

Trump ramps up tensions with UK after Huawei 5G decision

By Thomas Scripps
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Boris Johnson's Conservative government has agreed a limited role for Chinese technology company Huawei in Britain's 5G telecommunications networks. The decision was made at a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) Tuesday.

Huawei will be excluded from the core parts of the network, which process information, and restricted to providing 35 percent of the equipment in the network periphery—base stations and antennas which connect user devices with the core. The company will also be barred from geographical areas around military bases and nuclear sites.

The fudge decision is a desperate attempt to placate the Trump administration and avoid a collision over basic issues of economy and security. It had clearly failed as soon as the decision was announced.

It follows a year of pressure from US officials determined to deny Huawei access to Britain's 5G network. Earlier this month, a US security delegation visited Downing Street to argue, "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 US threatened to cut off vital intelligence sharing arrangements with Britain if the deal with Huawei went ahead.

Claimed security concerns aside, the Trump administration's main aim is to hamstring China's technology sector and drive them out of markets as an economic competitor. They fear the British decision could set a precedent and open the way to the Chinese company in other countries.

UK security advisors have continued to insist that they are able to counter the security threat posed by Huawei. A Whitehall source said Tuesday, "We are clear-eyed about the challenge posed by Huawei, which we today confirm is a high-risk vendor... Our world-leading cyber-security experts know more about Huawei than any country in the world—and they are satisfied that with our tough approach and regulatory regime, any risks can be managed."

A critical motivator for the UK is that the economic costs of banning Huawei would be immense, with huge commercial interests at stake. A report commissioned by the UK's biggest network operators said restricting the use of Huawei would delay the launch of 5G technology by between 18 months and two years, costing the UK economy between £4.5 billion and £6.8 billion.

Huawei is a much cheaper option than its rivals in the 5G market and is already being used in their infrastructure—under supervision—by three out of four of the UK's mobile operators—EE, Vodafone and Three. Since 5G is being implemented on top of existing 4G networks which already contain Huawei technology, a ban would involve ripping elements of the current system apart, worsening the delay on rolling out the latest technology. 5G is considered essential to attracting new economic investment, particularly for technology and manufacturing companies.

Beijing had threatened "repercussions" if the UK enforced an outright ban on Huawei.

Refusing to accept the demands of the US has consequences. Trump's enforcer, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, warned on Twitter Sunday, "The UK has a momentous decision ahead on 5G."

Referencing an earlier tweet from the former Tory chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, who wrote a *Daily Mail* op-ed opposing Huawei's involvement, he continued, "British MP Tom Tugendhat gets it right: 'The truth is that only nations able to protect their data will be sovereign'."

Within minutes of the UK's announcement, the *Daily Telegraph* posted a letter "To the people of Britain" by Klon Kitchen, a 15-year US intelligence operative and member of the neo-con Heritage Foundation. Kitchen asked, "Why bother with the struggle of leaving the European Union only to run into the arms of the communist Chinese?"

Republican Senator Tom Cotton sent a statement to the *Daily Telegraph* saying, "I fear London has freed itself from Brussels only to cede sovereignty to Beijing. Allowing Huawei to build the UK's 5G networks today is like allowing the KGB to build its telephone network during the

Cold War... the US Director of National Intelligence should conduct a thorough review of US-UK intelligence sharing.”

Liz Cheney, daughter of the former vice president and unindicted war criminal, Dick Cheney, said, “If they’re going to have Huawei in their 5G we have to recalculate [and] reassess whether or not they can continue to be among the closest of our intel partners.”

Leading Republican Newt Gingrich tweeted, “British decision to accept Huawei for 5G is a major defeat for the United States [sic]. How big does Huawei have to get and how many countries have to sign with Huawei for the US government to realize we are losing the internet to China?”

Elise Stefanik, a Republican congresswoman with close ties to the military, tweeted, “Congress must work on a bipartisan basis to push back on this decision by the UK...”

Pompeo is due to begin a two-day meeting with Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab today.

The extent of the pressure from the US was reflected in Parliament Monday in the most significant rebellion Johnson has faced from the Tory Party since the December election. Tory grandee Sir Iain Duncan Smith began, “Given the fact that we are at war, in a sense... there is a cyber war going on... that we should think about giving a company which is heavily subsidised by China, a country that has set out to steal data non-stop, and also technology, that we think of giving to them that right to be in what is essentially a very, very delicate area of our technology...”

Long-time hawk Bob Seely asked, “Why is it argued that you could limit Huawei to the periphery of the network when Australia and the United States don’t agree, and when the head of Australia’s cyber agency says the distinction between core and edge in 5G collapses?”

Owen Paterson, a former cabinet minister, said, “If there is such a risk, and we know Sir Richard Dearlove, ex head of MI6 has said there is, we know there is a risk of losing key intelligence from our closest allies, what is the overwhelming advantage of this equipment that we are looking to take this risk?”

Tugendhat compared to move to “nesting a dragon into our critical national infrastructure.”

The government said Tuesday there would be a Parliamentary vote on the Huawei deal in the near future, with the *New Statesman* commenting that those Tories opposed “hope today is merely the opening salvo of a campaign that will see the government defeated.”

Home Secretary Priti Patel and Defence Secretary Ben Wallace were opposed to Huawei’s involvement, but were outvoted in the NSC by Johnson, Chancellor Sajid Javid and Cabinet Secretary Mark Sedwill. The *Sunday Times* reported that both were “on the warpath” over the pending Huawei

decision, saying that Johnson had been “bounced” by Whitehall officials into accepting a role for the Chinese company.

These right-wing, nationalist complaints were echoed in the Labour Party, with Shadow Culture Secretary Tracy Brabin stating, “The Tories refused to take our technological sovereignty seriously and failed to invest in home-grown alternatives to Huawei. As a result, they’re in the ludicrous position of having to choose between the UK’s security concerns and our infrastructure needs.”

The Scottish National Party took an identical line, with John Nicholson MP stating that the government had “chosen low cost over security” and Carol Monaghan MP stating that she did not know if it was “naivety or arrogance preventing the UK government from seeing the high risk being presented to security.”

Johnson is being brought face-to-face with the real cost of his Brexit strategy in the demand from Washington that the UK lines up four-square behind the US trade and military war drive against China. US/UK tensions first broke into the open in 2015 when then Prime Minister David Cameron agreed to participate in the China’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) against America’s wishes.

Now sharp divisions have emerged in the Tory Party, only recently united after the bloodbath over Brexit, on the eve of Britain’s exit from the European Union. With the UK departing the EU in just two days, it faces a rendezvous with disaster in its chosen partnership with Trump and his “America First” agenda. This threatens the trade deal Trump promised Johnson would be negotiated if he was able to secure Brexit and weaken another US rival, the EU, in the process.

On Monday, Tim Morrison, a former adviser to President Trump on his National Security Council, declared, “I’m concerned that, as the United Kingdom finally appears to be at least at the end of the beginning for Brexit, what this could mean for a US-UK trade agreement.”

Asked about the consequences for a US/UK trade deal he warned, “It becomes extremely difficult to see how you could get the votes on Capitol Hill [for such a deal].”

The author also recommends:

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[18 January 2020]

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