

Trump's latest explanation for the Huawei ban is unacceptably bad

Over the past week, the US government has taken extreme and unprecedented steps against Huawei, cutting it off from every US partner at the risk of a long-term rupture in trade between the US and China. But while the impact of the order is clear, it's still not entirely clear why it was put in place.

The official explanation, according to the initial executive order, is that Huawei hardware puts the US at risk for espionage. As the order puts it, "foreign adversaries are increasingly creating and exploiting vulnerabilities in information and communications technology and services," and the "unrestricted acquisition or use" of hardware made by foreign adversaries makes those vulnerabilities worse.

Are Huawei phones bound for Europe really a US security risk?

It's a convincing case when it comes to restricting Huawei's role in network infrastructure, and it's a case a number of officials have made in that context. But it makes a lot less sense for exported hardware. Why shouldn't Corning glass or Micron flash memory be sold to Huawei for use in phones bound for Europe? Huawei doesn't sell phones within the US, so the infrastructure security argument doesn't make as much sense. And if the problem is really just that China has a history of intellectual property violations and trade secret theft, the same logic might apply just as easily to Chinese companies like Lenovo or dronemaker DJI, with catastrophic consequences for those companies and the industry at large.

Complicating all of this is the growing trade war, which is

taking place on a largely separate diplomatic track. For more than a year now, Trump has been placing an escalating series of tariffs on Chinese imports in order to force leaders to the bargaining table, with China retaliating with its own tariffs, and increased tension as various summits have fallen through. From afar, it's easy to see the measures against Huawei as part of that same logic: pressure placed on China's economy to extract concessions down the road. But if that's true, offering a national security justification would be both dishonest and diplomatically counterproductive, doing lasting damage to America's credibility in the event that a genuine security threat emerges.

All that was in the background on Thursday afternoon, when Trump addressed the press after an event with agricultural groups. When a reporter asked Trump about the moves against Huawei, his answer was troubling. (The video footage is [here](#), if you want to see it for yourself; it starts about 41 minutes in.)

TRUMP: Huawei is something that's very dangerous. You look at what they've done from a security standpoint, from a military standpoint, it's very dangerous. So it's possible that Huawei even would be included in some kind of a trade deal. If we made a deal, I could imagine Huawei being possibly included in some form, some part of a trade deal.

REPORTER: How would that look?

TRUMP: It would look very good for us.

REPORTER: But the Huawei part, how would you design that.

TRUMP: Oh it's too early to say. We're just very concerned about Huawei from a security standpoint.

There are two claims here, which Trump makes quite clearly: First, that the restrictions were placed on Huawei because the

company is a security threat, and second, that the restrictions against Huawei could potentially be lifted as part of a trade deal.

These two claims are incompatible – or to be more precise, they only make sense if the security threat is a bluff. You can't negotiate away a security threat as part of a trade deal, for the simple reason that China can't credibly promise that it will stop spying. No matter what deal Trump signs, China's spy agencies will continue to seek out valuable information within the US. If Huawei was a threat before the deal, it will be just as much of a threat afterwards.

It only makes sense if the security threat is a bluff, but that would be very bad

Of course, if Huawei wasn't really a security threat, and Trump just used that as an excuse to escalate the trade war, that would be even worse. The national security world runs on confidential intelligence, and life-or-death operations often need to be undertaken for reasons that can't be made public. On those occasions, the president and other government leaders can only tell part of the story, and beyond that, they need the public to trust that there's a valid national security concern for concealing the rest. That trust has taken a hit in recent years, often for good reason, but it's an important part of what it means to have a functioning intelligence service. Rolling back massive restrictions in the wake of a trade deal would be catastrophic to that credibility, and trust in this institution is the main reason we have to believe Huawei is a threat in the first place.

I don't know why the executive order was put in place. It's genuinely plausible that the threat described in the order is real. It may be that Trump was simply speaking out of turn and the company won't be part of any broader deal. But whatever the facts, it's the President's job to justify his actions to the public, to present these measures against Huawei as part of some broader plan undertaken for the good of the country.

Trump's executive order has caused immense chaos and concern, not just for Huawei but for its suppliers in America and users around the world. He owes those people an honest explanation for why this was done. So far, they haven't gotten one.

<https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/23/18637836/trump-huawei-ban-explanation-trade-deal-national-security-risk>