

China-US Relations: Mixed Returns for the Huawei Bashing Tour

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Global Research, February 24, 2020

Region: [Asia, USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

The US imperium is rattled, so much so it's letting everyone else know about it. Move over the trade war with its bitchy insistence on redressing imbalances, surpluses and deficits; the next phase of conflict with China is being waged in matters of technology, with Huawei's 5G prowess featuring prominently. As the veteran Australian journalist Tony Walker [soberly notes](#), "The ultimate destination of this conflict is unclear, but its ramifications will scar international relationships for decades to come."

The Munich Security Conference saw US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary Mark Esper particularly vocal on the issue of Huawei. Both intended their visit to be a warning against European states who might succumb to China's 5G temptation. "Reliance on Chinese 5G vendors," [warned Esper](#), "could render our partners' critical systems vulnerable to disruption, manipulations and espionage." Cue the necessary critique of Beijing, which sounded like a faux Churchillian warning about imminent danger.

"The Chinese Communist Party is heading even faster and further in the wrong direction with more internal repression, more predatory behaviour, more heavy-handedness and a more aggressive military posture. It is essential that the international community wake up to this challenge."

Instructions were also relayed from the White House to Germany's US ambassador Richard Grenell to "make clear that any nation who chooses to use an untrustworthy 5G vendor" risked compromising intelligence sharing arrangements with the US "at the highest level".

Even President Donald Trump's opponents made an appearance. US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi [was grim](#) before delegates attending the MSC; dealing with the Chinese telco only offered absolutes, not degrees. "This is about choosing autocracy over democracy on the information highway." Making arrangements with the company was akin to "putting the state police in the pocket of every consumer in these countries, because of the Chinese way." Not exactly culturally fleet-footed, to say the least.

Pelosi had appeared in the full rhetorical regalia of a wounded, challenged empire. "This is the information highway of the now, and why should we want to give license to the Chinese to direct the traffic on that information highway of the future?"

The US has also been enlisting its support from loyal, unflinching deputies on the Huawei bashing circuit. Consider the [solemn note](#) in *The Strategist* by the Australian director of the signals directorate, Simeon Gilding. Its tone is one of sad resignation, regret, and schoolmarmish, notably on the British decision to permit Huawei some limited role.

“It is disappointing that the Brits are doing the wrong thing on 5G, having not exhausted other possibilities. Instead they have doubled down on a flawed and outdated cybersecurity model to convince themselves that they can manage the risk that Chinese intelligence services could use Huawei’s access to UK telco networks to insert bad code.”

Australia, in fact, has gone beyond the call of ingratiation, a point that has not been lost on Beijing’s good offices. In 2018, Andrew Shearer, then deputy head of the Office of National Intelligence, and Alastair MacGibbon, formerly of the Australian Cyber Security Centre, took it upon themselves [to demonise Huawei](#), paving the ground for the company’s exclusion from supplying 5G technology that same year. Both made it their missions to convince the United Kingdom to stay clear of the company.

As an unnamed source reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* [claimed at the time](#), “We made representations to the UK on why our stance was taken ... it’s been respectful. It’s a bit like a fight at a family lunch where people might go home sore but they quickly realise blood is thicker than water.”

Last year, Australian officials [scurried to New Delhi](#) to drum up support against Huawei from their Indian counterparts. “Indian officials,” according to the *Australian Financial Review*, “were keen to get an understanding of how the Turnbull government arrived at the decision to ban Huawei, and multiple discussions have been held on the matter.”

This whole endeavour has been a bit much for China’s ambassador to Australia, Cheng Jingye, who has been particularly vocal on the subject, [describing](#) the measure as “politically motivated”, “a discrimination against the Chinese company. At the same time, it doesn’t serve the best interest of the Australian companies and consumers.” For the ambassador, approaches have been made to the authorities in Canberra “to explore what security risks or concerns [they] have. And also they have pledged, I think publicly, to conclude a no-backdoor agreement.”

Gains made by the US side of the table at the Munich Security Conference, certainly on the issue of Huawei, were minimal. The Munich Security Report published this year spoke of “Westlessness”, though the US delegation bellowed the point “western values” were winning, whatever shape victory had taken. The only thing missing in Pompeo’s delivery was the draping of the Stars and Stripes. A sense of which way the wind was blowing was gathered in the opening remarks of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who landed a neat blow against Trump’s foreign policy. The US, [he suggested](#), had rejected “the very concept of the international community ... ‘Great again’ but at the expense of neighbours and partners.”

European counterparts such as French President Emmanuel Macron are intent on taking a line similar to the UK. The position on China is unsurprising, a traditional Gallic resentment at the flexing of US muscle. French junior economy minister Agnès Pannier-Runacher [told BFM Business television](#) in November last year that, “The government will not exclude anyone. We are not following the position of the United States.” Huawei, she noted, had “a 25 percent market share” along with such tech giants as Nokia and Ericsson.” Samsung, she added, was also keen to be involved in supplying 5G in the French market.

US legislators detected some hope in Germany, with lawmakers from Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Party [backing a strategy paper](#) with the potential to prevent

Huawei's involvement in the country's 5G plans. But no outright ban is countenanced, with Merkel taking the cautious line that all companies be subject to similar security safeguards.

The outcome of the chattering, bickering and sides swiping from Munich, apart from limited success in the Huawei bashing stakes, was this: expect the information highway over the coming years, whoever is controlling it, setting the tolls, adjusting the metres, to be a rather potholed one.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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