

US and UK clash over Huawei involvement in 5G rollout

By Robert Stevens
18 January 2020

The Trump administration is stepping up its threats against Boris Johnson's Conservative government ahead of a decision by the UK on whether to involve China's Huawei in Britain's next generation 5G broadband wireless networks.

The Tory government is pledged to rollout 5G nationally in order to boost the UK's competitiveness. The technology can enable wi-fi speeds 100-times faster than current 4G networks and is crucial to the operation and development of new technologies, including automated factories.

The US is vociferously opposed to allowing Huawei access and is threatened to cut off intelligence sharing with the UK. The US and Britain are the leading countries in the "Five Eyes" global intelligence and surveillance operation, along with Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The US has secured agreement from Australia to ban Huawei and Canada and New Zealand are under heavy pressure to follow suit.

According to several pro-Tory newspapers, Johnson will allow Huawei a limited role in building Britain's 5G network infrastructure—following approval by an upcoming meeting of the National Security Council (NSC). The NSC includes cabinet ministers and senior officials involved in foreign and defence policy, as well as representatives from the intelligence agencies and the armed forces.

According to the *Daily Mail* Wednesday, "the National Security Council is set to give the green light to Huawei when it meets at the end of this month." The *Daily Telegraph* wrote, "Despite ferocious US lobbying efforts and warnings over the threat of Chinese espionage, Huawei will probably be allowed in, albeit with caps on how much of its gear may be used, especially in the most sensitive 'core' parts of the UK network."

The decision over Huawei access has wracked successive Tory governments. Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, was forced to sack her defence secretary, Gavin Williamson, after he leaked the deliberations of an NSC meeting last April. The NSC had provided Huawei access in principle while barring it from core infrastructure. This was also opposed by then Home Secretary Sajid Javid, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt and Trade Secretary Liam Fox. The policy was only passed with the casting vote of May.

Williamson is a hawk, who advocated a defence policy of confronting China and particularly Russia. Such was the pressure being exerted by Washington that his leaks to the *Daily Telegraph* were the first deliberations of an NSC meeting ever made public.

Since then, US tensions with China have escalated, with the Trump administration levelling a raft of "America First" trade-war measures. Despite this week's US-China trade deal, most of the punitive measures against Beijing remain in place.

Huawei has been operating in the UK market for 17 years under a government-approved partnership with British Telecom. All four of Britain's mobile phone providers have already launched 5G and are using Huawei technology at the non-core level.

On Friday, *Sky News* reported that the two biggest UK phone networks, BT and Vodafone, are preparing to write a joint letter to Johnson next week stating that they back Huawei access. A letter from CEOs Philip Jansen and Nick Read will "offer qualified endorsement of any decision to allow Huawei to participate in the UK's 5G network" with a reporter saying they will argue "that Britain's digital economy risks being stunted if Huawei is banned."

Their intervention came after the Trump administration sent a delegation Monday of six senior officials to Downing Street to lay down the hard line. They included Matt Pottinger, deputy national security adviser, Christopher Ford, assistant secretary of state for international security and non-proliferation, and Robert Blair, special representative for international telecommunications policy.

The delegation presented what they claimed was "new technical information" about security risks posed by Huawei and reiterated their demand that the UK ban Huawei entirely from its 5G rollout. One delegation member said it was "nothing short of madness" to allow Huawei in, with the *Financial Times* citing an official present at the meeting who said, "It's the strong view and assessment by the US by a broad range of officials both political and professionals that any amount of equipment from untrusted Chinese vendors is too much."

The *Guardian* reported that the delegation "spoke to ministers on their visit as well as security officials. They also

lobbied Dominic Raab, the foreign secretary, when he was in Washington last week at the height of the Iran crisis.”

The newspaper was told by one delegate that “Donald Trump is watching closely.” The delegation, according to the *Guardian*, said it had even investigated the CVs of Huawei employees posted online and “concluded that about 100 Huawei staff had connections to the Chinese military or intelligence agencies.”

