

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2509

November 7, 2023

The Honorable Janet Yellen
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Secretary Yellen:

TikTok—and its parent company ByteDance—are threats to American national security. The popular video-sharing app harvests vast amounts of data from Americans’ personal devices, data which then flows overseas to our main geopolitical rival. Whistleblower testimony has revealed that China-based employees have full access to U.S. user data.¹ And under Chinese law, ByteDance is required to make that data available to the Chinese Communist Party upon request.²

We’ve known all this for years. But the Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S. (CFIUS), which you chair, has not yet concluded its review of the app, or demanded that ByteDance sell off TikTok. Recent developments underscore the need for prompt action.

While data security issues are paramount, less often discussed is TikTok’s power to radically distort the world-picture that America’s young people encounter. Israel’s unfolding war with Hamas is a crucial test case. According to one poll, 51% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 believe that Hamas’s murder of civilians was justified—a statistic notably different from other age cohorts. Analysts have attributed this disparity to the ubiquity of anti-Israel content on TikTok, where most young internet users get their information about the world.³

Crucially, this disparity aligns with the Chinese government’s foreign policy preferences. Having previously refused to condemn Hamas, the Chinese government is now calling for a “ceasefire” that would cripple Israel’s ability to defend itself.⁴ And we know from past experience that political manipulation is business as usual for TikTok. To take just one example, in 2019, as ByteDance partnered with the Chinese government to surveil Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, TikTok censored American user content critical of this repression.⁵ It appears that ByteDance is once again up to its old tricks—as innocent Israelis suffer and die.

¹ <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/tiktok-whistleblower-hawley-demands-thorough-review-explosive-new-allegations>

² <https://www.axios.com/2022/12/02/tiktok-chinese-influence-fbi-wray>

³ <https://twitter.com/jmj/status/1717404573214671068>

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/china/china-xi-israel-hamas-ceasefire-comment-intl-hnk/index.html>

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/tiktoks-owner-is-helping-chinas-campaign-of-repression-in-xinjiang-report-finds/2019/11/28/98e8d9e4-119f-11ea-bf62-eadd5d11f559_story.html

This simply heightens the stakes of the TikTok question: the longer this app is allowed to operate in the U.S., the longer its Chinese Communist Party overseers will apparently be able to propagandize Americans. That is unacceptable.

I urge you, and the other members of CFIUS, to swiftly conclude your review and ban *all* ByteDance-controlled apps currently available to U.S. users. The matter is as simple as that.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Josh Hawley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Josh Hawley
United States Senator