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Digital Regulation and Economic Diplomacy in the United States–China TikTok Dispute

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Abstract

The rapid development of digital technology has made data a key strategic asset, influencing not only national security but also shaping the dynamics of international relations. In this research, I use the TikTok Agreement between the United States and China as a key case study to investigate how digital regulation intertwines with economic diplomacy. Using qualitative case study methods, this analysis examines academic literature, official government documents, and media reports to explore the driving factors, the diplomatic processes involved, the economic impact, and perspectives on global governance in this dispute. The research shows that the agreement arose from deep concerns about data security, domestic political pressures in the United States, and the broader technological rivalry between the US and China. This case reveals the complex interplay between corporate-level negotiations and international diplomacy, with private companies like ByteDance playing key roles in geopolitical struggles. Economically, this event exacerbated trade tensions and fueled fragmentation in the digital world. Globally, it underscores the lack of a unified international framework for digital governance. Through this study, I seek to provide insights into how digital platforms function beyond ordinary businesses to become strategic entities that play a crucial role in today's international relations.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed the structure of the global economy and the way countries interact with each other. Social media platforms like TikTok, for example, represent a digital economy that transcends national borders, but also presents new challenges related to regulation, data protection, and sovereignty in the digital realm (Wu, 2020). As a Chinese technology product that has successfully reached international markets, TikTok has created complex geopolitical dynamics between the United States and China (Lim, 2020). The tensions that arise here are not only related to cybersecurity threats but also reflect economic competition and diplomacy in the global digital arena (Zhang, 2022). In such a situation, digital regulation no longer functions solely as a domestic legal framework but has evolved into an instrument of economic diplomacy that can influence the dynamics of relations between countries (Chen & Liu, 2023).

The debate and agreement surrounding TikTok between the United States and China provides a stark illustration of how digital issues can become a domain of economic diplomacy. From the US government's perspective, the app is considered a national security risk, particularly due to the potential access of user data by Chinese authorities (Mozur & Krolik, 2020). China, on the other hand, views US actions as digital protectionism intended to hinder the growth of its technological economy (Kaye, 2021). This situation clearly demonstrates that digital regulations cannot be separated from the strategic and economic interests of each country (Wakabayashi & Conger, 2024). In the context of increasingly intense global technological competition, the TikTok case illustrates how data and information now play a vital strategic role in modern-day diplomacy (Lim & Ting, 2019).

TikTok, known as the world's, fastest-growing short-form video platform, is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese technology company. In the United States, its popularity is particularly prominent among the younger generation, making it not merely a means of entertainment but also a crucial channel for disseminating information that can influence public opinion and socio-political dynamics (Cristiano, 2025). The US government is concerned that TikTok user data may be accessible to Chinese authorities through domestic regulations, particularly China's 2017 National Intelligence Law, which requires local companies to support state intelligence activities. This concern is further explored by Gray (2021), who explains that digital platforms from other countries have the potential to be used as instruments to collect sensitive data or disseminate non-neutral content.

The core of the dispute between the United States and TikTok lies in national security concerns. As Chen (2022) explains, the US government sees several key risks associated with the app, including potential access to citizens' personal data, potential algorithm manipulation, and the platform's use as a tool for political propaganda. Amidst the geopolitical tensions between the US and China, this issue has become increasingly sensitive, prompting the US government to take regulatory measures to minimize potential threats. Therefore, this conflict cannot be separated from the broader technological and economic competition between the two countries (Bu, 2025).

The United States relies on an agency called the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) to address potential risks posed by foreign investments. After ByteDance acquired Musical.ly in 2017, CFIUS began assessing the potential security risks posed by the ownership. As explained by List (2022), with the passage of the Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act (FIRRMA), CFIUS now has broader authority to examine, halt, or implement risk-reduction measures against foreign investments deemed threatening. In CFIUS's history, the TikTok case stands out as one of the most complex, as it involves political, economic, technological, and diplomatic aspects between countries.

