



# **The increasing role of techno-nationalism in international relations: An analysis of the TikTok ban in the United States**

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## Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own original work. It has not previously been submitted for any degree or examination at this or any other university. All sources consulted have been acknowledged through citations and are listed in the reference list. Where the work or ideas of others have been used, this has been duly indicated and attributed in accordance with the reference guide and conventions of the North-West University.

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## Dedication

To my late mother, Modiegi Constance Babeile, and my late grandmother, Keneilwe Babeile. Your love and joy will always live with me; I do it for you.

## Acronyms

|                |                                                        |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>AI</b>      | Artificial Intelligence                                |
| <b>ARPA</b>    | Advanced Research Projects Agency                      |
| <b>ARPANET</b> | Advanced Research Projects Agency Network              |
| <b>BRI</b>     | Belt and Road Initiative                               |
| <b>CAE</b>     | Chinese Academy of Engineering                         |
| <b>CAS</b>     | Chinese Academy of Sciences                            |
| <b>CCP</b>     | Chinese Communist Party                                |
| <b>CEO</b>     | Chief Executive Officer                                |
| <b>CFIUS</b>   | Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States   |
| <b>CHIPS</b>   | Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors  |
| <b>CIA</b>     | Central Intelligence Agency                            |
| <b>CSET</b>    | Center for Security and Emerging Technology            |
| <b>DARPA</b>   | Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency              |
| <b>DOJ</b>     | Department of Justice                                  |
| <b>EU</b>      | European Union                                         |
| <b>EUREKA</b>  | European Research Coordination Agency                  |
| <b>EVs</b>     | Electric Vehicles                                      |
| <b>FBI</b>     | Federal Bureau of Investigation                        |
| <b>GDP</b>     | Gross Domestic Product                                 |
| <b>GOP</b>     | Grand Old Party (Republican Party)                     |
| <b>GPS</b>     | Global Positioning System                              |
| <b>ICBM</b>    | Intercontinental Ballistic Missile                     |
| <b>ICT</b>     | Information and Communications Technology              |
| <b>ICTS</b>    | Information and Communications Technology and Services |
| <b>IP</b>      | Intellectual Property                                  |

|                   |                                                                                                       |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ISIS</b>       | Islamic State of Iraq and Syria                                                                       |
| <b>LLC</b>        | Limited Liability Company                                                                             |
| <b>MGX</b>        | Mubadala Generative Excellence (UAE sovereign investment firm)                                        |
| <b>MITI</b>       | Ministry of International Trade and Industry (Japan)                                                  |
| <b>NASA</b>       | National Aeronautics and Space Administration                                                         |
| <b>NSA</b>        | National Security Agency                                                                              |
| <b>NSS</b>        | National Security Strategy                                                                            |
| <b>PAFACA</b>     | Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act                               |
| <b>PRC</b>        | People's Republic of China                                                                            |
| <b>R&amp;D</b>    | Research and Development                                                                              |
| <b>RAND</b>       | Research AND Development (Corporation)                                                                |
| <b>RESTRICT</b>   | Restricting the Emergence of Security Threats that Risk Information and Communications Technology Act |
| <b>SDI</b>        | Strategic Defense Initiative                                                                          |
| <b>SEMATECH</b>   | Semiconductor Manufacturing Technology                                                                |
| <b>TRIPS</b>      | Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights                                                 |
| <b>UAE</b>        | United Arab Emirates                                                                                  |
| <b>UK</b>         | United Kingdom                                                                                        |
| <b>U.S. / USA</b> | United States of America                                                                              |
| <b>USDS</b>       | TikTok U.S. Data Security Incorporated                                                                |
| <b>USSR</b>       | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics                                                                   |
| <b>ZTE</b>        | Zhongxing Telecommunication Equipment Corporation                                                     |
| <b>5G</b>         | Fifth Generation (wireless network technology)                                                        |

## Abstract

This dissertation presents a critical analysis of the decision of the United States government to ban the Chinese-owned short video sharing social media app, TikTok. Using interpretivist research paradigm and qualitative, document-based research design, this dissertation applies discourse analysis to relevant documents like policy documents, judicial rulings, executive orders, and media sources in the period 2019 to 2026. Using the techno-realist framework, an extension of the realist tradition, the dissertation argues that the ban reflects deliberate techno-nationalism within U.S.–China great power competition, rather than verifiable national security concerns. As conceived, techno-realism contends that in today’s digital age, technology is the main channel through which power is generated, that corporations controlling these technologies function as geopolitical actors, and that treating foreign-owned platforms as security issues reflects a rational strategy by states rather than a reaction to an objectively demonstrable threat. The dissertation demonstrates that the national security case against TikTok was created and institutionalised by successive speech acts by United States officials, heavily relying on hypothetical risk and as opposed to actual harm. To put it differently, TikTok was banned not because it was proven to be dangerous, but because it was successfully framed as such. The dissertation further argues that the framework for TikTok in this way was not driven solely by the state. Domestic technology firms like Meta and Oracle acted as state auxiliaries, lobbying for the ban, and materially benefitting from it. This dissertation calls this, the State-Corporate Nexus and contends that it is a structural characteristic of techno-nationalism in practice. The most significant finding demonstrated that the United States government’s rejection of TikTok’s data localisation proposal, Project Texas, reveals that ownership change was always the goal. In essence, the problem was never about U.S. data, but who controlled the platform. The dissertation situates the ban within a historical three phase evolution of techno-nationalism and finds that it represents the most advanced stage of an escalating trajectory of techno-nationalist intervention in the United States technology policy towards China.

**Keywords:** Techno-nationalism, TikTok, ByteDance, United States-China relations, securitisation, digital sovereignty, platform governance, PAFACA.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction

This dissertation provides a critical analysis of the decision by the United States government to ban the Chinese based platform TikTok. This study argues that this move is best viewed as not only being about national security measures but grounded in techno-nationalism that falls within the broader context of great power competition between the United States and China. In this study, the term “ban” is not only used to refer solely to the possibility of restricting access to the platform, but more broadly to the political, and geopolitically driven legal and regulatory process that resulted in calls for forced divestment of TikTok’s United States operations. Rather than focusing solely on the purported security threats, this study seeks to offer a theoretically rich analysis that uncovers the other deeper national interest factors behind the efforts to ban the app in the United States.

While significant attention both in public and policy discussions about TikTok have revolved around data security, potential foreign influence and algorithmic transparency (see Culhane, 2024; Reuters, 2023; Rembert, 2022; Maulidia *et al.*, 2025), this dissertation argues that these concerns form part of a deeper geopolitical perspective. Importantly, this is not to say that the concerns are not legitimate or true, but rather that they are not isolated and, in fact, are strategically used to achieve techno-nationalist objectives. The study employs Capri’s (2024:11) definition of techno-nationalism stating that it is “a mindset that equates the technological prowess of a state’s chosen actors with the strength of its national security, its economic prosperity and its social stability. Techno-nationalism seeks to achieve competitive advantage for its stakeholders, on a local and global scale, and to leverage this advantage for geopolitical gain.” In essence, techno-nationalism links technological capacity to national security, economic competitiveness, and social stability to preserve or advance state power. Against this backdrop, the dissertation, as will be further illustrated, situates the TikTok ban within broader and interconnecting debates on techno-nationalism, great power competition, and the important role of technology in international relations. In other words, the study argues that the ban is best understood as a move to curb the growth of Chinese tech firms whilst safeguarding and promoting American technological dominance.

To properly understand techno-nationalism, one must first engage with nationalism itself. Nationalism, as Bieber (2018:520) argues, is a narrow and malleable ideology, which views membership in a nation as vital. Historically, nationalism was prominently manifested during the 1789 French Revolution, which aimed at unifying the country and people of France (Dann and Dinwiddy, 1988). Today, this may seem obvious, but populations did not always clearly identify with the nation-state or see themselves as part of it. In fact, Dann and Dinwiddy (1988) highlight the period of the French Revolution as vital in influencing notions of national identity and citizenship. This is how in contemporary times national identity and citizenship are very closely linked and have become issues of importance around the world (see Filsinger et al., 2021; Hazony, 2018). Scholars further contend that nationalism arose from rampant industrialisation, urbanisation, print-capitalism and colonial resistance (Mylonas and Tudor, 2021:112). Furthermore, Mylonas and Tudor (2021:113) identify the changes brought about by the industrial revolution as another pivotal catalyst for nationalism. Importantly, in international relations, nationalism distinguishes one nation-state from others, seeks to preserve the country and its people as the nation, and prioritises political actors who emphasise national interest (Bieber, 2018:520).

Drawing from this historical context, one can deduce that nationalism is an ideology that is, first and foremost, about advancing the interests of the nation and the nation state. This is consistent with the realist approach, which has explained state behaviour in international relations. Realism posits that states are primarily concerned with their survival, prosperity, and competition in an international system characterised by anarchy (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Technology capability and capacity in this perspective is therefore concerned not only with being a form of economic asset but also a tool for national power. This study advances the theory of realism by adopting a variant called techno-realism, which puts technology at the core of power in contemporary international relations. Techno-realism explains how states view emerging technologies through the lens of relative power competition and security maximisation (Sukma, 2024:25). This is to say that these states seek to always be at the forefront of the development, use, and sale of these technologies whilst also ensuring that rivals are not at an advantage. Through this framework, digital platforms are seen as instruments of geopolitical influence that are to be localised or stamped out. This study argues that this is precisely the case with the TikTok ban used to maintain the U.S. dominance in the international digital platform market. As Gray (2021:2) writes:

For at least two decades the US has dominated in the international digital platform market. This dominance falls within a broader geopolitical system of US hegemony

that has defined the liberal world order since the end of the Cold War. Through strategic partnerships and alliances with nations around the world, the US has enjoyed great economic and political power. China's economic growth destabilises a world order based on U.S. hegemony.

The dissertation posits that techno-realism is important in conceptualising the TikTok as a manifestation of great power rivalry of the United States and China, at a time where technological dominance is increasingly determinant of strategic advantage.

## 1.2. Background Context

Within the last decade, the international system has experienced a period characterised by strategic competition between the United States and China, especially in the technology domain (see Sun, 2019; Danilin, 2021; Kennedy & Lim, 2018; Capri, 2024; Abrams, 2022). This competition has been labelled a tech-war, in which each state seeks to dominate the technological space. Emerging and dual use technologies, like artificial intelligence, semiconductor chips, digital platforms and telecommunications infrastructure, have found themselves at the heart of national security strategy and economic desire. As a result, it becomes clear that what was once a hallmark of a widely accepted globalisation framework, in interdependence, is now being perceived as a source of vulnerability and dependence which undermine the primacy of a state (Capri, 2024; Farrell & Newman, 2019). This shift in technology also brought about a shift in the perception of social media platforms such as TikTok.

TikTok is a short video sharing platform that is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance. The platform is a product of the Chinese short video app developed by ByteDance, Douyin, and lip-synching app, Musical.ly (Gray, 2021:7). TikTok entered the highly competitive space of social media becoming one of the first globally dominant consumer targeted Chinese platforms operating within the United States. As Gray (2021:7) notes, by the late 2010s and early 2020s, TikTok was the most downloaded app worldwide, with an active monthly user base of over 700 million. While another Chinese social media platform, WeChat, had failed to gain a considerable user base in the United States despite its popularity in China, TikTok managed to do exactly that. The foundation on which the popularity of the app is built is its advanced algorithm. TikTok uses a machine-learning recommendation algorithm that builds a user profile without requiring following users; instead, it shows an endless stream of swipeable videos that reveals each user's interests and likes (Gray, 2021:7). The algorithm can generate large amounts of highly personalised videos for users,

essentially increasing time spent on the app and user retention. However, this success has brought about increased scrutiny from American officials and policymakers.

In this ever-evolving international relations landscape, digital platforms have become significant geopolitical players. Social media platforms are no longer seen as just commercial platforms that enable communication and entertainment, but as tools that are subject to debates about data governance, potential influence, and propaganda (Brooking & Singer, 2018). Therefore, there is an incentive to control the data and digital ecosystems that make up parts of the internet in order to extract economic value and increase relative advantage over other nations. It is in this light that the United States' legal and regulatory actions regarding TikTok should be understood. This dissertation argues that the growth of a rival nation's platform is a significant threat to a country, especially when it comes to the techno-realist perspective that explains techno-nationalism. The TikTok ban falls as part of a wider range of techno-nationalist policies undertaken by the White House in relation to Beijing, which include export controls, supply chain restructuring, and embargoes. The case should therefore be seen as one of the clearest manifestations of a wider shift to how states view technological interdependence. Although the detailed evolution of the TikTok ban, including executive actions and judicial rulings, is comprehensively outlined in the findings chapter of this dissertation; the case study is introduced and contextualised in this section. This section provides a concrete background understanding of how techno-nationalist policies are undertaken in a competitive international system.

## 1.2. Problem Statement

The rapid technological developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have contributed what this dissertation argues is the increasing role of techno-nationalism within the international relations sphere. This increasing role, for example, is noticeable in a number of cases, such as: The United States' ban on Huawei and ZTE, China's "great firewall", the European Union's digital sovereignty agenda, India's ban on Chinese apps, including TikTok. Digital platforms, especially social networks, are seen as actors who possess the ability to influence geopolitical dynamics and international relations in general (Bjola & Manor, 2018; Chachko, 2021). The sustained efforts of the U.S. to ban TikTok, therefore, are not an isolated case. Rather, these efforts ought to be understood as highlighting the increasing role of techno-nationalism in international relations.

The dissertation argues that the United States government's decision to ban the Chinese-owned social media app TikTok because of reported data privacy and national security concerns, is an example of a growing techno-nationalist trend. However, the underlying motivations and

implications of actions informed by this perspective are unexplored in academic conversations of international relations. In other words, although there is literature on techno-nationalism, there is limited academic literature that focuses on the geopolitical and techno-nationalism politics that were central to the efforts to ban the app in the US. The contribution of this study then is to provide the geopolitical and techno-nationalist motivations that guided the TikTok ban. It does so through analysing the TikTok ban as a case study to understand the rise and impact of techno-nationalism in international relations in the contemporary age. Therefore, the problem at the core of this proposed research is the lack of comprehensive understanding of how techno-nationalism, as shown by actions like the TikTok ban, is changing traditional norms of geopolitical power, sovereignty, and global governance in the contemporary digital age. These strategic manoeuvres are likely to continue as more advanced technologies become important sources of power and leverage for states.

### 1.3. Research Questions

The primary research question of the proposed study is the following:

- To what extent, does the U.S government ban of TikTok signify the role of techno-nationalism in international relations?
- And the secondary question that the study aims to answer is: What are the implications of TikTok ban on US-China relations?
- What does the increasing role of techno-nationalism mean for international relations?

### 1.4. Research Objectives

1. To investigate the key factors behind the U.S. government's decision to ban TikTok.
2. To examine the implications of the TikTok ban on US-China relations and the wider global technology governance.
3. To assess the broader significance of techno-nationalism for international relations.

### 1.5. Significance of the Study

As mentioned in the introduction the digital age has brought significant changes to the international system. This study analyses this change and its impact on geopolitics by focusing on two of the current superpowers of the world in global politics, namely, the United States and China. Although much of the public discourse has been about the ban and free speech ramifications (see Mackintosh, 2024; Harwell, 2024; Chen, 2022), this study has not identified significant

scholarship on the increasing role of techno-nationalism in international relations. As a result, the study would contribute to the international relations field by demonstrating what techno-nationalism is, how it is practised, and what it means for the rest of the world. Through the examination of TikTok as a case study, the dissertation argues that digital platforms, such as TikTok, have become central actors and role players in geopolitics and as discussed in the following section, have the ability to widely influence areas such as diplomatic relations and national security.

In a growing technological world, which has seen the advent of technology such as advanced artificial intelligence, the study aims to contribute to the calculations that inform international policy on such technologies. Furthermore, this study contributes to the body of knowledge in techno-nationalism, especially within the framework of international relations. A significant part of the limited literature has often focused on the information technology aspect of this emerging phenomenon, leading to a desire for knowledge on the implications on states and their relations. Specifically, this examination focuses on the strategic relationship between the United States and China but explores global technological markets and what it means for countries with technology firms. The dissertation finds itself relevant, as the examination used to view the banning of social media platforms like TikTok is also applicable to other foreign emerging technologies. This means that the dissertation stands out in the contribution it makes to the general field.

Importantly, the in-depth look at the TikTok ban as a case study for the increasing role of techno-nationalism in international relations through a techno-realist theoretical framework makes the study inherently unique. While various scholars have looked at techno-nationalism through traditional realist lenses (see Capri, 2024; Luo, 2022; Reinert, 2023), none have advanced traditional realism to techno-realism, which places technology at the core of great power rivalry, like this dissertation. The study draws from traditional realism, as outlined in detail in chapter 3, but proposes a much more relevant contemporary lens to understand techno-nationalism today.

## 1.6. Limitations of the Dissertation

As a desktop study, this dissertation relies solely on publicly available sources such as official government documents, judicial rulings, executive orders, and media reports. No fieldwork, elite interviews or survey data were collected. This does not invalidate its findings, as they derive from extensive document analysis, which has been thoroughly and comprehensively completed. A key limitation is the inaccessibility of classified intelligence. The United States partly based its case against TikTok on classified reports that are not public, so this dissertation cannot assess or exclude

their role in the securitisation process. These limitations are mitigated through an interpretivist research design that traces how securitisation occurs. The dissertation analyses how the security case against TikTok was constructed, institutionally validated, and implemented over time, without trying to verify whether TikTok posed an objective threat, which would require access to classified reports.

## 1.7. Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced the core argument of the dissertation, that the United States government's effort to ban TikTok was not just a response to national security concerns of a foreign-owned digital application, but an active expression of techno-nationalism embedded in great power competition between the United States and China. The chapter clarified that the use of the term "ban" is used in the broad sense to include the political, legal, and regulatory process that culminated in the forced divestiture ruling. The chapter also provides the conceptual and contextual basis for this dissertation. Using Capri's (2024) definition of techno-nationalism and highlighting techno-realism as the theoretical lens of the dissertation, the chapter positioned TikTok as part of a wider shift in how states perceived technological interdependence as a form of vulnerability in geopolitical strategy. Furthermore, the chapter identifies the gap in existing literature, which is the absence of work that places the TikTok ban within a techno-nationalist and geopolitical context, instead of treating national security concerns as justifications. The research questions and objectives that follow as a result are geared towards addressing this gap along with the significance of the dissertation and its contribution to the fields of international relations, techno-nationalism, and digital governance.

## 1.8. Chapter Layout

### **Chapter 1**

This chapter served as an introductory chapter to the dissertation. In the chapter, the dissertation introduces the central argument of the chapter as well as the background to which this research exists. The chapter also outlined the research questions, objectives and significance of the study to the field of international relations.

## **Chapter 2**

This chapter is a critical review of the literature which critically engaged with existing scholarship on techno-nationalism and its role in international relations. The study engages with the literature by mapping out the evolution of techno-nationalism from its early roots to its modern form. The chapter also fills the gap identified by the study.

## **Chapter 3**

This is the theoretical framework chapter. In this chapter, the dissertation introduced techno-realism as the primary theoretical lens used throughout the study. The chapter does this by laying out the foundational theories for techno-realism and where it augments understanding. Finally, the chapter outlined four key tenets of techno-realism that are used to analyse the TikTok ban.

## **Chapter 4**

The chapter developed the research methodology used in the dissertation. This chapter also explains the methodological decisions made across this dissertation, including the data collection, sampling, and analysis. Finally, it explains why all these methods are the most appropriate for examining the TikTok ban as a case study.

## **Chapter 5**

This is the findings chapter. It lays out the chronological account of the TikTok ban from its early developments in 2019 to the final divestiture resolution in 2026. The chapter provided a strong empirical foundation which the following analysis chapter rests on showing how TikTok became constructed as a national security threat.

## **Chapter 6**

This chapter is the analysis and discussion chapter. Building on the previous chapter, it uses the techno-realist theoretical framework to explain the empirical findings. The chapter argues that the TikTok ban is indeed part of a larger coherent techno-nationalist strategy used by the United States. This is done through the application of the four tenets of techno-realism.

## **Chapter 7**

This is the concluding chapter of the dissertation. The chapter synthesises the key arguments made in the dissertation and directly responds to the research questions and makes reflection of the contribution the study has made to the fields of international relations and techno-nationalism. The chapter also provides concluding remarks on what the increasing role of techno-nationalism means for the future of international relations.

## Chapter 2: Literature review

### 2.1. Introduction

The primary objective of this chapter was to review the literature on the phenomenon being investigated, namely the increasing role of techno-nationalism in international relations. The importance of a literature review in an academic project of this nature is that it, in part, situates the current study with already existing scholarly work (Lamont 2015:66). It does so by engaging and providing an “analytical overview” of the work published by scholars as it relates to a topic of interest and identifies gaps in the literature (Lamont 2015: 66). A literature review is an “essential component” in research and lays the “foundation” for the analytical and concluding chapters of this dissertation (Lamont 2015: 64). In agreement with Lamont (2015), Halperin and Heath (2020: 114) argue that a literature review “prepares the ground” for the argument advanced by the study. They assert that a literature review ought to show how the subject of enquiry has not been adequately examined within the literature and what plans the study must tackle this (Halperin and Heath, 2020: 115).

With this in mind, the chapter is divided into three substantive sections. The first and most extensive section deals with conceptualising techno-nationalism as a historical practice and a theoretical concept. It traces the evolution of techno-nationalism across three phases; the Cold War model, industrial policy pivot, and the regulatory and data era in contemporary times. This is done to establish the genealogy of where the TikTok ban is located. The chapter then moves towards examining the U.S.-China technology rivalry specifically, this serves as the geopolitical context that explains techno-nationalism in the contemporary era. Finally, the chapter engages with literature on national concerns in cyberspace and social media, demonstrating how digital platforms have found themselves at the centre of strategic calculations by states and how this national security framing is used as a tool of techno-nationalist policy. Taken together, these sections situate the dissertation within existing scholarship and identify the gap that it addresses: the absence of integrated scholarship on how techno-nationalism operates specifically through the securitisation and geopolitical framing of foreign digital platforms.

### 2.2. Conceptualising Techno-nationalism

As noted above, a literature review, “paves the way” forward in advancing the argument of a study. (Halperin and Heath 2020: 115). It is almost infeasible, some may argue, to proceed with any

argument on the current study without an ‘analytical overview’ of techno-nationalism as a concept and its role in geopolitics. Techno-nationalism has emerged as an important area of interest in the context of a wider global technology competition, especially between major states such as the United States and China (Evans, 2020; Capri, 2020; Diegus & Roselino, 2023). The concept of techno-nationalism first gained attention from the work of the Havard University professor Robert Reich in 1987. According to Reich (1987:66), techno-nationalism had become an “unambiguously national orientation toward technological development, primarily driven by the desire to confine technological knowledge within national borders”. He contextualises techno-nationalism in the mid-1980s relationship between the United States and Japan, defined by tensions over deep economic interdependence and the growing anxiety by Americans over lost technological leadership (Reich, 1987:64). A key driver of techno-nationalism during this period was the concern that the U.S. had become incredibly dependent on Japan for critical components. Reich (1987:64) estimates that around 40 percent of advanced electronics found in American weapons systems came from Japan, with the figure projected to rise in the years that followed. The concern was limited not only to military technology but also to technology that has commercial use. Using the example of the failed attempt to purchase Silicon Valley firm, Fairchild Semiconductor Corporation, by Japanese Electronic company Fujitsu, Reich (1987) asserted that this was a unique shift from techno-globalism guided by a commodification of technology. As Reich (1987:66) explains, “Technology is viewed as something that can be uniquely American— developed here, contained within the nation’s borders, applied in America by Americans. It is like a precious commodity that we should save for ourselves rather than allow foreigners to carry off”. This early conceptualisation can still be found today in perceptions of technology by states and is examined further in this dissertation.

