

The Impact of the TikTok Ban on Political Relations between the United States and China

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Abstract

The ban on TikTok in the United States has been one of the most controversial policies that have had a major impact on US-Tiongkok bilateral relations. This policy is based on national security reasons, but it also reflects the dynamics of geopolitical competition between the two countries. Using Gilpin's Realism approach, this study analyses how the TikTok ban reflects the US' efforts to maintain its dominance in the global economy and technology. Applying content analysis and data triangulation methods, this study collected information from various sources, including government policies, trade reports, and international media coverage. The results show that this policy exacerbated tensions between the US and Tiongkok, especially in the trade sector and technology industry. In response, Tiongkok imposed retaliatory policies by increasing trade tariffs on US products and restricting American technology companies' access to its domestic market. In addition, the data shows that although the total value of trade between the two countries is still in the trillions of dollars, the escalating tensions may hinder growth and encourage diversification of global supply chains. The findings confirm that the hegemonic competition between the US and Tiongkok is not only in the economic sphere, but also in the aspects of technology regulation and cybersecurity. This research provides insights into the impact of the TikTok ban on the US-Tiongkok relationship, as well as how the strategic steps of the two countries in facing the changing global economic and political landscape.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ban on TikTok by the United States (US) has become a major highlight in the dynamics of international relations, especially between the US and China. TikTok, as a social media platform owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, has achieved immense popularity among US users. However, concerns regarding data security and potential foreign influence prompted the US government to take the drastic step of banning the application[1]. This decision not only affects millions of TikTok users in the US, but also raises tensions in bilateral relations between the US and China. The two countries, which previously engaged in various forms of economic and technological cooperation, are now facing new challenges that could exacerbate their competition in the digital realm. This US move is seen by many as an attempt to curb the influence of Chinese technology in the global market.

Relations between the US and China have been based on the principle of mutual benefit, especially in the fields of trade and technology. Trade between the United States and China has experienced significant dynamics in recent years. In January to October 2024, the total value of trade in goods between the two countries reached USD564.174 billion, an increase of 2.8% compared to the same period in the previous year. China's exports to the US during that period reached USD427.776 billion, while imports from the US to China amounted to USD136.398 billion [2]. Data shows that trade between the two countries reaches trillions of dollars annually [3], reflecting a high level of interdependence. However, the US decision to ban TikTok signals a shift in approach to technological cooperation, which had previously been one of the main pillars of their relationship[4].

The ban on TikTok not only impacted the technology sector, but also sparked tensions in various other areas. In the economic sector, this step could affect investment and trade between the two countries. In the diplomatic realm, the decision could exacerbate negative perceptions and increase distrust between the US and China. In addition, in the field of cyber security, this action reflects the escalation of competition in securing strategic data and information [5].

This research will focus on analyzing the impact of the TikTok ban on bilateral relations between the US and China. This study will explore how these policies influence political, economic and social dynamics between the two countries. To understand this phenomenon, the theory of Realism in international relations can be used as an analytical framework, considering its emphasis on national interests and the balance of power in interactions between countries. So the aim of this research is to analyze the impact of the TikTok ban policy on bilateral relations between the United States and China from a political, economic and cyber security perspective. This research also aims to identify how this decision reflects the dynamics of global power competition between the two countries and its implications for future technology policy.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to understand the implications of the TikTok ban policy for the stability and dynamics of international relations between the US and China. By analyzing the impact of this policy, it is hoped that it can provide insight into how unilateral actions in the field of technology can affect the global balance of power and international cooperation in the future.

Interestingly, this topic also opens up discussion regarding the boundaries between national security and technological globalization. Are actions like banning TikTok a necessary step to protect national interests, or are they an obstacle to the free flow of information and innovation? These questions become relevant in today's digital era, where technology knows no national borders, but remains bound by respective national policies and interests. Apart from this, this research wants to analyze the impact of the ban on TikTok in the United States on its relations with China.

2. LIBRARY STUDY

Realism is one of the main theories in the study of global politics which focuses on power, national interests, and the dynamics of competition between political actors, both states and non-state entities. In the context of global politics, realism is not only applied in the study of international relations but also in the analysis of foreign policy, security, political economy and technology. Morgenthau argued that politics is basically a struggle for power [6]. He stated that all political actors act based on national interests defined in terms of power. For Morgenthau, humans are naturally selfish and seek domination, so that global politics is always characterized by conflicts of interest [7].

