

TikTok bans could be the canary in the coalmine for global economic and technological fractures

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The Australian government recently [announced](#) a TikTok ban on government devices, citing foreign interference and influence concerns.

When asked on ABC's *RN Breakfast* whether children should also be prevented from using the video-sharing app, Alastair MacGibbon, chief strategy officer at CyberCX Australia, apparently believed so, saying, 'I do wonder whether or not there needs to be some broader action'. This was echoed by [Katherine Mansted](#), of the same cybersecurity firm.

Some security experts may prefer a wider prohibition, but politicians will think twice before they decide whether they can afford it electorally. Just as a wider TikTok ban in the US could cost President Joe Biden '[every voter under 35](#)', a Labor government in Australia could face a similar scenario.

Both WeChat and TikTok are owned by Chinese tech companies. WeChat is primarily used by people in China and in Chinese diaspora communities. A new study shows that WeChat in Australia plays an important role in the lives of Mandarin-speaking migrants from China. TikTok, on the other hand, is one of the most favoured platforms by people under 35 in the West. While a WeChat ban would seriously affect Chinese diaspora communities in both the US and Australia, a TikTok ban would have little impact on them.

Nevertheless, the symbolism behind the proposed TikTok ban is not lost on these communities. Rightly or wrongly, an angry caller to SBS Mandarin Radio's [hotline](#) made this association between the US congressional hearing on TikTok and his own identity as a Chinese Australian:

If TikTok's CEO – a Singaporean – can't dissociate himself from the PRC in the eyes of those arrogant congressmen, how can we, as people of Chinese heritage, be accepted by the Western society in which we have become citizens? I believe this TikTok ban makes one thing clear to all of us Chinese Australians: as long as you have a Chinese-looking face, even though you don't speak a word of Chinese, you'll always been linked to China.

The federal government has [denied](#) that the announcement of the TikTok ban was delayed until after the Aston byelection to avoid upsetting the many Chinese-Australian voters in the electorate. But responses on WeChat suggest that, along with the announcement of the AUKUS deal, news of the TikTok ban was another blow to Labor supporters hoping to see a more independent foreign policy towards China. As one WeChat commentator asked, 'Why wasn't it announced before the NSW election? Now they've got our votes, they can afford to let us down?'

Interestingly, while there has been much media coverage of the US hearing into TikTok on Capitol Hill in late March this year, there was hardly any Australian media coverage of the successful [lawsuit](#) launched in 2020 by Chinese Americans in the US District Court in San Francisco against then-president Donald Trump's attempted WeChat ban.

The recent TikTok ban is only limited to government devices, but the news has received wall-to-wall coverage in the media. This is understandable: nothing excites our media as much as a ban on something related to China. And headlines containing two words — 'China' and 'ban' — are more likely to drive traffic than, say, a ban on fossil fuels. This is despite what former Defence Force chief Admiral [Chris Barrie](#) tells us: that climate change poses a bigger threat to Australia than China's military build-up.

Many cybersecurity analysts in this country embody — rather than critique — the [securitisation](#) discourse, so it's not surprising their analyses, much sought after by our media, have so far failed to discuss the topic in its broader contexts.

The first missing context is geopolitical. While TikTok has been singled out mostly on grounds of data security and political influence concerns, it seems to be driven more by a deep-seated distrust of the Chinese government. This distrust explains why most other major platforms are not a source of concern, even though they have proven to be equally guilty of data breaches and [undue political influence](#), and even though the [US government](#) has also collected data from individual users.

In fact, as some tech [analysts](#) point out, TikTok, unlike many US social media apps, does not collect precise location data. Similarly, Facebook, which was found to have been used by Russian trolls to influence the US election in [2016](#), actually collects more data than TikTok.

It seems most of our media commentators have overlooked the largely symbolic significance of the TikTok ban: TikTok may well be the thin end of the wedge. If the ban is broadened into private use, it could signal the beginning of what some international relations [scholars](#) call a 'duopolistic digital world' — a division into a China-led internet and a US-led internet. Such a bifurcation is bound to intensify if the new cold war escalates, since this cold war is being fought first and foremost on technological fronts.

The second missing context is economic. Harvard economics professor [Kenneth Rogoff](#) believes a wider TikTok ban could be the canary in the coalmine as far as the future of economic globalisation is concerned. The US' pressure on China over TikTok is not just about defending 'the free world'. It is also about defending the global dominance of the US tech giants.

While much has been made of TikTok's feared security and political influence threats to the West, much less observed is the fact that TikTok already [threatens](#) US social media platforms economically, in terms of market share, user reach, and social impact; so it must be quashed.

The Pew Research Center's 2022 [survey](#) of teens on social media lists TikTok as second only to YouTube among US teenagers, followed by Instagram and Snapchat, with Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Reddit and Tumblr trailing behind. So when President Biden, taking a leaf from Trump's book, said TikTok should be [sold](#) to a US buyer or shut down altogether, this was not necessarily all about fear of China's ideological influence on America's young people.

TikTok is clearly part of the technological rivalry between Chinese tech companies and their US counterparts. This explains why [Targeted Victory](#), a consulting firm paid by Facebook's parent company Meta, mounted a negative public relations campaign aiming to undermine the popularity of TikTok in the US.

No doubt the Labor government in Australia is carefully watching the US government's next move. How it navigates the narrow and potentially treacherous passage between big tech, security advisers, young voters and Chinese Australians may test its fundamental values just as much as its handling of AUKUS already has.

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