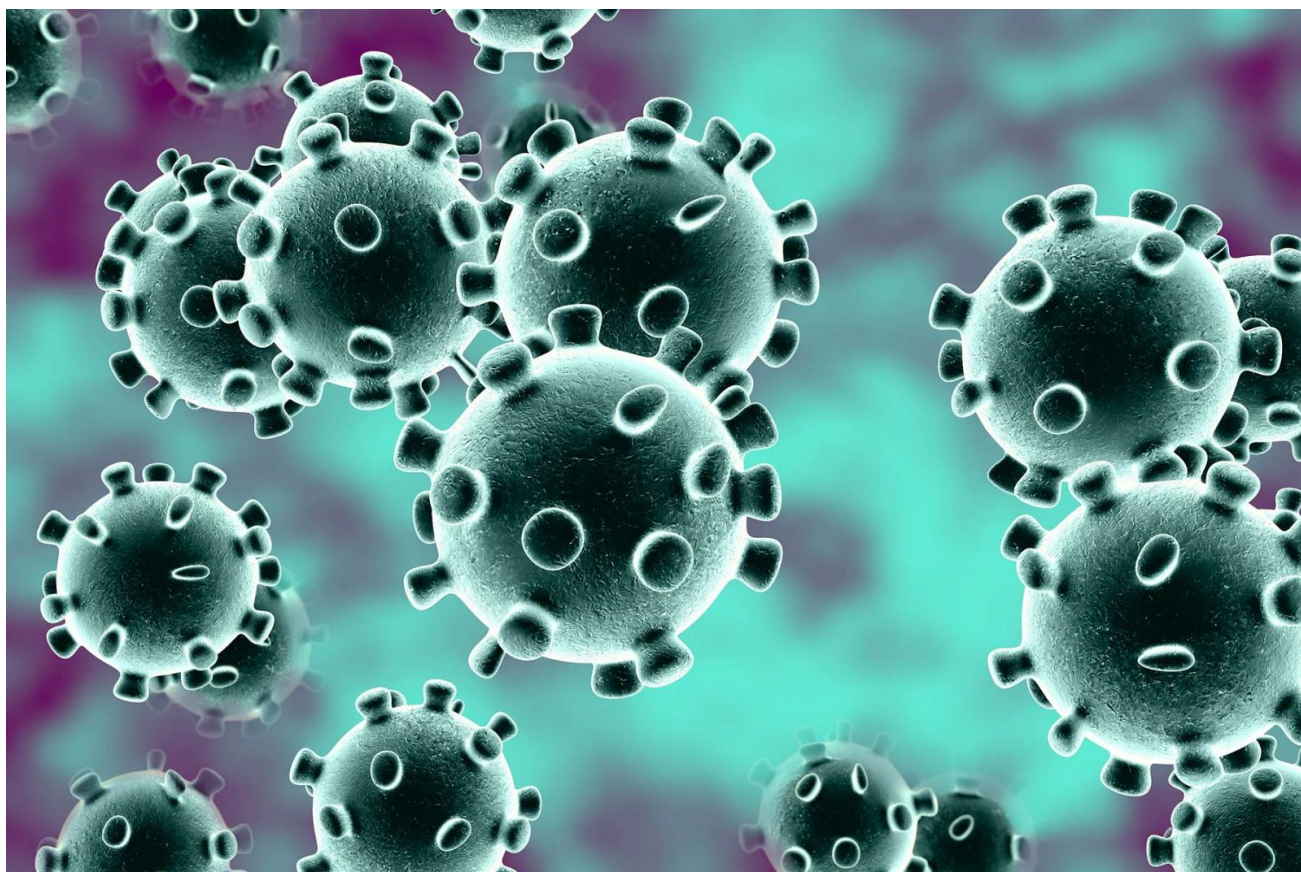


The Corona Virus War: The Genesis

by Walid Phares



Strategic Perspective

There are quite a few emotional and passionate narratives circulating in the press and on social media regarding the coronavirus, COVID-19, and understandably so as it has caused the death of tens of thousands and has been wreaking economic havoc throughout the country and the world. And because the events are still unfolding, and there is so much chatter on this topic, the time is right to start thinking about the current crisis in strategic terms.

First, perspective is needed. There have been many viruses that dominated headlines in the past decade or two – H1N1, SARS, West Nile...all causing death, hospitalization and

affecting lives and communities, along with medical breakthroughs and health and scientific innovation. But the history of viruses stretches back much further, thousands of years. Viruses are found throughout all of recorded human history. And the death toll of these plagues?

Not in the 10s of thousands. Not even in the millions. But a death toll of tens of millions. When looking back at antiquity, entire civilizations have been wiped out by viruses.

