

The US TikTok Ban, the RedNote Moment and China

by Aurelio Insisa

On 23 April 2024, the US Senate passed a bill forcing the Chinese company ByteDance to choose between divesting from its prized social platform TikTok, one of the dominant apps among Americans aged 18-29,¹ or accepting its ban on US soil. Following ByteDance's refusal to divest, the US Supreme Court upheld the ban on 17 January 2025. The ban on TikTok rested on national security grounds. TikTok is technically a limited liability corporation registered in Delaware and with headquarters in Singapore and Los Angeles. Yet, its parent company ByteDance, while incorporated in the Cayman Islands, is based in Beijing and subject to a domestic legal framework legally requiring it to "provide assistance" to the Chinese government, including, crucially, giving up the data of TikTok users.² Further highlighting the limited

autonomy of the company vis-à-vis Chinese authorities, "cells" of the Chinese Communist Party have been embedded within the structures of the company since 2017.³ In short, ByteDance cannot guarantee that the personal data of its users could be kept at arm's length from Beijing.

While the Senate's bill enjoyed bipartisan support, then President-elect Donald J. Trump publicly stated that he would not enforce the ban. Throughout the 2024 electoral campaign, Trump had announced – in contrast with most of the Republican Party members of

State Security Law, the 2016 Cybersecurity Law, the 2017 Intelligence Law, the 2020 Measures on Cybersecurity Review, and the 2021 Data Security Law. Sze-fung Lee, "TikTok: China's Glaring Trojan Horse. How Beijing Uses the Intensely Addictive App for Digital Surveillance and Influence Operations", in *MLI Papers*, May 2024, p. 18, <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/?p=79711>.

³ Daan Kingma, *An EU Solution to a Chinese App: Regulatory Approaches towards TikTok's Risks*, Leiden, Leiden Asia Centre, September 2023, p. 10-11, <https://leidenasiacentre.nl/?p=13734>.

¹ Olivia Sidoti and Wyatt Dawson, "Social Media Fact Sheet", in *Pew Research Center Fact Sheets*, 13 November 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/?p=7314>.

² The relevant legal framework includes the 2015

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Congress – his opposition to the bill, acknowledging how the platform had been a relevant tool for re-election.⁴ On 19 January, Trump announced that he would consider imposing a 90-day delay of the ban and search for a joint-venture between ByteDance and a US company.⁵ Two days later, he suggested the possibility that either Elon Musk (CEO of Tesla, owner of X, and Administrator of the Department of Government Efficiency in the new administration), or Larry Ellison (chairman of Oracle) would buy the social media platform.⁶

Behind the ban

While the national security rationale behind the ban appears straightforward, the overall picture is more nuanced. As previously mentioned the current legal framework in China forces ByteDance to provide TikTok users' data to Chinese bureaucratic actors for surveillance and gathering data. Matter of fact, this very same scenario has already happened in the past,⁷ and while the company has assured that this will

not happen again, the Chinese legal framework enforcing these decisions has not changed. However, it is also important to remember that, as Daan Kingma notes, "TikTok's collection of user data is not more pervasive than other online platforms, including Meta, Google, and Twitter".⁸ Furthermore, focusing exclusively on national security concerns over data access by the Chinese Party-State provides only a partial picture of TikTok's significance. The app's role as a springboard for information manipulation by state and non-state actors is the other critical dimension of the issue.

Multiple studies found no strong evidence for censorship favouring the Chinese government on TikTok, with proven cases of information suppression arguably due to localised censorship, as in the case of US social media platforms.⁹ Yet, there is evidence of TikTok being instrumental in Chinese operation of election interference, such as during the 2022 mid-term elections in the US and the Taiwanese general elections of 2024.¹⁰ More recently, TikTok has also been accused of being instrumental to the recent case of election interference in the November 2024 elections in Romania, which saw the annulled victory of far-right, pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu – even though in this case the platform appears to have been used by domestic actors, rather than Chinese ones.¹¹

⁴ Dara Kerr, "Can Trump Circumvent a TikTok Ban?", in *The Guardian*, 17 January 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xxc39c>.

⁵ Clare Duffy and David Goldman, "TikTok Is Back Online after Trump Pledged to Restore It", in *CNN*, 19 January 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/19/tech/tiktok-ban/index.html>.

⁶ Alexandra S. Levine and Stephanie Lai, "Trump Saying He's Open to Elon Musk or Larry Ellison Purchasing TikTok", in *Bloomberg*, 21 January 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-01-21/trump-says-he-s-open-to-musk-or-ellison-purchasing-tiktok>.

