

China's Huawei steps up charm offensive, rejects security fears

March 6 2019, by Dan Martin



The US says Huawei equipment could be manipulated by China's Communist government to spy on other countries and disrupt critical communications

Chinese telecom giant Huawei insisted on Wednesday its products feature no security "backdoors" for the government, as the normally

secretive company gave foreign media a peek inside its state-of-the-art facilities.

Huawei has kicked off the year with an aggressive PR campaign to counter US warnings that it could be used by Beijing for espionage and sabotage, with reclusive founder Ren Zhengfei denying the fears in a series of foreign media interviews.

The charm offensive went into another gear Wednesday as Huawei welcomed news organisations to its facilities in southern Guangdong province.

That included a stop at Huawei's Independent Cyber Security Laboratory, whose director Wang Jin waved off the US fears.

"Our most basic red line is that our products cannot have any backdoors," Wang said.

Journalists also toured a huge factory floor with 35 highly automated assembly lines in the city of Dongguan, where an array of robotic arms put together a Huawei P20 smartphone every 28.5 seconds.

CFO's arrest

Foreign journalist visits are hardly routine at Huawei's facilities in Guangdong, where high-tech labs and manufacturing facilities employ more than 60,000 people, but these are unusual times for the company.

The United States says Huawei equipment could be manipulated by China's Communist government to spy on other countries and disrupt critical communications.



Around 60,000 employees work at the Shenzhen headquarters which includes laboratories, hotels, swimming pools, fitness centres and a Huawei University

Washington is urging governments to shun the company just as the world readies for the advent of ultra-fast 5G telecommunications, an advancement that Huawei was expected to lead and which will allow wide adoption of next-generation technologies like artificial intelligence.

Huawei's Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou, Ren's daughter, also faces a court hearing on Wednesday in Vancouver on a US extradition request. Two Canadians have been detained in China in suspected retaliation over her arrest.

During the tour, journalists were served coffee in cups featuring an

image of a lighthouse and the words: "Lighting a beacon for Wanzhou's early return."

The US Justice Department accuses Huawei and Meng of circumventing US sanctions against Iran. Two affiliates also have been charged with stealing trade secrets from telecommunications group T-Mobile.

Christopher Balding, a China expert at Fulbright University in Ho Chi Minh City, said Huawei's sudden PR outreach shows its concern over the US stance, but that the company shouldn't suffer too much damage.

"They should be able to ride this out," Balding told AFP.



An employee works on a mobile phone production line at a Huawei production base during a media tour in Dongguan

"It's not realistic to expect the entire world to shun Huawei and that probably wouldn't be good anyway."

'Wolf' ethos

Founded by Ren in 1987, Huawei has espoused a relentless "wolf" ethos that executives say fuelled its rise to become the world leader in telecom network hardware.

It remains to be seen how the new charm offensive will play out, but the wolf may already smell blood.

After intense recent lobbying by Huawei, reports have suggested Britain and New Zealand may walk back earlier indications that the company would be frozen out of their telecom plans.

At the world's top mobile industry fair in Spain last week, Huawei bagged 5G commercial contracts or partnership agreements with 10 telecom operators—including Switzerland's Sunrise, Iceland's Nova, Saudi Arabia's STC and Turkey's Turkcell.



Huawei has espoused a relentless 'wolf' ethos that executives say fuelled its rise to become the world leader in telecom network hardware

On Thursday, Huawei Chairman Guo Ping will hold a news conference at the Shenzhen headquarters that may be the real reason for the media tour's timing.