But even recorded history does not tell the entire story. If you ask biologists and virologists, they will tell you we are talking about a phenomenon that is older than humans, viruses being around for 200-250 million years, and there has always been a confrontation between viruses and life on the planet. Thus, the first part of strategic perspective is understanding that what we are dealing with right now is, in historical terms, very recent. The war has only recently evolved to take on the most advanced species on earth: Us.

History also teaches us that all viruses are cyclical, and the same virus will come back and visit us, so now is the time to think strategically about how to address future clashes between humanity and viruses in this new war. And this is doubly important now because it may be the single most important debate in terms of public health – and not just for months or years, but decades, perhaps even after all of us on earth now are gone.

Unanswered Questions – and Consequences

There has been much debate among public figures, in the media, about the genesis of COVID19. So question Number 1 is very simple: Where did COVID19 actually start?

We know it had its genesis in China in the province of Wuhan. That is not debated. It did not start in Greenland. It did not start in Australia. It started in China. There may be a debate

over what it should or should not be called, but there is no debate that it started in China. The debate instead is over whether it started in the city wet market (animal market) or in a lab.

This is an important distinction because knowing the answer will lead to developing best practices and strategies for avoiding similar future outbreaks. But it is also an important distinction because of the legal and political consequences of the answer to that question.

If it was in a lab, then a conversation with the Chinese authorities is required to discuss the security of these biological labs. The international community will be very adamant about the discussion and implementation of its outcomes, which might include new security measures for biological labs, and not just in China. If the origin of this virus was a lab, that means the security of that lab lapsed, and China – as host to this lab – is ultimately responsible.

Believing it began in a lab has led to conspiracy theories that this virus is a weapon, but let's just work with the data available. The US government at this point believes it was an evolution of the SARS virus, either under Chinese government control to research it or to find antidotes.

But even if it came out of the wet market, there should again be laws and regulations to prevent new outbreaks in the future. Either way, countermeasures need to be put in place.

And regardless of the specific origin (market or lab), we know the genesis was in China, so we will have to deal with the Chinese government. And we cannot continue in international relations as if nothing has happened. The cause needs to be addressed.

Second, there will have to be a discussion about reparations. Such a conversation will be complex, an international negotiation process with multiple parties and unintended

consequences, but it is a tunnel we will have to travel through.

China's Response

Now the third point, and this is critical: What did the Chinese authorities do?

Let's be clear: This question would apply to any other government. It could have been in Russia. It could have been in America. It could have been in Italy – instead of being the recipient, they could have been responsible for the crisis...And any other country might be responsible in the future. So the third question here is simply: What did the authorities do? Because their response is crucial to how the crisis developed.

According to the information that we have, the Chinese authorities secured the Wuhan province with enormous force. The authorities sealed off the population of Wuhan from the rest of China. This is significant because that measure protected the most important Chinese strategic centers – the capital Beijing – and its economic center Shanghai. There was no travel between Wuhan and Beijing. There was no travel between Wuhan and Shanghai. The province was closed off completely.

But there was a breach. The breach – by Chinese authorities – was to allow citizens and resident nationals in Wuhan to fly, not anywhere within China, but out of China from Wuhan. And that is the genesis of the worldwide crisis.

There was a crisis inside China – similar to what happened in Africa with Ebola – but the world crisis came from the very simple fact that although China did not allow flights between Wuhan and other locations in China, they did allow flights from Wuhan to other parts of the world—where the virus took off infecting the rest of the planet.

The US Mobilization

We know that at the end of December, early January, Chinese authorities sealed off the province where the virus started but did not stop the flights from Wuhan to the rest of the world. But the second side of that equation becomes: When did the world mobilize? When did the United States mobilize and start to respond?

From the moment I saw those videos coming out of Wuhan on YouTube and social media I understood that if this virus was spreading person to person and if there was an operation to seal off an area with a population of millions, it meant that this virus is indisputably going to jump to other countries. And if it jumps to other countries, it is going to get to the United States because we are a global society. So as I was watching the transatlantic and transpacific flights continuing, I started my own personal mobilization: Reading what I could find about the health crisis and taking some personal measures, such as with travel and social interactions by the end of January and of course early February.

Likewise, governments were reacting, collecting information and mobilizing based on what they learned.

But what about The United States?

Information was coming to Washington, to the administration, to the agencies. There is also now talk of an intelligence assessment that was communicated to the administration and to committees in Congress – in the Senate and the House. But I didn't see hearings throughout January, till February, where the virus was addressed by Congress. If there was an intelligence report, I saw no reaction by the members in charge in Congress, no indication of intelligence dealing with the matter.