Facing pressure from CFIUS, ByteDance subsequently drafted mitigation measures known as the TikTok Security Agreement. This agreement includes storing US user data on domestic servers, regular audits by an independent party, separating operations from ByteDance in China, and access to algorithms for regulatory oversight. Patnaik (2023) highlights

that these mitigation efforts aim to mitigate security risks while maintaining TikTok's business continuity in the US. However, several studies suggest that these technical measures may not necessarily alleviate political concerns, as the underlying issue is not only technical but also distrust of the Chinese government's potential data control (Bernot et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, from the Chinese government's perspective, US measures against TikTok are considered economic discrimination and a form of technological protectionism. According to (Bu, 2025) asserts that these actions can be seen as an attempt to maintain US technological supremacy and hinder the expansion of Chinese digital companies in the global market. This dispute illustrates how countries utilize digital policy as an instrument of economic diplomacy to strengthen their strategic positions in global competition. In this context, TikTok finds itself caught between business interests and the fight for digital hegemony.

The TikTok case has also sparked a broader discussion about data sovereignty. Many countries are currently implementing data locality policies, which require data to be stored within the country of origin as a safeguard against cybersecurity risks. According to (Yang, 2024), this policy has become a global trend in response to growing concerns about the use of data for political and intelligence purposes. Thus, the TikTok dispute highlights new challenges in global data governance, as countries seek to control cross-border data flows to maintain their digital sovereignty.

From an economic diplomacy perspective, the TikTok incident illustrates how interstate relations are now directly intertwined with digital technology. Cristiano (2025) explains that in today's digital age, technology platforms can act as global players, influencing economic aspects, security, and interactions between nations. The bargaining process between the United States and ByteDance demonstrates that technology is no longer considered merely an ordinary industry but has become a crucial component of diplomatic tactics. In such situations, digital regulations can be used as a tool to exert pressure, negotiate, or even control economic relations with other countries.

Given all the dynamics discussed, the TikTok case proves to be a highly relevant study example for understanding the relationship between digital regulation and economic diplomacy. The dispute surrounding TikTok demonstrates that interactions between nations in the digital age are no longer solely influenced by military or economic power, but also by control of data, algorithms, and platform technology. As outlined by Bernot et al. (2024), the survival of digital platforms operating across borders now depends heavily on their ability to meet domestic political security requirements while navigating global geopolitical pressures. Therefore, examining the TikTok agreement provides a deeper understanding of how nations negotiate their interests in an increasingly connected but conflicting digital space. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between digital regulation and economic diplomacy in the context of the TikTok agreement between the United States and China. More specifically, the focus of this study includes: (1) Factors driving the agreement, such as data security aspects, domestic political pressure, and economic competition; (2) Diplomatic interactions between governments and private entities; (3) Economic impacts on trade, investment, and market access; and (4) Views on global governance. By using the TikTok case study, this study is expected to be able to provide academic contributions to understanding the role of technology platforms not only as ordinary businesses, but also as strategic players in the dynamics of international relations.

METHODS

This This research employed qualitative methods with a single case study design to explore the complexities of digital regulation and economic diplomacy in the TikTok agreement between the United States and China. The choice of qualitative methods was based on its ability to conduct in-depth exploration of current, real-world phenomena, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the motivations, interactions, and impacts of existing policies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data was obtained from various

credible sources, such as academic literature, official government documents, including CFIUS reports and statements from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, think tank reports, and news from international media, to ensure the validity and triangulation of information.

To analyze the data, this study employed thematic analysis techniques based on the Braun and Clarke (2006) model, which includes familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme discovery, review, definition, and reporting of themes. Through these steps, four main themes were identified as a basic framework for organizing the findings and discussion, the focus of this study includes: (1) Factors driving the agreement, such as data security aspects, domestic political pressure, and economic competition; (2) Diplomatic interactions between governments and private entities; (3) Economic impacts on trade, investment, and market access; and (4) Views on global governance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through an in-depth analysis of the TikTok agreement between the United States and China, the complex interplay between data security, geopolitical, and economic interests is revealed. This section will outline key findings grouped into four compoment are analyzed: (1) the agreement's key drivers; (2) diplomatic dynamics; (3) economic implications; and (4) global governance perspectives.

Key Driver of the Tiktok Agreement: Data Security, Political Pressure and Economic Competition

1) Data Security as a Strategic Reason

Data security issues are at the heart of the debate surrounding TikTok in the United States, particularly due to concerns that Chinese authorities could exploit the app to gain access to the personal information of US citizens. This is closely related to China's 2017 National Intelligence Law, which requires domestic companies to support state intelligence activities. Li (2020) explains that the law gives the Chinese government broad authority to request data from private entities "for national intelligence purposes," creating the risk of misuse of such data for strategic purposes. As a result, TikTok is considered a potential threat to US national security, particularly due to its ability to collect sensitive data such as location, user habits, behavioral patterns, and social interactions. These concerns are further amplified by TikTok's large user base in the United States, particularly among younger generations, making it a crucial platform for socio-political influence.

