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## A WHO pandemic pact would leave the world at China's mercy

Lessons have still not been learned, so why should we trust the WHO in a future pandemic?

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On 22 May, the World Health Organisation meets for the World Health Assembly, an annual summit to which all the world's countries are invited – except Taiwan, which is excluded at China's behest. On the agenda is a “pandemic accord” that would greatly expand the WHO's powers to intervene in a country in the event of a future outbreak.

The European Union, true to form, pushed for [a legally binding pandemic “treaty”](#) instead, but that won't happen for two reasons: the American Senate would need a two-thirds majority to ratify it; and the Chinese government would not allow even its pet international agency to tell it what to do. But the accord would still have substantial force of international law behind it, to make governments impose domestic lockdowns, for example – despite the WHO's own figures showing little correlation between lockdown severity and death rates.

Though some of the measures make sense, such as more sharing of vaccines with other countries, the plan skates around WHO's errors during the Covid pandemic. It ignored Taiwan's early alarm call, praised the Chinese government for its transparency at a time when it was denying human-to-human transmission and punishing whistleblowers, delayed declaring a health emergency, flip-flopped on masks and lockdowns and mounted a farcical Potemkin investigation into the origin of the virus. Added to its poor performance in the 2014

ebola outbreak, when for months WHO resisted calls from doctors and NGOs to declare an emergency to avoid offending member governments, this track record does not inspire confidence.

According to the meeting's agenda, the accord would be part of six "action tracks" focused on: healthcare systems; zoonotic outbreaks; endemic tropical diseases; food safety; antimicrobial resistance; and protecting the environment. What is missing from that list? Something WHO itself and the US and other governments insist might well have been the cause of the Covid pandemic, namely a laboratory experiment gone wrong or a virus-hunting researcher infected while sampling bats in the field.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO director general, said in July last year that it was premature to rule out a lab leak, a view echoed by the G7 summit in Cornwall. Since then if anything the evidence has grown stronger. A book published this month, Preventable by Professor Devi Sridhar, argues that a lab leak is "as likely an explanation as natural spillover and should be pursued until evidence emerges to the contrary".

A former software developer by the name of William Gates has written a book called "How to prevent the next pandemic". Its main message, according to one uncharitable reviewer, is that we can prevent the next pandemic by "doing all of the things that did not stop the last pandemic event, only more, faster and harder". But even Mr Gates does allow that "regardless of how COVID started, even the remote possibility of lab-related pathogen releases should inspire governments and scientists to redouble their efforts on lab safety, creating global standards".

Over the years laboratory accidents have resulted in deaths of researchers and others from smallpox, anthrax, SARS and other pathogens. In one case, a global epidemic of flu resulted from a mistake with an experimental vaccine in China in 1977. In recent years there was a dramatic increase in the number of coronaviruses taken from bat caves into labs for experiments, most of them in a city called Wuhan. The experiments tested how easily the viruses could be induced to infect human cells. Some scientists compared this to searching for a gas leak with a lighted match.

This pandemic began a long way from where the infected bats live but very close to the world's leading laboratory for collecting and manipulating SARS-like coronaviruses. That, plus the continuing failure to find an animal infected with the virus in food markets or elsewhere, added to some peculiar features of the virus's genome, has led many to conclude

that a proper investigation of the Wuhan Institute of Virology is warranted. But the institute has refused all requests to open up its 22,000-item database for international inspection even though doing so could go a long way to reassuring the world.

So you might think the World Health Assembly might have put lab safety and transparency of research on the agenda next week at the very least. But nowhere are these even mentioned. Presumably China would object. In February the WHO held the third “Covid-19 Global research and innovation forum”. In the titles of the 49 sessions, the word “origin” did not appear once. Though it has set up a committee, the WHO seems to be paying no more than lip service to its own commitment to investigating the possibility of a lab leak. Like some western scientists, it may be hoping the question of the origin of this dreadful pandemic remains unsolved lest the answer ruffle diplomatic feathers.

Here's what a pandemic accord should include, in my view: a commitment by all national governments to share the genomic data of all viruses collected in the wild and to share details of all experiments being done on potential pandemic pathogens (yes, including in biowarfare labs). Something similar happens with nuclear research and with airline accidents, so it can be done. **If China's government** refuses to sign, then let's gradually shame it into doing so. But it looks like we will have to do this outside the WHO.

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