

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Full Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on “Securing Communications Networks from Foreign Adversaries”

February 15, 2024

Today, this Subcommittee continues its vigilance in protecting our communications networks from rogue nation-states. Fortifying our networks to better defend against these national security threats is essential. I am pleased we will be discussing a broad range of proposals to advance the safety and security of our communications networks.

These networks are a significant driver of the American economy given so much of our daily lives run on them. From health care, to energy, to public safety, nearly every facet of American life relies on these networks. So, even as we work to ensure that every American can access high-speed, reliable broadband internet, we must also recognize our efforts to do so make our communications networks – and the devices that run on them – targets.

In fact, foreign adversaries often see our communications networks and devices as the entry points to disrupt our daily lives and conduct espionage campaigns. Just last week, U.S. officials issued an advisory stating that Volt Typhoon – a hacking group backed by the People’s Republic of China – had gained access to critical water, energy, and communications systems for at least the past five years. And because of this access, there is a real risk that the information they collected could be used to launch cyberattacks on our critical infrastructure.

Moreover, the information and technology sector is increasingly seen as a lucrative way to gain worldwide influence and control. You can see this in Huawei’s aggressive deployment of wireless infrastructure across the globe. It was also reported yesterday that hacking groups linked to China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran are turning to artificial intelligence to strengthen their spying capabilities. What’s at stake is not just the U.S. leadership on technology and innovation, but also values like free speech and expression, democracy, as well as civil and human rights.

Fortunately, this Committee has worked together on a bipartisan basis to enhance the security of our communications networks and advance legislation that furthers our national security interests. In 2020, we passed my bipartisan Secure and Trusted Communications Networks Act. This law gives the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) the authority to exclude suspect equipment and services from our communications networks if the agency finds that it poses a national security risk. This is critical, but we need to come together to make sure the FCC gets the additional \$3 billion it needs to fully fund the Rip and Replace program to rid our networks of this equipment.

And since it has been four years since the Secure and Trusted framework was enacted, we should also examine how it's working, and whether it needs any changes in the years ahead as these issues become even more complex.

The Biden Administration and the FCC have also taken several actions to build out our communications networks and address security concerns. Most recently, the Biden Administration successfully defended our nation's policy interests at the World Radio Conference against aggressive moves by China to undermine the success of unlicensed technologies. This is an area of innovation where the United States has been a worldwide leader.

Last March, President Biden also released the National Cybersecurity Strategy. It shifts the burden of protecting cyberspace away from consumers, small businesses, and local governments to software providers who are better positioned to reduce security risks.

Finally, we cannot overlook the importance of ensuring that all Americans have access to affordable, reliable internet service, with the digital skills to use it. This not only helps Americans access health care, education, and job resources. It also helps drive our global leadership in innovation, which strengthens our nation as a whole.

Internet affordability has been a major issue and it's why we created the Affordable Connectivity Program as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Today, it's helping more than 23 million American families – in all of our congressional districts – afford their monthly internet bills. Without additional funding, the program will expire in a couple of months. We simply cannot allow that to happen. We must pass H.R. 6929, the Affordable Connectivity Program Extension Act, bipartisan legislation introduced by Representative Clarke to extend this critical affordability program. I continue to hold out hope that our Republican colleagues will join with us in passing this legislation.

And if Republicans are really serious about addressing national security threats, they would join us in demanding the House vote on legislation that has now passed the Senate that would provide funding to strengthen our national defense and ensure Ukraine can continue to protect its democracy from Russia's unprovoked war of aggression. Speaker Johnson is blocking this urgent national security funding, siding with Pro-Putin extreme Republicans. These political games must end.