

Elon Musk's 'lab leak' tweets could be an issue for Tesla's plans in China

CNBC reports *The Global Times*, a state-run paper in China, has warned Elon Musk about pushing the covid "lab leak" theory. Reporter Eunice Yoon said the social media post asked if Musk is "breaking the pot of China," with a meaning similar to asking if he was biting the hand that feeds him.

Ever since Musk announced his intention to buy Twitter, it's seemed certain that at some point, the service's content would put him at odds with the Chinese Communist Party, as Nilay Patel wrote after the deal closed:

Are you excited for the Chinese government to find ways to threaten Tesla's huge business in that country over content that appears on Twitter? Because it's going to happen.

How fast we arrived at this most obvious sticking point is no surprise, but I'm still a bit shocked that this saber-rattling over something China doesn't like on Twitter has been posted by Elon Musk himself.

China is Tesla's second-largest market, home to one of its gigafactories, and is a source of materials that are key to making electric cars. *Bloomberg* reported in January that an expansion for Tesla's Shanghai factory was delayed due to the government's concern about Starlink, so this wouldn't be the first time his car company could be affected by other endeavors.

Musk was responding to tweets asserting as fact that the virus

originated in a Chinese laboratory. The tweets cited news, first reported by the *Wall Street Journal*, of a classified Energy Department report concluding, with “low confidence” that the Wuhan Institute of Virology was the source of the virus. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman called for the US government to “stop defaming China” and “politicizing” the process of tracing the origins of the virus. The *Global Times* post said Musk’s tweets and retweets are being used to “frame” China.

Twitter under Musk has predictably caved under government censorship pressure before, but now it’s the owner’s tweets that are the problem. Another *Bloomberg* report from 2021 noted how Tesla’s response to the government in China, with apologies and deference, is sharply different from the tone in the US, where Musk has at times hung up on government officials and invited followers to make up new acronyms for agencies like the SEC.

<https://www.theverge.com/2023/2/28/23619306/elon-musk-china-lab-leak-covid-tweets>