The term “techno-globalism” as used by Reich (1987:63) is the idea that technology is a joint multinational product that is inherently built off the collaborative knowledge of people around the world. As he writes:

From the techno-globalist’s point of view, it is meaningless to speak of America’s discoveries and technological breakthroughs relative to those of Japan, West Germany, or any other friendly nation, because there is no way to separate “our” technological advances from “theirs.” Technological development is a joint product of multinational institutions—universities, research laboratories, corporations, even defense programs—that link talented people from all corners of the globe through computers, satellite communications, and jet airplanes. (Reich, 1987:66).

Reich (1987:63) explains this outlining how the U.S. and Japan were inextricably linked through techno-globalism with examples like how Japanese firms funded research in American universities and American companies like Du Pont and IBM invested and operated within major laboratories in Japan, leading to concerns from Washington that this interdependence would be a threat to economic prosperity and national security. Importantly, Reich (1987) offers not only descriptive but also normative analysis on techno-nationalism. In Reich's (1987:66) view, techno-nationalism faced three foundational challenges, namely, the logistical impossibility of containment, the paradox of national identity and the fact that technology is a "shared experience" not a commodity. According to Reich (1987:66), modern knowledge and information is not leaked through "boxcars or briefcases"; instead, it is shared through satellite communications and computer to computer transfers, making any policy aimed at containing it logistically impossible. He adds that techno-nationalism makes national identity inherently paradoxical because technology is global: many foreign workers are employed by American companies and vice versa, many U.S. companies have overseas offices and foreign shareholders, and companies sign technology-sharing agreements, such as Motorola's agreement with the Japanese firm Toshiba. (Reich, 1987:67). Importantly Reich's (1987:68) biggest challenge is that techno-nationalism views technology as a "scarce commodity" that can be hoarded within national borders. He argues that the real value of technology is not in blueprints, data, or gadgets which can be disseminated easily but rather that technological learning exists as a "shared experience" within the minds of engineers and workers (Reich, 1987:68). By focusing on curbing breakthroughs, the U.S. ignores the fact technological innovation is built from prior knowledge, which rely on many people from different states, working on different projects (Reich, 1987: 68). It should then not be a way to punish other states because one's own state is unable to innovate but to build the skills and environment that foster innovation. As Reich (1987:68) eloquently puts it, "Thus the real worry is not that we [the U.S.] are becoming dependent on Japan's high-tech gadgets but that we are losing the ability to transform new discoveries into gadgets nearly as efficiently as they can".

As a result, Reich advanced a techno-globalist prescription. Reich (1987:69) proposes several solutions to curbing tech-nationalism such as the U.S. government providing subsidies to corporations that undertake complex production processes within American borders regardless of their nation of origin. As he puts it, "A Japanese company willing to give American workers experience in designing and producing the next generation of advanced computer chips is more valuable to us than an American company buying its advanced chips from Japan or setting up shop in Japan to do the same thing there." Reich applies this logic to Fujitsu-Fairchild deal, asserting

that instead of trying to prevent Fujitsu, a leader in production of complex memory chips, to acquire Fairchild, the U.S. government should have incentivised the Japanese company into designing and producing those chips in the U.S. thus training and educating the local population (Reich, 1987:69).

Importantly, in the context of this study, Reich's (1987) article remains a foundation because it establishes three conceptual pillars:

1. The relationship between technological capability and national power
2. The prevailing debate between interdependence and containment
3. The normative question of whether techno-nationalism is rational

These three pillars are important for several reasons, in part, because they serve as the first real conceptualisation of techno-nationalism applied to an empirical event. Secondly, they show a key debate which continues to this day on whether states ought to be interdependent or isolationist, especially in regard to technology. Finally, the pillars bring another discussion on whether techno-nationalism is a rational strategy for states. This paper argues that it is indeed rational for states to pursue techno-nationalist policies, particularly when faced with great power competition and rivalry.

However, Reich's (1987) optimism about the durability and success of techno-globalism reflected the conditions of his time. His perspective emerged during a period of expanding neo-liberal globalisation and before the wide securitisation of digital infrastructure. Although techno-globalism is still widely accepted, subsequent geopolitical developments have challenged whether it is the default assumption of international affairs. Intensification of U.S.-China strategic rivalry, increased weaponisation of supply chains, and securitisation of digital technologies paint a picture of states willing to take the economic costs of techno-nationalism in pursuit of technological autonomy. This dissertation builds on Reich's (1987) foundational distinction of techno-globalism and techno-nationalism but differs from his conclusions on the rationality of techno-nationalist policies. Reich (1987) examined the U.S.-Japan context of the 1980s and outlined the risks and feasibility of containment strategies on the assumption that globalisation and inherent knowledge diffusion would limit the effectiveness of techno-nationalism. Although his work is foundational, this study contends that contemporary techno-nationalism is best conceptualised as a deliberate and rational strategy of structural power competition and not a temporary or misguided economic policy. In this context, techno-nationalism falls in line with the broader great power rivalry between the United States and China with the pursuit of relative technological advantage being

important. Moreover, while Reich's (1987) analysis is entirely focused on the manufacturing industrial hardware sectors. This study expands the scope to digital platforms. The study also brings about the issue of digital platform governance as a key extension of Reich's work. By examining the TikTok ban, the study demonstrates how techno-nationalist logic operates within privately owned digital platforms that enable the transfer of data and communication.

Alex Capri (2024) provides the most comprehensive contemporary examination of techno-nationalism in his seminal book, *Techno-Nationalism: How It's Reshaping Trade, Geopolitics and Society*. Where Reich (1987) wrote from a bilateral rivalry context with a broadly liberal framework, Capri (2024) provides a contemporary examination of the ways in which techno-nationalism is changing global trade, social structures, and geopolitics. He puts forth the argument that technological infrastructure and systems are becoming more weaponised with a pivot to more de-globalised and nationalistic perspective. Capri (2024: 12) identifies the core instruments of this contemporary techno-nationalism as including the weaponisation of supply chains, strategic decoupling and de-risking, reshoring and friend-shoring of critical production, state-funded innovation and talent competition, technology diplomacy and strategic partnerships, and what he terms hybrid cold war tradecraft. The identification of core instruments is particularly valuable for this dissertation because it encompasses the economic and security aspects of techno-nationalist competition, whilst providing a framework used for digital platform governance and industrial production. Furthermore, this list helps to understand the ways in which states advance techno-nationalist policy and strategy. Luo (2022) extends the conceptual understanding by identifying a new form of techno-nationalism that is fundamentally rooted in the nexus between national security, economic, ideological, and geopolitical considerations. This multidimensional conceptualisation is relevant to the dissertation as it demonstrates how techno-nationalism cannot be sufficiently examined through a single analytical lens. The TikTok ban, as is argued in the dissertation, falls in a logic that involves data security, ideological contestation, economic competition, and great power rivalry, all perspectives that Luo's (2022) framework is useful for understanding.

Taken together, these contributions create a working conceptualisation of techno-nationalism for this dissertation. Techno-nationalism refers to a strategic approach in which states regard technological capabilities (including digital infrastructure, data systems, and platform governance) as both a tool and a symbol of national power, security, and sovereignty, and use policy instruments accordingly. It is different from techno-globalism, which view technology as a shared international resource governed by market forces and subject to collaboration. It is also distinct from normal

industrial policy, which may intervene in technology sectors for reasons of efficiency and not security and sovereignty concerns that characterise techno-nationalism. Techno-nationalism is also inherently irreducible to a single dimension with contemporary techno-nationalism being undertaken through economic instruments, security framing, regulatory tools, and ideological competition. This multidimensional understanding is what guides the analysis in this dissertation.

### 2.2.1. Historical Evolution: Techno-nationalism in State Practice

Techno-nationalism has been a mainstay and foundational logic of the international system, evolving from a cold-war orientation to becoming a central part of contemporary international relations. Building on Robert Reich's (1987) early work in conceptualising techno-nationalism both theoretically and empirically, this review outlines the genealogy of techno-nationalism. The section does this through a historical evolution examination of state tools and practices that have been used in different contexts, all of which achieve techno-nationalist endeavours. This section is divided into three eras. Firstly, the Cold War era, which is largely characterised by military industrial competition and state-led "Big Science". The next era is the industrial policy pivot post-Cold War, which saw the promotion of commercial innovation and the desire for national champions. The final era is the contemporary regulatory and data era, in which platform governance, control of algorithm, and data sovereignty are a key part of geopolitical competition. Importantly, these eras are not treated as rigid chronological breaks, but strategic shifts reflected in literature to show the primary objects of techno-nationalist concerns (from industrial military hardware to commercial social media apps) and the tools used to advance techno-nationalist policy (from embargoes to forced divestment).

Outlining the genealogy in this manner is useful for two reasons. First, it allows the study to interrogate how state perspectives on technology have remain constant, particularly the consistent securitisation of technology as being vital for military, economic and social means. Secondly, the genealogy in this section highlights important shifts in state priorities with regard to technology, specifically moving away from the physical equipment to data and algorithms, and the methods used to exert control. This shift is part of a critical concern in this dissertation. In that, as the study argues, techno-nationalism now operating through platform governance and data infrastructure means that contemporary digital disputes are not just relegated to regulatory solutions but are part of a deeper shift in international relations. By situating the U.S.' TikTok ban along a longer

historical timeline, this study argues that the TikTok ban is not merely an isolated policy incident but the consolidation of techno-nationalist logic of contemporary international relations.

#### 2.2.1.1. Phase I: The Cold War Model

It is important to acknowledge that technology was a significant and critical part of national power well before the Cold War. According to Capri (2024:34), since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, advanced nations have sought to use technology to derive power and advance their own interests because of what he dubs “the technology feedback loop”. The technology feedback loop, as Capri (2024:37) explains, is a cycle in which wealth and knowledge circulate around key institutions such as government, finance, military, academia and industrial, which creates a cycle where increased wealth enables greater knowledge, therefore increasing innovation and leading to even more wealth. Essentially, these nations recognised that technology could be used as a driver to attain wealth and power. This is exemplified by how, from about 1575 to 1675, the Dutch Republic succeeded in shipbuilding and manufacturing through a technology feedback loop driven by the stock market and the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, alongside advances in engineering and maritime science (Capri 2024:38). The Japan’s Meiji Restoration, early export restrictions, and industrialisation of Europe are all demonstrations of the historical importance that states have placed on technology (Edgerton, 2007a; Capri, 2024). This dissertation, however, identifies the Cold War as a critical point to start the review on the initial phase of techno-nationalism. What makes this period different from previous centuries is that it brought about the systematic securitisation of science and innovation, centralised and weaponised export controls, and put research at the heart of national security conversation. This period is not just about using technology for power and wealth, but about viewing it as an existential tool in great power rivalry.

The review starts from the Cold War, when technological superiority was viewed as an important part of global power. Although there had been strong state emphasis on technology in earlier periods (see Chin, 2019; Capri, 2024; Edgerton, 2007a), the Cold War was a significant step in systematically establishing technological development as a core tool of geopolitical competition. As Siddiqi (2014:190) argues, this era was defined by “Big Science”, which is a form of scientific research characterised by massive budgets, large teams of staff and organisation, government involvement and the use of sophisticated technology. He further points out that looking at the Cold War, scientific practice, and Big Science had become so intertwined with the national-security state, particularly in the Soviet Union (Siddiqi, 2014:190). As many other scholars have pointed out, The United States and the Soviet Union invested heavily in nuclear technology, space

exploration, and other technologically advanced fields as they saw it as a symbol of national power (Zhuravlova, 2023; Edgerton, 2007b; Kawamata, 2023). In essence, this dissertation argues that the Cold War did not just intensify technological competition, it formalised the idea that technological supremacy was a primary determinant of state survival. From a structural realist perspective, this approach is easy to understand. Structural realist scholar Kenneth Waltz (1979:88), remarking on the anarchic nature of the international system and the power of states as a result, contends that “Whatever elements of authority emerge internationally are barely once removed from the capability that provides the foundation for the appearance of those elements. Authority quickly reduces to a particular expression of capability”. What Waltz means is that any “authority” that appears in the international system is due to a country’s material capabilities and not any form of central world government. As a result, if power is defined through the relative means of capabilities, then technological capacity and innovation, especially in fields of nuclear development and computing, became a central part of bipolar power competition during the Cold War. This perspective then drives states to seek to increase their technological capacity for the benefit of power acquisition.

The history of the Cold War emphasises how states became the primary driver of technological directionality, pivoting technological development and science from its autonomous roots into what by many means served as an essential arm of the state (McDougall, 1985; Capri, 2024; Wolfe, 2018). McDougall (1985:5) calls this technocracy, which is “the institutionalization of technological change for state purposes, that is, the state-funded and -managed R & D explosion of our time”. According to MacDougall (1985), the cold war brought on massive amounts of technocracy, which was seen in various projects during that time. For example, Siddiqi’s (2014) analysis views several Soviet technological projects, such as its space programme, as being guided by both military capacity building and a techno-ideological spectacle to show ideological and systematic superiority (a debate that is examined later in the section). Similarly, Reynolds (2010:385) argues that the launch of the Sputnik, the world’s first artificial earth satellite, in October 1957 was a big blow to American technological pride. According to Reynolds (2010:385), the U.S. responded to this by allocating \$1 billion over seven years in the form of fellowships, grants, and loans to fast track the development of skills essential to technology, eventually leading to the establishment of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1958. Conway (2014:251) supports this recollection of events, succinctly stating that NASA was “a creation of the Cold War” following anxieties around the USSR successfully launching Sputnik.

This shows that states had taken a direct driving role in technology and science for state purposes, which saw the creation of other industries as a result.

However, this intertwined and even state led relationship with technology and innovation bore the military industrial complex, which is the symbiotic relationship between the military entities of a nation and the private, academic, and industrial research that provides research and development. As Reynolds (2010:379) explains, although some industrial research departments had existed around the 1930s, “Big Science” created the military-industrial complex that came from the Second World War and was institutionalised during the Cold War. Using The Manhattan Project as an example of the military-industrial complex, Capri (2024:46) shows how the U.S. atomic bomb programme demonstrated the military’s ability to assemble a large “brain trust” of engineers and scientists from diverse fields to pursue a single goal. Capri (2024:46) further goes on to demonstrate the scale of this project, writing that:

At the height of its operations (just within its tightly ring-fenced inner circles) President Roosevelt’s top-secret programme had-130,000 civilian and military personnel and contractors on payroll, located across some 30 sites, primarily in the U.S., but also in Britain and Canada. The programme ultimately cost US\$2 billion, or about US\$26 billion in 2024 dollars.

The institutionalisation of the military industrial complex occurred during the Cold War in different ways. According to Reinert (2023:140) along with NASA, the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), which would later become the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), was also established after the Sputnik launch with the stated aim of “inventing the future” in technology. This invention of the future would happen through the channelling of federal money into foundational technologies and has played a role in inventions like the internet, self-driving cars, and the GPS (Reinert, 2023:140). Siddiqi (2014:141) notes that the Soviet science and defence industry functioned as a single normative state, which helps explain why, by 1990, 87 percent of national research and development was allocated mainly to the military under the industrial ministry system. The key difference in the military industrial complexes of both the USSR and the United States is found in their integration within the broader economy and their institutional networks. As Reynolds (2010:378) argues, while both systems championed the “state-as-innovator” model during the Cold War, the American version of the military industrial complex was more

deeply connected with the wider economy and society, while the Soviet version “suppressed the civilian economy and restricted the flow of information”.

Importantly, there exists significant tension in the literature as to the primary function of technology during the cold war: was it a practical tool of military capacity and power or a symbolic marker of ideological superiority? This study has largely addressed the perspective that the pursuit of relative and absolute power was the primary motivator for technological innovation (Waltz, 1979; Capri, 2024; Zhuravlova, 2023; Edgerton, 2007b; Kawamata, 2023), however, the ideological context of the Cold War ought to be understood. In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*, McDougall (1985) argues that the USSR used state-controlled technological change “as a partner to ideology”. According to McDougall (1985), the Space Race, which was rooted in the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), shifted to a race to be first in space to show the superiority of a particular social system to the world. McDougall (1985) further argued that the desire to “invent the future” drove both the USSR and the United States to adopt a technocratic model. Framing the mood in Washington following various unsuccessful foreign policy endeavours such as the reversal in Laos and the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, McDougall (1985:8), recants how President John Kennedy had asked Congress to go to the moon, not out of technological necessity but to assert the U.S. as a top power again. McDougall (1985:8) illustrates this point arguing:

As Vice President Johnson capsulized: "Failure to master space means being second best in every aspect, in the crucial arena of our Cold War world. In the eyes of the world first in space means first, period; second in space is second in everything." Space technology was drafted into the cause of national prestige. Later, advanced technology in general was tapped as the vehicle for national and international regeneration.

Siddiqi (2014) adds a crucial layer to this analysis, arguing that the USSR had ostensibly embraced what was dubbed “gigantomania”, an obsessive compulsion to large scale infrastructure and industrial projects, as an effective tool in representing the vitality and capability of the socialist state and model. Siddiqi (2014:191) uses the Dneprostroi Dam and the trans-Siberian railroad as some of the examples of spectacles meant to enhance this view of the USSR. In this body of literature, technology served as a spectacular exhibition of national capability alongside the promotion of effective military tools. This is to say that technological supremacy was central to showcasing the results of following a particular ideology, namely, socialism and capitalism. The ideological perspective in which technology

was viewed was even employed to belittle their counterparts. As Wolfe (2018:3) argues, U.S. propaganda depicted Communist sciences as authoritative order characterised by forcing practitioners to follow political party dogma, technological spectacle over simple sciences, political loyalties, prioritise practical achievements, and advance nationalistic goals. Inversely, the U.S. projected a desirable style of science, one that held scientists as independent of government control and external interference, a sort of apolitical version of science (Wolfe, 2018:2). However, this is not true, as there were several ways in which the United States sought to usurp the USSR even when it was not scientifically necessary, such as the desire to go to the moon. In the context of the Cold War, this makes sense: both the U.S. and the USSR had to project a vision of a world most desirable not only for their population but for the rest of the world. This dissertation finds this discussion very relevant to the case study of the TikTok ban by the United States. Specifically, the dissertation is concerned with the U.S.-China relations as a new form of Cold War race to innovate the future; this has been called the Tech War. It is particularly fitting that the United States is in geopolitical competition with a rival that advances and projects a different ideology in China. The study makes use of this contextual basis to help understand the current relations between the United States and China, especially with regard to technology and, more specifically, TikTok.

#### 2.2.1.2. Phase II: The Industrial Policy Pivot and the Rise of National Champions

The end of the Cold War and the resulting increase of global trade did not signal the end of state-led technological emphasis; instead, it presented a fundamental shift in the focus of technological nationalism. Although Phase I can be broadly characterised by the placement of technological leadership at the forefront of military paradigm for both security and ideological reasons. Phase II is a departure from this and demonstrates how technology became a significant determinant of economic security in a globalised world. This section therefore engages with the literature surrounding the industrial policy pivot, showing how states shifted their focus to the development of national champions in high technology industries like electronics, semiconductors, and aerospace, largely because of their dual use application. To make this point, the International Monetary Fund reported a significant decline in military spending following the end of the Cold War (Clements et al., 2021). While this was happening, commercial technology was rapidly growing driven by the rise of the personal computer, emergence of the internet and East Asian electronic companies that were increasing in their dominance (Capri, 2024; Tyson, 1992; McGee, 2025).

The dissertation finds that the clearest sign of this pivot comes from Japan, which had established a form of commercial techno-nationalism while the Cold War was heading to its end. As Johnson's (1982) study of the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) reports, from the 1950s Japan used preferential credit allocation, guided planning, coordinated research and development, as well as nurturing infant industries to build and maintain capacity in specific technology sectors. What made MITI different, according to Johnson (1982), was not that the state owned these companies nor the fact that they had a direct command to these industries, but rather that the state had significant ability to guide private investment towards goals of strategic national importance because of the collaborative relationship between those that are in the industry and the bureaucrats. As Johnson (1982:24) explains, "The government did not normally give direct orders to businesses, but those businesses that listened to the signals coming from the government and then responded were favored with easy access to capital, tax breaks, and approval of their plans to import foreign technology or establish joint ventures". Evans (1995:12) would later theorise this developmental state model as "embedded autonomy", a mixture of internal corporate coherence and external connectedness to society. This connection allows the state to provide the collective goods for the development of a nation that markets cannot singlehandedly provide. In essence, Johnson (1982) and Evans (1995) characterise this relationship as a sort of state-private link that guides private capacity and resources towards nationally strategic goals. In 1980s Japan, this proved to be truly transformative as the country moved to become the world leader in consumer electronics, semiconductors, and machine tools (Johnson, 1982; Brown & Linden, 2010). It is no surprise that during this period, companies like Sony, Panasonic, Nintendo, Toshiba and Casio had become ubiquitous, not only within Japan but also in Western markets. This was undoubtedly a wake-up call for Western governments, demonstrating that focused state intervention in commercial technology markets, particularly when carefully organised and planned, can generate substantial comparative advantages. This conclusion was further reinforced by Amsden's (1989) analysis of South Korea's industrial transformation. In her seminal book, *Asia's Next Giant: South Korea and Late Industrialization*, Amsden (1989) argues that the rapid economic growth of South Korea was primarily driven by state-led industrial policy and not just the free market forces. According to Amsden (1989), South Korea used state intervention, created "chaebols" (large, diversified business groups with preferential access to credit, benefits, and government contracts), which applied protectionist policies to domestic firms that met export goals, and adopted new technology to build competitive industries in a single generation. These East Asian case studies in Japan and Korea form as the empirical foundation for national champions strategy that Phase II techno-nationalism applies across many other countries.

Understanding what the cultivation of a national champion involves in practical terms is useful before the dissertation examines scholarly debates on their merit. From the above section, one can understand a national champion not simply as a large, successful domestic firm, but rather a firm that a state has deliberately cultivated through a set of specific policies to improve chances of success. These policies can come in the form of protectionist strategies especially for infant industries, subsidised and fully research and development, facilitated technological acquisition through licencing agreements, joint ventures and even industrial espionage and government procurement preferences (Johnson, 1982; Amsden, 1989; Evans, 1995; Brown & Linden, 2010). The logic behind these tools is grounded in what international economists call “Strategic Trade Theory”. Research by Brander and Spencer (1985) shows that in oligopolistic industries with steep learning curves, few global competitors, and large economies of scale (such as semiconductors, commercial technology, advanced manufacturing, and computing), government subsidies can shift profits from foreign to domestic firms, raising national welfare enough to offset the subsidy’s cost. In short, this argument helps explain where and how national champions policies are used, in markets where entry barriers are high and first mover advantages are coveted, states can intervene to secure the future of domestic firms very early on.

