TikTok CEO Grilled by Skeptical Lawmakers on Safety, Content

A nearly six-hour grilling of TikTok's CEO by lawmakers brought the platform's 150 million U.S. users no closer to an answer as to whether the app will be wiped from their devices.

U.S. lawmakers on Thursday pressed Shou Zi Chew over data security and harmful content, responding skeptically during a tense committee hearing to his assurances that the hugely popular video-sharing app prioritizes user safety and should not be banned due to its Chinese connections.

In a bipartisan effort to rein in the power of a major social media platform, Republican and Democratic lawmakers hurled questions on a host of topics, including TikTok's content moderation practices, how the company plans to secure American data from Beijing, and its spying on journalists.

Chew spent most of the hearing attempting to push back assertions that TikTok, or its Chinese parent company, ByteDance, are tools of the Chinese government. But he failed to answer uncomfortable questions about human rights abuses committed by China against the Uyghurs, and seemed taken aback by a TikTok video displayed by one lawmaker that advocated for violence against the House committee holding the hearing.

The rare public appearance by the 40-year-old Singapore native comes at a crucial time for the company. TikTok has ballooned its American user base to 150 million in a few short years, but its increasing dominance is being threatened by a potential nationwide ban in the U.S. and growing fears among

officials about protecting user data from China’s communist government.

There’s also symbolism for lawmakers in taking on TikTok, which has been swept up in a wider geopolitical battle between Beijing and Washington over trade and technology, as well as heightened tensions due to recent balloon politics and China’s relationship with Russia.

“Mr. Chew, you are here because the American people need the truth about the threat TikTok poses to our national and personal security,” Committee Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers, a Republican, said in her opening statement.

Chew told the House Committee on Energy and Commerce that TikTok prioritizes the safety of its young users and denied it’s a national security risk. He reiterated the company’s plan to protect U.S. user data by storing it on servers maintained and owned by the software giant Oracle.

“Let me state this unequivocally: ByteDance is not an agent of China or any other country,” Chew said.

Nevertheless, the company has been dogged by claims that its Chinese ownership means user data could end up in the hands of the Chinese government or that it could be used to promote narratives favorable to the country’s communist leaders.

In 2019, the Guardian reported that TikTok was instructing its moderators to censor videos that mention Tiananmen Square and included images unfavorable to the Chinese government. The platform says it has since changed its moderation practices.

Concerns about the platform increased when ByteDance admitted in December that it fired four employees who accessed data on two journalists, and people connected to them, last summer while attempting to uncover the source of a leaked report about the company.

Aware of its weakness, TikTok has been trying to distance itself from its Chinese origins, saying 60% of ByteDance is owned by global institutional investors such as Carlyle Group.

“Ownership is not at the core of addressing these concerns,” Chew said.

But for many others, it is. The Biden administration has reportedly demanded TikTok’s Chinese owners sell their stakes in the company to avoid a nationwide ban. China has said it would oppose those attempts. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said at a separate committee hearing Thursday that he believes TikTok is a security threat, and “should be ended one way or another.”

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said “everyone was watching” Thursday’s TikTok hearing at the White House. But she declined to comment on specific actions the administration could take to address its TikTok concerns.

In one of the most dramatic moments of the hearing, Republican Rep. Kat Cammack played a TikTok video showing a shooting gun with a caption that included the House committee, with the exact date before it was formally announced.

“You expect us to believe that you are capable of maintaining the data security, privacy and security of 150 million Americans where you can’t even protect the people in this room,” Cammack said.

TikTok said the company on Thursday removed the video and banned the account that posted it.

Concerns about what kind of content Americans encounter online, or how their data is collected by technology companies, isn’t new. Congress has been wanting to curtail the amount of data tech companies collect on consumers through a national privacy law, but those efforts have failed.

At a news conference on Wednesday, Rep. Jamaal Bowman, a New York Democrat and one of the few allies TikTok seemingly has on the Hill, said lawmakers concerned about protecting users shouldn't target TikTok, but must instead focus on a national law that would protect user data across all social media platforms. Chew also noted the failure of U.S. social media companies to address the very concerns for which TikTok was being criticized.

"American social companies don't have a good track record with data privacy and user security," he said. "Look at Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, just one example."

Committee members also showed a host of TikTok videos that encouraged users to harm themselves and commit suicide. Many questioned why the platform's Chinese counterpart, Douyin, does not carry the same potentially dangerous content as the American product.

Chew responded that it depends on the laws of the country where the app is operating. He said the company has about 40,000 moderators that track harmful content and an algorithm that flags material.

Wealth management firm Wedbush described the hearing as a "disaster" for TikTok that made a ban more likely if it doesn't separate from its Chinese parent. Emile El Nems, an analyst at Moody's Investors Service, said a ban would benefit TikTok rivals YouTube, Instagram and Snap, "likely resulting in higher revenue share of the total advertising wallet."

To avoid a ban, TikTok has been trying to sell officials on a $1.5 billion plan, Project Texas, which routes all U.S. user data to servers owned and maintained by the software giant Oracle.

As of October, all new U.S. user data was being stored inside the country. The company started deleting all historic U.S. user data from non-Oracle servers this month, in a process

expected to be completed this year, Chew said.

Republican Rep. Dan Crenshaw noted that regardless of what the company does to assure lawmakers it will protect U.S. user data, the Chinese government can still have significant influence over its parent company and ask it to turn over data through its national security laws.

Congress, the White House, U.S. armed forces and more than half of U.S. states have already banned the use of the app from official devices. Similar bans have been imposed in other countries including Denmark, Canada, Great Britain and New Zealand, as well as the European Union.

A complete TikTok ban in the U.S. would risk political and popular backlash from its young user base and civil liberties groups.

David Kennedy, a former government intelligence officer who runs the cybersecurity company TrustedSec, said he agrees with restricting TikTok access on government-issued phones but that a nationwide ban might be too extreme.

“We have Tesla in China, we have Microsoft in China, we have Apple in China. Are they going to start banning us now?” Kennedy said. “It could escalate very quickly.”

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