

TikTok: A Threat to U.S. National Security

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Issue Brief

Issue: TikTok is a powerful tool for manipulating mass sentiment in the hands of a company that actively cooperates with and is subject to the coercive power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP has the intent and capability to, as well as a history of, manipulating information on a mass scale. The Party's ability to leverage TikTok directly for its own ends distinguishes the platform from the platform's U.S.-based social media rivals. TikTok and its parent company, ByteDance, have no practical means, legal or otherwise, to resist the CCP's pressure. Only solutions that separate the company from the CCP will protect U.S. national security.

Key Points:

- ByteDance is a company domiciled in the People's Republic of China (PRC) with its own Party committee and is tied to the Party-army-state, to which it has a host of obligations and is subject to strong coercive state power.
- The CCP has the intent and capability to, as well as a history of, trying to manipulate narratives and information to undermine adversaries and achieve strategic advantages.
- TikTok is responsible for and capable of manipulating sentiment on a mass scale. The social media platform—and conceivably other PRC apps, including mobile games and e-commerce platforms—can be used to intentionally manipulate how people feel. This could influence U.S. citizens' views on topics based on the CCP's preferences.
- TikTok may have acted illegally in its handling of users' data and conducted other malicious activities, such as tracking journalists. Leaks have highlighted the lack of separation between ByteDance and TikTok at the operational level.

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ByteDance actively collaborates with and is closely tied to the CCP's security apparatus. Both PRC law and the CCP's extralegal coercion compel cooperation with the government. ByteDance operates under the stringent whole-of-society surveillance and control mechanisms imposed by the Party, which are manifested through laws that enforce cooperation with state intelligence operations.

- **ByteDance has signed a strategic cooperation agreement with the Ministry of Public Security.** TikTok's parent company has committed to helping improve content planning to provide specialized support for public security accounts. This effort is designed to strengthen the influence and credibility of public security communications, including by maximizing the reach of public security-related content. [1] ByteDance has been involved in such activities in Xinjiang. [2]
- **ByteDance has integrated PRC cyber police into their platforms to censor content.** Content reported by the cyber police under the Ministry of Public Security is prioritized in a specialized review queue. Users can also directly report inappropriate content to the cyber police. ByteDance's party secretary previously expressed a desire to work similarly with the majority of other government agencies. [3]
- **ByteDance must conform to PRC national security laws.** Since 2014, Beijing has issued new laws and amendments on counterespionage, data security, state secrets, cybersecurity, and personal information protection that establish expectations for PRC companies and individuals to support the regime operationally. [4] The 2021 Data Security Law mandates a centralized system for data security, with a global reach affecting PRC companies and their overseas subsidiaries, to assess and monitor security risks. Article 7 of the 2018 National Intelligence Law prohibits companies from withholding data from state intelligence agencies. [5] Articles 28 and 69 of the 2016 Cybersecurity Law stipulate that individuals and organizations have the responsibility and obligation to maintain national security. This requires network operators to provide technical support and assistance for the activities of public security and national security organs. [6] The Central State Security Commission is enshrined as the ultimate authority over data security policy and strategy in the PRC in the Data Security Law and Personal Information Protection Law. [7]
- **CCP presence on ByteDance's board entails party intervention in its operations.** This presence comes via the PRC government's "golden share"—a 1 percent ownership stake assigned to a fund connected to the PRC's Internet oversight authority. [8] This arrangement includes a board seat for a government official, allowing for direct influence over ByteDance's operations, including critical aspects such as corporate governance and the management of TikTok's algorithm. [9]
- **A party committee micromanages ByteDance's operations and decision-making.** ByteDance established an internal party branch in 2014 and a party committee in 2017. Through these bodies, it has engaged in activities to reinforce party loyalty among its members, including oath-taking ceremonies where employees swear to uphold and never betray the Party's agenda. [10] Zhang Fuping, secretary of the company's party committee, has committed to working with government agencies. [11] He has emphasized the importance of the party committee taking a proactive and elevated role in oversight, ensuring that algorithmic decisions are in accordance with Xi Jinping Thought and promote "socialist core values." [12]

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The CCP has the intent and capability to, as well as a history of, manipulating narratives and the information environment to support its objectives. A clear strategy aims to shape public opinion and suppress information that could challenge the Party's narrative.

- **The CCP pursues comprehensive control over media, public discourse, and the Internet within, and increasingly, beyond China's borders.** The CCP contends that controlling information through data manipulation, content restriction, and bot sharing on social media is key to modern cognitive warfare. [13]
- **The CCP employs a complex approach to global information control via governmental departments and military strategies.** For instance, state-sponsored hackers and the PLA execute operations ranging from overt propaganda to covert interference in foreign affairs using advanced technologies for subliminal messaging, deep fakes, and sentiment analysis and manipulation across major social platforms. [14] The State Council's News Center and Douyin have jointly signed a cooperation memorandum to optimize short video dissemination for state-owned enterprises and promote the Belt and Road Initiative through creating positive public opinion. [15]
- **CCP efforts to influence the information environment include the selective shadow banning of content that portrays the PRC negatively and the posting of content that portrays the PRC positively.** A recent report analyzing hashtags on Instagram and TikTok concluded that TikTok "systematically promotes or demotes content on the basis of whether it is aligned with or opposed to the interests of the Chinese Government." [16] TikTok has blocked accounts, including that of 17-year-old Feroza Aziz, who posted a video to raise awareness of human rights violations in Xinjiang, and former NBA player Enes Kanter Freedom, for the same reason. [17] In the early days of the George Floyd protests in 2020, the platform suppressed certain hashtags. Following a public backlash, this decision was reversed, but reinstated later on. [18] Company documents showed that moderators were told to censor political speech in livestreams and punish those who harmed "national honor" while padding feeds with content from "shadow accounts" operated by company employees posing as regular users. [19] TikTok also hosts ads from state media outlets, in violation of its stated policy to "not show political or election ads on the platform." [20]
- **The CCP has publicly forced ByteDance to conform to its censorship preferences.** Zhang Yiming, ByteDance's founder, issued a famous apology for inappropriate content appearing on a company platform. He promised improvements by reinforcing party-building work in the company. Zhang outlined plans to correct the algorithm and expand the content review team from 6,000 to 10,000 staff members to ensure content aligned with socialist values. Zhang also invited National People's Congress delegates and members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference to supervise content. [21]

