Trump administration forces Facebook and Google to drop Hong Kong cable

Enlarge / Police on the streets of Hong Kong, where demonstrators continue to protest the erosion of freedoms.

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Google and Facebook have withdrawn plans to build an undersea cable between the United States and Hong Kong after the Trump administration raised national security concerns about the proposal. On Thursday, the companies submitted a revised plan that bypasses Hong Kong but includes links to Taiwan and the Philippines that were part of the original proposal.

One of the original project's partners, Hong Kong company Pacific Light Data Communication, has been dropped.

Federal law requires a license from the Federal Communications Commission to build an undersea cable connecting the United States with a foreign country. When Google and Facebook submitted their application for an undersea cable connecting the US to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Philippines, a committee of federal agencies led by the Justice Department recommended against approving the connection to Hong Kong, citing the "current national security environment."

The Trump administration cited "the [People's Republic of China] government's sustained efforts to acquire the sensitive

personal data of millions of U.S. persons” as a reason to deny the application.

The proposed cable’s “high capacity and low latency would encourage U.S. communications traffic crossing the Pacific to detour through Hong Kong before reaching intended destinations in other parts of the Asia Pacific region,” the government argued.

Until recently, Hong Kong enjoyed a significant amount of autonomy from China’s government in Beijing, allowing Hong Kong to offer its citizens substantially stronger civil liberties than those enjoyed on the mainland. That, in turn, gave companies greater comfort doing business in Hong Kong.

But in recent months, the firewall between Hong Kong and the mainland has collapsed. A new national security law gives the mainland government the power to arrest Hong Kongers for vague offenses like “separatism” and “subversion.” As a result, Western governments and companies are increasingly treating Hong Kong as just another city in China.

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