Few works are as influential as Laura Tyson (1992), who uses case studies of commercial aircraft, semiconductors, and supercomputers to show how MITI used subsidised R&D, preferential procurement, and import barriers to protect and nurture Japanese firms early on, ensuring their competitiveness in international markets. A response to this for the U.S. would be a “Cautious Activism” approach, which emphasises state intervention in high technology industries whilst still showing a commitment to free market values (Tyson, 1992:13). Explaining this approach, Tyson (1992:13) argues:

My trade policy agenda is a defensive one. I recommend that the nation's trade laws be used to deter or compensate for foreign practices that are not adequately regulated by existing multilateral rules. Unlike most traditional and even many moderate free traders, I am convinced that such practices can inflict substantial long-term injury on American producers. The case studies provide compelling evidence of such injury. In addition I believe that, in pursuit of defensive objectives, US policymakers should be guided by the principle of selective reciprocity and motivated by the goal of opening foreign markets. Wherever possible, they should favor approaches that encourage trade and competition over those that discourage them.

Tyson (1992:152) identified SEMATECH (Semiconductor Manufacturing Technology), a consortium established in 1987 with state-private funding, as the embodiment of this perspective. SEMATECH emerged in response to concerns within both industry and government that Japanese semiconductor firms were investing more heavily in, and achieving better results from, manufacturing process R&D and capital equipment than their American rivals (Tyson, 1992:152). Tyson would go on to become Chair of President Clinton's Council of Economic Advisers, showing that the techno-nationalist logic she had advanced had moved from an academic setting to mainstream American policymaking. Importantly, the inclusion of SEMATECH as an example is not as a central focus of analysis of the review nor that of the dissertation; instead, it is the most visible example of American entry into Phase II industrial techno-nationalism. In this perspective, governments in the industrialised world saw that being more active in strategic technological sectors is of massive importance. The dissertation draws from this, as later sections will show how social media platforms like TikTok found themselves embedded within these concerns.

Robert Gilpin (1987), looking from a political economy of international relations point of view provided the structural realist perspective of the geopolitical implications of this. He argued that the different rates of growth by states are a primary driver of shifts of power in the international system. This can be applied to the commercial technological industry as the convergence of both technological competition and hegemonic grappling. Analysis from Tyson (1992), Johnson (1982) and Gilpin (1987) together establishes the intellectual background for the treatment of commercial technology policy as a tool of high politics. Samuel (1994) reinforced this perspective by showing how Japan had used technological indigenisation not only as an economic strategy, but a way to express national sovereignty ideology through pop culture and Japanese institutions.

On the other hand, the strongest challenge to the strategic trade and the conceptual justifications for the establishment of national champions came from the liberal framework itself. Robert Reich, whose 1987 article has been discussed in this dissertation, contributed to discourse in his book *The Work of Nations*. Reich (1991) provides a structural critique to the success of national champion strategies, asserting that in the new world of mobile capital, internationally dispersed ownership, and globally scattered production, the nationality of a firm is largely irrelevant to the economic interests of supposed national constituency. If there is an American semiconductor firm that manufactures in the Netherlands, with employees from across the world, and with profits distributed to global shareholders, the firm is not

inherently serving American interests by virtue of being incorporated in the U.S. Instead, Reich (1991) believes that what matters is not where a firm was headquartered but where it has chosen to invest, train workers and generate productivity. A subsequent study by Gereffi *et al* (2005) on global value chain supported this argument, demonstrating how production in technology had become so disaggregated across national borders that the attribution of output to a single national industrial base had become virtually impossible. This is to say that perhaps national champions are inherently not national by their nature. McGee (2025) would later illustrate this exact concern in relation to Apple's operations in China. According to McGee (2025:7), Apple, headquartered in the United States, has trained at least 28 million Chinese workers since 2008 and was investing US\$55 billion per year by 2015 to help Chinese suppliers scale while maintaining high standards. The logic was straightforward: by training thousands of employees to carry out intricate manual work on assembly lines, Apple was able to produce luxury-grade products on a mass-market scale while keeping costs down. This level of investment is impactful and shows the geopolitical consequence of the global web that national champions operate under. Apple found itself effectively becoming a developer of China, having unwittingly transferred knowledge that allowed Chinese firms like Huawei and Xiaomi to evolve into world class competitors that even outsell Apple in some markets (McGee, 2025).

The tension between Reich's (1991) critique of globalist reality and Tyson's (1992) strategic trade argument has largely been unanswered in the literature. This is why it resurfaces adjacently in this study on the debates of whether policy actions such as the U.S. CHIPS Act or China's Made in China 2025 are primarily for the interests of the state or the corporations involved. The dissertation positions itself in the debate by arguing that states are increasingly seeking to mitigate their dependence on global supply chains whilst also increasing investment into national champions and domestic firms. This position is advanced in detail in chapters 5 and 6. Importantly, though, Phase II would be incomplete without an analysis of China as a key player in this period.

#### 2.2.1.2.1. China's emergence into techno-nationalism

China's emergence as a techno-nationalist actor during Phase II is a significant development that directly deals with the TikTok ban that this study examined, therefore, it should be carefully explained, not just mentioned. Contrary to belief, China's main entry into techno-nationalism was not Made in China 2025 (a document that is useful in Phase III), but with the post-Mao

development state in the 1980s. A significant milestone was the introduction of the 863 Plan in 1986, a government programme designed to promote indigenous innovation and lessen dependence on foreign technology, particularly in advanced high-tech sectors (Feigenbaum, 2003). Speaking about the plan, Feigenbaum (2003:142) remarked how it has “adapted the core principles of China’s technonationalism to new strategic and technical challenges.”. He further explained that:

The 863 Plan borrowed Nie’s [a founding father of the People's Republic of China] notion that the central state, in close partnership with some of the country’s most renowned scientists and engineers, must bear the burden of funding and otherwise promoting technologies of unusual strategic value. It sought to preserve a critical role in policy and technology planning for individual strategic weaponeers. And, finally, it aimed to train a new generation of technicians, much as Nie’s strategic weapons mentoring arrangements had done in a strictly military context (Feigenbaum, 2003:142).

The plan in part was meant to replicate the kind of state-directed high technology emphasis like the American Strategic Defense Initiative and the European EUREKA, with Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping remarking that “The next century, will be the century of high technology” (Feigenbaum, 2003:160). The programme identified seven priority research areas based on their potential for dual-use applications and their strategic significance: biotechnology, space technology, information technology, lasers, automation, energy, and new materials (Feigenbaum, 2003:157). As Feigenbaum (2003) argued, the 863 Plan was built on the foundational model of China’s previous strategic weapons programme, keeping the rigorous review model and the fusion of military and civilian objectives. This is what separates China’s Phase II techno-nationalism from the American version, where the Americans had at least maintained a formal separation between defence and commercial technology policy. China was fundamentally different as the strategic weapons and commercial technology industry were both established from the same institutional and nationalist objectives (Feigenbaum, 2003). From the 1990s and 2000s, China used this model through national champion strategies that borrowed from Johnson’s (1982) MITI and Evans’ (1995) developmental state framework: preferential procurement steered domestic agencies to Chinese tech firms; import substitution protected telecom equipment, software, and internet services from foreign competition; and targeted industrial credit channelled capital to firms in strategic sectors. This saw the emergence of high technology powerhouses from China, such as Huawei and ZTE in telecommunications, and Tencent and Alibaba in internet services, who were

able to be highly competitive largely in part because of Chinese state industrial policy rather than just market competition (Naughton & Tsai, 2015).

It then falls within this dissertation to distinguish the Phase II techno-nationalism of China from its Japanese and Korean counterparts. For Japan and South Korea, technological autonomy and leadership were mainly concerned with economic strategy and national security risks. However, for China, it was those things and a source of political legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the projection of national sovereignty in an environment where technological dependence on Western states carried a historical and ideological context more than economic calculation (Naughton & Tsai, 2015). Earlier work by Segal (2011) supports this analysis, arguing that China's technology policy is inseparable from its historical and ideological context, with the drive for indigenous technological capacity linked to the CCP's aim of restoring China's great-power status after the century of humiliation. This means that much like Phase I's analysis of the USSR, China's techno-nationalism carries a significant degree of political and ideological foundation that makes it more resilient to cost-benefit calculations, as would be the case in purely economic-motivated policy. Interestingly, it also means that any foreign technological leverage exercised over China, such as export controls, platform restrictions, and supply chain dependencies, are read by Beijing not only as a competitive disadvantage but a threat to sovereignty. A form of threat that would justify and encourage further Chinese techno-nationalism, especially when it has brought the country enormous success and development. This argument is essential to understand both China's commitment to technological self-sufficiency and leadership and the political context in which U.S. techno-nationalist measures targeting Chinese technology, including TikTok, are received.

The Phase II literature establishes several arguments that this dissertation carries forward. Firstly, it confirms the idea that states across the political spectrum embraced industrial techno-nationalism as a guiding principle once commercial technologies became important to national power. It also showed that the scholarly debate between strategic trade justification and national champion critique of industrial policy remains largely unsolved, reflecting concerns around the benefits of technological leadership and risks of state-directed market intervention. Finally, it reveals that China's emergence as a geopolitical and technological superpower was driven by an ideologically charged techno-nationalism that was not only limited to economic benefit alone. Phase II is specifically important in the dissertation as it allows for a strategic extension to digital platforms, data flows, and algorithms as contemporary areas of techno-nationalistic competition. That

extension is provided in Phase III, which this dissertation moves to next, and where the TikTok ban finds its place in the literature.

### 2.2.1.3. Phase III: The Regulatory and Data Era

Phase III of techno-nationalism does not begin just as a clean break detached from what came before. Instead, it works as a logical extension to Phase II's focus on techno-nationalism. The national champions strategy, industrial policy emphasis, and competition over critical technological sectors all remain and intensify in the contemporary era. However, the fundamental change is the terrain and scope of the analysis. Whereas Phase II was largely driven by competition over the production of the most advanced physical technologies, Phase III is all about who gets to govern the digital landscape itself. In essence, Phase III focuses on who controls the platforms used by billions to communicate, the algorithms that shape what they see and believe, the infrastructure that moves this content, and the data flows that track their behaviour. This framing, however, requires significant grounding in the deeper body of scholarship that deals with data sovereignty, the political economy of digital platforms, and algorithmic power from various angles. This section is therefore tasked with drawing threads and links to show how they converge on the central claim of this dissertation: that the U.S' TikTok ban is best understood as a Phase III techno-nationalist act. This act is driven by the same logic and emphasis on technological competition between states in both Phase I and Phase II evolution but now is practised through regulatory and data governance tools.

This dissertation argues that understanding what is new about Phase III requires examining the strategic role of data in geopolitical competition and the governance of those data as a key issue for states. Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, offers the most influential explanation of how data shifted from being a mere technical residue of digital interactions to becoming the foundational source of interest for wealth accumulation. Zuboff (2019) argues that big corporations such as Google discovered that behavioural data left by users, like what they search for, their location and social connections, could be harvested, processed and sold as prediction products. These prediction products are sold on what Zuboff (2019) calls "behavioral futures markets", which are essentially markets that trade on what humans are likely to do next. Zuboff (2019) calls this entire structural system "surveillance capitalism" and argues that it leads to a greater desire to extract more user data as the accuracy of prediction products improves. In essence, large corporations will increase their spending on both collecting and trading user data, driven by the increased precision and reliability of those data. Although Zuboff (2019)

does not directly address techno-nationalism, her argument carries a clear implication: if user behaviour data constitutes a valuable raw material for a new form of power, then any state that governs the major flows of such data and the platforms that extract them gains a strategic advantage over states that lack this control. States have long known the importance of data and these predictive products; post 9/11, the United States intensified surveillance and lifted historical limits on it, with intelligence agencies increasing their capacities in this arena (Zuboff, 2019). Levine's (2018) analysis goes even further, arguing that the internet was specifically designed as a surveillance tool. He notes that the early version of the internet called ARPANET was designed specifically to monitor the world in real time, predict or prevent social upheaval, and analyse political movements (Levine, 2018). Most notably, an example of this surveillance was exposed by the intelligence contractor Edward Snowden. Snowden revealed that there exists a system of mass surveillance where the United States government harvested enormous amounts of digital information straight from private tech firms and built a "surveillance state" characterised by warrantless monitoring, large-scale collection of phone metadata, and an extensive, global signals intelligence apparatus (Gellman, 2020). Zuboff (2019) developed her framework as a critique of corporate power and its impact on democratic autonomy. However, the concerns outlined by Zuboff (2019) also stretch to the geopolitical questions of which states benefit from data captured, the influence they have, and whose population are the data being extracted from? Here, TikTok becomes a key object of analysis. As a platform built on Chinese corporate structures, owned by a firm governed by Chinese law, and holding behavioural data on millions of Americans, the concerns raised in Washington mirror the characteristics of this data environment. This desire for digital sovereignty has become increasingly pressing for states.

#### 2.2.1.3.1. Digital sovereignty in International Relations

Digital sovereignty has become the primary tool that states have sought to theorise and operationalise their desired claim to govern the data and platforms operating within their borders. There has been significant interest from a scholarly perspective in digital sovereignty since the 2010s, with the literature showing the different motivation and operationalisation of states. Pohle and Thiel (2020) define digital sovereignty in its most basic terms as the attempts made by states to control and assert authority over digital infrastructure and data flows that fall within their borders. They argue that claims to digital sovereignty can be systematised into three primary categories, namely: state autonomy and the security of national infrastructures, economic autonomy and competition, and user autonomy and individual self-determination (Pohle & Thiel, 2020). State autonomy and infrastructure security are a focus that emphasises the ability of a nation

to make independent decisions about its digital infrastructure and how its technology is deployed (Pohle & Thiel, 2020: 8). The authors identify tools used to achieve this, such as data localisation, which is the restriction of data storage and flow to specific jurisdiction to limit foreign access and control (Pohle & Thiel, 2020:9). A relevant example of this for the dissertation is Project Texas (which is discussed in detail in Chapter 5) and the attempts made by ByteDance to avoid divestiture by storing American user data within the U.S. The second claim of economic autonomy and competition is about addressing the perceived market dominance of foreign technology firms (mainly from the U.S. and China) by promoting the “innovative power of domestic economy” and nurturing local firms (Pohle & Thiel, 2020:10). Finally, Pohle & Thiel (2020) argue that user autonomy and individual self-determination shift the focus from the state to the individual viewing sovereignty as the capacity of citizens to make conscious and independent decisions in the digital space. However, as Glasze et al. (2023) demonstrates that digital sovereignty is not a uniform coherent endeavour undertaken a single ideology; it draws from being used as a form of information control in the authoritarian contexts and data protection, national security strategy, and economic regulation in liberal democracies. For Glasze *et al.* (2023), “digital sovereignty” varies by country: states use the same term but often pursue different goals. This conceptual distinction creates a particular challenge for the dissertation, but it also highlights something important: the impulse to regulate digital space as if it were sovereign territory is almost universal among states, regardless of regime type, indicating that it is largely shaped by the structure of the international system and not any ideological framework. This is particularly relevant when looking at the combination of economic dependence on foreign-owned digital assets and the security implications of cross-border data flows. Despite being anchored by different ideological and governance frameworks, what unites the European Union’s (EU) General Data Protection Regulation, Russia’s Sovereign Internet Law, China’s Cybersecurity Law and the United States’ executive actions against TikTok is not a unified vision of digital governance, but a sign of near universal anxiety about who controls digital life within the nation’s borders.

This dissertation argues that examining China’s model of digital sovereignty is directly relevant because it increasingly serves both as a reference point for how Western states formulate their own approaches and as the primary origin and context for the Chinese platform ecosystem, including ByteDance. China’s approach to internet governance, which began in the mid-1990s, is built on what Creemers (2017) and Griffiths (2019) have identified as cyber sovereignty, which is the claim that the state and the obligation to govern and control data, content, and communication that flows through networks within the states’ jurisdiction. Despite being discussed in the vein of censorship,

The Great Firewall is better understood as a form of infrastructure that territorialises cyberspace, giving the Chinese state power to create a boundary between the domestic digital environment and the global internet, to control what citizen share, see, and what they say (Griffiths, 2019). According to Creemers (2017) the establishment of such comprehensive digital control is to maintain ideological security, assert the CCP dominance, make society predictable, upgrade social management, and assert national sovereignty. One primary motivation that falls under asserting national sovereignty is the concern of foreign governments using social media to incite a colour revolution or an Arab Spring style in China (Creemers, 2017). Additionally, under Xi Jinping, the digital architecture that brought about The Great Firewall was systematised and extended through legislature (specifically, the 2017 Cybersecurity Law, the 2021 Data Security Law, and the Personal Information Protection Law) that essentially mandated data localisation and corporation with intelligence and state security for firms operating in China (Creemers, 2017). The significance is clear for the legal architecture at the heart of the TikTok ban: ByteDance as a company incorporated under Chinese law, is subject to these requirements. This draws the attention of the United States government due to concerns that ByteDance could share data from American users with the Chinese government (as discussed in Chapter 5).

China's cyber sovereignty model is especially relevant in the context of the phase III techno-nationalist, as it is not limited to serving a defensive or inward-looking project. Segal (2011) and Capri (2024) both identify the external facing nature of China's digital strategy, especially through the Digital Silk Road. This project, serving as a technology centric extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been a driver in exporting Chinese digital infrastructure like telecommunications equipment and surveillance systems to countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Segal, 2011; Capri, 2024). This export of digital infrastructure can be seen as diplomatic strategy, a commercial endeavour, and a techno-nationalist act driven to create technological dependencies, giving China structural leverage over the digital environments of recipient states, extending the logic of what Farrell and Newman (2019) call weaponised interdependence into new territories.

However, the United States have classified this effort by China as a form "digital authoritarianism" where the state essentially controls the digital space and limited Western alternatives and where there exists a competition between the Chinese and American forms of digital governance (U.S. Department of State, 2023). This classification is a key part of the ideological contests in understanding digital governance in Phase III. Importantly, this framework should not be accepted without critical examination. As Pohle and Thiel (2020) and Flew and Su (2023) have pointed out,

Western states have also found themselves increasingly asserting control over digital platforms, using mechanisms that resemble data localisation and regulation of platforms, essentially doing what they criticise China of. The TikTok ban itself is an example of the state using national security laws to restrict a foreign digital platform from its digital environment on the grounds that it would be berated and rejected from their Chinese counterparts. The implication of this focus on digital platforms has meant an explosion in the number of regulatory measures used by states. According to Flew and Su (2023), states have moved at an incredible pace to assert legal authority over digital platforms with an estimated over 100 new legislative and regulatory measures used across different jurisdictions by May 2021. This, according to the authors, shows that there is greater emphasis by states to intervene in one way or another in the digital space and its leaders (Flew & Su, 2023). With the United States using executive orders and China employing a state-centric model, it becomes clear that both states are asserting control over the platforms in their jurisdiction, with clear justification of national security and public concern. It is precisely this dimension that makes Luo's (2022) identification of contemporary techno-nationalism rooted in the nexus of national security, economic strategy, and geopolitical rivalry, a key pillar to which Phase III techno-nationalism rests. The fact that the TikTok ban can be justified on all three grounds is inherently a feature of Phase II techno-nationalism. It is the amalgamation of all these rationales that makes it very difficult to contest on a single dimension, a tool that states are finding increasingly useful.

This dissertation finds that the literature on Phase III is not without unresolved debates and tension and therefore moves to acknowledge and outline. The first concern, the use of national security frameworks as an explanation for the TikTok ban. Several scholars, including Slawotsky (2024) and Malawer (2024), have noted that national security discourse is increasingly being used in technological competition as a form of cover for what are economic and competitive motivations. Securitisation as a way of doing, this is examined later in the dissertation. States employ the protection of domestic platform industry from foreign companies and preservation of American dominance of the social media landscape in the context of this dissertation. The use of national security concern and geopolitical and economic protectionism is not inherently mutually exclusive, as seen in earlier phases of techno-nationalism; however, it is still worth identifying that what seems to be largely driven by strategic gains is obscured by national security framing.

A second and important gap in the literature for Phase III techno-nationalism is the relative lack of scholarly work on digital platform governance as a form of techno-nationalism specifically, and not as part of a cybersecurity, data protection, and competition framework. The existing work on digital sovereignty, largely and rightly so, treats state's assertion of authority over platforms as

governance response to the influence of private firms, intervention in the market, and security concerns about foreign tech. While this is generally comprehensive, what is lacking is literature that engages with how platform regulation and exclusionary measures work as tools in great power competition. Much like how semiconductor exports were restricted to prevent a rival state from obtaining critical technology, TikTok is now undergoing a similar form of control. Gray (2021) provides a key study into the geopolitical motivations behind the regulations of platforms, specifically TikTok. Her analysis found that lawmakers had framed TikTok not as an ordinary platform subject to standard governance issues, but rather a tool that the Chinese state might use for strategic influence within the United States, a framework that is fundamentally geopolitically driven (Gray, 2021). Critically, Gray (2021) sounds a warning that this dissertation takes seriously: geopolitical motivations can be used to obscure more direct factors relevant to platform governance, especially in an industry where the overwhelming number of firms are U.S. technology firms. TikTok, according to Gray (2021) finds itself in a unique position as it is the first non-American platform to objectively succeed and compete with Silicon Valley social media giants and thus being excluded from the market is beneficial to American interests in ways that cannot simply be limited to security concerns. The resulting tension between a genuine security threat and the use of geopolitical framework to eliminate a foreign actor is identified by Gray (2021) but is not fully resolved. Capri (2024) comes closest to providing a fully-fledged picture of platform governance building from what Gray (2021) brings to the dissertation. Capri (2024) situates platform governance in a hybrid cold war framework where states control the digital environment and infrastructure as a logical extension of the sovereign technological competition that has been outlined in all three phases of techno-nationalist evolution. In this light, the TikTok ban is not only about data protection measures or national security threats, nor is it about protectionism alone. It is a techno-nationalist act that is consistent with the Phase I and Phase II evolution traced within this literature review. The logic has not changed, but the object has, from nuclear weapons to semiconductors to social media algorithms, states have increasingly sought to employ techno-nationalist ways to deal with a changing world.

### 2.3. Techno-Nationalism and Great Power Competition: The US-China Technology Rivalry

The three phases traced above exist in a geopolitical context. Their contemporary manifestation and expression are shaped primarily by the strategic rivalry between the United States and China. This rivalry, as the dissertation argues, is the most complete way of understanding Phase III techno-nationalism. As mentioned above in the literature review, China's techno-nationalism finds its roots embedded in the broader institutional framework, from the 863 Plan in the 1980s to the national champions strategy found in the 1990s and 2000s. With the contemporary period, China's ambition did not change, but the scale of the ambition moved rapidly, as did the response of the United States to it. Therefore, this section is not concerned with revisiting what has already been established with China's industrial policy. Instead, this section centres on academic work that examines the rivalry itself and contends that grasping the nature of this rivalry is crucial background for understanding the TikTok ban.

