

US moving to ban China-based TikTok social media app

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As part of its aggressive confrontation with China, the Trump administration is preparing to ban the hugely popular social media app TikTok, developed by the Beijing-based internet corporation ByteDance.

According to a report in the *Financial Times* (FT) on Thursday, the White House is considering putting TikTok on a blacklist that would prevent Americans from using the app on the grounds that the Chinese government is obtaining the personal information of US citizens through the social media platform.

FT wrote, “Three people familiar with the debate in the Trump administration said one proposal being looked into was to place ByteDance, the parent Chinese company, on the commerce department’s ‘entity list.’” If this action were taken, the report said, it would become “exceptionally hard for US companies to provide technology to TikTok. The restrictions would include software, meaning that Apple and other app stores could no longer provide updates over their platforms.”

One of the senior US officials told FT, “We are going to send a very strong message to China.”

The entity list, which identifies non-US individuals and organizations as presenting a risk to national security and/or foreign policy interests, was used last year to block the Chinese telecom tech corporation Huawei from doing business in the US on the grounds that it was assisting Beijing in conducting espionage in America.

On July 7, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told Fox News that the White House was “taking this very seriously” and “certainly looking at” banning the TikTok. In relation to the overall expanding anti-China policy, Pompeo explained, “With respect to Chinese apps on peoples’ cellphones, the United States will get this one right too.”

When asked if he would suggest that US citizens use the TikTok app, Pompeo claimed without providing any evidence or proof, “Only if you want your private

information in the hands of the Chinese Communist Party.”

TikTok, which is based in Los Angeles, released a statement defending its security practices, saying: “We are fully committed to protecting our users’ privacy and security. TikTok has an American CEO, a Chief Information Security Officer with decades of US military and law enforcement experience... TikTok US user data is stored in Virginia and Singapore, with strict controls on employee access. These are the facts.”

TikTok is a video sharing social media platform where users make short videos between 3 and 60 seconds of themselves or others dancing, lip-syncing to a popular song, telling jokes or performing other talent acts, and share them with other users. Use of copyrighted music is restricted to a maximum of 15-second videos. The app is currently available in 75 different languages.

A precursor to TikTok called Douyin was initially released in 2016 in China and rapidly gained 100 million users within one year. Rebranded as TikTok for international release in September 2017, the app has since been downloaded 2 billion times and has at least 800 million monthly active users.

To get a sense of how massively popular TikTok is and how rapidly it has come to dominate the video sharing segment of the social media market, Twitter was launched in 2006, added video sharing in 2013 and has 330 million monthly active users.

Another Trump administration official who has been a vocal proponent of banning TikTok while providing zero facts to back up claims that the app is spying on US citizens is White House trade adviser Peter Navarro. Speaking on Fox News Sunday, Navarro said the Trump administration is “just getting started” and he would not rule out a US ban of TikTok.

Navarro claimed that “all the data that goes into those mobile apps that kids have so much fun with and seems so

convenient, it goes right to servers in China, right to the Chinese military, the Chinese Communist Party, and the agencies that want to steal our intellectual property.”

While the Chinese company has attempted to reassure the US government that it poses no threat by hiring the former Disney executive Kevin Meyer as CEO, Navarro said TikTok is running the same playbook as Huawei and putting “an American puppet” in charge, which is not going to work.

Expressing US imperialist gangsterism, Navarro said even if TikTok is sold to an American buyer, it would not solve the problem. “If TikTok separates as an American company, that doesn’t help us,” he said. Again, without providing any details or proof of his assertion, Navarro asserted, “Because it’s going to be worse—we’re going to have to give China billions of dollars for the privilege of having TikTok operate on US soil.”

On Wednesday, White House chief of staff Mark Meadows told reporters on Air Force One that the administration is “looking at the national security risk as it relates to TikTok, WeChat and other apps that have the potential for national security exposure, specifically as it relates to the gathering of information on American citizens by a foreign adversary.” WeChat is a messaging, social media and mobile payment app released in 2011 with more than one billion worldwide monthly active users.

A major aspect of the concern over the popularity of Chinese social media apps is their use in other countries around the world, undermining the domination of internet and social media markets by the US tech corporations. TikTok is more popular in India than it is in the US and a third country where it is most popular is Brazil. Some American corporations such as Wells Fargo and Amazon have banned the use of TikTok by employees on company-owned devices.

Another consideration is that the US military-intelligence establishment wants to be in charge of and have the unfettered and exclusive ability to utilize mass consumer mobile devices and apps to spy on the public. Meanwhile, according to experts, the data being collected by TikTok is not unique for an advertising revenue-based platform.

According to Will Strafach, iOS security researcher and creator of the privacy-focused Guardian Firewall app, “For the iOS app available to Western audiences, it [TikTok] appears to collect very standard analytics information,” including user’s device model, screen resolution, operating system in use, and time zone

information. “Most data collection by apps concerns me, I don’t like any of it. However, in context, TikTok appears to be pretty tame compared to other apps,” he says.

There is bipartisan support in Congress for the Trump administration’s aggressive efforts against the Chinese apps. Senator Marco Rubio (Republican of Florida), who is the acting chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, wrote in a statement, “TikTok has yet to provide a real explanation to Americans about how they protect their data and how much of it could be made available to the Chinese Communist Party.”

Rubio is calling on the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), led by the Treasury Department, to investigate TikTok. It has been reported that CFIUS is already conducting a secret national security review of TikTok and ByteDance. In the past, CFIUS investigations have forced Chinese companies to sell their US assets and block potential acquisitions of US companies by Chinese firms.

Last March, the House passed an amendment submitted by Representative Abigail Spanberger (Democrat of Virginia), a former CIA agent, to ban TikTok use by employees of the Transportation Security Administration, following the agency’s guidance against its use in February.

There are significant encumbrances and contradictions involved in moving to shut down the use of TikTok and other China-based popular apps in the US. Among these are concerns that doing so can cause a series of retaliatory actions in an escalating trade war and the impact of shutting down widely used communication tools that are used by Americans free of charge in the months leading up to the presidential elections.



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