



# AUSTRALIA'S ROLE DURING THE INDEPENDENT GLOBAL REVIEW OF COVID-19

PURSUING LONG-TERM BIOSECURITY WHILE NAVIGATING SHORT-  
SIGHTED POLITICS

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POLICY BRIEF - SIAN MCGRANE

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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As the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to spur international chaos, questions about the future of global biosecurity and rising diplomatic tensions must be dealt with cautiously and skilfully. The call for an independent review of the global response to the virus was adopted unanimously on 19 May 2020 by the World Health Assembly.[1] It presents Australia with a crucial moment not only to play a pivotal role in de-escalating diplomatic tensions between the United States (US) and China, but also in the robust reformation of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) biosecurity mechanisms and the international Health Regulations (IHR) that underpin them.

Australia now faces the challenge of lessening diplomatic conflict between China and the US which could interfere with the work of the independent review, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of the review to encompass not just national and organisational response mechanisms, but also the insufficient global health frameworks upon which they are built.

The issue, however, presents complex implications for the security of Australian industries, our bilateral relations with China and the US, and the ease with which these improvements to global biosecurity mechanisms can be implemented in the coming years. The three following goals must be of main priority and form the basis of the policy recommendations:

**1.Improving national biosecurity surveillance mechanisms**

**2.Reforming global biosecurity response protocols**

**3.Fostering multilateral co-operation and goodwill**

## **BACKGROUND**

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The independent review of COVID-19 will bring under scrutiny the effectiveness of the WHO's regulation mechanisms, the organisation's specific actions in relation to providing appropriate health guidelines to states, the timeline of their response, and the zoonotic origins of the virus at the earliest appropriate moment.[2] The review will also examine every member state's pandemic protocols and the pattern of the virus' spread in order to improve future pandemic preparedness and responses.[3]

However, as the WHO's regulation mechanisms are informed by the IHR, which have proved inadequate in responding to Public Health Emergencies of International Concern (PHEIC) like COVID-19 in the most efficient way possible, the current scope of the independent review remains insufficient for providing the best blueprint possible for future biosecurity responses. For example, it mentions only the intention to investigate "...the functioning of the [IHR]" and fails to confirm the need for its reformation; it thus may miss crucial faults within it which had stunted the global response in the first place. Problems that must be addressed include the requirements needed to trigger declarations of PHEICs covered under Article 12 and the ability of the WHO to initiate verification processes with member states on the basis of concerning information before states provide official notification covered under articles 9 and 10.[4] Also of note is the need to fundamentally revise the IHR's funding mechanisms, improve financial incentives for state's to respect obligations to share critical information and uphold core health regulations, and strengthen transparency mechanisms in order to address internal corruption.[5]

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# THE PROBLEM

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In light of the review's call for the "...spirit of unity" and "intensification of cooperation and collaboration..." under sub-section OP1 of the review,[6] Australia has a responsibility and unique position between China and the US to help de-escalate diplomatic tensions and bolster the WHO. The animosity felt between the two superpowers places the efficiency of any globally coordinated recuperation plan at risk. Yet, Australia must also make sure to not compromise bilateral trade relations with China at the cost of our domestic industries.

The Chinese Government's "facemask diplomacy" propaganda aimed to divert narratives that condemn China's pandemic response[7] and their multiple warnings in the past about wet market-level health standards[8] complicates this diplomatic conflict. President Trump's formal withdrawal of US funds to the WHO[9] and use of the terms "Kung-flu" and "the Chinese virus,"[10] as well as the White House official's accusations of the virus being "lab-made" as a Chinese bioweapon[11] also exacerbates the situation.

Additionally, Australia's relationship with China has soured over its strong push earlier this year for a review of China's pandemic response, leading Australian politicians to tumble into the manifesting blame-game unfolding between China and the US.[12] This has led to the imposition of 80 per cent tariffs on Australian barley exports to last for five years, which grain industry groups estimate will cost rural and regional economies at least \$500 million per annum. [13] Further economic punitive action from China, as Australia's largest trading partner, will cause unmitigated damage to Australian economies.[14]

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



## **Australia to act as a mediator between the US and China.**

As the WHO's intervention is currently restricted by member state's giving of permission, failing to ease the diplomatic strife between the US and China threatens the independent review's ability to conduct investigations within both nation's territories. This would involve advising Australian politicians like Minister for Home Affairs Peter Dutton and others to desist from raising accusations at China,[15] reassuring China of Australia's commitment to the impartiality and non-defamatory nature of the independent review, and negotiating with the US to join with the WHO once more in order to facilitate its improvement.

This may prove difficult, however, in the current political climate but should nonetheless be pursued.

## **2 Australia to draft additional articles for the independent review that call for the reformation of the IHR and more robust transparency mechanisms within the WHO.**

This will include addressing the faults within IHR as stated in the Background section of the brief in new legislation to be given to the WHO, or other multilateral organisations, for consideration. It is an essential and proactive action that will fortify future systems of surveillance, communication, response, and recuperation against fatal communicable respiratory diseases. However, this option has a long-term timeline as considerable diplomatic negotiation will be needed to reach an accord between all member states.

## **3 Australia to help bolster biosecurity surveillance at the wet-market level.**

Australia can offer its services, personnel, or finances to civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) overseas to secure health and safety risks at the wet-market level. This option is both pragmatic and a show of diplomatic good-will. Though called the "perfect incubator for novel pathogens,"[16] wet-markets are also often essential where there is dire food insecurity - their assessment must be conducted with high cultural sensitivity from foreign nations.[17] Whether in China or throughout Asia, Australia can express solidarity in protecting the frequenters of wet-markets while addressing sites of high bio-insecurity by such means.

# CONCLUSION

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Though the independent review has scarcely reached its infancy, our current context demands global recognition for the dangers of decentralised approaches to public health. In considering these options, the Australian Government may stand at the forefront of the oncoming mandate for universal, inclusive, and life-saving health security infrastructures, services and mechanisms, in turn providing a promising blueprint for the future that will save millions.

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