

# CIA Now Favors Lab Leak Theory on Origins of Covid-19

*Agency says it had 'low confidence' in its finding, but this is further than it has ever gone in pinpointing the origin of a virus that killed millions worldwide*

By Michael R. Gordon and Dustin Volz  
Wall Street Journal

WASHINGTON—The Central Intelligence Agency has now concluded that the deadly Covid-19 pandemic most likely arose from a laboratory leak, lending credibility to a view that has been the focus of sharp debate among scientists and politicians for years.

In doing so, the CIA has now joined the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Energy Department in identifying a laboratory mishap in Wuhan, China, as the probable source of the Covid virus. It has [killed more than 1.2 million Americans](#) and over seven million people worldwide.

“CIA assesses with low confidence that a research-related origin of the COVID-19 pandemic is more likely than a natural origin based on the available body of reporting,” an agency spokesman said in a statement released Saturday.

The spokesman added that the judgment was “low confidence” and that the CIA would continue to evaluate “any available credible new intelligence reporting or open-source information that could change CIA’s assessment.”

The agency had previously taken the stance that it didn’t have enough information to assess whether the virus had leapt from an animal to a human or arose from a laboratory mishap.

Covid-19 emerged in Wuhan in late 2019 and then spread rapidly through the world in 2020 and 2021 before the development of vaccines helped limit deaths. It marked one of the worst pandemics in modern history.

But the origins of the virus still divides the U.S. intelligence community, in large part because the Chinese government hasn’t cooperated with international investigations. Four U.S. intelligence agencies have favored, with low confidence, the animal

transmission theory. So has the National Intelligence Council, a body of senior intelligence officers that reports to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

John Ratcliffe, the new director of the CIA confirmed earlier this week by the Senate, has long said he thought the lab leak theory was the most plausible explanation. In an interview with Breitbart published Friday, Ratcliffe said investigating the issue was a top priority that he wanted to tackle on “day one.”

As the current CIA chief, Ratcliffe declassified the new judgment for public release.

Officials familiar with the matter said the agency has been continuing its work on the question since the virus arose. The agency said in its Saturday statement that “both research-related and natural origin scenarios of the COVID-19 pandemic remain plausible.”

The New York Times earlier reported on the new judgment.

A spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, Liu Pengyu, criticized the CIA statement as an example of political manipulation. “We firmly oppose the politicization and stigmatization of the source of the virus, and once again call on everyone to respect science and stay away from conspiracy theories,” he said.

A former FBI senior scientist told [The Wall Street Journal in December](#) that a fresh look at the virus’s origin and the intelligence-community reports on the issue was needed.

In the waning days of the Biden administration, Jake Sullivan, former President [Joe Biden](#)’s national security adviser, called for establishing a panel of outside experts to take a fresh look at the intelligence agencies’ findings.

The debate over Covid origins at times has been heavily politicized. During his first term in office, President [Trump](#) blamed Beijing for what he called the “China virus,” while his Democratic critics at the time said the White House was trying to divert attention from its management of the response to the pandemic.

While the natural transmission theory was initially the dominant view within the intelligence community, the debate over Covid’s origins has shifted considerably over the past several years. No host animal that might have transmitted the virus has been found, while experts have raised concerns that precautions for containing biological agents at the Wuhan Institute of Virology were inadequate.

The FBI, which was the first intelligence agency to point to a lab leak as a likely explanation, made its judgment with “moderate confidence,” while the Energy Department and CIA’s views were made with low confidence.

The CIA issued its low confidence judgment after former CIA Director William Burns directed the agency to take a position on the origins rather than remain agnostic, according to officials familiar with the matter, though he didn't urge a particular conclusion. The updated analysis, which wasn't based on specific new intelligence, was published internally at the agency before Ratcliffe's arrival, the officials said.

Sen. Tom Cotton, the Republican chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, applauded the CIA for releasing its new judgment, which he called "the most plausible explanation of Covid's origins."

He added: "Now, the most important thing is to make China pay for unleashing a plague on the world."