

UK set to ban Huawei from 5G network

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The global economic war initiated by the US against the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei has gone up another notch. The British government is now virtually certain to reverse its January decision to allow the corporation to have some limited participation in Britain's 5G mobile phone network.

The key factor in the about-turn, after months of denunciations of the UK decision by Washington, was the move by the Trump administration in May to ban the use of US software in Huawei's operating systems.

Previously the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) had concluded that the alleged security concerns raised by the US could be allayed so long as Huawei was excluded from critical networks.

However, following the US ban on the use of American software, the GCHQ is reported to have reversed its decision, advising that including Huawei would carry risks that could not be controlled.

The US has continually alleged either that Huawei functions as an espionage mechanism for the Chinese government or that it would be required to do so under Chinese law.

Both Huawei and another Chinese high-tech firm ZTE have denied enabling Beijing to conduct espionage, and the US has never published any evidence they have done so. Washington has continually insisted, however, that they could be forced to hand over data if that was demanded by the Chinese government and therefore must be excluded from the telecommunications networks of all US allies.

The rank hypocrisy of these assertions is evidenced by the fact that the major instigator of global spying and hacking operations is the US itself. As Huawei officials have previously pointed out, one of the main reasons for the US actions against the company is that, unlike American corporations, it provides no "backdoors" to US intelligence agencies.

The drive against Huawei is part of a series of actions

by the US to intensify global economic, political and military pressure against China. At the same time, Washington has maintained its pressure on allies such as Britain to fall into line, which now appears to have worked.

In a comment published in the Financial Times over the weekend, the former head of the British spy agency MI6, John Sawers, set out the claims which will be employed to reverse the January decision on Huawei as he sought to portray China as an aggressor.

"The last six months," he wrote, "have revealed more about China under President Xi Jinping than the previous six years. China is overplaying its hand and giving Western leaders no option but to stand up to it."

In January, he wrote, the UK had found what he said was a "reasonable balance" in limiting Huawei's role in Britain's 5G network, but that US sanctions on China had "shifted the parameters" on its potential involvement in British telecoms.

The latest US sanctions—the ban on the sale of software as well as the designation of Huawei and ZTE as national security threats—mean that "reliable non-Chinese suppliers can no longer work with the company. UK intelligence services can therefore no longer provide the needed assurances that Chinese-made equipment is still safe to use in the UK's telecoms network."

Sawers made clear the Huawei decision is part of the wider agenda for action against China and pointed to the need for "new leadership in the US that would help create a common front that includes Japan, South Korea, and India, as well as the US, EU, UK, Canada and Australia."

The reference to "new leadership" is based on the recognition that such a common front, all the major powers, would proceed even further under a Biden presidency, as key sections of the military and intelligence agencies, for which the Democrats speak,

are coming to regard Trump as being too “soft” on China.

These views were articulated in an article published in Defense One earlier this month in which it said the 2017 US National Security Strategy, focusing on “great power competition” with stronger measures against China, would be pursued “much more robustly” under a Biden administration.

A decision to ban Huawei in the UK will prove very costly, potentially running into billions of dollars and will be less efficient.

When the Johnson government initially gave approval for Huawei in January, the Financial Times reported it had repeatedly asked Washington if it could provide alternative technology, but to no avail.

“We have been asking for almost a year, but there has been no answer at all,” one unnamed official told the FT.

The increase in costs arises from the fact that 5G does not replace the existing 4G network but is based on it. Huawei is deeply involved in the UK 4G network, and its technology is not compatible with other systems. This means telecom companies will have to spend large amounts of money to reconfigure their already existing systems, a process that will slow down the rollout of 5G.

But such economic considerations are being dispensed with in favour of geostrategic objectives in which increasingly aggressive measures against China are front and center.

This push is backed by a significant section of the Conservative Party. Even before the latest US sanctions, leading Tories had been threatening an “insurgency” against any decision to include Huawei in the 5G system.

Sir Iain Duncan-Smith, one of the leaders of the Conservatives’ 59-member Huawei Interest Group, warned, “Unless the government now really takes a firm lead, they will find that Parliament leads dramatically.”

At a virtual press conference on Monday, China’s Ambassador to the UK Liu Xiaoming denounced the impending decision, saying it would damage Chinese trust in the UK and undermine any belief that Britain could carry out a foreign policy independent of the US. Banning Huawei would send out a “very bad message to other Chinese businesses,” he added.

He said China wanted to be a “friend and partner,” but “if you want to make China a hostile country, you will have to bear the consequences.”

The ambassador then made an appeal to British imperialist interests and the personal motivations of Johnson, who fancies himself as a modern-day Winston Churchill and would like nothing so much as a revival of the “glory days” of the British Empire.

“If you dance to the tune of other countries,” he said, “how can you call yourselves Great Britain?”



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