Carr argues that global politics cannot be separated from the interests of power [8]. According to him, countries always try to strengthen themselves and defend their interests,

so that conflict and competition are normal in international relations. He emphasized that power is the main factor in world politics. According to him, if one country is too strong, other countries will try to balance it to avoid domination. Therefore, the balance of power must continue to be maintained to prevent major conflicts [9].

Waltz developed the theory of structural realism which emphasizes that it is not human nature that causes global conflict, but rather the anarchic structure of the global political system [10]. Countries and global political actors operate in an environment without a central governing authority, so they must rely on their own strength to survive [11]. In the context of global politics, Waltz's neorealism can be used to understand how technological, economic and cybersecurity dynamics reflect structural competition between major powers such as the US and China.

Meanwhile, Gilpin developed a theory which emphasized that the global political system is controlled by a hegemonic country that has economic and technological power [12]. What this means is that the hegemonic country will try to maintain the status quo in various ways, including through economic and technological policies. This perspective is suitable for analyzing how the US uses regulation and economic policy as instruments to limit China's dominance in the global technology sector.

In analyzing the impact of the TikTok ban on relations between the United States and China, Robert Gilpin's Realism theory is the most relevant. Gilpin emphasized that a hegemon like the United States will try to maintain its dominance in the global political system in various ways, including through economic policies, trade and technology regulations. Banning TikTok is not only about user data security, but also part of the US strategy to limit China's influence in the global digital economy. The US sees the rapid growth of Chinese technology companies as a threat to its dominance in this sector, so this ban policy can be understood as a hegemonic move to maintain the US' position as a leader in the digital economy and technological geopolitics.

Several previous studies have discussed the relationship between the United States and China. Like the research entitled '*The impact and implication of the COVID-19 on the trade relationship between China and the United States: the political economy perspectives*' [13] Previous research focused on trade dispute between the US and China, by highlighting tariff policies, investment, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic relations between the two countries. This article also emphasizes that China's rise has threatened US hegemony in global politics and trade. Previous research results found that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated US-China trade tensions and accelerated a shift in the global balance of power, with China increasingly challenging US dominance. While this research focuses on implications of the US ban on TikTok on US-China bilateral relations. This research not only looks at the economic aspect but also how this policy is part of the hegemonic competition between the two countries in the technology and national security sectors.

There is also previous research related to this research, entitled '*US TikTok ban: how the looming restriction is affecting scientists on the app*' [14]. Previous research had a more micro research focus, namely focusing on the social and academic impacts of the TikTok ban in the US. The research highlights how scientists and the academic community in the US are using TikTok to share research, reach wider audiences, and improve science communication. Thus, the ban on TikTok is considered a threat to academic freedom, public involvement in science, and the loss of an effective platform for sharing scientific information. Meanwhile, this research has a more macro research focus, the United States-China bilateral relations. This research focuses on the geopolitical and economic conflicts that emerged as a result of the US government's ban on TikTok. Thus, banning TikTok is seen as part of the US strategy to suppress China's technological dominance and protect its domestic technology industry from foreign influence.

The research entitled '*The Evolution of the Technology War Between China and the USA*' [15] is a reference for previous research because it has similarities in the big theme, namely US-China technological competition. However, there is a significant difference in research focus, where previous research focuses on technology wars in the context of industry 4.0 and techno-nationalism strategies, while this research focuses on the impact of the TikTok ban on US-China relations. Previous research looked at the macroeconomic implications of global technological competition, whereas this research examines the specific impact of US policy on diplomatic and trade relations with China. Previous research has highlighted the transition to 5G technology as one of the key aspects of US-China competition, while this research looks at how the policy of banning TikTok is exacerbating economic and geopolitical tensions.

The research entitled '*The Impact of the US-China Trade War on the Global Economy*' [16] is a reference for previous research because it has similarities in the big theme, namely the impact of US policy on economic relations with China. However, there are significant differences in research focus and results. Previous research discussed the impact of the US-China trade war on the global economy, while this research is more specific in looking at the impact of the TikTok ban on US-China bilateral relations. Previous research sees tariff and trade policies as the main factors in US-China economic tensions, while this research sees digital protection policies as a new dimension in this economic conflict. Previous research shows that trade wars have a negative impact on the world economy as a whole, while this research shows that US digital protection policies could worsen trade and investment relations with China.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive-analytical methods to understand how the TikTok ban affects relations between the United States and China. This approach was chosen because this research is not just looking for numbers or statistics, but is more focused on understanding the dynamics and impact of this policy from various perspectives. Using descriptive-analytical methods, this research will explain the policy background, reactions from the two countries, and their impact in the political, economic and cyber security fields. The data in this research comes from various existing references, such as scientific journals, books, official government reports, and websites. These documents will be studied to see how this policy was constructed, how each party responded to it, and how this policy had an impact on relations between the two countries. In addition, US and China trade data reflecting the economic interdependence of the two countries will also be an important part of this analysis.