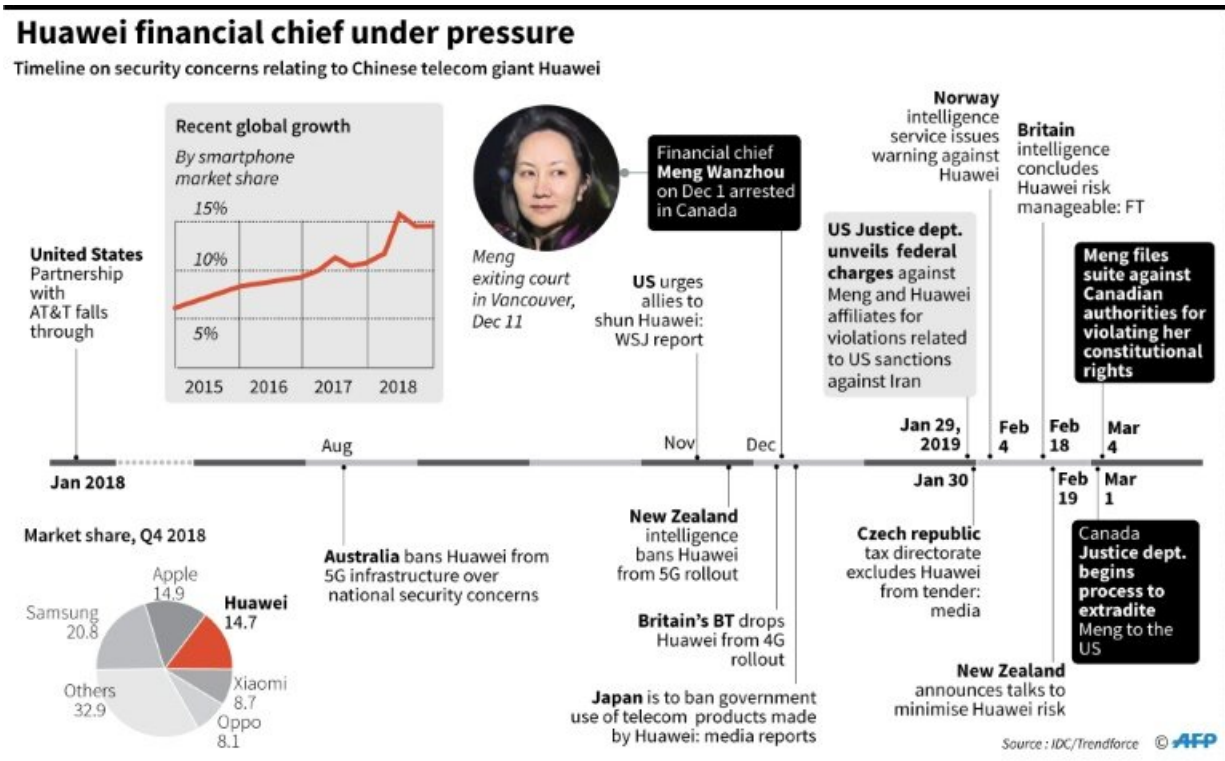
The New York Times on Monday cited anonymous sources saying Huawei this week will announce plans to sue the US government for barring American federal agencies from using the company's products.

The topic of the news conference has not been disclosed, but a big announcement would allow Huawei to seize back the narrative from Meng's extradition hearing.

Huawei declined to comment publicly on the Times report.

Opening its sprawling grounds also is a chance for Huawei to show that it is a global player not to be trifled with.

Its Shenzhen headquarters—near Dongguan—has cutting-edge laboratories, hotels, swimming pools and fitness centres, a dozen cafeterias, and a Huawei University where it trains staff as well as foreign customers and partners.



Timeline on Huawei security concerns, and the legal woes of financial chief Meng Wanzhou.

Huawei strenuously denies any connections to China's government.

Sceptics, however, say it is highly unlikely that Ren, a former Chinese army engineer, could have steered his company to such heights in such a strategic sector without the support of Beijing, which has clearly stated its goal of becoming the world's high-tech leader.

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Citation: China's Huawei steps up charm offensive, rejects security fears (2019, March 6)
retrieved 20 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2019-03-china-huawei-gates-widening-pr.html>

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