

Donald Trump once tried to ban TikTok. Now can he save it?



To keep the app alive in America, he must persuade China to sell up

The long campaign to outlaw TikTok in America succeeded at last when the Chinese-owned video app was forced to shut down on January 18th. But the blackout lasted only a matter of hours. The next day TikTok sprang back to life for its 170m American users, issuing a message thanking an unlikely ally: Donald Trump.

Mr Trump, who tried to outlaw TikTok during his first presidential term, now intends to “save” it from a ban enacted by his successor, Joe Biden. On his first day back in the White House Mr Trump signed an executive order giving the app a 75-day stay of execution. Keeping TikTok alive in the long run will require him to persuade China to allow its sale. The outcome of that negotiation will be consequential not just for the tech industry but for America’s relationship with its main global rival.

The Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act (PAFACA), which came into force on Mr Biden’s last day in office, makes it illegal to “distribute, maintain or update” apps controlled by “foreign adversaries”, singling out TikTok by name. On January 17th the Supreme Court upheld the law, exhausting TikTok’s legal appeal and prompting the app to shut down. When Mr Trump indicated his willingness to seek a solution, TikTok switched its service back on.

The president’s change of heart reflects a change in public opinion. Whereas in early 2023 half of American adults wanted to ban TikTok, by last summer the figure had fallen to one-third, according to the Pew Research Centre, a think-tank. Mr Trump, who joined the app last year and has 15m followers, credits TikTok with winning him youngsters’ votes and providing competition to Mark Zuckerberg’s Meta. “If you get rid of TikTok, Facebook and Zuckerschmuck will double their business,” he warned last year.

Yet Mr Trump’s power to save the app is limited. His executive order instructs the attorney-general not to enforce PAFACA for 75 days. But tech companies appear nervous of flouting the law, which threatens fines of \$5,000 per user—\$850bn in TikTok’s case. Apple and Google have removed TikTok from their app stores, making new downloads or updates impossible. Mr Trump said on January 21st that he did not have TikTok on his phone but planned to install it. For now, he will find that hard.

To escape PAFACA’s ban, TikTok would have to cut ties with its Chinese owner, ByteDance. The company has long said TikTok is not for sale; the app’s acquisition is opposed by China’s government, which has a tight grip on private companies. Chinese officials have described America’s efforts to buy TikTok as “plundering” and classified the app’s recommendation algorithm as a sensitive technology that cannot be exported.

The return of Mr Trump makes a deal somewhat more likely. China is keen to avert the trade war that the new president has threatened; TikTok is a card it could play. Mr Trump raised TikTok with China’s president, Xi Jinping, in a phone call on January 17th. A few days later he said it would be “somewhat of a hostile act” if China blocked the app’s sale—and that tariffs could follow.

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