How far the US has been prepared to go was summed up in an interview of Defence Minister Ben Wallace with the *Sunday Times* ahead of the US visit. The *Times* noted that Wallace was “surprisingly outspoken about how aggressive the Trump administration has been about Huawei...” as “Trump, his national security adviser and his defence secretary have all threatened to cut off some intelligence to the UK if the National Security Council gives Huawei a green light.”

Wallace states, “They have repeatedly said that. They have been clear about that: President Trump, the national security adviser. The defence secretary said it personally to me directly when we met at NATO. It’s not a secret. They have been consistent. Those things will be taken into account when the government collectively decides to make a decision on it... Friends and enemies that are independent make you choose.”

Despite the threats, Johnson’s government is set to approve Huawei access to non-core parts of the network, meaning it would be allowed to install antennas, etc. Regarding the intelligence supplied by the US delegation, a UK government source issued a terse statement that “We’d already anticipated the kind of threat that the US material demonstrates and factored that into our planning.”

Sir Andrew Parker, the head of the UK’s domestic intelligence agency, MI5, backed up those advocating allowing access. The *Financial Times* stated, “Sir Andrew acknowledged that security concerns alone should not always ‘dominate and dictate’ a decision...” Parker told the FT he had “no reason to think” that London’s intelligence-sharing relationship with the US would be jeopardized by adopting Huawei’s technology.

Culture Secretary Nicky Morgan told *Bloomberg Television* that “5G is very important—and the roll-out of 5G—in terms of encouraging tech companies to be based here, so there are a number of different factors in making that decision.”

From among the ministers in May’s Cabinet who opposed China’s access, only Javid remains a minister under Johnson. According to reports, only two ministers in Johnson’s cabinet, Priti Patel and Wallace, are opposed to Huawei access. They are backed by senior Tory figures with connections to the military, including Tom Tugendhat, chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee in the last parliament, and Bob Seely.

This week Tugendhat told *Sky News*, “Of course you can individually guard every chicken, but isn’t it better not to let the fox into the hen house in the first place?”

In a posting on the influential *Conservative Home* web site

Seely warned that the UK was in danger of “sleepwalking into a decision we will regret in the years and decades to come.” He demanded, “Whoever becomes chair of the foreign or intelligence and security select committees needs to pledge to open immediate investigations into the suitability of Huawei.”

Johnson has been forced to walk a tightrope, given that his entire post-Brexit strategy is based around securing a free trade deal with the US and an ever-closer alliance with Washington.

Speaking to the BBC this week, he said, “We want to put in gigabit broadband for everybody.” In a pointed reference to the US he said, “Now if people oppose one brand or another then they have to tell us what’s the alternative.”

To this Johnson was sure to add, “On the other hand, let’s be clear, I don’t want, as the UK prime minister, to put in any infrastructure that is going to prejudice our national security or our ability to cooperate with Five Eyes intelligence partners [the UK, Canada, the US, New Zealand and Australia].”

Economically there is no alternative to Huawei, which recently became the top global supplier of mobile radio equipment. It is not only a leading developer of telecommunication technology, but is able to supply services far cheaper than rivals, including its main 5G rivals, Nokia and Ericsson. It is estimated that banning Huawei from access could cost the UK economy £6.8 billion.

While the US is publicly making security issues the centre of its objection to Huawei accessing its ally’s communications infrastructure, the US is primarily concerned with China’s rise as an economic competitor. This week, two US senators, Republican Richard Burr and Democrat Mark Warner, put forward a bill aimed at pushing back against China’s 5G dominance by offering to subsidise US companies working on the technology to the tune of \$750 million. At least \$500 million would also be on offer to companies that use “trusted and secure” equipment worldwide. But comparatively this is chicken feed.

The rollout of 5G globally is becoming an arena for the eruption of geopolitical tensions. Germany, with deep economic ties to Beijing—China is now the biggest source of growth for Germany’s carmakers—is currently deciding on whether to allow Huawei access. Chancellor Angela Merkel backs working with Huawei but is opposed by significant political figures in her ruling coalition. Last month, China’s ambassador to Germany warned, “If Germany were to make a decision that led to Huawei’s exclusion from the German market, there will be consequences... The Chinese government will not stand idly by.”

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