence report that it had “low confidence” the Covid-19 virus accidentally escaped from a lab in Wuhan.

Intelligence agencies can make assessments with either low, medium or high confidence. A low confidence assessment generally means that the information obtained is not reliable enough or is too fragmented to make a more definitive analytic judgment or that there is not enough information available to draw a more robust conclusion.

The latest assessment further adds to the divide in the US government over whether the Covid-19 pandemic began in China in 2019 as the result of a lab leak or whether it emerged naturally. The various intelligence agencies have been split on the matter for years. In 2021, the intelligence community declassified a report that showed four agencies in the intelligence community had assessed with low confidence that the virus likely jumped from animals to humans naturally in the wild, while one assessed with moderate confidence that the pandemic was the result of a laboratory accident.



After three years of Covid-19, our medical analyst has learned these lessons -- and sees these priorities moving forward

Three other intelligence community elements were unable to coalesce around either explanation without additional information, the report said.

The Wall Street Journal first reported on the new assessment from the Department of Energy. A senior US intelligence official told the Journal that the update to the intelligence assessment was conducted in light of new intelligence, further study of academic literature and in consultation with experts outside government.

A Department of Energy spokesperson told CNN in a statement: “The Department of Energy

continues to support the thorough, careful, and objective work of our intelligence professionals in investigating the origins of COVID-19, as the President directed.”

The Department of Energy’s Office of Intelligence and Counterintelligence is one of 18 government agencies that make up the intelligence community, which are under the umbrella of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence declined to comment.

China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs pushed back against the claim when asked about the reported assessment during a regular briefing on Monday.

Spokesperson Mao Ning pointed to the “authoritative and scientific” conclusion reached after a 2021 field mission between Chinese and World Health Organization experts, who determined the lab leak hypothesis was “highly unlikely.” That mission was later criticized for a lack of transparency by Western governments.

“The parties concerned should stop stirring up arguments about laboratory leaks, stop smearing China and stop politicizing the issue of the virus origin,” Mao said.

‘Not a definitive answer’

National security adviser Jake Sullivan said on CNN’s “State of the Union” on Sunday that the intelligence community remains divided on the matter, while noting that President Joe Biden has put resources into getting to the bottom of the origin question.



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“Right now, there is not a definitive answer that has emerged from the intelligence community on this question,” Sullivan told CNN’s Dana Bash. “Some elements of the intelligence community have reached conclusions on one side, some on the other. A number of them have said they just don’t have enough information to be sure.”

Sullivan said Biden had directed the national laboratories, which are part of the Department of Energy, to be brought into the assessment.

In May 2020, researchers at the government-backed Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory issued a classified report that found it was possible that the coronavirus escaped from a lab in Wuhan, which came at a time when that line of inquiry was considered taboo.

The US began exploring the possibility that Covid-19 spread in a laboratory as early as April 2020, though the intelligence community has noted repeatedly that a lack of cooperation from Beijing has made it difficult to get to the bottom of the question.

Republicans react

The latest intelligence assessment was provided to Congress as Republicans on Capitol Hill have been pushing for further investigation into the lab leak theory, while accusing the Biden administration of playing down its possibility.

House Foreign Affairs Chairman Mike McCaul said Sunday he was “pleased” that the Department of Energy “has finally reached the same conclusion that I had already come to.”

“I have requested a full and thorough briefing from the administration on this report and the evidence behind it,” the Texas Republican said in a statement.



Top Republican on House Foreign Affairs Committee calls Covid-19 origin 'worst cover-up in human history'

McCaul in his statement referred to a 2021 report he had released as ranking member of the Foreign Affairs panel, which “found a preponderance of the evidence proved” that the pandemic originated with a leak from the Wuhan lab.

The chairman called on the Biden administration to publicly concur with that conclusion.

“It is critical the administration also begin to work immediately with our partners and allies around the world to both hold the (Chinese Communist Party) accountable and to put in place updated international regulations to ensure something like this cannot happen again,” McCaul said.

Republican Sen. Dan Sullivan of Alaska on Sunday called for public hearings following the disclosure of the Department of Energy assessment.

“We need to do extensive hearings. I hope our Democratic colleagues in the Congress can support that. I know the Republicans in the House are certainly supportive of that,” the Senate Armed Services Committee member said on NBC’s “Meet the Press.”

“Think about what just happened over the last three years, one of the biggest pandemics in a century. A lot of evidence that it’s coming from the Chinese,” Sullivan said.

A spokesperson for House Oversight Chairman James Comer, a Kentucky Republican, said in a statement that the committee was “reviewing the classified information provided” by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in response to a letter requesting information earlier this month.

One of the sources said that the new assessment from the Department of Energy is similar to information from a House Republican Intelligence Committee report released last year on the origins of the virus.

This story has been updated with additional reaction.

CNN's Aaron Pellish, Andrew Millman, Zachary Cohen and Sam Fossum contributed to this report.

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