

National resilience

Yesterday in the Commons the Culture and Digital Secretary announced a change of policy for the roll out of 5G mobile telephony. Following new official advice on national security , the government decided to ban Huawei components in the 5G network from the end of this year, and to work away to remove Huawei altogether by 2027.

The government accepted this would delay provision of the new network by between 2 and 3 years and could cost an extra £2bn. The Minister given the job of explaining this stressed that national security must come first, so this was a necessary price to pay.

This was a crucial moment in the evolution of UK policy. It marked a decisive departure from the pro China approach of the previous 15 years, where buying more than whatever the degree of sensitivity of the product or component was fine. Our policy towards China was based on the proposition that they would do us no harm and be there for us when we need their supplies. It was a grand partnership where we became more dependent.

The immediate trigger was a tougher US stance limiting Huawei's ability to make and export. The further deterioration in the relationship over Hong Kong, the treatment of minorities in China, the aggressive approach to the South China Sea and the action on the Indian border also influenced the decision.

The UK needs to have enough control over strategic networks and over crucial intellectual property for our wider security. Immediately the UK needs to catch up with the leaders in mobile telephony.