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President Joe Biden asked U.S. intelligence agencies to probe whether the COVID-19 pandemic began naturally or from a laboratory leak. So far, they don't have a firm answer. SUSAN WALSH/AP

COVID-19's origins still uncertain, U.S. intelligence agencies conclude

By **Jon Cohen** | Aug. 27, 2021 , 5:45 PM

The U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) has concluded it doesn't have enough information to resolve whether the COVID-19 pandemic began because of a natural jump of SARS-CoV-2 from animals to humans or a laboratory accident.

After a 90-day review requested by U.S. President Joseph Biden, the IC today issued a two-page, unclassified **assessment** of its efforts, offering "key takeaways" after "examining all available intelligence reporting and other information." The first, and most important, takeaway is that the IC is "divided on the most likely origin" of the pandemic coronavirus and that both hypotheses are "plausible."

The National Intelligence Council and the unnamed "IC elements" involved—which could include military agencies, FBI, CIA, and branches of the Department of State—apparently agreed on a few points in their assessment. Chinese officials didn't "have foreknowledge" of SARS-CoV-2 before an outbreak of

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the virus arose in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. SARS-CoV-2 probably emerged, they concluded, no later than in November 2019. The agencies also concluded that “the virus was not developed as a biological weapon.”

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Biden has urged the Chinese government to allow an independent audit of laboratories in Wuhan that work with coronaviruses, a request that Chinese officials have soundly rejected. “China’s cooperation most likely would be needed to reach a conclusive assessment of the origins of COVID-19,” the assessment says. “Beijing, however, continues to hinder the global investigation, resist sharing information and blame other countries, including the United States.”

Jesse Bloom, an evolutionary biologist at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center who has advocated that the lab-leak theory receive more serious attention, welcomed the assessment’s conclusion that both hypotheses are plausible. “I hope the intelligence community will release any new information they have collected,” says Bloom, who organized a letter, signed by 17 other scientists and **published by Science**, that called for “balanced consideration” of the competing origin hypotheses.

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Many had expected that the IC would issue a thorough report, and the brief assessment offers few details of what the agencies uncovered and how they weighed evidence. There was “low confidence” by some groups involved that SARS-CoV-2 had a natural origin, but only one IC element had moderate confidence the virus came from a lab. The decidedly undecided nature of the assessment was obvious. “Analysts at three IC elements remain unable to coalesce around either explanation without additional information, with some analysts favoring natural origin, others a laboratory origin, and some seeing the hypotheses as equally likely,” it noted at one point.

The assessment was “quite balanced,” says William Hanage, an evolutionary biologist at Harvard University. “This summary indicates that the IC elements overall were leaning in the direction of a natural origin,” Hanage says. “I think this reflects the view of most scientists who have looked into it.” He says without more evidence from early human cases or from animals that harbor closely related viruses, it will be hard to come up with a convincing argument for either scenario. “There’s no definitive evidence,” he says.

David Relman, a microbiome researcher at Stanford University and a signatory of the *Science* letter, says the origin of COVID-19 deserves the “redoubled effort” by the Biden administration to both understand this pandemic’s beginnings and the difficult questions it raises. “Not surprisingly, a clear answer was not readily available, but this does not mean that an answer will not be found or that greater clarity will not be forthcoming,” Relman says. “We must not back off.”

In a statement, Biden said the United States would “continue working with like-minded partners around the world” to pressure the Chinese government to allow experts, led by the World Health Organization, to access “all relevant data and evidence,” which would include biosafety protocols at the Wuhan labs, and more animal and human data from the start of the pandemic. “We must have a full and transparent

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accounting of this global tragedy,” Biden said.
“Nothing less is acceptable.”

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doi:10.1126/science.abm1388



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