Beyond the technical aspects of data security, there are also concerns about the possibility of manipulation through algorithms. According Roberts (2020) outlined that TikTok's algorithm, which selects and distributes content to users, could be used as a subtle propaganda tool if controlled by a foreign party. With its highly personalized and difficult-to-audit algorithm, the US government views TikTok as an effective medium for shaping public opinion at large. Cheung & Jackson (2023) also added that Western concerns about Chinese technology companies are not only technical, but also stem from China's political structure, which gives the state strong control over the technology sector. Therefore, CFIUS's demand that US data be kept under Oracle's supervision through "Project Texas" is an attempt to mitigate security risks, although some experts argue that this measure does not completely eliminate the possibility of external interference.

2) Domestic Political Pressure in the United States

The escalation of the TikTok case in the United States is driven not only by security concerns but also by domestic political dynamics. The platform has been exploited as a political tool to demonstrate a tough stance against China. As explained by Glaser and Murphy (2021), anti-China sentiment has grown rapidly within both major parties, leading to a cross-party consensus that Chinese technology companies, including TikTok, require stricter oversight. Consequently, the US government faces significant political pressure to take decisive action, especially after several intelligence reports warned of the potential for foreign influence through such digital platforms. The Trump administration issued an executive order banning TikTok from operating in the country, while under Biden, the

investigation into ByteDance continues through the CFIUS mechanism.

Public pressure also reinforces the government's call for swift action. A Pew Research survey (2023) showed that a majority of Americans believe Chinese technology companies pose a national security risk. Furthermore, there are particular concerns about how social media affects teenagers, making TikTok a frequent target of criticism, particularly from Democratic legislators who highlight mental health concerns. Thus, TikTok appears to have become a political arena where various interests converge, from national security to consumer protection. This political pressure ultimately provides a stronger justification for the government to implement stricter regulations, making this issue no longer merely a technical issue but also a political instrument within the context of domestic competition.

3) US-China economic and Technoogical Rivalry

In addition to domestic security and political aspects, the TikTok agreement was also triggered by the global economic rivalry between the United States and China. TikTok is one of the few Chinese platforms that has successfully dominated the digital market in the West, challenging the hegemony of US technology companies like MetaTrader and Google. Lee (2022) stated that TikTok's emergence as a major competitor in the social media space signals a significant shift in global technological power dynamics. TikTok's rapid success in attracting young users puts direct pressure on US companies, which previously dominated the digital space without significant competition from Chinese companies. TikTok is seen as a representation of China's ability to create competitive digital innovations on a global scale.

In a geopolitical context, TikTok's existence is seen as a threat to US technological supremacy. Wright (2023) emphasizes that US digital protectionist policies toward TikTok are part of a broader strategy to prevent China from gaining an edge in future technologies. Measures such as algorithm audits and operational separation requirements are efforts to ensure that the US digital space remains under domestic oversight. This rivalry demonstrates that TikTok regulation is not merely a consumer protection measure but also part of a strategic competition between superpowers to control global technological innovation and influence.

Diplomatic Dynamics: Private-Sector Negotiations and Government Diplomacy

1) ByteDance's New Roles

The TikTok case stands out because it involves a complex interplay between international diplomacy and negotiations between business entities and government authorities. As a privately held company, ByteDance faced demands from both the United States and China. From the US side, the company was forced to address legal requirements and security concerns raised by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS). The negotiations that culminated in the "TikTok Security Agreement" included the establishment of TikTok Global, with Oracle as a reliable cloud service provider and Walmart as a business partner, demonstrating how international technology companies must adapt to stringent domestic regulations (Cheung & Jackson, 2023). These technical measures can be seen as a form of "corporate diplomacy," where businesses seek to build trust by demonstrating their commitment to locally enforced data management norms.

