

President Trump signs executive orders banning Chinese social media apps TikTok and WeChat

By Kevin Reed
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In a significant escalation of anti-Chinese aggression by the White House, President Donald Trump issued a pair of executive orders on Thursday banning the mobile apps TikTok and WeChat in the US pending a takeover of the two platforms by American companies within 45 days.

Both social media apps are owned by companies based in China. TikTok, a short-form video sharing platform with 800 million worldwide and 80 million US daily active users, is owned by ByteDance with corporate headquarters in Beijing. WeChat, a multipurpose messaging app with 1 billion worldwide and 19 million US daily active users, is owned by TenCent with corporate headquarters in Shenzhen.

In his “Executive Order on Addressing the Threat Posed by TikTok,” the President states that “the spread in the United States of mobile applications developed and owned by companies in the People’s Republic of China (China) continues to threaten the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States.”

Relating the executive orders to presidential national emergency powers, Trump states that “action must be taken to address the threat posed by one mobile application in particular, TikTok.”

Without providing any evidence or detailed proof, the executive order repeats the unsubstantiated assertions made by the President, other White House officials and Congressional leaders that TikTok “automatically captures vast swaths of information from its users, including Internet and other network activity information such as location data and browsing and search histories.”

Exposing the unsubstantiated nature of the official reasons given for banning the use of the apps, the executive orders stop short of claiming—as the President and his advisors have done repeatedly in public over the past three weeks—that the data is being gathered by the Chinese government.

Instead, the document says that the data collection by TikTok “threatens” to allow “the Chinese Communist Party

access to Americans’ personal and proprietary information” and “potentially” allows the Chinese government to “track the locations of federal employees and contractors, build dossiers of personal information for blackmail, and conduct corporate espionage.”

The document similarly states that TikTok “reportedly” censors content that the “Chinese Communist Party deems politically sensitive” such as “content concerning protests in Hong Kong and China’s treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities.”

One purpose of Trump’s proclamations is to mobilize his right-wing and extreme nationalist supporters with unsubstantiated anti-Chinese talking points. The documents state that the banned apps “may” be used for “disinformation campaigns that benefit the Chinese Communist Party, such as when TikTok videos spread debunked conspiracy theories about the origins of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus.”

The two executive orders are virtually identical in form and content with the exception of additional paragraph referring to the electronic funds transfer features of WeChat.

Under the terms of the orders, if the apps are not taken over by an American firm within the 45 day limit, business transactions with the China-based companies will be prohibited. This means, for example, the American companies doing business with ByteDance and Tencent—such as advertisers or Apple, Google and Amazon where TikTok and WeChat are downloaded by users from app stores—must end their relationship with the Chinese firms.

Microsoft Corporation, operating under the direction of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) headed by Secretary of the Treasury Stephen Mnuchin, has been in negotiations to acquire the assets of TikTok, initially those in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Now these talks are reported to include the forced divestiture of all assets of the company, including

those in Asia and Europe, not including China.

A potential deal between TikTok and Microsoft is now complicated both by the 45-day deadline and the challenges of divesting the firm from its Chinese owners. A report in the *Financial Times* on Thursday said, “Any eventual deal may take a variety of forms ... a long list of obstacles stand in the way of a transaction, including price. ... Two people following the talks closely said that the timeframe would be difficult to meet, with one of them going so far as to say it could take between five and eight years to fully separate the software.”

Critics of the ban are pointing to the fact that TikTok and WeChat are just two of many China-based consumer products and apps used in the US. TenCent owns RiotGames, for example, the developer of the massively popular League of Legends video game and is also an investor in Epic Games, the developer of the popular Fortnite.

Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, said on Thursday of the orders, “I just think it’s a really bad long-term precedent, and that it needs to be handled with the utmost care and gravity whatever the solution is. I am really worried...it could very well have long-term consequences in other countries around the world.”

Beyond the immediate political motivations of the President’s reelection campaign, the aggressive moves by the Trump administration against TikTok and WeChat have significant bipartisan support and express the increasingly desperate and inexorable drive by US imperialism into economic and military conflict with China.

By issuing the executive orders under the auspices of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (1977), the Trump administration is making it clear that these measures are of a preemptive character and in anticipation of a major escalation of a confrontation with China. The text of the executive orders expresses this logic, explaining that the “Department of Homeland Security, Transportation Security Administration, and the United States Armed Forces have already banned the use of TikTok on Federal Government phones.”

It is significant that just hours before Trump signed his executive orders, the US Senate voted unanimously for a bill expanding the banning of TikTok for all federal employees. Senator Josh Hawley (Republican of Missouri), who introduced the bill, said of the vote, “I’m encouraged by the bipartisan support we have seen in this body to hold the Chinese Communist Party accountable and that includes, by the way, holding accountable those corporations who would just do China’s bidding. And, if I have anything to say about it, we won’t be stopping here.”

The bipartisan support for aggression against China was

also expressed by the *New York Times* in its article on Friday entitled “Trump’s Orders on WeChat and TikTok Are Uncertain. That May Be the Point,” which extends friendly advice to the Trump administration.

Calling for an extension of the TikTok and WeChat policy, *Times* trade and international economics reporter Ana Swanson writes, “Other Chinese tech companies could find themselves as the next target of the Trump administration. U.S. officials viewed the executive orders on TikTok and WeChat as a template that could be applied to other Chinese companies, and some have discussed whether services like Alibaba’s Alipay pose a similar national security concern, according to people with knowledge of the matter.”

In an important development on Friday, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that a small company with ties to the US military intelligence establishment embedded its software in hundreds of apps allowing it to “track the movements of hundreds of millions of mobile phones world-wide.”

The report says, “Anomaly Six LLC a Virginia-based company founded by two U.S. military veterans with a background in intelligence, said in marketing material it is able to draw location data from more than 500 mobile applications, in part through its own software development kit, or SDK, that is embedded directly in some of the apps. An SDK allows the company to obtain the phone’s location if consumers have allowed the app containing the software to access the phone’s GPS coordinates.”

Such relationships with intelligence gathering services completely exposes the fraud of US government statements—especially those of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo—about the privacy and personal information rights of American citizens. The activities of Anomaly Six LLC and many others like it shows that the largest electronic surveillance operation in the world is the intelligence state of US imperialism.

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