A useful starting point for understanding the structural context behind the U.S.-China rivalry is engaging with work that creates a framework for understanding how technology and innovation methods create a tension between a dominant and emerging state. Kennedy and Lim (2018) do exactly that, identifying what they call the "innovation imperative", which is the desire of a rising state to obtain and advance new technologies in order to address structural economic obstacles and maintain its rise on the international stage. The problem, they argue, is that when states pursue this endeavour, they generate negative externalities for the dominant state (Kennedy & Lim, 2018). The first is a negative externality to security in which as China's technological capabilities improve, especially in dual-use technologies such as artificial intelligence and semiconductors, the United States faces a degradation of power in these industries (Kennedy & Lim, 2018). The authors point out that this pushes the United States to limit the transfer and ownership of certain technologies. For example, Washington has blocked efforts by Chinese companies to invest in or purchase U.S. semiconductor firms such as Aixtron, due to the dual-use nature of their technologies, which are vital for military applications like anti-ballistic missile systems (Kennedy & Lim, 2018). According to Kennedy and Lim (2018), the second is a negative externality of the order of the universe, in which China's growing technological capacity is increasingly enabling it to challenge the U.S.-led global order established since 1945. An example of this negative externality is China's weak enforcement of intellectual property laws and the use of economically motivated cyber espionage, which challenge the U.S.-led intellectual property regime (embodied

in agreements such as TRIPS) designed to protect the economic interests of technology leaders (Kennedy & Lim, 2018). This framework is valuable for this dissertation because it does not limit the rivalry to military competition but instead shows that technology driven rivalry is played out in institutional, security and economic spaces. This is what the U.S.-China contest is doing regarding digital platforms and data infrastructure that this dissertation examines.

Additionally, Allison's (2017) Thucydides Trap argument, the idea that when a rising power threatens to displace an established one, war becomes structurally likely, has been consistently used to explain the U.S.-China technology rivalry. Importantly, Allison (2017) does not present the outcome of war as a prophecy, but instead as a warning about the possibility of war. At first glance, it might seem like a perfect fit, with China rising and the United States as an incumbent facing the friction and intensified technological competition. However, this dissertation is cautious of adopting this framework without engaging in a critique of it. Several critics have argued that Allison (2017) makes use of biased case selection, flawed historical interpretation, and the possibility of a self-fulfilled prophecy (Chan, 2019; Peters et al., 2022). The dissertation still finds Allison's work (2017) useful, even though it is focused on military conflict and the U.S.-China rivalry is largely a technological rivalry. For example, Allison's (2017) analysis of the significant investment and economic growth made by China in various industries is impressive by nature and scope. This backdrop serves a key part of understanding the U.S.-China rivalry, even though the dissertation does not view the end goal as a military conflict. As mentioned earlier, Capri (2024) provides the clearest way to make sense of the U.S.-China rivalry with the concept of a hybrid cold war, a competition for technological dominance using tools of the state like export controls, platform bans, and supply chain reshoring, as alternatives and not precursors to a military confrontation.

What makes contemporary U.S.-China technological rivalry different from earlier instances of great power technological competition, including the U.S.-Japan rivalry found in the Phase II era, is the ideological dichotomy, digital infrastructure as the arena of contestation, and the mutual independence of both countries. China is an important economic partner and ideological competitor of the United States, whereas Japan was a security ally and a liberal democracy. This dependency in many ways is what is shaping the U.S.' desire to decouple from China. Bateman (2022) documents the idea of decoupling, especially in relation to the U.S. and China. His analysis reveals that there is no consensus on a definition of decoupling and on how far it should go within American policymakers (Bateman, 2022). According to Bateman (2022:123) "[decoupling] in its strongest form, it can mean a total technological divorce between the United States and China—a

very grave prospect currently favoured only by a few radical voices. In its weaker form, it can refer more generally to the kind of marginal reduction of technological interdependence seen for the last several years". Considering this, he distinguishes three camps: "restrictionists", who support far-reaching technological decoupling; "cooperationists", who contend that limited, targeted engagement is still both feasible and beneficial; and "centrists", who advocate an intermediate course but have yet to set out a clear strategic vision of what that would entail. (Bateman, 2022:3). The incoherence from the American perspective over what decoupling is and how it is undertaken is not simply a semantic issue, but one significant to this dissertation. This means that individual policy decisions, including the TikTok ban, cannot be strictly viewed from the perspective of a unified approach under a particular logic. The implication of that is, states are generally unclear and inconsistent with what measures they employ, particularly when policymakers and the executive branch fall within different camps.

## 2.4. National Security Concerns in Cyberspace and Social Media

There have been concerns about the role that social networks play in national security of states in today's interconnected world. This is particularly true in the news arena and in the ways it affects national security. According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009) in the past, official news sources, such as news sites and media houses, were largely the ones who decided what was newsworthy, even sometimes collaborating with government and deciding which information should not be published in accordance with motivations for public knowledge. Lumppp (2014) further adds that because of the vast number of available online sources and the rise of micro blogging platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), this type of control is virtually impossible today. The increased access to smartphones and the internet has allowed news to spread much faster, driving high engagement. Digital platforms carry geopolitical importance because of three interrelated characteristics that make them inherently different from earlier forms of commercially significant technology. Firstly, their network architecture creates a winner-takes-most outcome, where leading platforms are so ubiquitous in social and economic life, effectively giving those who control them a form of structural power over the population that is unlike any other firm with normal market power (Srnicsek, 2017). Social media platforms are an example of this, as they have become so ubiquitous and widespread in everyday society, which has given firms in that industry significant power and influence. Secondly, as Zuboff (2019) has established, these platforms have access to vast and incredibly specific behavioural data of users, creating an environment of information asymmetry between the companies and users and government which has never been seen in the history of communications technology. Third, because these platforms operate across

international borders, while incorporated in a limited number of countries, they create the structural condition for the weaponised interdependence of Farrell and Newman's (2019) weaponised interdependence. This means, in part, that platforms would not need to be consciously weaponised to become a geopolitical risk; instead the inherent nature of its algorithm to determine what users see, have behavioural data and be subject to laws of a rival state is just about enough to create vulnerability that Phase III techno-nationalist policy seeks to address.

The rise of social media and other digital platforms has also added new complex layers to national security calculations. As Singer and Brooking (2018) argue in *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, social media has become a modern battlefield where everyone is a part of the war by being on the internet. In essence, this book examines the weaponisation of social media from the origins the internet and how it is used to deliberately influence masses by actors that seek to achieve their goals. Singer and Brooking (2018) outline how military, government, and armed groups use social media to promote and achieve their interests, making use now fast spreading tools of propaganda, misinformation, and confusion. The authors delineate a direct correlation between social media activity and tangible security threats, illustrating this nexus through empirical examples that include the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, ISIS recruitment dynamics, and the Russia–Ukraine war, as discussed by Singer and Brooking (2018). This viewpoint is supported by Rid (2020) in *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*, in which he outlines the evolution and history of disinformation and political warfare by states and other state-sanctioned actors. Through Rid's (2020) thorough analysis of the history of disinformation and influence operations, it is clear that social networks are only the latest vehicle used to carry out these activities. This points towards social media having the capacity to threaten and undermine national security. These works form a fundamental basis on the understanding of states in their strategic calculations of foreign technology, especially social media. For this study, both books have been used to understand how states primarily view social media as a threat to their national security because of their ability to be used by adversaries.

When read together, what Singer and Brooking (2018) and Rid (2020) reveal is that the threat posed by social media to national security is structural and deliberate, not incidental. The authors focus their attention on the weaponisation of social media by state-influence campaigns, terrorist organisations and non-state actors and not on the regulation of foreign owned platforms. This is not a limitation of these specific works which offer significant analytical depth, but rather an indicator of the broader literature. The way in which states use national security discourse not just

in response to the threats outlined by Singer and Brooking (2018), but as strategic and selective justification for techno-nationalist action, is very much underexplored. It is precisely this gap that the dissertation addresses. However, the selective use of national security frameworks has received some academic attention. Su and Tang (2023) observe that the concern brought about by TikTok, like its data harvesting processes and algorithmic opacity, can also be applied to numerous other digital platforms, including American-owned firms that have not received comparable regulatory and policy response. As Su and Tang (2023:58) write “As the one and only Chinese-originated platform that has an extensive global reach, TikTok puts itself at the crossroads of geopolitical manoeuvres, as well as judiciary tensions. In simple words, its data policy is scrutinised under political and legal prospects”. This section therefore has advanced two related arguments for this dissertation, the first being that social media platforms function as key actors within the national security strategies of contemporary states. Secondly, national security framework is carefully and strategically deployed and applied as a policy instrument and not an objective determination of threat. How this framework is used in practical terms as a political mechanism, and why it is so effective in justifying techno-nationalist policy, is examined through the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3.

## 2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed and synthesised the key bodies of literature relevant to the central argument of this dissertation: that the U.S. TikTok ban is best understood as an act of techno-nationalism within a broader context of great power competition. This chapter has done so by tracing the conceptual evolution of techno-nationalism from Reich’s (1987) foundational distinction between techno-globalism and techno-nationalism through Capri’s (2024) contemporary framework. The chapter also situated the evolution across three historical phases, namely the Cold War model, the industrial policy pivot post-Cold War, and the current regulatory and data governance era, where the focus of the study, TikTok finds itself.

In the review, two emerging themes have emerged that are significantly relevant to the argument of the dissertation. The first is that national security framing, while not always disingenuous, works as a key political tool to ensure the legitimisation and operationalisation of techno-nationalist objectives in liberal democratic contexts. The second is that geopolitical competition over digital platforms cannot simply be reduced to a dichotomy between U.S. openness and Chinese digital authoritarianism. The literature shows that the desire to control the digital information space by

states is near universal among major countries and that the TikTok ban functions as the most visible instance of an American desire to do so.

Importantly, this review has revealed a crucial gap that the dissertation seeks to fill: although there is a growing body of scholarship on techno-nationalism, digital sovereignty, and platform governance, there remains a shortage of work that brings these strands together to analyse how techno-nationalist logics function through the securitisation and geopolitical framing of foreign digital platforms. This dissertation positions itself precisely in that intersection, and the theoretical framework advanced in Chapter 3 builds on the conceptual ground prepared in this review of the literature.

## Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

### 3.1. Introduction

The literature examined in Chapter 2 provided a coherent account of state behaviour and techno-nationalism. Tracing developments from the Cold War's military-industrial complex, through the post-Cold War shift in industrial priorities, to today's regulatory and data governance era, it shows that states have consistently treated technology as a component of national power that must be defended and contested. Another key insight from the review was the fact that the nature of what technological power is, has undergone a significant change in the contemporary period. During the Cold War, technology was mainly a tool of military capability with emphasis on nuclear warheads, weapons systems and space rockets. The industrial policy era, brought on the perspective of technology as a driver of economic competitiveness, this time in the form of national champions, semiconductors and commercial electronics. In the contemporary digital era, however, technology has shifted from being a tool of power to being the medium itself through which power is created and circulated. Consequently, platforms that manage the circulation of information, companies that possess the algorithms determining what users are shown, and data infrastructures capable of producing highly granular insights into user behaviour embody a distinct type of power. This dissertation advances the argument that existing theoretical frameworks in international relations are insufficient to provide a comprehensive explanation of this particular form of power.

The purpose of this chapter is to both present a theoretical lens and argue for why techno-realism is the most appropriate and empirically justified tool for examining the TikTok ban as a techno-nationalist policy in contemporary international relations. The chapter argues that while classical realism is foundational and in part useful for explaining state behaviour in an anarchic international system, it is not enough on its own to explain the dynamics concerned in this dissertation. The realist tradition itself views technology as a part of a broader aspect of power like military force and economic capacity. This framing however is not sufficient in as far as how digital platforms and infrastructure today create and disseminate power. Techno-realism moves to explain this contemporary landscape without necessarily abandoning the core principles of the realist tradition.

The chapter is structured into four parts. The first sets out the core assumptions of realism and demonstrates why it offers a highly persuasive theoretical framework for understanding how states behave in international relations. Secondly, the chapter identifies limitations of classical realism in its application to the digital age and makes the point that the augmentation offered in this

dissertation is necessary. The chapter then conceptualises techno-realism, outlining four interrelated tenets and showing how each of them apply to the case of the TikTok ban. Finally, the chapter concludes by summarising how techno-realism is an effective tool for this dissertation to interrogate the TikTok ban in a manner that the realist tradition and other theoretical framework lenses cannot do alone.

### 3.2. International Relations Through the Lens of Realism

Realism is undoubtedly one of the foremost theories used in the field as can be seen by the fact many international relations textbooks have a chapter or section on it (see Dunne *et al.*, 2016; Sørensen *et al.*, 2022; Grieco *et al.*, 2022; McGlinchey, 2022). According to Smith (2016: 4), at one point, realism dominated the discipline of international relations. Even today, realism is central to the study of international relations because of its ability to help us understand and make sense of states' behaviour in an anarchic global system. The realist perspective views international relations as a "struggle for power and security among competing nation states in a dangerous world" (Grieco *et al.*, 2022:84). To understand why realism continues to be such a compelling analytical tool, it is necessary to unpack and understand the fundamental foundations that make up the theory. These core assumptions form the conceptual backbone of realist thought and analysis and shapes how the theory explains the behaviour of states in the international system. According to McGlinchey and Gold (2022:85) the core tenets of realism are that: the international system is inherently anarchic, where there is no higher authority or global government to maintain order; states are the primary actors in international relations; states are rational actors, who pursue strategies aimed at maximising national interest in a competitive environment; security is the most important concern of international politics, with states seeking to ensure their survival and finally, the pursuit of power and security causes competition and conflict, which makes rivalry a characteristic of international relations.

The realist school of thought provides us with a fundamental grounding of understanding state behaviour in the international system, and as will be further explained, especially with techno-nationalism. Even as realism is one of the traditional theories of international relations, it is highly relevant today. The relevance, as is important to note, is not merely from the theory remaining the same but rather expanding because of the contribution of various scholars. This should not come as a surprise because of the dynamic field of international relations, where there are always new events and phenomena developing that

need explaining and understanding. Consequently, within realism there are different schools of thought that offer their own different emphasis and analysis.

One such school of thought is classical realism. Classical realism is a traditional approach to international relations that is focused on the values of state survival and national security (Sørensen *et al.*, 2022:69). According to Lebow (2016:35), one such influential thinker of classical realism is Hans Morgenthau, whose work remains foundational to this school. Morgenthau (1948:192) asserts that power and dominance are the important considerations for political behaviour. Referring to Morgenthau's assessment of power and dominance, Sørensen *et al.* (2022:76) explains that "the craving for power dictates a search not only for relative advantage but also for a secure political space—i.e., territory—to maintain oneself and to enjoy oneself free from the political dictates of others." For the purposes of this dissertation, classical realism's attention to relative power and the insecurity of states in an anarchic environment form an important foundation lens that will be augmented to account for the digital aspects of contemporary great power rivalry.

Another important strand within realism structural realism. According to Dunne and Schmidt (2020:137) structural realism was established as a dominant theory of international relations by Kenneth Waltz in his publication, *Theory of International Politics*. Waltz (1979) outlined how defensive realism argues that states are not inherently aggressive and that their priority is not maximising power but maintaining their position in the international system. Furthermore, Waltz also notes that when states seek to attain hegemony within the international system, they draw out other states banding together to achieve a balance of power, that in turn threatens the security of said state (Waltz, 1979:126). This leads Dunne and Schmidt (2020:137) to conclude that under structural realism, states are more concerned with maximising security as compared to maximising power.

The realist tradition would then be expanded with the inclusion of offensive realism. Although offensive realism shares the same basic assumptions with structural realism, the theories differ when describing state behaviour. Offensive realism, as initially developed by John Mearsheimer (2001), posits that great powers are inherently predisposed to maximising their power relative to others, under the anarchical international system. Offensive realism, according to Mearsheimer (2001), helps us see and understand that states in the global stage are often driven primarily by the desire to have power. This power pertains to the ability to influence the international system towards their favour and benefit. Offensive realism is particularly useful for understanding relations between countries that are considered great powers in the global arena (Mearsheimer,

2001:5). This makes it a valuable lens for examining the U.S.-China technology rivalry that underlies the TikTok ban. Overall, classical, structural and offensive realism provide a foundational analytical platform for this dissertation. The shared assumptions of anarchy, state rationality, security primacy and relative power competition can be observed in the strategic logic that is driving the U.S.' techno-nationalist response to TikTok. This dissertation, however, argues that this platform is not sufficient on its own, and now moves to providing the necessary augmentation to make it applicable to contemporary international relations.

### 3.3. Advancing Realism In the Digital Age

As explained above, the realist school of thought has been continuously rethought and conceptualised as the field of international relations has constantly shifted. One of those shifts has been the increasingly evolving role of international digital companies in international relations. Instead of states being the only players in world affairs, digital international companies have grown in significant revenue, power and influence, bringing about increased importance comparable to nation states (see Sheng, 2022; Khanal *et al.*, 2025; Broeders *et al.*, 2025). As Sheng (2022:7) writes “with the capabilities deriving from their massive databases and private algorithms, Big Tech firms are deeply involved in the construction of all aspects of the social order.” This then means that classical realism needs an evaluative branch of the theory that examines technology and advances realism in the contemporary digital age. Instead of completely discarding realism, this study builds upon the theory by extending its conceptual form into the digital space, an arena where new forms of power are established, influence is fought for, and security competition emerges.

Firstly, the uniform nature of state-centric approach of realism does very little in accounting for the actions and capacity of powerful non-state actors. From Morgenthau's classical realism to Waltz's and Mearsheimer's structural variants, traditional realism views states as the most primary and almost singular unit of analysis in international politics (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Yet there has been a significant shift in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which has placed even more power and influence in the hands of non-state actors. As Strange (1996) argues, the promotion and rise of global markets and corporations has diffused authority from states has allowed transnational non-state actors increasing influence in international outcomes. Global corporations wield incredible wealth and power owed to economic interdependence and close relationships with national governments, with some of these corporations' sales figures surpassing the GDP of some nation states (Damaschin, 2024:97). It therefore becomes important to recognise

the influence of corporations, directly through their influence and size but also indirectly through their lobbying and closeness with nation states, in being legitimate actors. The failure of traditional realism to identify and outline this shift poses a significant limitation when examining a case study like the TikTok ban, where a private digital corporation is at the very centre of great power rivalry.

The second and more fundamental limitation is that there is no coherent theory of technology in traditional realism. The school of thought treats technology as another part of material power, like economic might or military power. In doing so, traditional realism falls short in explaining the ways in which data-driven platforms, like social media firms, wield their influence through strong network systems, the gatekeeping of critical algorithms, data mining and their dual-use nature, which allows them to compete commercially and be politically valuable to the state. Work that supports this assertion has been undertaken by Zuboff (2019) whose examination of surveillance capitalism shows how platforms are able to make unprecedented behavioural predictions and assumptions from data, becoming both economically and politically valuable. Adam Segal (2016) further argues that states, state-affiliated actors and other non-state actors are increasingly learning to “fight, trade, manoeuvre and manipulate in the digital age” with control of information platforms becoming crucial in geopolitical competition. What classical realism’s view of technology is limited in explaining that TikTok’s algorithmic power and access to millions of user data is not a tool of power like a factory or a missile is a tool of power. It is a structural medium through which power takes shape. Power derived from the capacity to determine what large populations see, believe, and focus on cannot be captured as a mere material capability in the realist account.

All of this considered, these critiques do not serve to invalidate the realist tradition and its core insights but rather demonstrate the need for a conceptual addition to include digital-age mechanisms of power, securitisation and strategy. Techno-realism fills this theoretical gap by integrating the political underpinnings of platforms, data regimes and corporate firms into a realist framework, while keeping the core realist tenets of anarchy, relative power competition and the primacy of security. Beyond centring technology in analyses of international politics, techno-realism better explains why a social media platform like TikTok faces intense contestation, securitisation, and regulation on national security grounds. The following section develops this framework in full.

### 3.4. Conceptualisation of Techno-realism

The preceding sections have established two things; that realism is the most appropriate foundational explanation for state behaviour in great power rivalry, and that traditional realism

requires conceptual augmentation and addition to explain the qualitative transformation in how power currently operates in the contemporary digital era. Techno-realism is that augmentation. As defined by Sukma (2024:25), techno-nationalism posits that technology is the primary means of power in contemporary politics and as a result facilitates the circulation of power, not only limited to states but other non-state actors that are very influential in the modern political landscape. Given the rise of emerging technologies, technological platforms and discourse around platform dominance, the technological conflict that has brought on techno-nationalist policies between the United States and China lies at the heart of techno-realism.

Before moving on to outline the four key tenets used by this dissertation to operationalise techno-nationalism, it is worth clarifying what makes it unique. Techno-realism is not just about inserting technology into the realist toolkit as one more material factor. Instead, it fundamentally reshapes what counts as the basic unit of analysis. While classical realism is concerned with determining which state holds the greatest power, techno-realism instead examines who controls the infrastructure that generates and distributes that power. Notably, in the digital age, it is not always the state but rather the firm that owns the platform, the algorithms governing information flows, the data architecture that predicts and tracks human behaviour and the legal jurisdiction that has authority of all of it. This is the environment that the TikTok ban is contested, and it is this environment that traditional realism, whether it be both classical and offensive realism, are not sufficient in explaining. Techno-realism as a conceptual theory to make sense of international relations is largely new, although analysis of technology as a key part of international relations has been examined before (see, Fritsch, 2017; Drezner, 2019; Cartwright, 2020; Capri, 2024). This dissertation grounds the conceptual understanding from Sukma's (2024) framework and extends it by engaging with theoretical literature on data, platforms and geopolitical competition. The chapter moves to establish four logically sequential tenets of techno-realism, each building on another to demonstrate the integrated and explanatory relevant nature of techno-realism as a theoretical framework.

### 3.4.1. Technology As the Primary Medium of Power

The first and foundational tenet of techno-realism is that technology is not merely a tool of power but the primary medium through which power is constituted in contemporary international relations. According to Sukma (2024:29), "technological power can be exercised at any given level; from micro level, meso level, and macro level to global level." This is a significant departure from how traditional realism views technology. From the perspective of Morgenthau (1948) and

Waltz (1979) technology just another component of a state's material capabilities that enhances military or economic power but is not directly constitute power in itself. Techno-realism directly challenges this framing. This argument, that technology constitutes power instead of just being a component of material capabilities, rests on the already established understanding that in the contemporary digital environment, firms that control these platforms have tremendous power in what users see, do and experience. This by its very nature is different from the power gained from a military or economic asset. This idea resonates with Capri (2024:15), who outlines how states have spent significant amounts of money on technological research and innovation efforts to strengthen their relative power. More than just seeking to strengthen their relative power, these states recognise that being at the forefront of the next generation of technology secures their structural position in contemporary international relations. In this sense, this tenet allows for an analysis of techno-nationalism through a technological centred lens that reflect how states view and compete over technology in the contemporary age.

When applied to the TikTok ban, this tenet is very clear. The algorithm of TikTok, a key part of its commercial value, is at the core of its geopolitical importance. Because the algorithm can serve highly personalised videos and information to hundreds of millions of American users, whoever controls the platform effectively influences what people think, see, and care about, and, just as importantly, what they do not. Traditional realism does not have a category for this form of structural power. As a result, this understanding has been used to frame TikTok in congressional hearings as a national security threat, a framing that is consistent with the techno-realist logic.