2) The Chinese Government's Stance on the TikTok Conflict

From Beijing's perspective, the United States' measures against TikTok are not merely technical matters, but rather a form of political pressure and protectionism in the technology sector. The US demand that TikTok be separated from its parent company, ByteDance, or even forced to sell its US operations, is considered unacceptable political interference. China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM, 2021) officially states that any transfer of strategic technology, such as TikTok's algorithm, must be authorized by the Chinese government. Zhang (2021) explains that this is China's way of maintaining control over digital assets deemed crucial to its national power. By establishing strict regulations on technology exports, China is

actually trying to avoid US dominance in regulating its domestic digital companies.

Furthermore, China's response to this case also reflects broader geopolitical dynamics. The country wants to assert its sovereignty in developing domestic technology and strengthen its bargaining position in the global competitive arena. The US action is seen as part of a broader strategy to slow China's technological progress. Consequently, Beijing's response is not only aimed at protecting ByteDance but also at sending a strong message to the world that it will oppose foreign interference in its digital companies. This situation further emphasizes that the TikTok dispute is not just about one company, but rather a reflection of the shifting balance of power globally.

Economic Implications: Trade, Technology Investment, and Access to Markets

1) Impact on US-China Trade and Investment

The dispute surrounding TikTok has had a significant impact on economic relations between the United States and China, particularly on investment flows in the technology sector. Through the implementation of the Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act (FIRRMA), the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) now has broader authority to monitor and even reject foreign investment in sectors deemed crucial. According to Lee (2022), this strengthening of oversight from 2018 to 2022 has shifted global investment patterns, particularly for Chinese companies seeking to expand in the US. The TikTok case itself is clear evidence of how such regulations can limit the expansion of foreign businesses, thereby creating greater uncertainty in cross-border business interactions.

On the other hand, this US move has also raised concerns that China might retaliate by restricting the operations of American companies, such as Apple, Tesla, or US chipmakers with significant market presence in the country. More broadly, the TikTok incident demonstrates how technology trade is now heavily influenced by national security. Many other countries have begun to emulate the US by tightening regulations on apps and companies from countries deemed potential threats. For example, India banned TikTok in 2020, driven by political tensions with China. These new regulations ultimately created serious obstacles to foreign investment flows, which were previously primarily based on efficiency and profitability. Thus, the evolution of the TikTok case illustrates how geopolitics can reshape the framework and dynamics of technology trade and investment globally.

2) Impact on Global Technology

The TikTok incident has had a significant impact on the global technology ecosystem, particularly regarding data regulation and the way digital companies operate. Many countries are now implementing new security criteria to assess the risks posed by foreign apps. The European Union, for example, is intensifying data security audits on digital platforms, while Australia, Canada, and the UK have even banned TikTok from government devices. These developments demonstrate a growing global awareness of the potential dangers of foreign platforms. Creemers (2022) emphasizes that countries are now more cautious about granting operating permits to foreign companies with extensive access to domestic user data. The same applies to companies from the US or Europe wishing to operate in China, where cybersecurity regulations are also very strict.

Beyond increasingly stringent regulations, this phenomenon is also driving fragmentation in technological innovation. International technology companies must adapt extensively to increasingly diverse regulatory environments, ultimately increasing operational costs to adapt systems and security protocols to local regulations. In the long term, this can hinder innovation by limiting cross-border collaboration. As a result, many companies choose to develop different operating systems for different markets, which, of course, increases costs and reduces efficiency. TikTok appears to be the initial catalyst for this shift, demonstrating that global technological sustainability requires closer integration between regulation and diplomacy.

3) Internet Fragmentation and the Emergence of the "Splinternet"

One of the most significant impacts of the TikTok conflict is the acceleration of the splinternet phenomenon, which is a situation where the global internet is fragmented into regulatory zones based on geopolitical boundaries. In this context, digital platforms can no longer function as unified global entities, but must adapt to varying local demands in each region. Creemers (2022) explains that regulatory differences between the US, China, and the EU have resulted in three nearly separate digital systems, each with different principles of privacy, security, and governance. The US demand to separate TikTok's US operations from its Chinese parent reflects a broader approach to data localization and digital sovereignty. This creates an increasingly segmented digital environment, where technology companies must tailor their operations and infrastructure to different regulatory regimes in each country, thereby increasing operating costs and reducing global economies of scale.

