



Fear of Chinese Spies Halts Australia-Solomons Cable Project

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A project to build a 4,000-kilometer underwater cable connecting Sydney and the Solomon Islands came to a screeching halt following the Australian Secret Intelligence Service's warning to the Solomon Islands prime minister that the Chinese firm contracted to do the work, Huawei, allows Chinese spies access to conduct cyberattacks.

During a June visit to the Solomons, ASIS head Nick Warner informed Solomons Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare of his concerns about the use of Huawei as a contractor. Huawei's ability to securely install the cable came into question as a result of "backdoors" found in the firm's products.

"It is no secret that China is very active in intelligence activities directed against us," Defence Secretary Dennis Richardson said in his final speech before retiring in May.

Honiara gave contract rights to Shenzhen-based telecom giant Huawei in mid-2016, though a US-UK firm was initially awarded contract rights following "a competitive tender process," the Sydney Morning Herald reported. The US-UK company had full permission from Canberra's Attorney General to carry out the work. Huawei has yet to be granted such a permit. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) promptly pulled its financing of the project after the US-UK firm was snubbed.

In April, the Solomon Star reported that the Public Accounts Committee had called for a probe regarding alleged promises made by Huawei to Prime Minister Sogavare to contribute \$40 million to Sogavare's next election campaign.

In 2012, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) barred Huawei from bidding on the contract for Australia's \$38 billion National Broadband Network due to national security concerns.

Security risks stemming from "backdoors" have emerged as an issue in the US as well. Google, for instance, refuses to put "backdoors" into its platform, Alphabet Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt said during an April 2014 seminar at the Cato Institute in Washington. While

“backdoors” might be useful to Washington’s robust national security apparatus, that same loophole would leave Google products vulnerable to hostile cyber agents.

Honiara is relying on the submerged cable to modernize its technology sector. The island nation currently relies on satellites for all its internet access.

Australian Foreign Minister Julia Bishop told Fairfax Media on Wednesday that "Australia is strongly supportive of economic growth for the development and prosperity of Solomon Islands, including an undersea cable to provide the improved internet access that the business sector needs to generate jobs and growth."

The Solomon Islands Submarine Cable Company said that it is "working on the submission of a Permitted Zone Permit through the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) to complete their permits to land the cable in Australia," following media reports that the deal might go cold.

"Discussions with ACMA are on-going at the moment," the company told the Solomon Star, adding, "SISCC remains committed to delivering fast reliable fiber optic internet services to the Solomon Islands as soon as possible."

Huawei International, the Solomon Islands government and the Solomon Island Submarine Cable Company signed a memorandum of understanding on June 28, 2017.