

## Pop-Up Case: Should the United States Ban TikTok to Preserve National Security?

*U.S. politicians have raised alarm that TikTok, a popular video-sharing social media app owned by the Chinese company, threatens U.S. national security. Should the United States impose a ban on TikTok to safeguard citizens' data and the country's security?*

Use the following *hypothetical* case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do if they were decision makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

### The Situation

U.S. politicians have raised alarm that TikTok, the popular video-sharing social media app owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, threatens U.S. national security. Critics in the United States have suggested the app is vulnerable to adversaries in the Chinese government who could use data to undermine the security and privacy of individuals and the United States.

The app has more than one billion users worldwide. That includes 150 million monthly active users in the United States. Like many social media apps, it helps connect people across the globe. Businesses also leverage the app for marketing and other commercial purposes. TikTok's core demographic is young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four.

Critics have called for the U.S. government to ban TikTok to bolster national security. They warn that the Chinese government, which hosts a broad law that allows it to access information from private companies, can misuse the app and leverage users' data. The United States has remained relatively open to online businesses, although a ban would not be entirely new. The Trump administration banned several other Chinese software apps, such as Alipay and WeChat Pay, in 2021. China, for its part, has maintained firmer control on cyberspace, banning many popular U.S. apps including Google.

TikTok could be particularly insecure because users interact with rapidly with a great deal of content, and personal information about them can be quickly gleaned from the app. A former White House official has warned that malign actors could easily manipulate the app's suggested "For You" content. They fear such interference could ultimately influence U.S. public opinion, in turn allowing the Chinese government to influence U.S. elections.

Still, proponents urge that despite those risks, internet freedom is a core U.S. value. To them, banning apps can serve as a slippery slope to denying individual freedoms and businesses rights. Some have argued that banning TikTok could "dangerously expand the national security state," and that preserving online freedom and international businesses' ability to operate within the United States should be a top priority.

The TikTok debate touches on wider questions about effectively balancing online safety and freedom that remain unresolved in the United States and internationally. Although countries have called for a new UN treaty to counter cybercrime, so far they have not settled on a multilateral agreement to govern online space. How to balance those protections while preserving internet rights and freedoms is also still debated.

### Additional Resources:

1. [Don't Ban TikTok, Fix Internet Privacy \(New York Times\)](#)
2. [Advancing Cyber Diplomacy Symposium \(Council on Foreign Relations\)](#)
3. [America May Be a Step Closer to Banning TikTok \(The Economist\)](#)



### Decision Point

Pressure is mounting among U.S. legislators to secure U.S. national security against the vulnerabilities of the popular TikTok app. Some have called for banning the Chinese-owned app completely. In response, TikTok's leadership has tried to assure U.S. lawmakers that its app is secure, defending its desire to continue operating in the United States. As part of an attempt to protect against a U.S. ban, the company recently established new safeguards such as a new subsidiary "TikTok U.S. Data Security" which aims to better protect U.S. data.

The U.S. president is seeking talking points for an upcoming speech on the issue. The National Security Council (NSC) needs to advise the president on the best course of action in the face of rising national attention to the TikTok question.

#### NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- *Pressure ByteDance to sell the TikTok app to an owner outside of China.* Selling the app to a different country could provide a way for TikTok to operate more safely within the United States. However, that strategy could fail if ByteDance does not comply.
- *Threaten TikTok with a U.S. ban. Exert pressure on TikTok to choose between significantly changing its governance and implementing stronger data safeguards or facing a ban on operating in the United States.* That effort could help preserve internet freedoms while better protecting users. However, China's government will not necessarily agree to any reforms or effectively enforce them.
- *Prioritize business and internet freedom by working only on multilateral approaches to bolstering cybersecurity.* Such approaches could include increased U.S. leadership in developing stronger international laws to govern international cyberspace. This option could help build a stronger systematic approach and global buy-in. It will, however, face Chinese pushback and inevitable barriers to enforcement.

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## Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips [here](#) and [here](#)). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

### Gauge Reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

### Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

### Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.



### Simple Cabinet Simulation:

Appoint yourself (or a student) to be president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones), and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president. The president should ask questions and ultimately make a decision and explain their choice.

### Cabinet Simulation With Assigned Opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign the class opinions. For example, divide your class into three groups, and assign each group one of the policy options presented in the case. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or another student) as president.

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