### 3.4.2. The Geopolitical Significance of Non-state Corporate Actors

The second tenet of techno-realism builds directly on from the first. If technology constitutes power, then the firms that own and control the technology are inherently geopolitical actors and not just commercial entities. Techno-realism acknowledges that in the current digital age, the monopoly of power is no longer exclusively held by nation states. Instead, multinational corporations such as Microsoft, Google, Oracle, Meta and TikTok have become geopolitical actors in their own capacity. The companies have become transnational actors who have control over data, user attention and infrastructure, leading to them having abilities, much like states, to shape politics, economics and security (Zuboff, 2019). With the growing interdependence of borderless technological platforms, critical questions have been raised about supply chain resilience (see Miller, 2022; Capri, 2024) and over-reliance on rival states (see McGee, 2025). Under techno-

realism, all these non-state actors play a vital role in understanding geopolitical competition, especially one that is viewed as techno-nationalist in nature.

With regards to the TikTok ban, the geopolitical actors are not just the United States and Chinese governments, it is also ByteDance, as an owner of TikTok. As ByteDance is subject to Chinese law that would mandate it to cooperate with Chinese intelligence agencies, it is also simultaneously operates as a key actor in the American digital information ecosystem. This dual position, being subject to Chinese law and being embedded in American digital life, makes ByteDance a structurally significant non-state actor in the techno-realist framework. The concern surrounding ByteDance in the U.S. is not only that the firm could weaponise TikTok but also the structural reality that ByteDance compliance with Chinese law could create a situation of vulnerability. Conversely, American tech firms like Google, Meta, and Amazon are a key instrument of U.S. technological power, as their platforms, operating systems, and cloud infrastructure underpin most digital services worldwide, including in China. Techno-nationalism recognises this corporate-state nexus as a defining characteristic of contemporary geopolitical competition, and this is examined in the analytical chapters of the dissertation.

### 3.4.3. Technological Securitisation as Rational State Strategy

Continuing the logical building of the tenets, the third tenet of techno-realism follows logically from the second. If privately owned companies wielding technological influence over societies represent a structural vulnerability for states, then it is strategically rational for states to securitise foreign-owned platforms and the potential risks they pose. Techno-realism recognises the Copenhagen School's securitisation theory as being highly relevant in issues of technology securitisation as rational state strategy. According to Copenhagen School thinkers Buzan *et al.* (1998:23), securitisation occurs when an "issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure". Through techno-realism, since technology is central to all analysis, states should view it through a security lens. In the technology realm, this has manifested in multiple different ways as is the case with the U.S. framing of Chinese technology like Huawei and TikTok, as a core part of this study, as national security threats that require techno-nationalist policies in response.

Importantly, the Copenhagen School suggests that a problem becomes a threat to security because it is presented as such by official agents of a state, and not necessary because there is a real existential threat (Kartasmita & Kurnadi, 2020: 168). In this sense, the security threat of TikTok only exists as far as it has been presented by the U.S. government. When a senior American official

describes TikTok as a national security threat or when congressional hearings characterise ByteDance as a de-factor arm of the Chinese Communist Party, they are securitising the platform. This is not from an objective threat assessment point of view but a guided way to move TikTok from the space of commercial regulation to a national security emergency environment justifying extraordinary legal measures. Importantly, this is not to say that the security concerns are false and made up, but that, as the dissertation argues, securitisation is meant to serve as the political and legal mechanism in which techno-nationalist objectives are pursued in liberal democracies. Without securitising a platform or topic, questions will be raised about the limitation of rights in the very same countries that criticise China of doing such. Securitisation operates strategically as a key enabling condition for legislation such as the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act to compel the divestment of ByteDance, not because concrete harm caused by TikTok has been demonstrated, but because the platform has been effectively framed as a security threat that falls outside the scope of other regulatory approaches. This techno-nationalist approach to Chinese technology is not unique to TikTok as similar actions have been used with Huawei, where concerns around national security and espionage were used to employ exclusionary measures (Capri, 2024:90). This is a useful tool to use interventionist policies despite operating in liberal institutional norms.

#### 3.4.4. Geopolitical Competition Through Technological Control

The fourth and final tenet of techno-realism asserts that the control of technology has emerged as an arena of geopolitical rivalry in the contemporary international relations. This tenet is a result of the first three: if technology is a form of power, if corporations act as geopolitical agents, and if securitisation represents a rational strategy for states, then great power rivalry will inevitably take shape as a struggle over who rules and directs the platforms, data architectures, and algorithmic systems that make up the digital environment. As Capri (2024) observes, the U.S.-China are in competition for supremacy in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, social media and 5G technology because the winner will set the standard for the future global order. Critical technological infrastructure has seen increased research and development, higher incentives and increased wages for personnel by companies and by nation states to emerge victorious in this pursuit (Capri, 2024:15). Through this lens, techno-realism helps explain how technology becomes central to geopolitical conflict, especially with increased import controls and tariffs. Zuboff (2019:352) perfectly explains why this is so important for states with the term “instrumentarianism”, which is the capacity to use behavioural data for modification, control and

monetisation. The value of TikTok is therefore also that it grants structural advance to whomever controls it, so much as they are able to use the behavioural data for their own motivations. This is to say that even in the United States desire to control the platform, which ever firm owns it will derive economic value by virtue of using instrumentalism.

These four tenets establish a coherent and logically sound explanation for the theoretical framework this dissertation uses for the TikTok ban. They explain why the United States views TikTok as national security threat, why ByteDance's nation of origin is significant in the techno-nationalist sense and why policymakers have moved to securitise the platform. Individually, classical realism, structural realism or any other existing theoretical frameworks can provide a comprehensive explanation for the TikTok ban. Techno-realism does exactly that.

### 3.5. Conclusion

This chapter has examined and outlined the theoretical framework guiding this study, which is broadly realism and more specifically, techno-realism. Beginning from classical and structural roots of the realist school of thought, the chapter outlined the fundamentals of these variations of the realist tradition, in turn showing why realism is very powerful in explaining interstate behaviour. However, the chapter also argued that while traditional realism is foundational in the dissertation, it is insufficient for the scope of analysis here. Primarily because it treats technology as a tool of material power and does not acknowledge the qualitative shift by which digital platforms, algorithmic infrastructure and data systems have become a structural through which power is formed and circulated in the contemporary era.

Techno-realism is that augmentation. Building from Sukma (2024:25), this chapter established four interrelated and logically sequential tenets: in the digital era, technology itself is a form of power; companies that command this technology inevitably become geopolitical players; rational states facing great power rivalry will move to securitise technological platforms owned by foreign actors; consequently, great power competition appears as a struggle over technological control and the governance of platforms

Importantly, this dissertation offers an original theoretical contribution by employing techno-realism, which preserves the fundamental explanatory strengths of realism while expanding the realist tradition to account for the structural significance of technology and platform power. The theoretical framework arms the dissertation with the necessary and relevant concepts, expectations and tools needed to interrogate the increasing role of techno-nationalist policies. More specifically, techno-realism provides the most comprehensive lens to analyse the U.S. ban of TikTok in the

subsequent chapters. The following chapter outlines the research methodology that guides the empirical application of this framework to the TikTok case study.

# Chapter 4: Research methodology

## 4.1. Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the methodological framework used during the course of this study and particularly to achieve the main objective as stated in chapter 1, namely; to examine how the U.S. government constructed and justified its decision to ban TikTok through techno-nationalist framing and securitisation discourse, and to analyse the implications of that ban on U.S.-China relations and the wider landscape of global technology governance. Building on the literature and theoretical framework foundation laid in the previous chapters, this chapter explains how the methodological decisions taken will aid in reaching the objectives of the study. Furthermore, the chapter looks at why the chosen methods are the most useful and relevant for conducting research in international relations. As international relations scholar, Lamont (2015:1) writes “research methods and methodologies are the building blocks that allow us to understand and interpret the world around us”. These are the ways in which researchers go about conducting their studies with concerns such as the type of data they collect, how they go about collecting it and how they make sense of said data. The ‘building blocks’ this study adopts are interpretivism as a research paradigm, and a qualitative document-based research design, which will be covered in this chapter.

Firstly, the study situates itself within the interpretivist paradigm, which posits the subjective nature of observable reality and the need to understand the meaning and context of subjective human experiences (Rahi, 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Broadly, this paradigm is in line with the qualitative nature of the study and allows for an in-depth analysis of how technological competition is framed as the national security concerns from policymakers and actors involved. The dissertation employs discourse analysis as the primary analytical tool for the research design, especially in relation to securitisation as a process undertaken. Securitisation operates through speech acts, which are performative utterances by authoritative actors that frame a particular threat (Buzan *et al.*, 1998:26). Discourse analysis is particularly useful to examine this process as it examines language itself as a data and seeks to uncover how meaning is produced through institutional framing, rhetoric and official communication. The alignment of securitisation and discourse analysis is therefore necessary for the methodology chapter.

The chapter begins by providing a justification for the interpretivist paradigm. It then proceeds to describe the qualitative, document-based research design and data collection strategy, which draws on primary state documents, official speeches, policy records, and international news and media

sources. Next, the chapter details the application of discourse analysis as the chosen method of data analysis and outlines the purposive sampling strategy used to select the sources. The chapter closes with a summary explaining how these methodological choices collectively respond to the research questions.

## 4.2. Research paradigm

To fully understand the importance states place on technological competition, especially in the context of the US-China TikTok ban, one needs to examine the phenomenon through a research paradigm. A research paradigm is a set of fundamental beliefs and assumptions that offer a conceptual framework for researchers, influencing the choice of methodology, the focus of enquiry and interpretation of findings (Heeks & Wall, 2018; Rahi, 2017). Furthermore, the research paradigm also incorporates epistemological (how reality is known) ontological (the nature of reality) considerations to be factored in while undertaking the study (Žukauskas *et al.*, 2018; Molina & Eduardo, 2023). While there exist various types of forms of research paradigm, like positivism, critical theory, pragmatism and participatory, this study uses the most appropriate: interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism is of the view that the observable reality is subjective, with specific importance placed on understanding the meaning and context of subjective human experiences (Rahi, 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For this dissertation, Lamont's (2015:18) definition of interpretivism is adopted, wherein it is understood as "reflexive research that rejects the application of natural science methods to the social world and instead interrogates ideas, norms, beliefs and values that underlie international politics." An interpretivist lens allows the study to conduct an analysis and interrogation of the meaning behind the actions and rhetoric of actors. It is important for this study because it sheds light on how states justify, frame and legitimise their decisions in the broader interests of ideology and geopolitics

In the field of international relations in particular, all facts are understood in broader context, this includes how particular actors have inherited ways of thought or of understanding the world, which guides them in the interpretation of the empirical data they are presented with (Hall, 2014:308). This insight is important to the dissertation, which argues that actions in the international relations field cannot simply be understood in isolation from the context in which they occur. Even states consider the contextual basis of which they and their allies or adversaries operate under when presented with new information, thus guiding their decision making. Knotter (2022:631), writing on the importance of interpretivism in international relations, asserts "The basic premise of interpretivism, as such, is that global social life simply does not lend itself very well to completely

‘factual’ representation. Assuming that the international political world remains an ever-evolving and unfixed landscape, interpretivism is forever circumspect in making sense of that landscape”. This understanding can be directly applied to the study of techno-nationalism. The motivations of states under the technological domain are not only limited and reducible to objective facts. Instead, they are largely shaped by ideology, belief and values that can only be understood through critical and rigorous contextualised interpretations. When looking at the adversarial and competitive nature of the states of interest, the U.S. and China, interpretivism allows for an analytical look into how the United States government constructed and legitimised its techno-nationalist policies, especially in the ban of TikTok.

Furthermore, this study makes the ontological assumption that techno-nationalism does not exist as an objective material phenomenon, but as a social constructed strategy that is carried out in reality through political framing, policy decisions and public rhetoric. From an ontological perspective, the dissertation argues that techno-nationalism is not an objective, material fact, but rather a socially constructed strategy that emerges through political framing, policy decisions, and public discourse. As Crotty (1998:10) observes, that ontology deals with “what is” with the nature of reality and structure of its existence. Given the central research questions of this dissertation being: ‘to what extent, does the U.S government ban of TikTok signify the role of techno-nationalism in international relations?’ and ‘what are the implications of TikTok ban on US-China relations?’ mean that one has to understand the social context that exists outside of the nature of techno-nationalism and the reality that would necessitate this particular policy direction. This ontological position is in line with the epistemological view from Lamont (2015:19), asserting that:

Unlike empiricists who aim to advance cumulative knowledge through observation and hypothesis testing, interpretivists aim to unpack core assumptions that underlie the positivist image of the world in an attempt to counter the perceived empiricist orthodoxy in IR. Interpretivist research agendas seek to understand identities, ideas, norms, and culture in international politics.

Furthermore, the dissertation draws on the second principle of interpretive research, as identified by McNabb (2020:244), writing:

The second principle of interpretive research is the importance of the contextual nature of the studied phenomenon or organization that was mentioned earlier. The researcher’s “meaning” is derived out of the particular social and historical context in

which the phenomenon is imbedded; at the same time, all patterns that can be discovered within this embedded context are constantly changing.

The nature of enquiry in international relations and even more so in the scope of making sense of states' actions, is not an objective reality which only makes sense through one perspective. In this study, the claim to ban TikTok over national security concerns will be interrogated from a techno-realist theoretical framework that is consistent with interpretive analysis. The interpretivism lens to which this study finds necessary as a means of knowledge pursuit also informs the research design, data collection and sampling techniques to be used. The epistemological focus on how meaning is found legitimises the use of qualitative, document-based approach to enquiry, whilst the ontological acknowledgement of understanding the context that surrounds the rhetoric of such techno-nationalistic policies mean that all documents collected from official state channels, media coverage and other sources should be examined not in isolation but holistically.

### 4.3. Research design

A critical component of the research design is deciding on whether the study will be of quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods approach. This study adopted a qualitative research design, as it is most appropriate to understanding the nuanced nature of motivations and strategies involved in states' techno-nationalistic behaviour. According to Lamont (2015:79), qualitative data research design is largely data collection and analysis methods that rely on collecting and analysing non-numeric data, in order to make sense of the world. Qualitative research design allows for a deeper enquiry into how states construct, justify and implement techno-nationalist policies through different ideological reasoning, symbolism and language. This is, therefore, particularly useful for this study not only because this study will not be focused on non-numerical data but also because it a necessary tool in uncovering the motivations behind states' techno-nationalistic policy.

Furthermore, this qualitative research design is fundamentally grounded in the interpretivism paradigm. This is the paradigm which acknowledges the socially created reality that is constructed by nations and the necessary content specific interpretation that is important for knowledge (Hall, 2014; McNabb, 2020). This approach supports the aim of the dissertation to examine key factors behind the US governments' decision to ban TikTok. The essential argument being that qualitative research will allow researchers to be able to engage with the literature to find the official reasons this decision was taken but also form other possible reasons, outside of the official narrative. Byram (cited by Lamont, 2015:78) calls this "inductive reasoning", where researchers are able to gather theoretical assumptions from empirical observations. In this study, for example, inductive

reasoning will be helpful in looking at how the U.S' government uses the blanket term of “national security” to curb or restrict the growth of companies from rival nations, such as China. With the application of theory, one gets a better picture, the supposedly inherent need for states to protect themselves or interests, but to also limit the rise of other states.

#### 4.3.1. Data Collection

The appropriate data collection mechanism, therefore, becomes more important as it informs the quality of the information used in the study. This study uniquely combines primary state documents from the United States and China with secondary sources in international relations, technology governance, and media coverage to capture competing narratives about TikTok's alleged national security risks. As the study is concerned with what realism scholar refer to as state motivations and strategic behaviour, document-based research is appropriate and necessary. As Lamont (2015:79) explains, data collection methods employed by international relations scholars may range from focus groups and interviews to internet-based research and archival or document-based research. However, the dissertation adopted document-based research. This involves collecting data from archival or published documents from a variety of sources, such as official reports, treaties, legislation, and media reports (Lamont, 2015:80). Some of these documents can be categorised as primary sources, while others are best understood as secondary sources (Lamont, 2015:80). The study included speeches from government officials and representatives, former officials and other relevant stakeholders such as executives of companies like TikTok. These speeches were collected in line with the relevance to the research questions and objectives.

The reason for this choice is grounded with Lamont's (2015:80), the use of official documents of states as primary sources of data can offer detailed information into a particular state or organisation. Importantly, the researcher is aware of the limitation of official sources, especially in the scope of political messaging to the public and other states. As George and Bennett (2005:103) caution, researchers ought to be aware of the circumstances that surround the release to the public and be cognisant of the fact that the release of said document could be done selectively to fit the political and personal goals of the officials who released it. For this reason, this dissertation triangulates official sources with various secondary and media-based sources to ensure a balanced and rigorous analysis. The secondary sources, on the other hand, consist of peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books and reports by reputable think tanks. These include works that have framed techno-nationalism historically and theoretically (see Samuels, 1994; Capri, 2020), the analysis of U.S.-China technological competition (see Farrell & Newman, 2019; Abrams, 2022; Zhang, 2024) and digital sovereignty and platform governance. Furthermore, the

study also includes media reports in the secondary data collection process. This is because media coverage of the TikTok ban is crucial in understanding the framing, public reception and political justifications and motivation for the ban. For example, various media platforms have recognised the United States has not provided any verifiable evidence that TikTok has given sensitive user data to the Chinese state (see Allyn, 2023; Zahn, 2023). Put together, the different kinds of sources enrich the study by providing rich information on examining the unofficial, hidden motivations of the ban, from the official narrative by the U.S. government. The sources also allow the study to better understand the phenomenon of techno-nationalism in the broader sense of global relations.

Keyword searches including but not limited to “TikTok”, “national security”, “China/Chinese technology” guided how data is retrieved and ensure relevance to the research questions. These documents are valuable in understanding the purported motivations behind restrictions as well as providing detail on what is restricted and how that is undertaken. Importantly, the study includes academic and research papers to provide a deeper understanding of the empirical studies and growing debates in the field of international relations, digital diplomacy and technological governance. The documents were then categorised according to their types, i.e. Official government material were classified as primary data, with journal articles being classified under secondary material. This structured approach enabled transparency as well as delve deeper into the different forms of literature that underpin this enquiry.

Finally, the study used primary data collected from the period 2019-2026, corresponding with the resurgence of techno-nationalism after the election of Donald Trump. The subsequent ramping up of U.S.-China technological rivalry as a result of that election is also why this timeframe was chosen. However, there are some secondary sources that fall outside this timeframe which were included. This concession is necessary because certain works are seminal and foundational in understanding the theoretical, historical and practical undertaking of techno-nationalism and technology competition in international relations. For example, Samuel’s (1994) *Rich Nation, Strong Army”: National Security and the Technological Transformation of Japan* provide an early account and case study of techno-nationalism, and as such would be important literature for the study. Therefore, while the empirical focus of the study is heavily focused to 2016-2026, the study incorporates influential work beyond this range when necessary to provide historical and conceptual context.

### 4.3.2. Data Analysis

This study adopted a discourse analysis to explain how the TikTok ban is viewed through rhetoric, official communication and media and public discourse. The definition used for this study is one that views discourse analysis as a methodological tool for analysing qualitative, constructionist and interpretive social phenomena (Hardy *et al.*, 2004:19). Furthermore, the study draws conceptualisation from Halperin and Heath (2020:266) writing:

In common with interpretivist approaches, it (Discourse analysis) assumes that people act on the basis of beliefs, values, or ideologies that give meaning to their actions; and that to understand political behaviour, we must know about the meanings that people attach to what they're doing. Consequently, its aim is to reveal the meanings that the political world has for agents who participate in it and that give people reasons for acting.

The recognition of actors being guided by beliefs, values or ideologies which explain why they do what they do is a crucial part of undertaking this study. As mentioned previously, techno-nationalism and specifically the TikTok ban by the U.S. exists in a broader geopolitical context. Halperin and Heath (2020: 369) assert that all endeavours to discourse must fundamentally be rooted in the idea that understanding the constructive effects of discourses, requires the researcher to be aware of their historical and social contexts. A context where states' actions are primarily guided by the beliefs, values or ideologies of their own but also of the perceived beliefs, values or ideologies of their counterparts. The analysis of official documents and sources, such as documents and speeches makes discourse analysis the most relevant data analysis method for this study. The study supports the assertion of Lamont (2015:90) that when undertaking discourse analysis in international relations, it is important to ensure sources are authoritative and come from official sources that speak for the entity that the study is examining.

Discourse analysis is very useful in viewing and interpreting information from media coverage and public discourse as critical sources of insight, especially in understanding how the ban has been justified to and received by both domestic and international audiences. Mainstream media (see Allyn, 2023; Zahn, 2023), has played a role in discussing how the framing of the national security threat posed by TikTok is not grounded in any publicly available data. These forms of framing and the impact they have on policymakers and on citizens will be carefully sampled to examine the link between public justification and strategic motivations. It also goes without saying

that while the TikTok ban is a recent development, it comes on the back of historical background of intense U.S.-China competition both inside and outside the tech space. In this manner, sampling included historical documents, commentary and policy conversations that would aid in contextualising the ban in a broader techno-nationalist shift. The use of the current contemporary information and historical knowledge strengthens the study in its vigour and contribution to new insights in an emerging and underdeveloped field of international relations. According to Lamont (2015:89), discourse analyses is undertaken with different documents that are most prominent or canonical and not reliant on a single text, speech or official document. The different sources that have been identified in the data collection section as well as the motivation for choosing them are in line with this principle of document analysis.

### 4.3.3. Sampling

Published material on the topic is the source of data for the proposed research. The study used purposeful sampling in the data collection process. Purposeful sampling is a method of qualitative research which involves the deliberate selection of data sources or participants on criteria that is in line with the research objectives (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015:534). The method is particularly useful to ensure that the chosen sample has relevant and resource-rich information in relation to the phenomenon studies (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015; Campbell *et al.*, 2020). According to Campbell *et al.*, (2020; 657) the rigour and trustworthiness of a study is fortified by the careful selection of data points and participants which best represent the aim of the research.

This study therefore recognises a criterion that will help in analysis and capturing diverse perspectives through relevance to identified themes, finding contrasting opinions and recommendations and a variety of perspectives. Secondary sources that are chosen through purposeful sampling was used based on their direct relevance to key themes, debate and theories that the study has identified. Furthermore, there will an emphasis on examining sources from different perspectives regarding the technological restrictions on TikTok and underlying techno-nationalist framework that explains it. With regards to official state documents, the proposed study aims to consult multiple involved states perspectives to get a reasonable and accurate picture of the phenomenon. Essentially, the sampling strategy prioritised materials that:

- Speak directly to the TikTok ban and the broader conversation around the U.S.-China technological rivalry.
- Report different policy positions and political motivations.
- Report different national and institutional perspectives.

- Critically engage with themes of national security, techno-nationalism, platform governance and digital sovereignty.

Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm underpinning this study, the sampling process is concerned not primarily with the accumulation of large quantities of data, but with the identification of meaningful and recurrent themes that can explain the strategic rationale underlying the TikTok ban and its implications for understanding the role of techno-nationalism in international relations.

#### 4.4. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework that underpins the study, showing how the interpretivist paradigm, qualitative research design and discourse analysis function together to answer the research questions. Through the adoption of interpretivism, the research acknowledges the socially constructed nature of techno-nationalism. Furthermore, interpretivism allows for the uncovering of beliefs, values and ideologies that influence state behaviour.

