Opinion

TikTok tensions are a new front in US–China tech wars

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TikTok is one of the most downloaded and used apps among young people in the United States. But despite its popularity, the US Congress' decision to force TikTok to sell or face a ban is just the latest move against the app. TikTok filed a lawsuit in response, claiming that the law violated the First Amendment of the US Constitution. But whether the app can win this battle remains uncertain.

While TikTok's user base continues to grow, it appears that the app may be in danger of losing the public relations battle. A late 2023 poll found that nearly 40 percent of Americans favour a government ban on TikTok despite around 60 percent of US respondents being active users of the app. Another poll revealed that 59 percent of Australians support a nationwide ban on TikTok.

The most cited rationale behind the US government's decision to force TikTok's sale or ban is the national security concern. Lawmakers have voiced apprehension over the platform's data handling practices, fearing that sensitive user information could be accessed and exploited by foreign entities — particularly the Chinese government. They also point to China's national security laws, which give the Chinese government the power to demand data from private companies and individual users for the purposes of intelligence gathering.

While the media consistently gives voice to such concerns, to date no publicly available evidence points to the Chinese government spying on people using TikTok.

A parallel trope in media is that TikTok is a vehicle for CCP propaganda. Lawmakers fear that the app is exposing millions of young Americans to the Chinese government's malign influence. The media frequently cites TikTok critics such as Republican Senator Jim Risch, who described TikTok as an 'indoctrination machine' that renders 'our kids and grandkids particularly vulnerable to falling under the manipulation of the Chinese Communist Party'.

These security and ideological concerns obscure the fact that TikTok has become both a catalyst and a metaphor for the tech rivalry between the United States and China.

TikTok has a clear advantage over US tech companies. Its algorithm shares similarities with Douyin, its Chinese counterpart. ByteDance, which owns both TikTok and Douyin, employs a large workforce in China to manually tag and annotate content, which has given it an edge in developing highly refined algorithms. TikTok's advanced algorithm, user engagement strategies and unique content format have allowed it to outpace many US social media platforms.

Forced divestiture of TikTok from ByteDance would have broader economic repercussions, including potential job losses, a significant impact on ByteDance's global valuation and a dangerous precedent for other Chinese

tech companies in the United States, potentially deepening the tech divide between the United States and China.

As the 2024 election approaches, TikTok has become a litmus test for which party is better equipped to deal with China. Given current geopolitical tensions, playing the 'tough on China' card is the safest political strategy for both parties. It is understandable why more hawkish Republican politicians want to ban TikTok, as the platform is mostly popular among younger users who are believed to favour incumbent US President Joe Biden and his Democratic Party, whereas Biden may be acutely aware that he cannot afford to be wedged by his opponents on China.

In most US media coverage, readers are told that the Chinese government could leverage TikTok's reach and influence to shape narratives, sway public opinion and potentially undermine US interests. But TikTok has become a powerful platform for shaping younger voters' views and attitudes on a wide range of social and political issues, many of which are incompatible with — and therefore challenge or even threaten — the interests of the political establishment.

Examples of TikTok's use as a political tool include TikToks mocking President Biden's limited student debt relief plan and TikToks critiquing the Democratic Party's policies on abortion rights. Young TikTok creators on the Republican side utilised the platform to challenge the Republican Party's stances on LGBTQ+ rights, immigration and climate change.

The platform has also supported grassroots activism advocacy for the pro-Palestinian cause. While Meta has been accused of favouring pro-Israel content, one study of TikTok found more pro-Palestine than pro-Israel posts, leading politicians on both sides to see TikTok as a potential threat to established narratives. #TikTokBan has become a forum for creators to critique the bipartisan push to ban the app over data privacy concerns. Many argue that the proposed ban is hypocritical given the extensive data collection practices of US tech companies.

The US Congress' bipartisan decision has reverberated in Australia, where it has become a point of difference between the major political parties. Coalition Shadow Minister for Home Affairs James Paterson has argued in favour of following the US lead, while the Australian Labor Party has made it clear that it has no intention to do so.

If Australia does follow the United States on this issue, it may damage Australia–China relations. But a TikTok ban in Australia now seems even less likely. During the June 2024 visit of China's Premier Li Qiang to Australia, Opposition Leader Peter Dutton, well-known for his hawkish position on China, signalled that he has now softened his stance. This change makes it somewhat safe to predict that, unlike in the United States, TikTok will not become a key issue in the 2025 Australian election, even if TikTok ends up being banned in the United States.

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