To analyze the data, this research uses content analysis techniques (*content analysis*). This means the various documents and sources that have been collected will be read carefully to discover emerging patterns, arguments, and trends regarding TikTok bans. With this technique, research can see how this policy is not just a matter of banning one application, but is part of the dynamics of technological competition between two large countries.

As a theoretical basis, this research uses Realism theory according to Gilpin. The reason this theory is used is because it emphasizes that the TikTok ban reflects the dynamics of power competition in global politics as well as the strategy of large countries such as the United States and China in controlling technological development in the world. Through this perspective, the research will examine how the TikTok ban can be seen as a US strategy to limit China's technological influence while protecting its national interests in the digital realm.

So that the results of this research can be trusted and valid, this research will use the data triangulation method. This means that the information obtained will be compared from various sources, both from the government, academics and independent media, to ensure that the conclusions drawn are truly objective. That way, the resulting analysis is not only based on one point of view, but reflects a broader and more balanced picture.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Research result

4.1.1 United States – China Relations and the TikTok Ban

In April 2024, President Joe Biden signed the law *Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act* [17], which requires TikTok to divest its holdings from its parent company, ByteDance, by January 19, 2025, or face a ban on operations in the US. This move was based on concerns over national security and the Chinese government's potential access to US user data [18]. In response to the law, TikTok and ByteDance filed a lawsuit with the US Supreme Court in December 2024, arguing that the ban violates the First Amendment to the US Constitution which guarantees free speech. The Supreme Court agreed to hear arguments from both sides on January 10, 2025. However, on January 19, 2025, official TikTok was no longer accessible in the US after the law went into effect. The app was removed from the Apple and Google app stores, and users who tried to access it received notifications that the service was unavailable. TikTok stated that they are working to restore service in the US as quickly as possible [19].

The TikTok ban in the US has had an economic impact, especially for content creators and businesses that rely on the platform for marketing and interaction with consumers. Many creators and small businesses in the US use TikTok as a main tool in their marketing strategy, so this ban has the potential to harm the creative economy sector [20]. On the other hand, the US government argues that this step is necessary to protect national security and the privacy of citizens' data from potential foreign threats. They emphasize the importance of ensuring that user data is not misused or accessed by entities that could harm national interests [21].

When President Donald Trump is elected on January 20, 2025, he plans to lift the ban on TikTok and look for alternative solutions. One possible way for TikTok to continue operating in the US is to shift to collaborating with local companies, such as Oracle, to ensure the security of user data through a project called Project Texas [22]. Project Texas is an initiative to make every US user on TikTok feel safe and give them confidence that their data is safe and the operation of the platform is free from outside influence. This initiative addresses key issues of corporate governance, content recommendation and moderation, data security, and system access [23].

From 2022 to 2025, the cooperative relationship between the United States (US) and China will experience complex dynamics, influenced by various factors, including trade policies, economic initiatives, climate cooperation, and technological issues such as the ban on TikTok in the US. In 2020, the US and China signed a "Phase 1" trade agreement ending a nearly two-year tariff war. In the agreement, China committed to increasing its purchases of US products by \$200 billion over two years. However, this target was not fully achieved, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic which hampered global economic activity [24]. Entering 2025, China proposed reinstating the "Phase 1" trade

agreement in response to new tariffs imposed by US President Donald Trump in February 2025. This proposal included a commitment not to devalue the yuan, to increasing investment in the US [25].