Global Governance Perspective: Data Sovereignty and the Future of Digital Platforms

1) Absence of International Data Governance

The TikTok case is now dominating the debate around digital governance globally, with significant policy implications. One key aspect is how it highlights the absence of a comprehensive international regulatory system capable of addressing the intersection of national security interests, personal data protection, and the dynamics of digital commerce. Despite efforts such as the European Union's GDPR regulation, which emphasizes privacy, or the OECD's guidelines on cross-border data transfers, a global consensus on how to manage digital platforms, which are often viewed as an extension of foreign geopolitical forces, remains elusive. Instead, the TikTok case highlights the tendency for countries to pursue independent action or form closed technology alliances, such as the United States-led Alliance for the Future of the Internet.

2) Data Localization Normalization

This situation has apparently led to broader acceptance of data localization practices. For example, the United States' demand that TikTok user data be stored on domestic servers, while framed as national security, is actually a concrete manifestation of data localization itself. This then sets a strong precedent that allows other countries to adopt similar policies, which could ultimately hinder innovation, narrow the space for digital commerce, and exacerbate overall internet fragmentation. In fact, countries may use the US move as justification for implementing their own digital protections, under the pretext of national security or data sovereignty. Furthermore, the TikTok case raises fundamental questions about the direction of social media development on a global scale. Can such platforms still be called "global" as geopolitical tensions continue to escalate? It is clear that the sustainability of cross-border digital platforms will increasingly depend on their ability to "localize," extending beyond technical aspects such as storing data on local servers to structural aspects, including ownership, management, and operation of content algorithms (Creemers, 2022). It is possible that in the future, we will see more hybrid partnership models, such as the agreement between TikTok and Oracle, which still allows foreign ownership but with strict operational and security oversight in the hands of domestic entities.

3) Global Digital Platform of the Future

The TikTok case provides a clear illustration of how global digital platforms in the future will be increasingly influenced by geopolitical dynamics. This conflict demonstrates that such platforms can no longer operate as single entities serving the world seamlessly. According to Creemers (2022), the global internet structure is now trending toward regionalization, where platforms are forced to adapt their operations, algorithms, and data policies to local jurisdictions. In TikTok's case, this is evident in the formation of TikTok Global and the implementation of Project Texas, which effectively separates US user data from ByteDance's operations in China. This approach ultimately results in a new hybrid model, forcing technology companies to make fundamental adjustments to the scale of their global operations.

However, this model also raises questions about the long-term sustainability of global digital platforms. If geopolitical tensions continue to escalate, companies may be forced to create different versions of their platforms for each region, which could reduce the uniformity of the user experience and significantly increase development costs. TikTok offers a prime example of this future, where global companies must learn to navigate increasingly restrictive digital boundaries. In a geopolitically charged environment, a platform's ability to remain "global" will depend heavily on how well it can comply with local regulations without losing its essence and core functionality. As such, TikTok serves as a crucial case study for understanding the future direction of digital governance and the global internet architecture.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the TikTok agreement between the United States and China is a clear example of the complex relationship between digital regulation and economic diplomacy in the current geopolitical context. This dispute was triggered by various factors, including data security risks arising from China's National Intelligence Law, domestic political pressure in the US, and broader technological competition between the two countries. The negotiation process revealed complex dynamics involving corporate diplomacy by ByteDance and decisive state intervention from Washington and Beijing. Economically, the case exacerbates bilateral trade tensions, affects international investment flows, and accelerates trends toward digital fragmentation and data localization. From a global governance perspective, the TikTok case highlights the lack of a unified international framework for addressing the intersection of national security, data privacy, and cross-border digital trade. This case shows how digital platforms are increasingly required to navigate diverse regulatory environments, balancing operational globalization with localized compliance. This research contributes to the academic discourse by integrating security, economic, and diplomatic dimensions into a coherent analytical framework, and offers a model for understanding future technology-related disputes in an increasingly digital international system.

Based on the research findings, several recommendations can be made: for the US and Chinese governments to create clearer channels for bilateral dialogue on technology and data security issues in order to prevent unnecessary escalation of conflict; for global technology companies such as ByteDance to implement proactive strategies in data management and algorithm transparency, and to consider partnership models with local entities to build trust and maintain a global presence; for future researchers to investigate similar cases on other platforms or regional responses, and explore the effectiveness of data localization policies; and for international policymakers to accelerate the development of an inclusive global digital governance framework to harmonize standards and prevent further fragmentation of the internet.

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