

It's not too late to keep Huawei's 5G tech out of the U.K., Sen. Warner says

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Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., talks with the media in Russell Building on Wednesday, April 10, 2019. On Thursday he said there's still time for the U.K. to decide against Huawei technology when building the country's 5G network. (Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call file photo)

The U.K. may still be persuaded to bar China's Huawei Technologies from building the country's 5G network, Sen. Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee told reporters Thursday.

"I don't think it's too late," Warner said. But the U.K.'s decision may be complicated because the country's existing telecom network already has an "enormous amount of Huawei equipment embedded" in it.

[Despite U.S. spying warnings, Huawei 5G reportedly gets U.K. approval]

U.S. allies are struggling to balance their need to have secure telecom equipment and continue cooperating with the United States while also being able to afford the heavy investment the switch to 5G entails, Warner said.

“Most of our allies realize this problem but it’s hard when even with some of the European nations, where Huawei will come in and offer a price point that is 20 percent or 30 percent less than their competitors, will offer zero percent financing and 100 percent financing to overcome the economic challenge,” Warner said at a breakfast meeting organized by the Christian Science Monitor.

American allies are pushing back and asking Washington how it intends to handle the fact that some of the smaller U.S. telecom companies also use Huawei equipment in their current generation networks, Warner said.

[Mueller report: Russia hacked state databases and voting machine companies]

In late 2016, Japan, Australia and South Korea were the first to raise alarms about China’s growing clout in 5G technologies built on the back of stolen intellectual property and forced return of Chinese students from abroad with technical skills, Warner said. “Frankly there was a missed opportunity at the end of the Obama administration” to build a coalition of countries to push back on Beijing’s flouting of international rules and norms, he said.

Warner said he supports President Donald Trump’s tough stance on China’s trade practices but “I’m extraordinarily afraid . . . he’s going to do some deal with China where he maybe sells another \$100 billion of soybeans and declares victory and we lose the challenge on intellectual property and emerging technologies like 5G.”

The United States has been pressing its closest allies including the group of nations — Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom — with which it shares intelligence information to not allow Huawei to build their 5G networks. Top U.S. officials have repeatedly said Huawei has close ties with China’s intelligence agencies and the use of its 5G equipment would guarantee Beijing has access to all Western secrets that will travel the emerging network.

[Cybersecurity budget up 5 percent in 2020, White House says]

Gen. Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has told lawmakers that if U.S. allies were to start using Huawei equipment, Washington’s capacity to share intelligence with them will suffer. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo repeated that warning this week, after leaked news reports emerged in the past month saying British Prime Minister Theresa May had approved the use of Huawei equipment in a closed door cabinet meeting.

“We don’t believe you can have those technologies in your systems and still have a trusted network,” Pompeo said in an interview with Sky News on Wednesday.

“The United States, for its part, will only participate in trusted networks,” Pompeo said. “We will only share America’s information with those networks that we are confident aren’t under the control of China or China’s government.”

Australia has banned Huawei from building the country's 5G networks, while other close U.S. intelligence partners including Canada and New Zealand have yet to reach a conclusion. Germany has said it would not outright ban Huawei.

Huawei denies that it works on behalf of Beijing and is suing the United States over a ban on the use of the company's equipment in U.S. government networks.

With a combination of a large number of smaller antennas, higher frequency radio waves and technologies that can move data bits around faster and more efficiently than current networks, 5G may be able to offer download speeds of 20 gigabits per second on a mobile network, compared with one gigabit on current 4G networks. The combination of high speeds and low latency, or delay, is expected to underpin a whole new economy with autonomous cars, internet-connected devices and remotely operated factories.

Separately, the U.K.'s National Cyber Security Center in March issued an assessment that said Huawei cannot be counted on to make equipment without bugs and security gaps.

The assessment also concluded "Huawei's software component management is defective, leading to higher vulnerability rates and significant risk of unsupportable software."