The selection of a qualitative document-based design was explained as the most appropriate for examining techno-nationalism through the TikTok ban. This is because of the engagement with official statements, speeches and policy documents but also with media coverage and representation in order to understand how meaning is constructed and contested. The use of discourse analysis as a form of data analysis is a useful methodological tool. Discourse analysis is unique in ability to show how meaning is constructed using language and rhetoric by states to explain or legitimise policy decisions. Additionally, this form of analysis is directly tied to the interpretivist approach in emphasising the contextual background of states actions. This moves from just examining the surface-level explanations of phenomena including explanations by official state actors. By situating discourse analysis in the broader framework of U.S.-China techno-nationalist rivalry, the study goes beyond what states say but also why they say it and to what effect. Finally, from this purposeful sampling is used to ensure that relevant and important sources are included. The inclusion of a variety of sources from different perspectives like the U.S., China and international media provides rich content for the study.

## Chapter 5: Case study of the TikTok Ban in the US

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents an empirically sound and chronological account of the United States government's escalating actions towards TikTok. The chapter starts its account from the first congressional letters of 2019 to the final divestiture settlement of 2026. The main aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how TikTok was shifted from a consumer entertainment platform to the centre of geopolitical competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). In line with the interpretivist paradigm and the discourse analysis framework presented in Chapter 4, this chapter does not aim to assess the objective validity of the national security arguments advanced against TikTok. This is because undertaking this action requires access to classified intelligence, that may or may not exist, which falls beyond the scope of what is publicly available. Rather, this chapter examines how these claims were constructed, validated by institutions and applied through legislation and executive action over time. The focus is therefore on the evidentiary basis of the public case against TikTok and not whether a classified threat existed outside of the public case. An important observation that is clear in the chapter is that TikTok's treatment by U.S. officials under two different administrations show a bipartisan consensus. Across both the first and second Trump administrations and the Biden administration, Democrats and Republicans alike have consistently portrayed TikTok as effectively an extension of the Chinese government that presents national security threats. This is especially significant in this dissertation because it suggests that the motivations behind the ban are much more important than individual political ideology and are rooted in the deeper fears of technological power and geopolitical competition, hallmarks of techno-nationalism.

The chapter is divided into eight chronological sections. It begins with an examination into the early congressional concerns started from ByteDance's acquisition of Musical.ly in 2019. It then moves to trace the Trump administration's first executive actions in 2020, the legal battle that ensued with TikTok in federal courts, the Biden administration's methodological review of 2021, the clear bipartisan consensus of 2023. The chapter further examines the landmark passage of the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act (PAFACA) in how it led to the final resolution in the form of the 2026 divestiture. These sections work to form an empirical foundation which the analysis chapter that follows will apply the techno-realist

framework to explain why the TikTok ban is a manifestation of techno-nationalism in contemporary international relations.

## 5.2. Early Scrutiny: The Musical.ly Acquisition and Initial Congressional Concern (2019)

The ban of TikTok by various U.S. administrative was not an overnight phenomenon. The earliest form of this U.S. scrutiny set forth a template of threat perception and construction that would underpin every stage of American policy that followed towards TikTok. The threat construction relied on a few key foundations: the conflation of corporate ownership with national allegiance, the use of national security in place of empirical evidence and the framing of a geopolitical rival's commercial presence as inherently threatening. Grasping this basic premise is crucial, as it shows that the TikTok ban has never really been solely about TikTok, but rather about China itself. The earliest official indication of U.S. government concern stems from a letter by U.S. Senator Marco Rubio to the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), in which he urged an investigation into ByteDance's 2017 purchase of the entertainment app Musical.ly, which was later merged into what is now known as TikTok. (Rubio, 2019). In the letter Rubio (2019) asserted that there was "ample and growing evidence that TikTok's platform for Western markets, including those in the U.S., is censoring content that is not in line with the Chinese Government and Communist Party directives." This is analytically significant for two reasons. Firstly, Rubio invokes "ample and growing evidence" without citing or providing any piece of it, the implication being that the invocation of Chinese ownership itself is enough to assert a threat. Secondly, from the beginning it becomes clear that the issue is framed in geopolitical terms, namely 'the West' versus the 'Chinese government'. This deliberate framing sets the tone for what was to come for TikTok and importantly highlights the policy position of the U.S. in relation to the platform without any substantiating evidence.

Later that month, Senators Chuck Schumer and Tom Cotton wrote to the Acting Director of National Intelligence, Joseph Maguire, warning about Tik-Tok's data collection practices and the potential adherence to censorship laws outlined by the Chinese government limiting what U.S. users could see (Romm & Harwell, 2019). The senators write that:

Security experts have voiced concerns that China's vague patchwork of intelligence, national security, and cybersecurity laws compel Chinese companies to support and cooperate with intelligence work controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. Without

an independent judiciary to review requests made by the Chinese government for data or other actions, there is no legal mechanism for Chinese companies to appeal if they disagree with a request (Schumer & Cotton, 2019).

Their letter drew specifically on China's 2017 National Intelligence Law which mandates that "All organizations and citizens shall support, assist, and cooperate with national intelligence efforts in accordance with law, and shall protect national intelligence work secrets they are aware of" (Chinese National People's Congress Network, 2017). When analysed, the letter's argument is based on a structural critique of China's legal and political system and not any documented verified occurrence of TikTok having acted on behalf of the Chinese government. The letter argues that the mere possibility of Chinese state interference under the law is sufficient to treat TikTok as a security threat. Additionally, much like senator Rubio's, the letter is framed geopolitically instead of technically. TikTok's data privacy risks are not framed like any digital platform that collects user data, like Facebook and X, it is described as a tool of an adversarial state used to influence and censor. As Capri (2024:12) observes, contemporary techno-nationalism is concerned with the weaponisation of technology policy especially as a tool of geopolitical competition. In retrospect, it becomes clear to this dissertation that the congressional letters served as a precursor to the eventual policy that excluded a Chinese based company from the U.S. market.

By the end of 2019, the CFIUS opened a national security investigation into ByteDance's 2017 acquisition of Musical.ly. According to Roumeliotis *et al.*, (2019) the CFIUS, which is responsible for the review of deals by foreign firms acquiring American companies being aware of the potential national security risks, investigation was also brought on by the fact that "TikTok did not seek clearance from CFIUS when it acquired Musical.ly." The review was initiated due to pressure from Congress rather than on the basis of intelligence data or concrete evidence, highlighting that the securitisation of TikTok was, from the very beginning, a politically driven undertaking. As Buzan *et al.* (1998:36) argue, securitisation is undertaken by a "securitization actor" who frames an issue as existential and requiring of extraordinary measures. Within the context of this section, the 2019 congressional letters constitute the primary speech acts through which the senators, as securitising actors, initiate TikTok's securitisation.

### 5.3. Executive Action: The Trump Administration's First Attempt at a Ban (2020)

Following 2019 establishment of the rhetorical foundation of the securitisation of TikTok, 2020 can largely be characterised by its institutional codification. During this time, the Trump administration relied on executive orders, proposed divestitures of certain forces, and other legislative actions, effectively shifting the matter into the domain of the executive branch. Critically, this escalation was not because of any new security incidents but in the context of deteriorating U.S.-China relations broadly, suggesting that TikTok was a part of a bigger plan. Public signs of executive intervention began in July 2020, when U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, reported that the U.S. is “looking at” banning TikTok and other Chinese social media apps (Martin, 2020). Pompeo stated on Fox News, “We've worked on this very issue for a long time, whether it was the problem of having Huawei technology in your infrastructure. We've gone all over the world and we're making process getting it out. We declared ZTE a danger to American national security,” (Martin, 2020). Asked if he would recommend American consumers download TikTok, Pompeo ended the interview answering, “only if you want your private information in the hands of the Chinese Communist Party” (Martin, 2020). Shortly after, President Trump told interviewer Greta Van Susteren that banning TikTok could be a possible way to retaliate against the manner in which China handled the coronavirus outbreak (Trump, 2020). Mitchell and Hussain of the *LA Times* (2020) reported that the president also told reporters that an executive order or emergency action to ban TikTok was imminent, citing worries about the app's collection of user data. This stance came even though companies such as Facebook and Amazon faced similar regulatory scrutiny over data practices without being threatened with a ban. This statement is crucial and has received limited attention in existing scholarship. Trump explicitly linking a potential TikTok ban to pandemic retaliation, an issue that has nothing to do with data security, reveals that the platform was indeed a tool of broader geopolitical leverage and not data concern.

The formal legal trigger was pulled on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, when President Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13942, which officially designated TikTok as a national security threat (United States, 2020a). A second executive order was issued the same day, Executive Order 13943, which targeted the Chinese payment and social media platform WeChat, explicitly referencing TikTok as a linked case (United States, 2020b). On 14 August 2020, a further presidential directive ordered ByteDance to divest all interests in TikTok's U.S. operations within 90 days (Trump White House, 2020). CFIUS chairman Steven Mnuchin praised the divestiture order as the product of an

“exhaustive review” that had “unanimously recommended this action to the President in order to protect U.S. users from exploitation of their personal data” (United States Department of the Treasury, 2020). The executive orders of August 2020 built and solidified the frame of TikTok as a ‘national security threat’ in a way that is hypothetically possible. As previously discussed above, it is more accurate to view this framework as motivated by geopolitical strategy of securitisation rather than by any real concern for data security. For instance, the executive order that TikTok’s data collection “threatens to allow the Chinese Communist Party access to Americans’ personal and proprietary information— potentially allowing China to track the locations of Federal employees and contractors, build dossiers of personal information for blackmail, and conduct corporate espionage”. Language used like ‘threatens to allow’ and ‘potentially allowing’ is an implicit concession that there exists no publicly available evidence to cite. This distinction between potential and actual threat is crucial for determining how ByteDance should respond. Despite limited literature on how TikTok can address national security concerns (see Wang, 2020), regulating TikTok alone is insufficient as long as ByteDance remains linked to China. Given the securitisation of TikTok, the only acceptable outcome is forced divestiture or a complete ban.

Concurrent with the executive orders, the U.S. senate passed the No TikTok on Government Devices Act of 2020, which was meant to “To prohibit certain individuals from downloading or using TikTok on any device issued by the United States or a government corporation.” (Government Devices Act of 2020). Although this law would pass the Senate twice before it was officially signed into law by Trump’s successor, President Joe Biden in 2022. This represented a unified approach in the perception of TikTok as a potential threat that showed the political backing behind the Trump administration’s approach to the platform. The executive orders by the Trump administration, all fell within a broad range of recommendations from his staff and advisors and even from rival tech giant firms. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, President Trump and other U.S. senators had several meetings with Facebook founder and CEO of Meta, Mark Zuckerberg in which the tech mogul “made the case to President Trump that the rise of Chinese internet companies threatens American business, and should be a bigger concern than reining in Facebook” (Wells *et al.*, 2020). The willingness of the chief executive of TikTok’s biggest commercial rival to lobby the president against the platform adds another layer to the purported national security framing. This dissertation argues that the environment in which concerns over TikTok were amplified and securitized was actively shaped by actors such as Facebook, who had strong financial incentives to push for a TikTok ban.

The formal offense would not be without response from Beijing as the Chinese government sought to prevent the sale of TikTok. As Mozur *et al.*, (2020) reported, on August 28, China's Commerce Military and Science and Technology Ministry played new export control measures restricting the export of "technology based on data analysis for personalised information recommendation services." TikTok happens to fall in that category because of the algorithm that runs the platform. According to an expert familiar with the new export control measures, if ByteDance were to sell TikTok, it would have to go through a licensing process (Mozur *et al.*, 2020). This action places significant leverage on the Chinese government and would make the sale increasingly complicated. China's counter response is relevant in this dissertation because it demonstrated that Beijing viewed TikTok's algorithm as a strategically valuable asset worth protecting through export control measures. It is also relevant because it showed the geopolitical nature of the TikTok ban, with the U.S. making a techno-nationalist move in the ban, China employed a techno-nationalist policy in response, in the form of targeted export control. The logical result of being a geopolitical standoff, requiring negotiation.

#### 5.4. Legal Resistance: Federal Courts Halt the Executive Orders

The TikTok ban by the first Trump administration was not without significant barriers. Intervention by the federal courts in late 2020 exposed the central contradiction of the use of national security justification without providing necessary evidence. On 24 August 2020, TikTok filed a lawsuit against the U.S. government in the Federal District Court for the Central District of California (TikTok Newsroom, 2020). The social media platform alleged that the Trump administration failed to act in good faith, follow due process, provide actual evidence that TikTok was a threat and that the threats identified by the CFIUS were based on "outdated news articles" (TikTok Newsroom, 2020). As the TikTok (2020) statement reads:

We are shocked by the recent Executive Order, which was issued without any due process. For nearly a year, we have sought to engage with the US government in good faith to provide a constructive solution to the concerns that have been expressed. What we encountered instead was that the Administration paid no attention to facts, dictated terms of an agreement without going through standard legal processes, and tried to insert itself into negotiations between private businesses.

The platform also makes no secret of its openness to selling its U.S. business to an American firm, reporting "We even expressed our willingness to pursue a full sale of the US business

to an American company.” TikTok simultaneously applied for a preliminary injunction in a bid to stop a complete ban of the ban considering the company was in negotiations with the Trump administration (Lerman, 2020). According to Lerman (2020), a Washington federal judge granted the preliminary injunction blocking the order from President Trump, with the judge finding the ban to be “a largely a unilateral decision with very little opportunity for plaintiffs to be heard.”

At the same time, another federal judge had granted preliminary injunction stopping the Trump administration from banning the Chinese app WeChat, (Whalen, 2020). Writing the judgement of the matter, U.S. Magistrate Judge Laurel Beeler, explained that “Certainly the government’s overarching national-security interest is significant. But on this record — while the government has established that China’s activities raise significant national security concerns — it has put in scant little evidence that its effective ban of WeChat for all U.S. users addresses those concerns,” (Whalen, 2020). Whalen (2020) further reports that the judge also found that the executive order brought on serious questions about the encroachment into First Amendment rights of TikTok. These rulings put a temporary halt on the 2020 ban offering legal precedent that national security rationales alone. Judge Beeler’s formulation itself is worth understanding: the court did not reject that China posed general security concerns, it found that the government failed to demonstrate a central connection between those concerns and the specific regulatory measures that were imposed. This evidence gap is exactly what characterises securitisation in the political process, the general anxiety of a geopolitical rival is used for political pressure to achieve an extraordinary action.

The 2020 court rulings form an important empirical benchmark for the remainder of the chapter. This is because they demonstrate that in the period in which there was significant executive attention against TikTok, the U.S. government had the political will to act against the platform but insufficient evidence to legally justify its actions. The subsequent legislature, especially the passage of PAFACA, can be seen as an attempt to find a different way to ban the platform, circumventing the legal route that has a higher benchmark for evidence. The problem at this juncture was finding a legal way to justify its predetermined conclusions.

## 5.5. Policy Transition: The Biden Administration's Methodical Review (2021)

Although the lawsuits of late 2020 temporarily halted President Trump's attempt to ban TikTok, the change in administration did not bring an end to the federal focus on the platform. In understanding the progression of the TikTok ban, 2021 can be classified as a transitional yet highly consequential year. The actions taken during the course of the year are misread as a more reserved approach in the aggressive posturing by Biden's predecessor, Trump. On the surface, the revocation of the Trump executive orders appears to be a de-escalation measure, closer reading shows that this was done to deepen techno-nationalistic policy institutionally. The first significant development occurred a day before President Biden's inauguration, on 19 January 2021, when the Department of Commerce issued the *Securing the Information and Communications Technology and Services Supply Chain* rule (United States Department of Commerce, 2021). The rule was drafted to give the Department of Commerce the ability to "evaluate and assess transactions involving ICTS to determine whether they pose an undue risk of sabotage to or subversion of the ICTS supply chain, or an unacceptable risk to the national security of the United States or the security and safety of U.S. persons." (United States Department of Commerce, 2021). Furthermore, the rule identified China as a part of a list of "foreign adversaries". According to legal analysis from Barker *et al.* (2021), the rule serves as a different "import control" measure vis-à-vis ICTs and has the potential scope broader than just restricting the import of specific goods and services. This formulation of the rule was a key sign of the methodical direction the Biden administration would be heading. The timing of the rule is significant because it suggests deeper institutional continuity. The Trump administration embedding techno-nationalist regulatory policy that the new Biden administration would inherit and build upon, demonstrates that the structural commitment to restricting Chinese technological access to the U.S. market was a bipartisan issue.

The Biden years with regards to the first Trump administration came with a seemingly less offensive projection of power and instead a more measured methodical approach. On 9 June 2021, President Joe Biden issued Executive Order 14034 titled "Protecting Americans' Sensitive Data from Foreign Adversaries" which formally revoked the two Trump executive orders (13942 and 13943) targeting TikTok and WeChat respectively (United States, 2021). The new executive order would not loosen the pressure on TikTok but would instead create a process which could be strong enough to repel challenges should any company have issues with it (Rogers & Kang, 2021). Speaking on the potential threats posed by foreign owned, Biden wrote, "The Federal Government

should evaluate these threats through rigorous, evidence-based analysis and should address any unacceptable or undue risks consistent with overall national security, foreign policy, and economic objectives, including the preservation and demonstration of America's core values and fundamental freedoms." (United States, 2021). The language of this order is significant. Biden's explicit emphasis on "rigorous, evidence-based analysis" shows in part an acknowledgment of the legal and foundational weaknesses that undermined the executive orders signed by Donald Trump before. Considering this, the Biden administration did not abandon techno-nationalist policy but fortified it institutionally, learning from the shortcomings of his predecessor to construct a more robust and legally defensible instrument that achieves the same strategic goals.

The Biden period also saw TikTok face questions of its user data access and relationship with the Chinese government, this time while facing questions at a Senate hearing (including other big social media companies) about child safety protocols on their platforms. As reported by *The New York Times*, questioned on whether Chinese ownership of ByteDance would expose user data to the Chinese government, TikTok head of public policy for the Americas, Michael Beckerman, responded that "Access controls for our data is done by our U.S. teams... And as independent researchers, independent experts have pointed out, the data that TikTok has on the app is not of a national security importance and is of low sensitivity" (McCabe *et al.*, 2021). In December 2022, The New York Times reported that TikTok had fired four employees after an internal inquiry discovered that the employees had accessed journalists and other U.S. users' data in a bid to track down a leak from the company (Kang, 2022). Kang (2022) explains that a ByteDance team responsible for monitoring employee conduct had tried to find suspected leak of company documents and conversations, and in doing so had gained user data access two journalists and people connected to them. The aim for doing this was to try and find out whether those people were in proximity with any ByteDance employees. Despite the firing and public admission, TikTok faced significant backlash and outrage over the incident. This is because the revelation was incredibly consequential in providing the political fuel for the pursuit against TikTok at a time when the Biden administration's approach was risked being seen as insufficient. The incident was about corporate misconduct and overreach against journalists and not data transfer to the Chinese government. Despite this, it was still used as an example of the national security threat that TikTok possesses. This conflation of corporate misconduct and state interference itself is feature of the securitisation process, with each incident being co-opted into achieving the overarching threat narrative, despite its specific difference and role players.

In late December 2022, the U.S. House of Representatives announced a ban on all TikTok downloads on house members and their staff's phones amid concerns about ByteDance and its affiliation to Beijing (Collins, 2022). This was followed by President Biden's move to ban the use of TikTok on nearly 4 million federal government employee's devices (Ingram, 2022). It is worth repeating that these escalating institutional restrictions, which are happening without any reported incident involving TikTok and the Chinese government, show the self-reinforcing logic of securitisation. Once an issue has been successfully repeated and framed as a security threat, it becomes institutionalised (Buzan *et al.*, 1998:27). This institutionalisation provides political legitimacy for the next, without any consideration of the availability of evidence. In this reading, the Biden administration's TikTok policy continued and normalised securitisation, tying it into the institution and normal operations of government instead of relying on executive powers.

## 5.6. Bipartisan Consensus: Congressional Hearings and the RESTRICT Act (2023)

By 2023, the issue of TikTok in the United States had radically moved from being a sporadic administrative and isolated executive action issue to a more sustained and bipartisan issue of concern. Central to this was the congressional engagement that the phenomenon received as fears surrounding purported national security fears intensified. The significant amount of attention from public statements and congressional hearings exemplify how TikTok, once perceived as a consumer entertainment application had now become a target of the United States Congress. A key empirical example of this escalation was the March 2023 House Energy and Commerce Committee on titled "TikTok: How Congress Can Safeguard American Data Privacy and Protect Children from Online Harms". TikTok's Chief Executive Officer, Shou Zi Chew was brought to answer questions surrounding the platform's operations like content moderation for minors, data security and issues of foreign influence (United States House Committee on Energy and Commerce, 2023). Bipartisan concern from Congress was emblematic of increasing consensus that TikTok's operations could implicate U.S. national security in ways that are beyond the traditional regulatory concerns about social media. Part of the general scepticism surrounding TikTok in this congressional hearing was on the company's relationship with the Chinese government and the potential implications it causes. Representatives including Committee Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers, framed TikTok as a potential threat to U.S. national security with the chair declaring in her opening statement that;

TikTok surveils us all, and the Chinese Communist Party is able to use this as a tool to manipulate America as a whole. We do not trust TikTok will ever embrace American values, values for freedom, human rights, and innovation. TikTok has repeatedly chosen the path for more control, more surveillance, and more manipulation. Your platform should be banned. (House Committee on Energy and Commerce, 2023).

Rodger's statement is telling in its rhetorical nature. That claim that "the Chinese Communist Party is able to use" TikTok as a tool of influence and manipulation is a hypothetical assumption, carefully crafted as if it were a fact. Much like previous rhetoric from U.S. officials, the wording around TikTok suggests these officials understand that there is no evidence to support their claims. More significantly, the statement makes use of the aforementioned 'us vs them' perspective that underpins U.S.-China technological competition. Explicitly invoking ideological terms like "American values, values for freedom, human rights, and innovation" compared with the Chinese way of "more control, more surveillance, and more manipulation" shifts the scope of discussion from a technological regulation to an existential threat of national security.

Shou Zi Chew was repeatedly questioned on whether ByteDance is compelled under Chinese law to share TikTok user data with the Chinese government. On each occasion, he asserted that he had seen no evidence that the Chinese government has made any request for user data and that TikTok had never shared it with Beijing (House Committee on Energy and Commerce, 2023). This testimony by Chew introduces a critical disconnect into the hearing and motivations of both the state and the TikTok executive. Government officials arrived with a predetermined view and narrative about TikTok, while the company's executive attended with the aim of refuting and rejecting any evidence that might be put forward. The result is a mismatch brought on by the lack of evidence presented and instead the hearing delving into scepticism of Chew's credibility. Another indicator of bipartisan escalation and pressure in 2023 was the involvement of senate hearings as other forms of inquiry. An example of this is then FBI Director, Cristopher Wray telling a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on worldwide threats to U.S. security that TikTok "screams out with national security concerns" as it could be used by the Chinese government to control software and drive narratives (Reuters, 2023). Reuters (2023) further reports that this sentiment around the concerns posed by TikTok was also shared by the CIA Director, Director of National Intelligence and National Security Agency Director. This testimony

from the FBI Director before a Senate Committee contributed to the increased bipartisan scepticism and laid the groundwork for the justifications of the ban.

