



AFPC Capitol Hill Briefing - The Debate Over TikTok: Policy Options for Congress

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On March 1, the American Foreign Policy Council's (AFPC) Indo-Pacific Security Program hosted a closed-door briefing for congressional staff on *The Debate Over TikTok: Policy Options for Congress*. Roughly 80 congressional staff, a mix of both Republicans and Democrats, attended the event. AFPC Senior Fellow in Indo-Pacific Studies Michael Sobolik moderated the discussion, and the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) facilitated the event. The expert panel included The Hon. Brendan Carr, Commissioner at the Federal Communications Commission, Klon Kitchen, Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and AFPC Fellow in Public Diplomacy Monika Richter.

TikTok is the most popular social media app in America, with well over 100 million users - and by some estimates, 150 million. Its foreign ownership by Chinese company ByteDance has raised concerns about potential exposure to malign influence of foreign actors, specifically the CCP. Documented instances of disinformation, censorship, malicious content, and even surveillance have spurred an ongoing conversation in Washington about whether the app should be banned.

In his opening remarks, Klon Kitchen characterized TikTok as an ideal tool for foreign intelligence agencies to penetrate and influence American political discourse. He pulled from his experience in the intelligence community and prior work on information operations to explain the ways the CCP could leverage TikTok to spread disinformation.

Next, Monika Richter put TikTok in the context of Beijing's broader disinformation strategy. She noted that the CCP's quest for "information dominance" and narrative control is global in scope. Platforms like TikTok are part of the Party's larger effort to shape discourse favorably and to censor speech critical of Xi and the CCP. She also identified a related objective Beijing is seeking: to weaken democratic institutions broadly and the American political system in particular.

Finally, Commissioner Brendan Carr explained various responses that the U.S. government could take to address the threat from TikTok. In one scenario, Washington could compel TikTok's Chinese parent company ByteDance to sell its stake in TikTok, which would then be sold to an American buyer. In theory, this could eliminate CCP malign influence and sanitize TikTok, but such a course of action is complicated and prone to delay. Another path is to ban TikTok outright - something which has notable support on Capitol Hill, but has created resistance from progressive and libertarian opponents on First Amendment and constitutional grounds. Commissioner Carr addressed those critiques and argued that banning TikTok focuses on a platform, not on speech.

Participant Bios:

The Hon. Brendan Carr

Commissioner, Federal Communications Commission

Mr. Klon Kitchen

Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

Ms. Monika Richter

Fellow in Public Diplomacy, American Foreign Policy Council

Mr. Michael Sobolik

Senior Fellow in Indo-Pacific Studies, American Foreign Policy Council