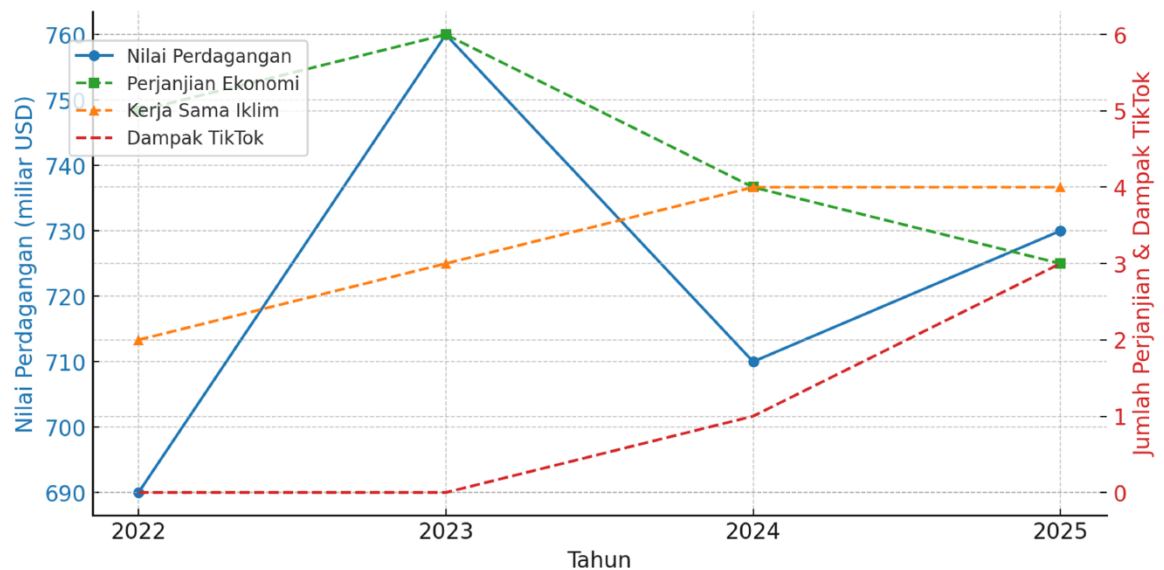


Figure 1. Dynamics of United States – China Cooperation (2022-2025)

Source: Processed from various secondary data, 2025.

The graph above shows the dynamics of US-China cooperation from 2022 to 2025. The left axis depicts the value of trade between the two countries in billions of USD, while the right axis shows the number of economic agreements, climate cooperation, and the impact of the TikTok ban. It can be seen that although trade remains high, the number of economic agreements has decreased, and the impact of TikTok's policies will begin to be felt in 2024-2025.

The banning of TikTok in the US in January 2025 adds complexity to relations between the two countries. The Chinese government hopes TikTok will remain permitted to operate in the US, emphasizing its positive role in the economy and job creation. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning stated that TikTok has been operating in the US for years without endangering national security. In response to a potential ban, Chinese officials are considering the option of selling TikTok's US operations to investors such as Elon Musk. These discussions reflect China's efforts to maintain TikTok's presence in the US market while alleviating security concerns voiced by the US government. [26]. Additionally, China's reaction to the TikTok ban was to increase restrictions on US technology companies operating in China. Through increasing semi-official moratoriums on the use of American hardware, potentially putting pressure on companies such as Apple and Tesla [27].

4.1.2 US – China Political Relations

From 2022 to 2025, the sanctions and trade tariff policies imposed by the United States on China will continue to increase, worsening economic relations between the two countries. In early 2025, China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, stated that the US' new tariff policy on Chinese products would damage global market stability and hinder post-pandemic economic recovery. This tariff increase

applies to various sectors, including electronic goods, industrial raw materials and high-tech products. According to the US, this policy aims to protect its domestic industry from unfair trade practices accused of China. However, China considers that this step is a form of economic protectionism that is detrimental to the principle of free trade [28].

Tensions have also penetrated the technology sector, especially in cyber security and technology export policies. The US government continues to tighten restrictions on Chinese technology companies, placing more than 50 Chinese entities on an export blacklist. This move aims to limit China's access to US high technology, such as high-performance computing, artificial intelligence (AI), and advanced military technology. Large companies such as Inspur Group and the Beijing Academy of Artificial Intelligence are the main targets of this policy. According to the US, these restrictions are important to maintain national security, although the Chinese see this as an attempt to hinder their technological progress [29].

In response to US policy, China also implemented strict regulations on foreign technology companies operating in its territory. For example, in 2022, China imposed a \$1.2 billion fine on ride-hailing company DiDi for alleged data security breaches [30]. In addition, China is also increasing surveillance of American companies such as Apple and Tesla, citing national data protection [31]. These steps show that the technological competition between the US and China is not only limited to trade wars, but also includes aspects of cyber security and dominance of the global digital industry.

The impact of this tension is not only felt in the diplomatic aspect, but also in the dynamics of global trade. Rising tariffs and trade restrictions have created uncertainty in international supply chains, especially in the technology and manufacturing sectors. US companies that depend on components from China, such as semiconductor manufacturers and automotive companies, are facing soaring production costs due to tariff policies. Meanwhile, China is also experiencing obstacles in exporting technology products to the US, which has an impact on their economic growth.

4.2.Discussion

In theory Realism Gilpin believes that the world order is controlled by the hegemon country, namely the country with the greatest economic, military and technological power. A hegemonic country will try to maintain its dominance in various ways, including through economic and technological policies. In the context of relations between the United States (US) and China, US policies in banning TikTok, increasing trade tariffs and tightening regulations on Chinese technology companies are part of a strategy to curb China's growth and maintain US supremacy in the global economic system.

