

A conspiracy theory linking the US army to the coronavirus now has official Chinese endorsement

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By **Jane Li**
China tech reporter

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Because China

Even small changes in China have global effects.



Something that had been merely suggested before has now been blown wide into the open in China.

A spokesman for China's foreign ministry, Zhao Lijian, tweeted yesterday that "it might be the US army" that brought the coronavirus to China, giving an official boost to a conspiracy theory that had been allowed to circulate on Chinese social media for weeks. The conspiracy posits that 300 athletes from the US military who in October attended the 7th Military World Games in Wuhan, where the epidemic first broke out, were infected with the virus, thereby spreading it in China.

Zhao's comment accompanied a video from a US congressional hearing this week on the country's response to the epidemic. Robert Redfield, director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), said in the video that some patients who were previously diagnosed to have died from the flu were found to have actually died from the coronavirus. The video began trending on Chinese social network Weibo, with many commenting that they now believe firmly that the US had covered up facts related to the epidemic.

Zhao, who was recently elevated to the spokesperson position at the foreign ministry after building a reputation as a firebrand diplomat who frequently attacks the US, blocked a number of Twitter users who called him out for embarrassing the Chinese government and spreading conspiracy theories on the platform, which remains banned in China. Today, he doubled down on

his claims, and shared two articles from Global Research—which claims to be an independent research and media organization based in Montreal—that say there is further proof that the coronavirus originated in the US. “This article is very much important to each and every one of us. Please read and retweet it,” wrote Zhao. The founder of Global Research is a Canadian economist who has espoused conspiracy theories linked to the H1N1 swine flu epidemic and 9/11 in the past.

Before his debut as foreign ministry spokesperson last month, Zhao served as the deputy chief of mission in Pakistan. He, together with several dozens of other Chinese foreign ministry officials and diplomats, represent a more vocal, much more confrontational style in China’s public relations offensive.

“A major motivation for Chinese diplomats to join Twitter is to tell the ‘China story,’” said Lokman Tsui, a communications professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He added that he didn’t think diplomats needed approval for every tweet they send as Chinese officials don’t get into positions of power without already knowing what the boundaries are.

At a briefing for journalists today, another foreign ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang, said he would not comment directly on Zhao’s tweets but said that “the international community has different opinions” as to the origins of the virus.

As the coronavirus started to spread in the US, China’s reaction at the apparent bungling by the White House in its response has been a mixture of surprise, pride, and even glee, fueled in no small part by state media outlets. Conspiracy theories that seek to shift the narrative away from one that pins China as the source of the virus are also growing in popularity, helped along by Chinese authorities. Zhao’s latest comments have only further legitimized these claims.

The hashtag #Zhao Lijian published five tweets to question the US# has been viewed almost 4 million times on Weibo. “I think this move is reasonable. Whether Zhao has evidence for the claim or not, why should we only see Western politicians attack China with made-up theories, and not see Chinese officials question whether the virus originated in the US? All we ask for is transparency [from the US],” said a user (link in Chinese). The comment is likely a reference to comments made earlier by Arkansas senator Tom Cotton that a virology lab in Wuhan could be the origin of the virus, a claim that has been rejected by scientists globally.

The origins of the coronavirus is also an issue that politicians in the US are increasing capitalizing on as the epidemic spreads in the country. Secretary of state Mike Pompeo, for example, has insisted on using the term “Wuhan virus” when referring to the epidemic, while California congressman Kevin McCarthy was criticized for using “the Chinese coronavirus” in a tweet.