



London Has Second Thoughts About Huawei

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Only months after officially announcing its decision to partner with Chinese tech giant Huawei in building 5G telecom technology for the United Kingdom, the administration of Prime Minister Boris Johnson now appears to be reconsidering the move. Facing growing political opposition at home, including from his own Conservative Party, Johnson in late May revealed that he had tasked his government with creating a roadmap to eliminate Huawei's footprint in British 5G telecom infrastructure by 2023.

The decision by Downing Street is part of a broader political shift now underway in the U.K. Parliament has just announced the formation of a China Research Group, led by Select Committee on Foreign Policy Chair Tom Tugendhat, to examine the potential dangers of economic and political coupling with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Additionally, there is now a growing chorus of political voices agitating for a reversal of the Huawei decision. The Foreign Affairs Committee of the British House of Commons has gone so far as to send a formal letter to Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab that publicly questions the Johnson administration's strategy vis-à-vis China.

The reasons have everything to do with the coronavirus. China's duplicitous handling of the pandemic has roiled opinion in the U.K. and left trust between the two nations at an all-time low. When asked in a recent multi-country poll carried out by McLaughlin and Associates whether they would trust China to protect their personal privacy on the internet, 76 percent of British respondents answered "no."

Nor is Britain the only country rethinking its ties to the PRC. A number of European nations, for example, are revisiting the prudence of close political proximity to China and its corporate appendages. In a recent interview with *The American Interest*, Reiherd Bütikofer, former chair of Germany's Green Party and a current European Union parliamentarian, defined the Continent's conundrum this way: "We're still willing to partner with China where possible, but it would be folly to assume that you can be systemic rivals on Monday and then go back to partnering for the rest of the week as if you were not."

Britain, however, is a special case. The U.K.'s impending exit from the European Union, which is now unfolding, has forced London into the delicate position of forming bilateral trade relations. This, in turn, has elevated the importance of Britain's ties to China—and to the United States. The Trump administration, for its part, has used this leverage to warn London against putting its trust in Huawei, and urged British politicians to seek alternatives to partnering with China on 5G.

The rationale behind America's objections is compelling. As a recent study by the American Foreign Policy Council amply underscores, global security would inevitably be compromised by such a partnership because it would provide the Chinese government with a window into how Western governments and their militaries operate.

But despite these warnings, Johnson's administration decided to press on with Huawei (although it tried to mitigate the damage somewhat by capping Huawei's access to 35 percent of the emerging telecom network). That, however, was before the outbreak of the coronavirus, which has fundamentally called into question China's trustworthiness and transparency among many foreign publics, the British people included.

Johnson's response has been to call for a plan to reduce Huawei's role in British networks by 2023. That approach reflects a stark reality; simply put, the U.K. does not have viable alternatives to the Chinese tech giant, in terms of cost efficiency and effectiveness. Indeed, companies like Nokia and Ericsson currently supply 5G technologies in Europe, but these options are arguably not as advanced as Huawei.

Yet one could still emerge—and sooner rather than later. The British government recently announced the formation of the D10, a club of democracies aimed at finding an alternative to Huawei. The group would include G7 countries, along with Australia, India and South Korea. Washington has reportedly already been briefed on the initiative.

It's an idea worth nurturing. Under the auspices of such a group, democratic nations could pool resources to channel investment into technology companies based in member states and set common standards for information security and assurance that would benefit all involved. Perhaps most importantly, they could demonstrate conclusively (the way countries like India have done) that there is an alternative to simply acquiescing to Chinese technological superiority.

Beijing, for its part, is worried about precisely that sort of an about-face. China's official *China Daily*, a mouthpiece for the country's ruling Communist Party, has warned ominously that the U.K. "will meet retaliatory responses" if Huawei is, in fact, banned. But this bluster masks a growing Chinese concern about changing global public opinion—and the consequences that might result from it.

If London's latest decision is any indication, Beijing has good reason to be concerned.

