

Pushing China's Huawei Out: Australia, the Solomon Islands and the Internet

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Be wary of the Chinese technological behemoth, goes the current cry from many circles in Australia's parliament. Cybersecurity issues are at stake, and the eyes of Beijing are getting beadier by the day.

The seedy involvement of Australia in the Solomon Islands, ostensibly to block the influence of a Chinese company's investment venture, is simply testament to the old issues surrounding empire: If your interests are threatened, you are bound to flex some muscle, snort a bit, and, provided its not too costly, get your way. Not that Canberra's muscle is necessarily taut or formidable in any way.

The inspiration behind Canberra's intervention was an initial contract between Huawei and the Solomon Islands involving the Chinese giant in a major role building the high-speed telecommunications cable between Sydney and Honiara. Even more disconcerting might be the prospects that it would work, supplying a cable that would enable the Chinese to peer into the Australia's own fallible network.

What made this particular flexing odd was the spectacle of an Australian prime minister congratulating himself in securing tax payer funding for the building of a 4,000 kilometre internet cable even as the domestic National Broadband Network stutters and groans. Another juicy point is that Huawei was banned from applying for tendering for the NBN in 2012.

As the world's second largest maker of telecommunications equipment [was told](#),

"there is no role for Huawei in Australia's NBN".

The then **Attorney-General Nicola Roxon** [explained](#) that the move was "consistent with the government's practice for ensuring the security and resilience of Australia's critical infrastructure more broadly." Better an incompetent local provider of appropriate "values" than a reliable foreign entity.

The move against Huawei has largely centred on fears voiced by the intelligence community in various states that Beijing might be getting a number up on their competitors. In February this year, the FBI Director [Chris Wray](#) expressed the US government's concern "about the risks of allowing any company or entity that is beholden to foreign governments that don't share our values to gain positions of power inside our telecommunications

networks.” Doing so would enable them to “maliciously modify or steal information” and provide “the capacity to conduct undetected espionage.”

Such comments tend to suggest envy; the US intelligence community chiefs know all too well that they, not a foreign entity, should have the means to conduct their own variant of undetected espionage on the citizens of the Republic, not to mention the globe.

The concerns fomented by Huawei’s alleged profile are such to have featured in the telecommunications sector security reforms pushed by the Turnbull government. When they come into effect in September, they would permit the government “to provide risk advice to mobile network operators or the relevant minister to issue a direction.”

Labor backbencher **Michael Danby** has also [pushed the line](#) that Huawei is materially compromised by its links to the Chinese Communist Party, a point that only becomes relevant because of its expertise in technology infrastructure. By all means allow Chinese companies to “build a fruit and vegetable exporting empire in the Ord and Fitzroy River” but be wary of the electronic backdoor.

“On matters like the electronic spine of Australia, the new 5G network which will control the internet of things – automatically driven cars, lifts, medical technology – I don’t think it’s appropriate to sell or allow a company like Huawei to participate.”

Certain figures backing Australian intervention can be found, though they tend to take line of ignoble Chinese business instincts. [Robert Iroga](#) of the Solomon Islands Business Magazine noted that no public tender was made, with Huawei getting “the right... this is where the big questions of governance comes.”

[Ruth Liloqula](#) of Transparency Solomon Islands spoke of “paying under the table to make sure that their applications and other things are top of the pile.” None of these actions, however, are above the conduct of Australia’s own officials, who tend to assume that matters of purity seem to coincide with those of self-interest.

The message from Canberra has fallen on appropriate ears. [Penny Williams](#), Canberra’s Deputy Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, told her counterparts in the Solomons that a study had been commissioned on the undersea cable project. Miracle of miracles, it “found a number of solutions that would provide Solomon Islands with a high speed internet connection from Australia at a competitive price.”

DFAT’s head of the Undersea Cable Task Force [Pablo Kang](#) also had the necessary sweeteners for his target audience; the project, appropriately managed by Australia, would be *cheaper* than the Huawei alternative.

It will be a delightfully grotesque irony should the Internet speed on the Solomons be quicker than their Australian counterparts, who specialise in lagging behind other countries. In May, the [Speedtest Global Index](#), which provides monthly rankings of mobile and fixed broadband speeds across the globe, found Australia languishing at an inglorious 56 on the ladder. (A relatively impoverished Romania comes in at an impressively kicking number 5.) Should that happen, the political establishment in Honiara will feel they have gotten the steal of the decade.

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