When Joe Biden ordered US intelligence last week to intensify efforts to determine the origins of Covid-19, he gave fresh life to the theory that the virus may have leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

The US president said that US intelligence had “coalesced around two scenarios” — that the virus had either emerged naturally or was the result of a lab accident.

It was the first time that the president had given credence to the possibility that the virus had leaked from a lab — a notion widely slammed as a conspiracy theory when Donald Trump first made the claim.

Current and former officials said there were several reasons why the Biden administration was willing publicly to entertain a theory that Democrats had once dismissed.
A crucial factor was that critics were more open to the lab-leak theory now that Trump, who was viewed as wanting to vilify China to deflect blame for his handling of the pandemic, was out of office.

They also said that Biden was reacting to what the intelligence had found. He is now under political pressure to find answers.

“The Biden administration has now studied the mountain of disturbing evidence that we were confronted with in the last few months of the Trump administration,” said David Asher, who led a state department investigation into the origins of Covid. “It is jaw dropping. And as they have noted, a great deal more needs to be assessed.”

Days before Biden was sworn in, the state department issued a fact sheet on the Wuhan institute which said that several researchers had fallen ill with Covid-like symptoms before the first publicly known case. It also said that the institute had worked secretly with the Chinese military.

Critics did not take the claim seriously because of the view that Mike Pompeo, secretary of state, tended to politicise intelligence. People were also focused on the aftermath of the riots on January 6 and the inauguration.

“We assumed the fact sheet wasn’t going to make immediate headlines. We wanted to put the information into the record so that people could reckon with these facts when tensions and fevers had dropped,” said David Feith, a former state department official who was involved in the release.

In March, Asher said publicly that some Wuhan staff were so sick that they were admitted to hospital. That and a recent Wall Street Journal story that three staff were hospitalised helped focus attention on the lab-leak theory.

But one person familiar with the debate said the driving factor was a shift among scientists who had been wary of helping Trump before the election or angering influential scientists who had dismissed the theory. He said this had helped make Democrats more willing to consider the theory.

“The most important thing that has happened is that prominent virologists have since spoken out,” he said.

In a letter to the Science journal, a group of 18 prominent scientists said that both theories were “viable” and should be taken “seriously” until sufficient data were obtained. They said the recent investigation that the World Health Organization conducted with China had not given balanced consideration to both scenarios.
“Even those of us working the issue inside the government were not well aware of how much scientific opinion was on our side because scientists were generally not speaking up, but you have had certain dams break over the past few months,” said Feith, referring to developments including the letter and the WHO investigation.

Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, also appeared to change his stance. Last year, he said the science “strongly indicates” that the virus emerged naturally, but he recently said he was “not convinced” and backed an investigation.

While Biden was just outlining the view of the intelligence community in his highly unusual statement, his willingness to make their tentative conclusions public also shone more attention on the lab-leak theory.

Mathew Burrows, a former senior intelligence official, said he could not remember a president making such a statement, saying that they have historically not wanted to be viewed as trying to force a conclusion.

“There are obviously Republicans who are trying to criticise anything that would seem to be a weak response to China, so I think Biden wants to show that he will not shy away from charging them [China] if there is united agreement in the intelligence community on the fact that the virus came out of the Wuhan lab,” Burrows said.

Mike Gallagher, a Republican congressman who has introduced a bill to declassify all the intelligence related to the investigation, also said that Biden appeared to be responding to political pressure, particularly after members of his team called on China to allow a transparent investigation — something few experts believe Beijing will allow.

“Biden was feeling the pressure,” said Gallagher. “They felt a little bit of blowback . . . but it’s a good move.”

One person familiar with the situation said the National Intelligence Council, which collates information from the entire intelligence community, produced two reports last year assessing US intelligence on the origins of Covid-19. The director for national intelligence declined to comment.

Those efforts, coupled with a third “scrub” of the intelligence this year, led to Biden saying last week that two of the 18 branches of the intelligence community leaned towards the natural origin scenario, while a third was more inclined towards the lab-leak theory.
Biden said the three had only “low or moderate confidence” in their conclusions while the other branches did not have enough evidence. That has sparked concern that 90 days is not sufficient for intelligence officials to reach any solid determination.

“The community as a whole is far away from reaching anything that we could call even a halfway firm conclusion,” said Paul Pillar, a former senior CIA official. “The fact that many of the agencies involved have not reached a consensus even for a ‘low confidence’ judgment tells you they’re a long way away from anything conclusive.”

Follow Demetri Sevastopulo on Twitter