

Huawei and Europe's Strategic Autonomy

By Sönke Marahrens



*Col i.G. Sönke Marahrens,
Colonel (GS) and Program
Director of the German
Institute for Defense and
Strategic Studies*

During the panel discussion on European technological autonomy, the audience witnessed a vivid discussion between U.S. and Chinese participants regarding the issue of Huawei's control of 5G technology and its planned application as the base for 5G networks worldwide. The U.S. participants accused China of using its technology monopoly to gain control over the Internet infrastructure of their clients. The Chinese participants countered the allegations by reminding the audience that Huawei has answered all requests for information and provided all the information asked for by governments worldwide. They tried to shift the discussion to a point of challenging the United States by arguing that, first, U.S. IT businesses cannot provide state of the art 5G technology; and second, that the accusations are part of an economic war conducted by the actual U.S. administration in order to protect the weaker U.S. IT companies – an act which China considers a violation of international trade laws.

The European participants followed the discussion very intently, adding insider and technical knowledge and questioning both positions, but finally sided with neither the United States nor China: "At the end, we can only choose who will spy on us."

The underlying security politics problem runs much deeper: it is far beyond a choice of technology; it is a discussion about whether and how Europe and/or Germany will or can maintain decision sovereignty.

The actual U.S. government approach of tolling and using national laws to target international competitors is hitting European market participants directly and indirectly. EU producers therefore can be targeted either directly for their market share in the United States or for future technological superiority over U.S. products, as exemplified by China. That, or they might become collateral damage of U.S. national economic actions – like the German auto industry, when the United States hit Mexico and Canada in order to revise the NAFTA agreement. Although China has proven that the actual 5G technology is coming without a backdoor, a simple remote-controlled update might change this, as history has already proven. From a European perspective, U.S. tech companies could be accused of this as well.

The heart of the issue is that outsourcing or loosening technical independence in essential technology fields like mobile internet, artificial intelligence, or computing will lead to European and German dependency on others, possibly preventing Europe from thriving.

In a world in which rule-based behavior is constantly being contested by autocrats and the autocratic tendencies of democratically elected governments worldwide, strategic decision autonomy is highly dependent on a secure and available IT infrastructure. Maintaining this strategic decision-making autonomy requires stringent holistic and critical analysis and a common understanding of critical IT infrastructures. Critical infrastructure must be understood in all dimensions. Undisturbed and uninfluenced internet access to control national or European CRITIS is as important as the provision of life-essential power supplies or water.

Therefore, future European and German security strategies must claim national/European decision-making autonomy equally in order to respond to today's common issues of protecting their territory

and their citizens. It must be understood that the rise of regional hegemony like Russia and China is challenging the existing world order and that, currently, even the creators of the Bretton Woods system prefer nationalism over international trade. Living in a volatile world requires the willingness to break old paradigms rather than insisting on maintaining the status quo in the face of actors unwilling to step back or down.

Future security strategies must be (re-)expanded by aspects of diplomacy, cyber, and economics in order to cover all changes, chances, threats, and challenges. To cope with the unreliable behavior of allies as well as the hegemonic actions of China and Russia, the society and population must be prepared to confront this behavior. European states must decide on how they want to shape the future – actively or passively. This requires investment, R&D funding, and a clear understanding of the dynamics of international politics.

