

# TikTok's digital drama at the forefront of a new Cold War

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While Western media outlets seem to have been obsessed with the unexpected launch of DeepSeek on 20 January, the controversy surrounding TikTok has not gone away.

TikTok faced a near-death experience in January 2025 after the US Supreme Court upheld bipartisan legislation to ban the platform in the United States. But 12 hours later, a [social media post](#) from US President Donald Trump revived the platform. To say that TikTok has had a tumultuous start to the new year is a serious understatement.

On 20 January 2025, Trump [signed](#) an executive order instructing the Attorney General to delay the ban for 75 days to allow his administration time 'to determine the appropriate course forward'.

The seemingly endless TikTok saga embodies the escalating [US-China rivalry](#), intertwining technology, geopolitics and culture. TikTok's brief shutdown and subsequent resurrection suggests that the platform's owner, Chinese tech giant ByteDance, is willing to take drastic measures to protect its interests while navigating a complex regulatory landscape.

The fate of TikTok will largely rest on President Trump's ultimate decision, but [signs of](#) a possible 50-50 joint ownership deal forebodes further protracted wrangling. It's still too early to say whether ByteDance will be willing to enter negotiations over such an arrangement. But TikTok's battle serves as a reminder that in the digital age, technology and platform economies are part and parcel of 'new Cold War' geopolitics.

TikTok's US troubles reflect the deepening mistrust and rivalry between Washington and Beijing. The platform faces accusations of being a potential conduit for Chinese government influence and a threat to US national security, which have led to repeated calls for TikTok to either sever its ties with China or face a ban.

During Trump's first administration, lawmakers were already concerned that ByteDance could be compelled to share user data with the Chinese government, enabling surveillance, influence operations or even espionage. Such worry led to an [executive order](#) in 2020 demanding that TikTok be sold to a US company, which has been followed by widespread calls for stricter oversight, bans or divestment in the United States, Australia and other countries.

In response to these regulatory worries, TikTok initiated '[Project Texas](#)' in 2021. The US\$1.5 billion project involved migrating and storing US user data on servers operated by US-based company Oracle and establishing a new entity, TikTok US Data Security, to oversee data management. But scepticism persisted

among US lawmakers and regulators, who questioned whether these measures could fully insulate TikTok from potential Chinese government influence.

The Chinese government views TikTok's algorithm as a strategic asset subject to strict export controls. And Beijing's broader ambitions to establish Chinese tech companies as global leaders would be severely undermined if TikTok were to fall into American hands. For this reason, China views the forced sale of TikTok to an American company as an unacceptable capitulation to US pressure, harming national pride and setting a dangerous precedent for other Chinese tech firms.

Concerns surrounding TikTok goes beyond data security and sovereignty, revolving fundamentally around corporate ownership. Digital platforms have become battlegrounds for US–China geopolitical influence and TikTok has emerged as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and cultural trends, particularly among younger audiences.

Chinese platforms such as TikTok and RedNote use algorithm-driven content recommendation systems to drive engagement, making them potent soft power instruments. This is evidenced by the large number of [TikTok posts](#) by American travellers, showcasing an attractive China. There has also been an explosion of anti-US content posted by '[TikTok refugees](#)' who have flocked to RedNote in anticipation of a TikTok ban.

TikTok's uncertain destiny has far-reaching implications for digital platforms and the global digital economy, highlighting growing tensions between technological and economic rivalry, and free trade principles. As countries increasingly view data as a strategic asset, regulating digital platforms is becoming a key battleground in the US–China rivalry. Half of the [top ten free apps](#) in Apple's App Store are [Chinese-owned](#) and with TikTok's global reach and RedNote's rising popularity, Chinese tech companies are poised to penetrate markets traditionally dominated by US tech giants like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

It is unsurprising that political impulses and legislative actions will continue to target divestitures and limit the market reach of Chinese platforms. While the reasons motivating such initiatives are really about ensuring continuous geopolitical, ideological, economic and cultural domination, the public rationale is almost always framed in the language of national security. This is despite many [statements](#) claiming there is little or no evidence suggesting that TikTok is a national security risk.

TikTok's fight is far from over. Although Trump has postponed the ban for three months to allow time to search for a solution, [US–China tensions](#) are unlikely to resolve soon, making TikTok a continued flashpoint.

The TikTok controversy serves as a cautionary tale about the risks associated with foreign-owned platforms for critical infrastructure and communication. But it also underscores the need for international cooperation and dialogue on issues such as data sovereignty, content moderation and regulating emerging technologies. As AI, machine learning and other advanced technologies become integral to platforms like TikTok, international cooperation is essential to ensure these tools are used responsibly and ethically, lest the global tech ecosystem becomes fragmented.

[Australia](#) finds itself caught between competing US–China interests. When the proposed TikTok ban was first reported, the [Labor government indicated](#) it would not follow suit. But despite [8.5 million](#) Australian users continuing to access the app, Australia has banned TikTok and WeChat from government devices and some [security analysts](#) advocate for a TikTok ban in Australia unless it is sold by the Chinese.

But Leader of the Opposition Peter Dutton now has a personal TikTok account despite having previously [called for](#) a ban. If he wins the next election, his stance on TikTok will likely be shaped by Trump's decision.

Australia's handling of TikTok will be closely monitored as a barometer of its alignment with US interests. Should the Australian government implement a ban, it could cause significant repercussions for its relationship with China. Navigating this increasingly polarised environment while safeguarding Australia's own interests will be crucial moving forward.

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