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TikTok is responsible for and capable of manipulating sentiment on a mass scale. A leaked internal study from Facebook (now Meta) in 2017 demonstrated that social media platforms can be used to covertly manipulate how people feel. TikTok has approximately 170 million active users in the United States, and a significant portion of adults use TikTok as their primary source of news. The CCP appears to have succeeded in some cases in using TikTok to improve perceptions of the PRC.

- **Party members have repeatedly spoken about using TikTok to improve perceptions of the PRC.** This includes using the platform to “construct the Party’s image,” [22] “fight the war of public opinion well,” [23] and “precisely grasp the cognitive orientation of target users/audiences while sympathetically communicating the concept of shaping the community of human destiny.” [24] The People’s Daily, the CPP’s mouthpiece, has declared that TikTok should be a “megaphone” for “telling China’s stories and spreading China’s voice.” [25]
- **Studies have shown that the most-viewed China-related TikToks portray the country in a positive or neutral way.** [26] A researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has emphasized that platforms like TikTok should “subconsciously complete the questioning of the negative propaganda of the West” and that TikTok in particular should create an “awakening.” [27] In 2023, TikTok users in Taiwan were more likely than non-users to agree with arguments that cast skepticism on the United States while also leaning toward the PRC’s political positions. [28]

TikTok may have acted illegally in its handling of users’ data and conducted other malicious activities. TikTok has reportedly broken laws in multiple jurisdictions and contradicted its own regulations. TikTok has already been banned entirely in countries across the world and from government devices specifically in almost all Western countries.

- **TikTok has been tracking users and storing users’ data in the PRC.** Data has been used to track and identify protestors in Hong Kong, in some cases acquiring their SIM card identifications and IP addresses. [29] The company’s U.S.- and PRC-based employees accessed users’ data to track journalists from Forbes and the Financial Times. [30] TikTok has stored financial data of some of its biggest stars on servers in the PRC. [31] Employees based in the PRC are widely known to have access to user data, according to leaked audio from company meetings, external auditors, and employee statements. [32] TikTok recruited “Overseas Review Managers” to censor content in the United States. [33] Some TikTok employees have been required to align their work day to Beijing’s time zone to accommodate ByteDance executives. [34] This accumulated evidence suggests that ByteDance remains in control of TikTok at the operational and technical levels.
- **The United Kingdom and the European Union have fined TikTok for misusing data.** The European Union’s Data Protection Commission imposed a EUR 345 million (\$377 million) fine on TikTok over General Data Protection Regulation violations and issued an order requiring them to change its children’s data processing practices. [35] The European Union has more recently launched an investigation into “shortcomings in giving researchers access to TikTok’s publicly accessible data.” [36] The United Kingdom’s Information Commissioner’s Office also fined the company GBP 12.7 million (\$15.9 million) for violating the law protecting children’s data. [37]

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Conclusion

Controlled by ByteDance and ultimately answerable to the CCP, TikTok has become a powerful tool to influence mass sentiment. While harder to prove that it has influenced the views of tens of millions of monthly active users in the United States due to the opacity of the platform's recommendation algorithm, certain preconditions for doing so are clearly met. Beijing has signaled its intent to manipulate perceptions of the PRC on TikTok. The social media platform has previously admitted to and been found to have blocked accounts, shadow-banned content, and manipulated its platform in ways that serve the CCP's interests.

The CCP values social media platforms, including TikTok and its domestic PRC-equivalent Douyin, as a strategic means to shape public opinion. [38] Various official and quasi-official PRC voices have repeatedly denounced the "Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act" which would force a sale of TikTok. [39]

While the U.S. Government need not reflexively oppose everything the CCP favors, the vehemence of these voices should make Americans ask why the CCP needs to maintain its ability to coerce and control TikTok. Mitigating this control goes beyond data and privacy protections, even assuming that those rules could be enforced without the Party's collaboration with U.S. authorities. Nor would any such protections help Americans or their government see when Beijing was actively manipulating TikTok to undermine U.S. interests, democratic values, or American society.

The Party's ability to leverage ByteDance and TikTok is the single most important feature that distinguishes the platform from US-based rivals Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Any solutions to the national security challenges posed by TikTok must separate the platform and its internal operations (e.g., algorithm, software development, key personnel, etc.) from the CCP's ability to exploit them directly.

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A: 1310 L Street, NW, Suite 810,
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