It was during this period that the proposed Restricting the Emergence of Security Threats that Risk Information and Communications Technology (RESTRICT) Act was introduced to the U.S. senate. The Act authorises the Secretary of Commerce to review commercial transactions involving specified information and communications technology products or services linked to a designated U.S. “foreign adversary” when they pose an undue and unacceptable risk to U.S. national security or citizen safety (Restrict Act, 2023). The act was seen by many as addressing the national security concerns posed by TikTok and formed part of a broader bipartisan perspective of the social platform. Although the bill did not pass, it showed 2023 was marred by increasing scrutiny surrounding the platform and that served as a broader catapult to what other forms of legislature would be passed to ban the platform.

## 5.7. The Divest-or-Ban Mandate: Passage and Judicial Review of PAFACA (2024)

Perhaps the most consequential development in the timeline of the TikTok ban came in April 2024, in the form of the United States Congress passing the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act (PAFACA). PAFACA is a U.S. federal law signed by President Joseph Biden on 24 April 2024, that bans social networking services defined as “foreign adversary controlled applications”, if the president deems them a national security threat (The Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act of 2024). The Act made specific mention to TikTok and ByteDance writing that the act is motive is to “ To protect the national security of the United States from the threat posed by foreign adversary controlled applications, such as TikTok and any successor application or service and any other application or service developed or provided by ByteDance Ltd. or an entity under the control of ByteDance Ltd.” (The Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act of 2024). The act gave ByteDance 270 days to divest from TikTok’s U.S. operations or accept a nationwide ban. This was significant as it was the first time that a ban or forced divestiture of a social media platform had been grounded in legislation at the federal level instead of an executive action by a sitting president. This showed a monumental shift within the U.S. legislative community, whereas earlier attempts to ban TikTok under the Trump administration have been characterised by constitutional and procedural challenges, which led to their failure, the PAFACA act represented

a bipartisan desire to directly shift techno-nationalism into law. For example, whereas the Trump Executive Order directly mandated ByteDance to divest to a U.S. based third party, the PAFACA act instead obliged intermediary service providers, including application distribution platforms such as app stores, to cease providing services to TikTok, thereby achieving a de facto prohibition of TikTok through indirect regulatory means (Wang *et al.*, 2024:1200). According to Wang *et al.* (2024:1202) the PAFACA act is a more of effective tool than previous legal measures as the indirect ban of TikTok meant that the platform could not undertake their typical litigation strategies to challenge it and also gave the platform a generous amount of time to adapt, leaving room for negotiation and a potential agreement. This shift from content regulation to ownership regulation demonstrates the strategic logic of U.S. policy throughout the entire process, the fundamental concern with TikTok was about who controlled and nothing else.

After PAFACA was passed, ByteDance intensified engagements with U.S. authorities in an attempt to avoid prohibition and divestiture. On 7 May 2024, TikTok and its parent company, ByteDance, filed a lawsuit in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit to block the federal law. The Court ruling, released later, report that ByteDance had previously been engaged in negotiations and had submitted a comprehensive national security agreement to the CFIUS, which was not deemed acceptable by officials (TikTok Inc. v. Garland, 2024). The nature of the negotiations had been previously reported as “Project Texas”. According to Lee and Ng (2023:2) “Project Texas” was an initiative proposed by TikTok to resolve national security concerns around U.S. user data and possible Chinese interference by establishing a U.S. subsidiary named TikTok U.S. Data Security Inc. (USDS) tasked with owning American user data and running TikTok on Oracle’s cloud servers. The point of which would be to have control over employees’ operational systems and user data to prevent external pressure for unauthorised access and to have stronger data practices, protection and control with a reputable U.S. firm managing U.S. user data (Lee & Ng, 2023:3). Despite the suggested concessions, U.S. officials declined to accept the agreement. According to reporting by Reuters, The U.S. Department of Justice rejected TikTok’s “Project Texas” citing that U.S. officials had no trust in ByteDance and in the resources or capability of the company to catch violations to national security (Shepardson, 2024a). The rejection was a monumental shift in U.S. policy thinking: this was no longer about technical safeguards and guardrails but has become about structural separation. This rejection based on trust than any technical shortcoming not addressed by ByteDance further support the argument put forth by this dissertation, that the TikTok ban is a manifestation of techno-nationalism in international

relations. U.S. officials had at this point known that the desired outcome was an ownership change and not better data governance.

In the ensuing *TikTok Inc. v. Garland* lawsuit (2024) that followed, TikTok argued that the PAFACA Act violated the first amendment (freedom of speech), by infringing on the platform's right to publish the speech of others as well as the ability to publish their own free speech. Additionally, according to the social media giant, the law was unconstitutional as it is a legislative act that imposes punishment on a specific entity without judicial trial and that it violated due process by essentially taking a property without just compensation while ignoring less restrictive alternatives (*TikTok v. Garland*, 2024). In December 2024, The New York Times reported that the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit unanimously determined that the PAFACA act was constitutional (Maheswari, 2024). According to the ruling by the court:

The Act was the culmination of extensive, bipartisan action by the Congress and by successive presidents. It was carefully crafted to deal only with control by a foreign adversary, and it was part of a broader effort to counter a well substantiated national security threat posed by the PRC. Under these circumstances, the provisions of the Act that are before us withstand the most searching review. (*TikTok v. Garland*, 2024).

The court concluded that Congress acted within its lawful authority to curb national security concerns and that the PAFACA's focus was on ownership and not speech itself and if there were any effects on expression, this was warranted by the state's security interests and were not emblematic of any form of discrimination (*TikTok v. Garland*, 2024). Following this ruling, TikTok sought emergency relief from the U.S. Supreme Court, seeking an order to freeze the enforcement of the law pending review (Maheshwari, 2024).

However, on 17 January 2025, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the PAFACA act citing the pressing concern around the government's national security concerns (Supreme Court of the United States, 2025; Liptak, 2025). A key element to the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling was based on what it essentially reported as the failure of TikTok to prove that Chinese access to U.S. user data was unreasonable. Writing on the majority opinion, justices assert that: "Even if China has not yet leveraged its relationship with ByteDance Ltd. to access U. S. TikTok users' data, petitioners offer no basis for concluding that the Government's determination that China might do so is not at least a "reasonable inferenc[e] based on substantial evidence"

(Supreme Court of the United States, 2025). This would lead to a critical concession by the Supreme Court informing the upholding of the act, with the justices writing:

We are mindful that this law arises in a context in which “national security and foreign policy concerns arise in connection with efforts to confront evolving threats in an area where information can be difficult to obtain and the impact of certain conduct difficult to assess.” We thus afford the Government’s “informed judgment” substantial respect here. (Supreme Court of the United States, 2025).

The Supreme Court’s ruling is very significant for this dissertation. The highest judicial body in the United States openly recognised that China had not so far used its ties to ByteDance to obtain data on American users yet still accepted the government’s claim that it could do so in the future. The standard applied of “reasonable inference” is inherently based on structural conditions and not material evidence, making it a geopolitical term. The implication is that national security arguments are grounded in the identity of an adversarial state and not in any specific acts that have been committed. This ruling has significant implications that extend beyond TikTok, it legitimises the securitisation of foreign owned digital platforms as the process has been endorsed at the highest level of the U.S. judicial system. The techno-nationalist logic outlined in this dissertation views this as a crucial step toward judicial ratification.

## 5.8. Final Resolution: The Second Trump Term and the 2026 Divestiture

On 18 January 2025, TikTok suspended its U.S. operations with both the app and the website going offline amid no divestiture completed by the statutory deadline (Lima-Strong *et al.*, 2025). According to The Washington Post, U.S. users were met by a pop-up that allowed them to download their data, with Google and Apple removing the app from their app stores soon after (Lima-Strong *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, the app also featured a message that included the possibility of a solution surrounding then president-elect Donald Trump, writing, “We are fortunate that President Trump has indicated that he will work with us on a solution to reinstate TikTok once he takes office. Please stay tuned!”. This was in reference to the complete turnaround by President Trump on the issue of TikTok, in which he had toned down its threat for a ban and sought a solution. Trump, now the president posted “SAVE TIKTOK!” on his official Truth Social account and had even added that any ban of TikTok would benefit Facebook, a platform he called “enemy of the people.” (Trump, 2024; Karnie & Swan, 2024). 20 January 2025 saw President

Donald Trump issue an executive order to delay the enforcement of PAFACA for 75 days (United States, 2025). TikTok gradually restored access for U.S. users and largely returned to major app stores following the signing of the executive order by Trump.

While it would be tempting to examine Trump's reversal on TikTok as a form of political opportunism, with Trump having garnered significant youth support during the 2024 election cycle (see, Hughes, 2025), this explanation alone is insufficient. The more likely explanation is the importance of the platform as a form of geopolitical leverage. Over the course of 2025, the Trump administration signed various executive orders aimed at delaying the enforcement action of PAFACA (Executive order 14258, Executive order 14310; Executive order 14350). Extensions were made in April, June and September with every executive order justified on the grounds that it will allow for negotiations on a divestiture to continue and that an abrupt ban could disrupt stakeholders (Shepardson, 2025; Hirsch *et al.*, 2025). As Reuters (2025) reports, during this period President Trump had increased tariffs on China and even suggested that he would be open to providing tariff relief to Beijing in return for the approval of the sale of TikTok. Importantly, in 2020, The New York Times reported that the response of China had largely been against a sale of TikTok with them making a move to tighten export control of technologies that included the platform's algorithm (Mozur *et al.*, 2025). The attitude towards the sale had softened in 2025 with Beijing being opened to the sale amid concerns about tariff war with the Trump administration. By using TikTok as a bargaining chip in broader trade confrontation, this dissertation argues that TikTok had found itself fully ingrained in the broader bilateral tensions of the United States and China.

On 22 January 2026, TikTok announced that a group of investors (TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC) had reached an agreement with ByteDance to acquire U.S. operations of TikTok wrapping up a 6 year long legal battle (TikTok Newsroom, 2026; McCabe & Lindner, 2026). According to the terms outlined by the White House, the new company would be predominantly owned by U.S. investors, overseen by a board composed of individuals with national security expertise, and bound by stringent data protection requirements, ByteDance would retain under twenty percent of the shares without any voting power, while Oracle would act as the platform's security provider (The White House, 2025c). The new ownership structure is also subject to critical analysis. According to The New York Times the investors behind the new U.S. operations of TikTok are the software behemoth Oracle, UAE investment firm MGX, private equity firm Silver Lake and Michael Dell of Dell Technologies (McCabe & Lindner, 2026). Other firms such as Susquehanna, General Atlantic, Alpha Wave Partners, Revolution, Virgo LI, NJJ Capital and Merritt Way make up the

list of companies that have stakes in the new U.S. operation of TikTok (TikTok Newsroom, 2026). In other words, the divestiture not only shifted a Chinese-owned platform into American ownership but specifically placed it under the control of politically connected American leaders and companies. The outcome of the TikTok ban about the triumph of national security policy over a foreign owned platform in TikTok. This result aligns with the techno-nationalist logic traced throughout this dissertation, evident not only in the removal of TikTok, but also in the broader restructuring of digital infrastructure that shifts its geopolitical and commercial value from China to the United States.

## 5.9. Conclusion

This chapter has presented an empirically grounded, chronological account of the United States government's actions toward TikTok, detailing how the platform shifted from being viewed as social media platform to being governed by national security concerns. The chapter uses official statements, executive orders, legislative debates and policy documents to reconstruct in detail how TikTok was reframed from in need of regulation to forced divestment. The purpose of this chapter was not to interrogate nor evaluate the validity of security concerns outlined by U.S. officials but was to document how these claims were made, validated through institutional mean and finally implemented over time. The findings demonstrate how U.S. policy towards TikTok gradually escalated through rhetoric rather than any single security breach incident. From examining early congressional letters seeking CFIUS review, to the signing of executive orders by both the Trump and Biden administrations and even the passage of the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act (PAFACA). TikTok became widely associated with the threat of national security risk. Importantly, this framing was born out of a hypothetical scenario and future projection as opposed to any publicly reported incident. The significance of this pattern is that it reveals how national security concerns serve as justification for techno-nationalist policy.

The findings also demonstrate the TikTok's Chinese ownership through ByteDance was the source of much anxiety from Washington. For the U.S. government, China's National Intelligence Law and the broader sway of the Chinese Communist Party over private companies emerged as major security concerns in handling a platform as large as TikTok. Even when ByteDance suggested massive mitigation efforts around data localisation and oversight, like Project Texas, these still were not enough for policymakers. The rejection of regulatory and oversight-based solutions for an ownership change solution, shows that domestic control and ownership were more important than any technical fix.

The findings indicate that TikTok was increasingly part of a broader pattern of U.S. technology policy toward China. This can be observed through the consistent reference to other Chinese technology firms like Huawei and ZTE and the use of the term “foreign adversary” in policy documents. Other examples of this are how general PAFACA is on the dealing with technology from foreign adversaries, placing TikTok as not only an isolated case but a precedent in dealing with future technology from Beijing and beyond. This shows a shift where digital platforms are increasingly linked to national security and geopolitical competition, changing how they are governed and regulated. The results further illustrate how TikTok became a central flashpoint in bilateral frictions between the two countries. The ensuing diplomatic resistance from Chinese authorities and the adoption of export controls, particularly concerning recommendation algorithms, demonstrate how platform governance has moved into the heart of ordinary trade disputes and wider geopolitical rivalry. The TikTok ban makes clear that conflicts over technology

The following chapter builds directly on these findings by applying the techno-realist framework to explain why the patterns identified in this chapter demonstrate a case of techno-nationalism in practice. As this chapter has shown the chronological events of what happened and how the public case was constructed, chapter 6 examined why this happened. The following chapter makes use of techno-realism’s four tenets of technology as power, the importance of non-state actors, securitisation as the rational state strategy and control of technology in the geopolitical arena.

# Chapter 6: Findings and discussion

## 6.1. Introduction

While the focus of the previous chapter analysed, amongst others how the United States government escalated its campaign against TikTok across different administrations to construct and institutionalise the platform as a national security threat without any publicly available evidence. The current chapter, on the other hand, builds and solidified from the analysis made in the previous chapter focused on what the pattern of behaviour demonstrated in Chapter 5 reveal about the role of techno-nationalism in international relations. This chapter, arguably more than any previous one, directly engages with the core question guiding this study: to what extent, does the U.S. government ban of TikTok signify the role of techno-nationalism in international relations? The increasing role is discussed in relation with the United States banning the app on geopolitical reasons instead of purported national security concerns.

The chapter is made up of four tenets of the techno-realist theoretical framework established in Chapter 3. Each tenet demonstrates a different dimension of the TikTok ban and contributes to the analytic argument on what its implications are for international relations. In the first tenet, the chapter demonstrates how TikTok was the centre of a structural rivalry that preceded it, showing that technology has become central to great-power competition. Secondly, the importance of non-state actors, argues that the ban is because of a State-Corporate Nexus, where domestic technology firms act as state auxiliaries, showing that techno-nationalism is not just explained by state actions alone. The third tenet of securitisation as a rational state strategy, demonstrates that liberal countries use securitisation as way to pursue techno-nationalist goals whilst still advancing commitment to open markets. The fourth and final tenet, which is the control of technology in the geopolitical arena, shows that competition over digital platforms governance and ownership is a defining feature of an emerging international order, and that TikTok serves as a precedent and mechanism use for what will surely recur. The four tenets demonstrate the argument of this dissertation: The TikTok ban is not an isolated regulatory action but a case study of how techno-nationalist operates as a central logic of great-power competition, changing how states use power, view threats and compete for strategic digital infrastructure. This chapter draws evidential foundation from the empirical record in Chapter 5 and applies the conclusions to international relations to show the increasing role of techno-nationalism.

## 6.2. Technology as Power

In chapter 3, this dissertation mentioned that in a techno-realist perspective, technology is a central form of power that operates beyond the material function. Essentially, technology is not a neutral or progressive force, but rather a medium that states use to secure their interests and compete in the international system. As Capri explains (2024:14), “It is important to note that technology, by itself, is not deterministic. In other words, those who create it must choose how to use it, whether for good or for evil.” Techno-nationalism as a way for understanding state motivations follows through with this perspective. To substantiate this argument, this dissertation demonstrates that both the United States and China constructed far-reaching techno-nationalist frameworks that explicitly identified the other as the principal adversary, even before TikTok had come of prominence. In this context, if both states had utilised this strategic thinking, TikTok’s problem was always going to be structural and not easily solved by compliance alone. The evidence that the United States employed a techno-nationalist framework is clear and consistent.

The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy by President Donald Trump exemplified the importance of technology in national power with the direction being “To maintain our competitive advantage, the United States will prioritise emerging technologies critical to economic growth and security such as data science, encryption, autonomous technologies, gene editing, new materials, nanotechnology, advanced computing technologies, and artificial intelligence” (The White House, 2017). Although previous years of National Security Strategy documents have seen technology mentioned as a tool for superiority (see The White House, 1990; The White House, 2002, The White House, 2015), 2017 marked a significant shift to viewing technology as the battlefield for dominance. This framing was then translated into consequential legislation. The Chips and Science Act of 2022 was a form of legislature that authorises roughly US\$280 billion to research and development, commercialization and manufacturing efforts in various strategic industries like AI and quantum technology. The Act also includes US\$52.7 billion for semiconductors skills development, manufacturing and research and development, and an additional US\$24 billion in incentives like tax credits and grants for chip production within the United States. The stated aim of this act is to rebuild domestic production, reduce strategic dependence on foreign suppliers by strengthening supply chains, create jobs for citizens and “counter China” (The White House, 2022b). Investment rules and guidance are outlined in the act, with funded entities and facilities barred from expanding “semiconductor manufacturing capacity in the People’s Republic of China or any other foreign country of concern” (CHIPS and Science Act, 2022). The National Artificial Intelligence Initiative Act of 2020 established a federal programme designed to accelerate funding

for AI research and development, education, and public-private cooperation with the main goal of ensuring the United States becomes the world leader in AI development and use for economic competitiveness and national security. Strategic documents and legislative texts make this convergence evident: the United States had put into practice the core idea that technological leadership equates to geopolitical supremacy and that China is the competitor against which this supremacy must be preserved. Responding to a question on concerns of overregulation of AI, U.S. Congressman, Rep. Brett Guthrie remarked that “...So it's not that I want to protect Silicon Valley and their product. I want to make sure that we win the battle against China, and that's what we have to do.” (The Washington Post, 2025). The competition between the United States and China had been outlined clearly at the institutional level before TikTok found itself embedded in the legal aspect.

China's techno-nationalist framework is like that of the United States but is driven by a different historical context. The “Century of Humiliation” (1839-1949), which was a period when China's industrial and military inferiority was exploited by foreign powers, still lingers in the Chinese state's collective minds and guides policymaking till today (Capri, 2024; Callahan, 2010; Kaufman, 2010). This collective memory and fundamental understanding have informed various regimes and their rhetoric on self-reliance and the broader project of national rejuvenation. With President Xi Jinping at the helm, China has found technology, and self-reliant technology importantly, to be a crucial means of power that will bring about great power and wealth. Speaking at the 2024 *Nationwide S&T Conference, the National Science and Technology Awards Conference, and the Conference of Academicians of CAS and CAE*, the Chinese president declared:

When our S&T (Science and Technology) flourishes, our race flourishes, and when S&T is strong, our nation is strong. Our party has always attached great importance to the development of science and technology. Since the 18th Party Congress [in 2012], the Party Central Committee has promoted the implementation of the innovation-driven development strategy in an in-depth way, proposed the strategic task of accelerating the construction of an innovation-oriented country, established the goal of building China into an S&T powerhouse by 2035, continuously deepened S&T structural reform, fully stimulated the enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity of S&T personnel, and vigorously promoted the building of self-reliance in S&T (Xi, 2024).

This foundational thinking gave rise to policies such as the Made in China 2025. The Made in China 2025 initiative, launched in 2015, is a plan to turn China into a global manufacturing superpower through the advancement of domestic capacity in key strategic sectors such as

aerospace, robotics, biotechnology and high-speed rail (PRC State Council, 2015). The structural similarities in what both countries see as a need to dominate in technology, is what enables the increasing role of techno-nationalism in international relations. This perspective explains President Xi's assertion that China cannot expect to get critical core technology through request, purchase or begging (China State Council Information Office, 2021). Moreover, in 2023 alone, China spent almost US\$1 trillion on clean energy development focusing on batteries, electronic vehicles (EVs), solar and wind power, and high-speed rail (Capri, 2024:15). The establishment of a state funded investment fund to boost Chinese semiconductor industry with capital of US\$47,5 billion (Reuters, 2025), the reported US\$150 billion in government subsidies to Chinese firms in 2022 (Capri, 2024:130), and the US\$8.2 billion AI fund for start-up companies from the government show the intent China has on technological development (Chan *et al.*, 2025). All of this is why it is not surprising that some experts have projected a US\$1.4 trillion market value of the Chinese AI sector and related sectors like component suppliers and infrastructure (Morgan Stanley, 2025). Officials, scholars, and business leaders frequently invoke the term “zizhu chuangxin” (the Chinese expression for indigenous innovation) to characterise domestically developed technologies and to convey an inward-looking stance that resists reliance on foreign sources (Vinig & Bossink, 2015; Kennedy, 2015). In other words, China had already secured a techno-nationalist stance aimed at reducing its reliance on Western-dominated digital infrastructure, the very arena in which TikTok was generating friction.

This dissertation highlights the focus on technological dominance in direct geopolitical rivalry as a key analytic element of the techno-realist framework for understanding the TikTok ban. The United States and China do not just compete across technological industries; they compete for them. This is done through governance, ownership and influence over digital infrastructure in geopolitical rivalry. The dissertation finds that both states have identified each other as primary adversaries, and used state resources, such as financial subsidies and legislation, to advance domestic technology at the rival's expense. This pattern is visible in the treatment of technological companies like Huawei, ZTE and the broader framing of Chinese technological platforms as inherently being tool of state power. What makes this competition unique, however, is the aforementioned primacy of technology as a terrain on which power is accumulated, contested and projected. In this context, the fate of TikTok was decided on what it represented: a Chinese-owned platform of digital influence operating within the United States' information environment, existing at a time where such a condition was deemed to be unacceptable to American techno-nationalist policy.

This dissertation importantly argues that techno-nationalism's role in international relations is increasing. This is demonstrated by the pattern of U.S. technology policy towards China over the last decade, showing progressive escalation of the scope and depth of techno-nationalist intervention. The exclusion of Huawei from 5G infrastructure in the country in 2018, was first major stage, where the state was actively involved in excluding a specific foreign company from critical domestic infrastructure and lobbied allies to do the same (Capri, 2024:90; Friis & Lyne, 2021). This was techno-nationalism in its direct form, focusing on one company, one technological industry and one layer of infrastructure. Subsequently, the second and deeper stage was the 2022 introduction of semi-conductor export controls. These controls were not limited to restricting foreign technology domestically but its capacity for development abroad, specifically targeting the foundation of manufacturing capability of China (Shrivastava & Jash, 2025). The CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 not only explicitly prohibited investment in Chinese semiconductor capacity but also made techno-nationalist exclusion a condition of receiving state support and embedding geopolitical rivalry into a law concerned with distributing public funds. PAFACA and the subsequent divestiture of TikTok is another stage of this techno-nationalist escalation and the clearest. Through federal legislation, the state compelled the forced ownership of a privately foreign platform based on ownership identity and the inference of risk. The culminating effort being the unanimous upholding at every level of the American judicial system, including the Supreme Court. Each of these stages has extended techno-nationalist intervention deeper into areas that would have previously been relatively untouched under liberal markets. The evidence of this trajectory is the foundation that this dissertation rests its central claim, that the role of techno-nationalism is indeed increasing in international relations, with TikTok as the most recent and clearest case study that this trajectory has led and not began.

