Biden extends Trump anti-Chinese TikTok policy

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Picking up where the Trump administration left off, the Biden White House has refused to drop the forced sale of the Chinese-owned social media video platform TikTok to an American company and is continuing to treat it as a matter of national security.

Amid talk of "aggressive push-back" against Chinese economic expansion, Biden's commerce secretary, Gina Raimondo, said on April 7 that reviews of TikTok and its corporate owner ByteDance are "ongoing" and being handled by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

While she would not go into any details, Raimondo said, "We have to level the playing field, no one can outcompete the American worker if the playing field is level," adding, "China's actions are uncompetitive, coercive, underhanded, they have proven they will do whatever it takes, and so I plan to use all the tools in my toolbox as aggressively as possible to protect American workers and businesses from unfair Chinese practices."

Raimondo's reference to "American workers" is a ploy and has nothing to do with ensuring jobs and decent living standards for the working class in the US. Far from it, the Biden administration is utilizing the extensive connections between the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO and other labor unions in a reactionary anti-Chinese propaganda campaign that is aimed at lowering the living standards of American workers such that US-based corporations can more effectively compete in the world markets.

When asked by reporters specifically about forcing ByteDance to sell TikTok, Raimondo refused to directly answer, saying, "what we do on offense is more important than what we do on defense." With the overtones clear, the Biden administration is seeking to mobilize the American public behind a military confrontation with China.

On April 12, it was reported that the Commerce Department needed more time to review the plan for a sale of TikTok to Oracle and Walmart that was worked out during the final months of the Trump administration. The original proposal ran into multiple legal challenges and reports that the Chinese government was in favor of shutting down the service in the US—keeping it running in the rest of the world—rather than having it sold off in a fire sale to Wall Street.

The Trump administration initially issued a series of executive orders banning TikTok and other Chinese-based apps last summer after both Democrats and Republicans in Congress said the video-sharing app posed a national security threat and should be not be used by US federal employees on government-owned devices. Secretary of State Pompeo went on Fox News on July 7 and claimed that sensitive consumer information was going straight into "the hands of the Chinese Communist Party," without providing a shred of evidence to prove the assertion.

The Biden administration has done nothing to either substantiate the accusation or dispel the falsehood about the passage of sensitive data from Americans going straight into the servers of the Chinese government. Such claims have been denied by TikTok executives all along. A statement published by American offices of the platform in Los Angeles stated at the time, "TikTok US user data is stored in Virginia and Singapore, with strict controls on employee access. These are the facts."

On March 22, the *Wall Street Journal* published the results of a study by the University of Toronto cybersecurity group Citizen Lab which found that the underlying code of TikTok poses no national security

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threat to the US. The *Journal* report says, “Citizen Lab, which releases regular reports on censorship and surveillance by Chinese social media apps, found no evidence of ’overtly malicious behavior’ after a technical analysis of TikTok, which is owned by Beijing-based ByteDance Ltd.”

The researchers found that the TikTok algorithm that learns what kind of videos users like to watch is “no more invasive than Facebook when it comes to data collection.” The Citizen Lab research also found that neither the Android nor iOS version of the software “appeared to collect contact lists, or record or send photos, videos, and location data without user permission.” The data collected—such as device information that can be used to identify and track users when they are not logged into the app and in-app behavior such as “likes”—is “comparable to the practices of other major social media platforms”

All of these facts did not stop a group of Republican Party lawmakers headed by the fascist supporter Josh Hawley (Republican from Missouri) from reintroducing legislation to ban the use of the TikTok app on federal government devices based on national security issues. The “No TikTok on Government Devices Act,” which was unanimously passed by the Senate last August, is now moving forward in the House of Representatives.

Recognizing an opportunity to win enthusiastic support from the Democrats—including the Biden White House—for a complete ban of TikTok in the US, Hawley said, “TikTok is a Trojan horse for the Chinese Communist Party that has no place on government devices—or any American devices, for that matter. My bill is a straightforward plan to protect American government data from a hostile foreign power.”

The Biden administration announced an “abeyance” on the plans for the sale of TikTok to Oracle and Walmart in mid-February so that it could “revisit” the issue. Part of the administration’s review is devoted to the lawsuits filed to block the sale and the complicated arrangements between the current owners of TikTok—including the billionaire ByteDance founder Zhang Yiming and the American private equity investment groups General Atlantic and Sequoia Capital—and the interagency of the Commerce and Securities called the Committee on Foreign Investment in the US (CFIUS).

A new deadline of June 11 has been set by the Commerce Department to release a plan for the financially valuable and highly popular short-form video platform in the US. In 2020, TikTok surpassed Facebook as the number-one downloaded app on both Android and iOS devices, and it hit the 2.5 billion download milestone earlier this year. TikTok is valued at $180 billion and ByteDance is estimated at $250 billion.

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