⁷ Taylor Hatmaker, "Senate Bill Seeks to Ban Chinese App TikTok from Government Work Phones", in *TechCrunch*, 12 March 2020, <https://techcrunch.com/2020/03/12/hawley-bill-tiktok-china>.

⁸ Daan Kingma, "An EU Solution to a Chinese App", p. 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

¹⁰ Sze-fung Lee, "TikTok: China's Glaring Trojan Horse", *cit.*, p. 22-24.

¹¹ Victor Goury-Laffont, "Report Ties Romanian Liberals to TikTok Campaign that Fueled

In addition, TikTok has shown to be a particularly apt playground for the dissemination of pro-China narratives countering Western critiques and defending the country's core interests, such as the origin of the Covid-19 pandemic or the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.¹²

The rise of TikTok in the global social media market is just one facet of the broader information disorder that has been engulfing America and other Western liberal democracies since the late 2000s-early 2010s and that has been intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic: voters increasingly mistrusting mainstream "legacy" media and unwilling to pay for information because of the new availability of (generally low-quality) free alternative media, information consumption mediated through the algorithmic recommendations of social media platforms designed to maintain engagement, growing exposure to an unmanageable amount of information without the necessary media literacy, and entrapment in echo chambers. TikTok's dominance adds a further layer of uncertainty to this explosive mix, due to its inextricable connection to a Chinese Party-State aggressively committed to and capable of asserting its values and interests beyond its physical borders. This further layer of uncertainty, in fact, points to a more profound rationale for the ban, one that US political actors in favour of it have arguably avoided explicitly articulating

Pro-Russian Candidate", in *Politico Europe*, 21 December 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=5912802>.

¹² Sze-fung Lee, "TikTok: China's Glaring Trojan Horse", cit., p. 25-28.

in front of their public: TikTok is a grave security threat to US national security because of its potential use by Beijing in the build-up to and the outbreak of a direct military confrontation with Washington.

A new little red book

Unexpectedly, in the days immediately before and after the Supreme Court's decision, more than 3 million US users, many of whom jokingly define themselves as "TikTok refugees", flocked to another Chinese social media app, Xiaohongshu ("Little Red Book"), known in English as RedNote.¹³ The potential survival of TikTok thanks to Trump may turn this shift towards RedNote into a transient phenomenon. Yet, no matter how short-lived, the RedNote "moment" is a meaningful event in the contemporary history of Sino-American relations, especially the debate over Chinese political influence. RedNote was established by Chinese entrepreneurs Mao Wenchao and Qu Fang in 2013 and conceived as an Instagram-inspired crossover social media/e-commerce platform, designed to target Mainland Chinese tourists shopping in Hong Kong and Japan. Like TikTok's US competitors such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and, to a lesser extent, X, RedNote too shifted to short videos as the main format during the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹³ Katie Pauls, "Chinese App RedNote Gained Millions of US Users This Week as 'TikTok Refugees' Joined Ahead of Ban", in *Reuters*, 17 January 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/chinese-app-rednote-gained-millions-us-users-this-week-tiktok-refugees-joined-2025-01-16>.

However, in contrast with ByteDance, RedNote did not create a “sister app” for users outside China. ByteDance, in fact, operates TikTok as the “segregated” sister app of its Chinese social media Douyin (sharing a similar architecture with its Chinese counterpart but with differences in algorithmic recommendation and content moderation), to guarantee the “insulation” of Chinese users and the enforcement of Chinese laws.¹⁴ On RedNote, instead, US users can directly interact with Chinese and China-based users on the app. At the same time, all users are subject to Chinese moderation, creating a fundamentally different experience from TikTok – a platform of choice for young Americans where “progressive” identities are openly debated and celebrated.¹⁵

Thus, two key issues have immediately emerged: young US users with liberal and even radical socio-political identities facing strictly enforced Chinese censorship, and Chinese concerns over unmonitored online interactions with users based abroad.¹⁶ RedNote’s Chinese corporate identity, then, further exacerbates and makes visible the issues at the root of TikTok’s US ban: Chinese social media

companies’ obligation to respect the relevant PRC legal framework and “provide assistance” to the Chinese government when required. Even if the TikTok ban eventually survives Trump’s opposition, RedNote’s moment in the US may remain short-lived.