The ban on TikTok in the US cannot only be seen as a step to protect national security, but also as a strategy to limit the expansion of Chinese technology companies. TikTok has become one of the most popular social media platforms in the world, with more than 150 million active users in the US. If allowed to develop, TikTok could become a threat to the dominance of US technology companies such as Meta (Facebook, Instagram) and Google (YouTube). By banning TikTok or forcing it to be sold to a US company, the US government is seeking to maintain control over the digital ecosystem and ensure that domestic technology companies remain dominant. This is in

line with Gilpin's view that a hegemonic country will intervene when a new economic power emerges that can shift its dominance.

Apart from the technology sector, the US also uses trade tariff policies to suppress China's economic growth. In early 2025, President Donald Trump raised tariffs to 10% on all goods imported from China, citing protection for domestic industry and clamping down on unfair trade practices. However, from the perspective of realism, this policy is more of a US strategy to weaken China's economic competitiveness in the global market. With higher tariffs, Chinese goods become more expensive in the US market, so US consumers and industry will be more likely to choose domestic products or from other countries that have better trade relations with the US.

China certainly will not remain silent in facing this policy. As the world's second largest economy, China retaliated by imposing 15% tariffs on US agricultural products and banning several American defense companies from operating in China. This step reflects a classic pattern in realism theory, where a country that challenges a hegemon will look for ways to retaliate and maintain its position in the global system. Gilpin explained that economic competition between hegemon countries and their competitors tends to lead to policy conflicts and trade wars. In the case of the US and China, these retaliatory actions not only harm bilateral relations but also disrupt the stability of global trade.

In addition to tariffs, the US is also targeting China's clean energy sector by raising tariffs on polysilicon and solar wafers from 25% to 50% in early 2025. This move aims to strengthen the US renewable energy industry and reduce dependence on Chinese products. In the context of realism, this reflects US efforts to maintain control over a strategic sector that is an important part of the future of the global economy. China is currently a leader in the production of solar panels and lithium batteries, so US policy aims to constrain China's expansion in these sectors and ensure that the US remains a major player in the global energy transition.

Meanwhile, in the cybersecurity sector, the US tightened regulations on Chinese technology companies by including more than 50 Chinese companies on the export blacklist. This includes companies working in the fields of artificial intelligence, quantum computing and military technology. From the perspective of hegemonic realism, this policy aims to limit China's access to high technology that could enhance its military capabilities or challenge US dominance in the global technology industry. Gilpin argues that the hegemon will use a variety of mechanisms, including technological sanctions, to ensure that its competitors cannot catch up in strategic areas.

To ensure the accuracy of this analysis, a data triangulation method was used by comparing various sources from international news, policy documents, and official statements from the US and Chinese governments. This approach allows research to assess whether the policies taken by the US and China truly reflect the patterns described in the theory of hegemonic realism. One such verifiable aspect is the reason behind TikTok's ban in the US. Some US government sources say that this policy is based on national security threats, but further analysis of industry reports shows that business interests and market dominance are also at play. By comparing official government statements, academic analysis, and industry reports, it can be concluded that economic and geopolitical factors contributed to this policy.

Data triangulation also shows that sanctions against Chinese technology companies are not just a defensive measure, but also an offensive strategy by the US to hinder the development of China's technology industry. Data from the US trade report shows that restrictions on technology exports to China correlate with US efforts to strengthen its domestic industries in AI and semiconductors. In addition, data from Western media

shows that US policy aims to protect national interests, while reports from Chinese media emphasize that this policy is a form of protectionism and discrimination against Chinese companies.

5. CONCLUSION

Banning TikTok in the United States is not just a national security policy, but also part of a broader geopolitical strategy. Based on analysis using Gilpin's Realism theory, this policy reflects US efforts to maintain its dominance in the global economy and technology. TikTok, as a fast-growing digital platform with more than 150 million users in the US, is seen as a threat to the supremacy of American technology companies. Therefore, this ban is not only aimed at protecting user data, but also to ensure that US companies remain in control of the digital ecosystem.

The impact of this policy is increasingly widespread with countermeasures from China. The Chinese government responded by raising tariffs on US products, limiting American technology companies' access to its market, and strengthening the domestic digital industry. This economic conflict is increasingly heating up bilateral relations between the two countries, especially in the trade and technology sectors. The US has also tightened regulations on Chinese companies such as Huawei and WeChat, further exacerbating tensions between the two countries.

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