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Security Nexus Perspectives

## THE BATTLE OF SENSE-MAKING AND MEANING-MAKING DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

By Dr. Deon Canyon\*

China's purposeful obfuscation of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan has been well established. The first case with COVID-19 symptoms was reported, not on Dec 8 2019 as China reported to the World Health Organization, but on Nov 17, 2019 as revealed in unpublished Chinese government data.<sup>1</sup> China's reactive lock-down approach suppressed the release of vital information that could have been used to limit the outbreak. As the virus continued to spread, China thought only of its own safety and allowed infectious people to travel throughout the world and created a pandemic.

In early March, the U.S. government started referring to the disease agent as the 'Wuhan virus' or the 'Chinese virus.' This is not unusual, for Spanish Flu, West Nile Virus, Zika and Ebola are all named after places and are still used by the World Health Organization despite it advising that the practice has a negative effect on nations, economies and people.<sup>2</sup> While the government was criticized for doing this, they were not the first. James Griffiths, Senior Producer for *CNN* International used it on Jan 22,<sup>3</sup> and the Singaporean CNA news channel used it on Jan 26.<sup>4</sup>

China quickly and aggressively tried to suppress where the virus came from by making attempts to take back control of the narrative. On Feb 27, Chinese respiratory specialist Zhong Nanshan said, 'Though the COVID-19 was first discovered in China, it does not mean that it originated from China.'<sup>5</sup> On Mar 12, Lijian Zhao, Deputy Director General, Information Department, PRC Foreign Ministry, stated that the U.S. Army brought the virus to China. Zhao pointed to the CDC shutting down the US Military's biodefense-lab at Fort Detrick, Maryland, due to an 'absence of safeguards against pathogen leakages,' and attributed the subsequent 'epidemic' of vaping-associated deaths to a corona-like, respiratory virus. The spread of this virus to Wuhan was made possible, Zhao claims, by 'five "foreign" athletes or other personnel visiting Wuhan for the World Military Games (October 18-27, 2019) who were hospitalized in Wuhan for an undetermined infection.'

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This narrative has been propagated by China's state-run media and diplomats. These are the same news outlets that the U.S. State Department designated on Feb 18 as 'foreign missions' to be treated as institutions of the Chinese government.<sup>6</sup> AMB Lin Songtian, the Chinese Ambassador to South Africa tweeted that the virus was not necessarily from China, let alone "made in China."

China wishes to be viewed as a trustworthy, economic champion with everyone's best wishes at heart. Thus, the association between China's incompetent suppression of COVID-19, collapsing global markets and a potential economic recession is a narrative that Chinese President Xi Jinping desperately wants to avoid.<sup>7</sup> But maybe he was not aware of the First Rule of effective Crisis Management... Accept Responsibility!

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