The political significance of the RedNote moment

No single dominant narrative can be easily reconstructed from the shift from TikTok to RedNote. Yet, while possibly anecdotal, the “atmospherics” of this mass e-meeting between young Americans and Chinese users do appear largely positive, marked by a willingness to bridge obvious cultural as well as recently entrenched political divides.¹⁷ At a deeper level, the RedNote moment provides a snapshot that confirms the gap in the perceptions of China between generations in the US. As a recent Pew Research Center study shows, people aged 18 to 29 hold more positive (yet still overall critical) views of China than their elders: only 27 per cent of the former view China as an “enemy”, compared to 32 per cent in the 30-49 bracket, 49 per cent in the 50-64 range, and 61 per cent among those aged 65 or more.¹⁸ Overall, younger Americans appear increasingly sceptical of the existing bipartisan

¹⁴ Daan Kingma, “An EU Solution to a Chinese App”, cit., p. 9-10.

¹⁵ Eric Cheung, “As US TikTok Users Move to RedNote, Some Are Encountering Chinese-Style Censorship for the First Time”, in *CNN*, 16 January 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/16/tech/tiktok-refugees-rednote-china-censorship-intl-hnk/index.html>.

¹⁶ Brenda Goh, “China Gives a Wary Welcome to Influx of ‘TikTok Refugees’ on RedNote”, in *Reuters*, 16 January 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/china-gives-wary-welcome-influx-tiktok-refugees-rednote-2025-01-15>.

¹⁷ Jiangqing Chen, “What’s Happening on RedNote? A Media Scholar Explains the App TikTok Users Are Fleeing to”, in *The Conversation*, 19 January 2025, <https://theconversation.com/whats-happening-on-rednote-a-media-scholar-explains-the-app-tiktok-users-are-fleeing-to-and-the-cultural-moment-unfolding-there-247621>.

¹⁸ Christine Huang, Laura Silver and Laura Clancy, “Americans Remain Critical of China”, in *Pew Research Center Reports*, 1 May 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/?p=164504>.

consensus over the “China threat” that has decisively shaped the country’s policy towards Beijing since the first Trump administration.

On RedNote, American users’ scepticism of the US’ China policy has at times manifested as a crude and naïve contrast between a utopian China and a dystopic America mired in imperial decline. In other words, RedNote has facilitated a (remote) encounter with a sanitised China onto which American users project their discontent about their own country.¹⁹ In doing so, RedNote amplifies Orientalist dynamics, turning China into an “Other”. The political implications of the generational divide over perceptions of China are considerable, both in the short and in the medium term, especially for the US political, military and security environments concerned with social cohesion in case of a potential conflict with Beijing.

The migration of millions of US users from TikTok to RedNote shows how the securitisation of the TikTok challenge, pursued – in a bipartisan fashion by Congress prior to Trump’s return to power – without searching for solutions and implementing concrete measures to fight information disorder, especially against the backdrop of the recent shift towards the radical right of the US tech sector,²⁰ will likely only

¹⁹ Katherine Dee, “Is RedNote Turning Americans pro-China?”, in *UnHerd*, 16 January 2025, <https://unherd.com/?p=650053>.

²⁰ Adrienne LaFrance, “The Rise of Techno-Authoritarianism”, in *The Atlantic*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/03/facebook-meta-silicon-valley-politics/677168>.

further enflame resentment against American institutions within the very same demographics that is perceived as dangerously unaware of the China challenge and naively exposed to TikTok’s structural capability to shape perceptions of the country. Rather, moves such as the TikTok ban may be perceived simply as Sinophobic and “anti-free speech” – and ultimately simply as hypocritical. This is why the “RedNote moment”, no matter how fleeting it may turn out to be, is meaningful. It is evidence of a pattern of negative polarization against the US and its institutions. After all, it is difficult not to perceive a certain generational resentment behind the choice of millions of Americans to move to an app literally called “Little Red Book” as a result of the ban of a favourite app that is primarily used for “song and dance” (and monetising content).

As of now, TikTok’s future in the US looks uncertain, and with it, arguably, the sustainability of RedNote’s newfound popularity. It remains to be seen whether the Sino-American joint venture envisioned by Trump will materialise. Additionally, the potential joint venture’s compatibility with the ban upheld by the Supreme Court is unclear. Finally, from a longer-term perspective, it is uncertain whether the existing bipartisan consensus on China, which initially propelled the bill targeting ByteDance, will endure amid Trump’s apparent willingness to negotiate with Beijing – a larger strategy of which his current efforts to renegotiate TikTok’s ownership are part.

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