**The Coronavirus Inquiry**

By: The Editorial Board

Wall Street Journal

May 19, 2020

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coronavirus-inquiry-11589930551?mod=opinion_lead_pos4>

The World Health Assembly on Tuesday unanimously agreed to establish an inquiry into the World Health Organization’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Press reports describe the investigation as “independent,” but it’s too soon to know if the probe will be free from political pressure.

The European Union and Australia led the push for an inquiry, which is set to begin “at the earliest appropriate moment.” Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison deserves particular praise for standing firm amid Chinese bullying. Beijing has imposed tariffs on Australian barley and suspended imports of beef over Mr. Morrison’s push for a probe.

China’s state-run media are spinning this as a win for China, since specific Australian language about Beijing’s role has been removed. “It is a totally different thing from the so-called independent inquiry pushed by the Australian side,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said Tuesday. Mr. Zhao, famous for promoting a conspiracy theory about the pandemic’s origin, is compensating for what is a political defeat for Beijing.

The resolution calls for an “impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation,” and China signed on only after more than 120 nations backed the resolution Monday night. China won a small victory over the resolution’s language, but Covid-19’s Chinese roots inevitably should come up. Even if the Chinese government is uncooperative, the world already knows enough about its early fumbles to earn criticism in an independent inquiry.

WHO bureaucrats argue that it’s too soon to begin a review with the crisis at full tilt and staff occupied. No one is suggesting director-general Tedros Ghebreyesus should spend next week being deposed, but a few steps can be taken now to get the probe rolling and ensure impartiality. If this really is an independent investigation, WHO officials dealing with the crisis needn’t be involved in these early steps.

First, the member states need more specifics about the scope of the investigation and who will conduct it. Without a diverse group of experts independent of WHO, it will be impossible to produce a serious study. An order to preserve past and future data at WHO is also needed. Once a team is formed, investigators can begin setting up a timeline and determining what is known and what holes need to be filled. When the immediate crisis is over, perhaps in a few months, a more intensive review can begin that involves interviews and document requests from critical figures like Dr. Tedros.

The focus shouldn’t be geopolitical jockeying between the U.S. and China. An impartial investigation can yield lifesaving lessons should Covid-19 make a comeback in the winter. With so many lives on the line, whether the results upset a particular country or leader should be irrelevant.