The attention in Congress in January, especially in the House of Representatives, was instead focused on measures being taken against the President of the United States.

Now the administration received that assessment – maybe in more detail, and maybe the president moved at a slower pace in order to collect more information before full mobilization because executive action is just that: action. And executive actions need to be prepared, but the executive branch, unlike the legislative branch, does not simply hold hearings. The White House executes plans. And at the time, there was strong opposition to the actions proposed.

It is important to understand the timeline (and the political atmosphere) to add perspective to why we acted when we acted.

The decision to shut down flights from China was the first and probably the most important strategic decision issued by the White House at the end of January. That was the beginning of our process, but the Trojan horse was already inside our walls. The events of December and most of January invited it in as tens of thousands of people who came either from China directly to the United States or through Europe or other countries ended up spreading the virus.

Hindsight is 20-20

Historians might and should ask: What was the US government doing? How did it perceive the threat? What were the real possibilities of dealing with matters in terms of the executive branch, in terms of tension between the administration and Congress during the heated politics at the time?

The reality of the matter is that by end of January it was too late for a full and clear interception.

If China had warned us, we would have shut down those flights a month and a half prior.

If, instead of a focus on only the impeachment process, a debate was possible in the first two to three weeks of January building consensus between Congress and the administration,

action would have been taken at the beginning of January, not at the end of January.

So the Chinese delayed our response by a month and a half and then our political process delayed it another month. And this is why by January 30, when the countermeasures by the United States were implemented, they were relatively late.

Even if we had had the opportunity to shut down the flights earlier on, we still would have encountered cases of coronavirus because we wouldn't have been able to shut down everything by the time the information came all the way through the agencies and through the media.

Even if the Chinese had told us in December, there still would have been hundreds of people who would have communicated the virus either via direct flights to the United States or via flights to Europe and then from Europe, or other countries like Japan, to the United States. So even if actions were taken one or two months before they were ultimately implemented, we still would have had the coronavirus, albeit in a very limited way. More significantly, then, we would have had information from the Chinese, and we would have been working with them and their firsthand knowledge.

Had there been a united position in Washington instead such a deep paralyzing division at the time, imagine the full strength of the US government and people coming against the threat in in December or January instead of prepping for this battle in February or March.

Reckless Accusations

There is one last matter to be addressed when discussing this health crisis from a strategic position.

When the US decided to shut down the flights from China, I was very concerned to hear at least three bodies accusing that decision of being racist.

Shutting down flights from China because of a virus is not racist. It is a health measure. China should have asked the US to shut its border in the same way the US and Canada together decided to shut down the northern border. In the same way the United States and Mexico jointly decided to shut down the southern border.

The accusation alone is a dangerous one, but the three entities that made the accusation exponentially increase the strategic risk.

It came, first, from China. China who knew better. China who sealed Wuhan from the rest of the country. China who prevented these flights from landing anywhere else in China. China who is responsible for releasing the virus.

It came, second, from the World Health Organization. We still have, on record, the director of the W.H.O. calling this decision by the US racist.

We shut down flights to stop anybody coming from abroad with that virus – including Americans. (We did treat Americans differently by allowing them to come but forcing a 14-day quarantine.) This was not a message to the outside world that “We don’t want you to come.” We actually truly desire these millions of people to visit. It is part of our economy. We have the largest visiting population in the world. America has the largest tourism industry on the globe.

So with the World Health Organization leveling this accusation of racism against the president of the United States – regardless of who the president is (Democrat, Republican, Obama, Bush, Clinton) – instead of focusing on world health, there is something deeply flawed within the system that needs to be addressed.

And thirdly, we heard the accusation from politicians here in the United States. This is not a matter of free speech. The opposition can say whatever it wants, but reckless, ignorant

accusations must be pointed out and addressed as such. To call a measure for national public safety, if not national security, racist, should it be said by politicians in Congress or in the media, sets a dangerous precedent.

If we continue to entertain such notions in the realm of national safety and national security, it endangers the country – and the world. Support of such dangerous rhetoric coming from academia and the media and political hardliners needs to stop. This is where the intellectual community should come together and discuss how to separate politics from crises. When we are as a nation making decisions, taking steps in regard to all Americans and their safety, health and security, there need not be any politicization. This is very dangerous. Reckless. Irresponsible.

Though this is in the past, this recklessness needs to be debated. It needs to be discussed because there will be another crisis. We don't need to enter the next unchanged. Instead, we need to achieve national consensus to completely separate politics from the public health of Americans and from the national security of Americans. Doing so might also help to allay fears and calm destructive passions when we need level heads the most.

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