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USA/China

Worrying About Huawei: Is China Winning the G5 Race?

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Prefatory Note:The following post contains my responses to questions posed by Sputnik News Agency a few days ago. The effort to warn European countries not to use equipment from the Chinese telecom giant, Huawei, is part warning and part threat. It claims to be a matter of security, but seems like an effort to avoid the competitive challenge posed by the superior technology of Huawei by claiming a threat to the security of European countries because China will be able to engage in unauthorized data surveillance. Waiting for American counterpart technology is a way of saying our surveillance will be less of a problem in the future than would a comparable Chinese capability. Underneath, one wonders whether this is a matter of protecting American business interests. In any event,

It is, at best, unusual for an American Secretary of State to warn foreign governments in a public speech about a specific foreign company.

Sputnik: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned European countries on Monday that using technology from Huawei could hurt their relationship with the United States. Speaking in Hungary, the first stop in a five-nation European tour, Pompeo said the United States has an obligation to alert other governments to the risks of building networks with equipment from the Chinese telecommunications giant.

What is your response such statements? Do you consider such steps diplomatically appropriate?

We cannot take Mr. Pompeo's statements at face value, and must consider several lines of possible explanation.

First of all, what is the basic motivation for such warnings to European countries with respect to Huawei? Is it primarily economic or political? If economic, it is a matter of gaining leverage for American and maybe European competitors of Huawei. It should be realized in this connection that Huawei mobile phones have been almost totally excluded from the American market on the basis of what is probably a specious argument, namely, that it gives China a backdoor entry to private communications among Americans. In this sense, the issue is really about economic competition with regard to the lucrative 5G network being currently constructed on a country by country basis, with the American complaint being disguised as one of security. Highly relevant is the fact that U.S. companies are reported to be one or two years behind Huawei's 5G technological capabilities.

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Even if it is political, in part, endangering privacy, encroaching on national sovereignty, and giving China some potential geopolitical advantages, the strong impression is that Pompeo is worried about China gaining influence in Europe at the expense of the United States. Pompeo's argument is, at best, slanted and disingenuous.

The US, as the Snowden disclosures showed several years ago, is engaged in by far the largest mega-data collection operation going on in the world, and there is no reason to think that it has abandoned such efforts to control global surveillance capabilities.

I believe Pompeo's warning that if Hungary and other governments in Europe do business with Huawei on the

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5G network it would become more difficult for us to partner with you is both a political and economic attempt to discourage normal dealing with this Chinese company. It also tells the peoples and governments of Europe that are better off being vulnerable to American 5G penetration than to Chinese penetration.

This kind of threat diplomacy is rather normal in international relations, at least behind closed doors, although it is not consistent with seeking friendly overall international relations. During the Trump presidency what has usually been discussed discreetly and non-provocatively in the past is now shouted from the rooftops. Such a crude diplomacy naturally raises global tensions, and gives rise to retaliatory threats and countermoves. It is not surprising, then, to learn that there are rumors of Chinese responses, threatening the operations of American companies doing business in China.

As for the alleged American concerns about the privacy rights of Europeans and the sanctity of national sovereignty, an element of hypocrisy is present. Surely, the United States has for decades engaged in extensive surveillance operations globally that pose grave threats to privacy and sovereign rights of all countries, including its friends and allies. To complain about China is to give the false impression that other political actors in the West have not pushed the boundaries of technology precisely to gain intelligence advantages and possible leverage for intervention in the internal affairs of other countries to the extent that they possess the technological capacity to do so. As with recent complaints about influencing foreign elections, the U.S. Government objects to practices that it has long and extensively relied upon to spread its influence in violation of the sovereign rights of foreign nations. Such habitual practice does not make it justifiable, but it does undercut a posture of outrage and innocence.

These considerations should be understood in any adequate evaluation of Pompeo's warning about Huawei.

How are the EU states likely to react? Will they shun away from using Huawei technology?

It is very difficult to anticipate how the states in Europe will react, and whether this reaction will be a unified EU response or depend on economic and political assessments made by each European government. There are current indications, for instance, of an internal conflict in the Czech Republic as between its intelligence agency that has conveyed warnings similar to those of Pompeo and with the Czech president, Milos Zeman, who seeks to avoid trouble with China over such concerns because he fears it might spoil present positive commercial and diplomatic relations.

On a geopolitical plane, especially in an EU or NATO context, this competitive view of 5G as between China and the United States, creates a situation of fundamental choice for Europe. In view of Trump's rather dismissive approach to the traditional core alliance relations, the EU and the main governments in Europe are given an opportunity to send Washington two crucial messages: first, "the Cold War is over, we will seek greater national and regional independence in pursuing our interests;" secondly, "don't take our friendship and solidarity for granted any longer or we will go elsewhere, and there are places to go."

There is finally the underlying question of technology. Is Huawei ahead of the game, and likely to stay there, making it advantageous for Europe to be linked with this Chinese company rather than waiting around for an uncertain equivalent development by American companies? Are there European potential competitors for the supply of this technology that would be more reliable and beneficial with respect to maximizing Europe's future private and public sector interests. Such European capabilities with regard to G5 network, repairs, and supplies might also give the EU and its members an option of equidistance diplomacy, being neither dependent upon or vulnerable to pressure exerted by either Beijing or Washington.

In effect, there are many issues that remain to be interpreted and commented upon in relation to Pompeo's

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rather unusual statements in Hungary. His remarks need also to be connected with the recent detention of Chief Financial Officer of Huawei and daughter of the CEO, Meng Wanzhou, in Canada on several charges, including stealing trade secrets from U.S. companies leading to an American formal request for extradition.

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