### 6.3. Non-state actors in geopolitics: The State-Corporate Nexus

As mentioned above, the TikTok ban may, on the surface, seem as if it was a U.S. government vs ByteDance affair. After all, TikTok's algorithm controlled the consumption and data of 170 million U.S. users giving it a structural position in the American information system that created geopolitical anxieties for the United States. However, a more careful analysis reveals that domestic U.S. based tech companies were very much behind the government's desire to ban the platform. It is this dynamic is called the State-Corporate Nexus, that this section analyses because it reveals that techno-nationalism, after all, cannot merely be reduced to state actors. According to Strange

(1996) non-state actors such as big private companies play a significant role in the geopolitical outcomes. This is not new for those who pay attention to international affairs. The United States, for instance, has at times gone to war with countries for the benefit of American companies and, broadly, to serve the American interests (Klare, 2001; Harvey, 2003). As a result, oil companies and military subcontractors have been a recurring part of American policy, both domestic and foreign, to lobby their interests and benefits. A core tenet of techno-nationalism is the understanding that within geopolitics, power is not exclusively held by nation states but also by multinational corporations as well. The State-Corporate Nexus exists where domestic U.S. technology corporations do not just coexist with the state but rather act as strategic partners in the techno-nationalist endeavour. Through the techno-nationalist lens, companies such as Oracle and Meta are not neutral players in the market but rather structural components of American power that use state securitisation to protect their commercial interest while advancing Washington's geopolitical agenda. The most direct example of this is the role of Meta in the TikTok ban. According to the Wall Street Journal, in 2019, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg held a private dinner with President Trump during which he argued that the rise of Chinese companies is a threat to American business and should take precedence in concern over regulation of Facebook (Wells *et al.*, 2020). Earlier in the year, Zuckerberg had made public statements declaring that TikTok is a risk to American values and technological supremacy and that it does not share Facebook's commitment to freedom of expression (Wells *et al.*, 2020). The Washington Post would subsequently report that Meta had paid a Republican consulting firm to undertake a nationwide smear campaign to change public perceptions against TikTok (Lorenz & Harwell, 2022). According to Lorenz and Harwell (2022), the campaign involved publishing op-eds and letters to the editor in leading regional media, circulating questionable accounts of supposed TikTok trends that began on Facebook, and working to enlist political journalists and local officials in efforts to undermine its largest rival. The campaign was so effective that Democratic Senator Richard Blumenthal sent a letter calling for TikTok executives to testify before a Senate subcommittee after seeing videos of a teen vandalism trend that, upon investigation, was found to have originated on Facebook, not TikTok. (Lorenz & Harwell, 2022). According to Khanal *et al.* (2025:54), Big Tech, through its control of platforms like social media and search engines, now plays a key role in defining what counts as a "problem" by controlling content visibility and shaping narratives, attention, and political discourse. The fact that Congress acted directly in response to Meta's framing demonstrates the considerable power that private corporations and their owners, such as Meta and Zuckerberg, wield when lobbying for their own interests. From a techno-realist perspective, Meta initiated a securitisation process by successfully lobbying the state to view

TikTok as an ideological and security threat. Zuckerberg and Meta, by extension, wanted the state to use its regulatory enforcement powers to neutralise a rival that Meta could not defeat through innovation alone. By positioning itself as an American company with “American values” fighting against a rival Chinese company, Meta made use of the State-Corporate Nexus that exists at its disposal. This confirms the deep insight that domestic tech giants use their domestic status and influence and reach to the government to restrict the success of foreign rivals in order to maintain a closed, state-protected digital market.

Oracle presents another example of this nexus from a different angle. As early as August 2020, President Trump had publicly spoken in support of Oracle as a preferred partner to acquire TikTok (McCabe, 2020). Trump called Oracle a “great company” and said that he believes Oracle would be able to handle TikTok (McCabe, 2020). Trump’s reason for having confidence in the company was very clear. Oracle, a company that specialises in providing management, storage and analysis of data for commercial partners, had enjoyed a good relationship with the Trump administration because of the President’s close ties with company founder and Chief Technology officer, Larry Ellison. Further reporting from The New York Times emphasise that while many Silicon Valley executives were not publicly Trump allies in his first administration, Oracle’s executives were always political allies of the president (McCabe, 2020). According to McCabe (2020), founder Larry Ellison had hosted a fundraiser for Trump at his home and Oracle CEO, Safra Catz, was a member of Trump’s transition team. Further reporting from OpenSecrets, a U.S. non-profit which tracks and publishes data on lobbying, campaign financing and revolving doors politics, reveal that Ellison dined with Trump at Mar-a-Lago in 2024, met regularly with him in 2025 and was designated by the White House as a key player in a US\$500 billion artificial intelligence partnership (Levinthal, 2025). The reporting by OpenSecrets’ Levinthal (2025) highlights Oracle and Ellison’s several ties to Trump such as sponsoring of the President’s military parade, lobbying and donations to affiliated politicians and causes. The political investment, policy influence and commercial reward as a sequence is a characteristic of the State-Corporate Nexus in practice. The company which had positioned itself as most to gain from a forced divestiture of TikTok was also the company that was active in building the political relationships that would have enabled such forced divestiture. The divestiture of ByteDance’s stake in TikTok, and Oracle’s eventual acquisition of the platform, did not result from a competitive bidding process based on which company could offer the strongest security for U.S. users. It emerged from a political process where loyalty and proximity to those in political power directly translates to commercial gain.

The State-Corporate Nexus is not solely limited to Big Tech companies' influence on government but by also the revolving door between government and the private sector. This revolving door refers to the transition of individuals who move from positions in government to jobs in the private sector, and conversely from the private sector into government roles. This blurring of the lines between the prioritising national security and potential private profit is a key reason why such a nexus exists. This was most starkly illustrated by the involvement of former Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin in the acquisition of TikTok. Mnuchin, who previously served as the chairman of the CFIUS which found TikTok to be a national security threat in 2020, revealed that he was organising an investor group to buy the platform after leaving the office (Goswami & Pound, 2024). The official who played a direct role in shaping TikTok's security designation and in lending institutional credibility to the alleged security risks later became a private-sector beneficiary, aiming to profit from that very designation. Another example is the reporting from Quartz which revealed that among 352 members of the House of Representatives who voted yes on the PAFACA act, 44 had reported to own shares of companies like Amazon, Meta, Google, Microsoft and Snap (Germain, 2024). According to Germain (2024), the data collected by Quiver Quantitative, a company that tracks congressional investments, is based on online filings which are easier to access than physical filings, implying that there could be more representatives that own shares in the rival tech firms. All this casts doubt on the stated reasons for banning TikTok, since its competitors would gain from the ban, or even its threat, personally benefiting the representatives. Through the techno-realist lens, this reveals that non-state actors particularly those affiliated with state officials, whether current or former, act as strategic auxiliaries of the state. In the case of TikTok, it became very clear that even after a "divesture" from ByteDance, the platform remains under the influence of the State-Corporate Nexus, a key part of a techno-nationalist worldview.

The significance of the State-Corporate Nexus goes beyond the TikTok ban to make a broader claim about techno-nationalism in practice within the contemporary international system. Techno-realism diverges from classical realist tradition in viewing the state as the primary actor and views corporations, especially large technological firms as operating on the state level as well. Furthermore, techno-realism recognises a State-Corporate Nexus that exists to the benefit of these large firms. The TikTok ban as a result demonstrates that domestic technological corporations both exist in the state's techno-nationalist reality, but also actively produce the conditions to which such reality is actualised. This is a structural part of techno-nationalism. States that pursue techno-nationalist goals need domestic corporate champions to legitimate, sponsor and execute them. In turn, corporations that seek market domination and the economic benefits that come as a result,

need state regulatory power to exclude foreign competitors that they cannot defeat through innovation alone. The result is a State-Corporate Nexus where national security discourse and competitive commercial strategy have become intertwined and mutually reinforcing and difficult to tell apart. The implication for international relations is that future foreign digital platforms and technological companies are likely to suffer the same fate as TikTok, leading to a fragmentation of technology. The following section examines the specific mechanism through which the United States as well as its corporate auxiliaries enabled a politically and legally defensible policy outcome, securitisation.

## 6.4. Securitisation as Rational State Strategy

This section analyses the United States' treatment of TikTok through the securitisation tenet of techno-realism. Techno-realism draws its third tenet from the Copenhagen School, asserting that technology is no longer a neutral tool of commerce but a core component of national security that states have increasingly examined through a security lens. It is worth outlining what the Copenhagen School theorises about security and the act of securitisation. As Buzan *et al.* (1998:23) argue, securitisation occurs when an issue is framed as an “existential threat” to justify committing actions that would otherwise be considered outside the normal bounds of procedure. Drawing from the findings presented in Chapter 5, the analysis shows how TikTok was increasingly and repeatedly presented as a national security threat and how this presentation enabled extraordinary state intervention in the digital marketplace. Instead of assessing whether TikTok constituted an objective national security threat, this section analysis how U.S. officials framed the social media platform as such, how that framing was institutionally validated and how all of this aligns with the techno-realist framework. Within techno-realism, securitisation is not only understood as strict formulaic approach that needs to meet specific category but rather a rational state strategy undertaken in situations of technological uncertainty and geopolitical rivalry. As Buzan *et al.* (1998:24) write, “In principle, the placement of issues on this spectrum [securitisation] is open: Depending upon circumstances, any issue can end up on any part of the spectrum.” It is important to clarify that this dissertation does not assume that the securitisation of TikTok is rooted in a genuine or empirically grounded judgement of national security threat. Instead, consistent with securitisation theory and techno-realist assumptions, securitisation is a tool used by states to pursue broader objectives, especially with issues such as geopolitical rivalry and technological uncertainty. In light of this, the absence of publicly disclosed evidence does not weaken the security framing but instead show how operating with precaution and assuming the worst can be used to substitute empirical proof in the contemporary digital security arena.

#### 6.4.1. Speech Acts as a Tool of Securitisation

Within the framework of the Copenhagen School, securitisation is not brought about by the objective and observable nature of a threat, but rather by the process of labelling an issue as such. Buzan *et al.* (1998:26) borrow the concept “speech act” from language theory, outlining how this is a performative act by an authority figure in framing a particular issue as an existential threat itself. It is not the objective threat of a particular issue that is viewed as requiring extraordinary action but rather the labelling of that issue itself. According to Buzan *et al.* (1998:26), “It is not interesting as a sign referring to something more real; it is the utterance itself that is the act. By saying the words, something is done”. In other words, TikTok was successfully securitised through this same mechanism. Through successive institutional speech acts that escalated in their nature and surety, the platform was elevated from a regulatory concern to an existential threat, each stage validating this without any publicly available evidence. As discussed in the previous chapter, the U.S. justified its ban of TikTok through a ‘national threat’ narrative. Early rhetoric from U.S. representatives in 2019 initiated the securitisation of TikTok. Letters from Senators’ Rubio, Schumer and Cotton show a willingness to characterise TikTok as a threat despite the lack of evidence supporting it. The letter from senator Rubio reads “I urge that CFIUS launch a full and thorough national security review of TikTok's acquisition of Musical.ly” (Rubio, 2019). Whilst in their letter, senators Schumer and Cotton write “With over 110 million downloads in the U.S. alone, TikTok is a potential counterintelligence threat we cannot ignore. Given these concerns, we ask that the Intelligence Community conduct an assessment of the national security risks posed by TikTok and other China-based content platforms operating in the U.S. and brief Congress on these findings.” (Schumer & Cotton, 2019). This outlines the start the securitisation of TikTok, framing the issue as posing national security risk and requiring intervention. Such intervention would only progress over time, with the potential threat of TikTok being placed in the spotlight more.

The securitisation of TikTok was based mainly on three factors: data security, algorithm influence and critical data infrastructure. Firstly, TikTok was framed as a data security threat because of the potential for the Chinese government to get U.S. user data (see, Rubio, 2019; Schumer & Cotton, 2019; Martin, 2020). Although there had been no verified evidence of such, the size of the platform and data practice surrounding it at that time were enough to build on the potential threat narrative. As Capri (2024:184) writes on data:

Firstly, corporations and governments are both competing and collaborating to acquire, analyse and leverage data for a wide variety of purposes. Companies both state- backed and private— are providing unprecedented amounts of data across a range of industries

and sectors to governments— both autocratic and democratic— who are using it for economic, military and social objectives.

Capri's words above are important for several reasons. Firstly, from the above it becomes clear that data collection happens in “both autocratic and democratic” countries. This then means that data collection by TikTok is not entirely different from that captured by U.S. based companies such as Meta. In both cases, the consumer does not know how that data is used by the state. Secondly, TikTok was also framed as a potential tool for algorithmic influence. Congressional hearings and public statements have advanced the argument that the platform is vulnerable to influence operations geared towards amplifying narratives, changing public perception and limiting information (see, United States House Committee on Energy and Commerce, 2023; Reuters, 2023; Hadero & Tucker, 2024). Delivering the opening remarks for a house committee hearing on TikTok and potential harm to children, representative Cathy Rodgers called TikTok a “grave threat of foreign influence in American life” and likened it to allowing a more powerful and dangerous Soviet Union to make cartoons during the Cold War (United States House Committee on Energy and Commerce, 2023). Rodgers ended proceedings by declaring that, “With data comes power. They [CCP] can choose what you see and how you see it. They can make you believe things that are not true. They can encourage you to engage in behavior that will destroy your life. Even if it is not happening yet, it could in the future.” (United States House Committee on Energy and Commerce, 2023). In this context, the opaque and proprietary nature of the algorithm was an important aspect of securitisation. This is because it is much easier to frame something that is not publicly available and observable, whilst maintaining the current and future uses of the product. Third, TikTok was increasingly characterised as critical digital infrastructure. Officials achieved this through outlining its cultural impact and societal reach making it a part of U.S. information environment. Concerns around influence and propaganda, silently recognises the usage by many as a tool for engaging with news, forming opinions and building communities. As such, when a product moves from primarily being an entertainment and communications tool to a critical digital infrastructure, it ought to be regulated differently. This reframing has enabled intervention on the premise that failure to act could result in societal risks for the nation.

From a techno-realist lens, the early framing of TikTok as a potential national security and counterintelligence threat should not be understood as exaggeration but rather as a rational response to the unique structural uncertainty surrounding digital technologies. Unlike traditional

security threats, technology platforms exist through complicated data practices and proprietary algorithms that are not easily accessible and verifiable. A state does not have the authority to force a foreign-owned platform to reveal the composition of its algorithms in the same way it can inspect a foreign vessel's cargo. As a result, securitisation becomes the logical conclusion to this uncertainty. The initial speech acts by the U.S. officials served as anticipatory security interventions on a platform, designed to legitimise future regulatory and executive action. As Buzan *et al.* (1998:26) explain "The distinguishing feature of securitization is a specific rhetorical structure (survival, priority of action 'because if the problem is not handled now, it will be too late, and we will not exist to remedy our failures')". Recurring statements from various level U.S. officials such as U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo and U.S. President Donald Trump on the national security concerns about TikTok worked to characterise it as an existential threat. On a policy level, executive orders signed by both Presidents Biden and Trump institutionalised this framing. These orders did not claim that TikTok had compromised national security in any form, but rather, they emphasised that there exists an existential risk that foreign-owned platforms could be forced to cooperate with adversarial states. This front footed, safety-first approach aligns with techno-realist understanding of securitisation as a rational governance strategy, rather than a specific response to an already established threat. In this sense, securitisation played a key role in the desire for the U.S. to reassert control over an increasingly important digital domain.

The decision to ban or force a divesture of the platform was upheld by an appeals court and the Supreme Court, with the Supreme Court explicitly outlining that the policy decision was based on a reasonable inference and not on empirically proven harm (Supreme Court of the United States, 2025). In placing the onus on TikTok to prove why it is an unreasonable inference that the Chinese government might compel it to provide U.S. data or undertake any form of activity that threatens U.S. national security, the courts accepted the government's premise that TikTok is inherently a threat. This further outline why states undertake speech acts and the power they have in actualising securitisation. The dissertation's analysis on speech acts demonstrates that TikTok's securitisation was not a response to the evidence, it was because the platform was framed as threat. After this framing had been repeatedly asserted and taken as given, it acquired a kind of institutional self-confirmation. What is most striking about this self-confirmation of alleged threats is that later measures taken against the platform are defended by invoking earlier claims that were never backed by evidence. In this way, the demand for evidence gradually loses relevance and weight, particularly when the issue enjoys bipartisan support.

#### 6.4.2. Securitisation as a Gateway to Techno-nationalism

This dissertation argues that the securitisation of TikTok did not function as an end in itself but rather a necessary step in the pursuit of techno-nationalist policy objectives. Because of the successful characterisation of TikTok as a national security threat, U.S. policymakers were able to legitimise state intervention in what has largely been an open liberal economic market. Measures of forced divestment, nationality-based ownership restrictions and exclusion from domestic markets are a stark departure from the free trade, limited government intervention-based order. Yet these tools were reframed as being necessary to mitigate security risks and ensure stable national security. Within securitisation theory, the designation of an issue as a matter of national security allows for normal politics to be set aside, thus justifying the use of exceptional measures (Buzan *et al.*, 1998:24). This becomes ever so consequential in the realm of digital platforms. Once TikTok became successfully constructed as an existential threat, the normal politics response such as regulation and legal guardrails overlooked for a more pronounced and result. This shift enabled the U.S. state to directly reshape rules regarding the structure of the digital market whilst still projecting the image of a commitment to rule-based governance.

From a techno-realist point of view, technology is not a neutral tool of commerce but a strategic asset of importance at the core of broader geopolitical rivalry. As a result, states seek to reduce dependence on adversarial technology while maximising control over domestic technology. Capri (2024) notes several examples of this in industries ranging from superconductor chips to rare earth minerals. There exists a deliberate desire to shift from the old liberal free trade rules-based order to a more nation-first centred approach. The TikTok ban demonstrates this dynamic clearly. The proposal of a forced divestment or ban under of PAFACA is a deeply techno-nationalist approach. The specific aim of this intervention, driven primarily by a securitisation process, was not only to mitigate specific risks but to deliberately exclude a foreign-owned platform from the U.S. digital system on the basis of its national affiliation. This techno-nationalist approach to Chinese technology firms is not only unique to TikTok, but as similar patterns have also been observed with firms like Huawei (Capri, 2024:90). In that case, concerns around competition and technological dependence were replaced by securitisation serving to deploy exclusionary policy outcomes. The TikTok case is a great example of showing how security discourse is used to pursue techno-nationalist policies under the guise of mitigating risk. This gives states a way to use interventionist policies even whilst existing under liberal institutional norms.

Importantly, this analysis and, in extension this study, does not claim that techno-nationalism represents a wholesale rejection of liberal economic principles and norms. Rather, it highlights

how conditional these principles become when technological systems are characterised as issues of national security. Securitisation plays a crucial role in advancing the techno-nationalist agenda as it serves as the political and legal justification for such policies.

## 6.5. Control of Technology in the Geopolitical Arena

The final tenet analysis the TikTok ban through the techno-realist framework of geopolitical competition and technological control. Building on the previous section, which demonstrated how securitisation was used to justify the extraordinary intervention of the digital marketplace on a political and policy level. This section expands the study by arguing that such intervention ultimately is symbolic of a broader struggle for strategic advantage in the technological space. From a techno-realist perspective, digital platforms do not exist as commercial entities but critical components of national power, whose ownership, use, governance and influence on domestic ecosystems have massive geopolitical implications. The central argument advanced in this section is that the U.S. response to TikTok represents an attempt to manage technological dependence and to protect their relative technological advantage in the face of increasing U.S.-China rivalry.

### 6.5.1. Technology as an Avenue for Geopolitical Competition

In realist theory, states operate in an anarchic international system where survival and relative power are the most important of concerns (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Techno-realism as an extension of this logic to the digital space, posits that technology exists as both a source of power and a potential vulnerability to states. Through this lens, technological systems, especially those that serve to enable the communication of information, data and social interactions, become of strategic importance regardless of their current use. Digital platforms such as TikTok provide a classic example of this shift. As a large-scale, algorithmically mediated platform with arguably the most extensive reach into the U.S. information ecosystem and popular culture, TikTok has been consistently characterised by U.S. officials as exerting a disproportionate influence on social interaction, the formation and diffusion of cultural trends, and patterns of information consumption. As outlined in the findings section, policymakers frequently emphasised the large U.S. user base and reach, especially among younger people. This served the function of strategically placing TikTok at the core of national security concerns and not as a conventional entertainment application. This emphasis on scale and reach shows a techno-realist thinking that influence does not only come from intent but from the structural place a platform occupies in society. For social media platforms like TikTok especially, there exists a lot of capacity to move the needle in favour of a rival state. Singer and Brooking (2018) document various instances of

how social media has been weaponised to influence elections, recruit teenagers for terrorism, spread propaganda and carry out sophisticated disinformation campaigns. With the publicly available and widespread nature of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and deepfake technology, states are increasingly looking to at social media platforms as a disseminator of information. From a techno-realist perspective, foreign control over such systems is difficult to regulate through traditional means, especially in instances where parent companies, like ByteDance, are mandated to comply with home country rules on data use. Techno-realism recognises this and promotes the understanding that having control over data and information flows affords any entity, state or private, a form of structural power that has the capacity to shape societal behaviour and political outcomes.

Importantly, as stated in the findings and consistently through the analysis, the value attributed to TikTok by U.S. officials was not based on evidence of espionage or manipulation. As demonstrated in the findings, officials relied on hypothetical scenarios, anecdotal evidence (see Kang, 2022), and future risk projections and scenarios that emphasised what TikTok could do instead of what it has done. This is drawn from the foundational roots of realism, which also applies to techno-realism, emphasising the uncertainty states have about the behaviour of others. The biggest emphasis was on ByteDance's Chinese ownership. References to compliance with China's National Intelligence Law and the potential for influence of the state in private firms, served as motivation to situate TikTok within a broader geopolitical rivalry, despite all attempts by the firm to provide operational and safety assurances. Within techno-realism, ownership and jurisdiction matter as they shape the context to which technology operates and how it is perceived. TikTok's links to China could thus not be seen as irrelevant when it could hypothetically be used as a tool for foreign influence. All of this is informed how TikTok came to be understood as an avenue for geopolitical competition and not a commercial actor. The sheer size of the platform, algorithm opacity, foreign ownership and data practices collectively placed TikTok as a strategically important technology in the U.S.-China rivalry. Under the techno-realist lens, it is rational for a state to have heightened attention and to undertake precautionary action, which would move from concern to control under these conditions.

## 6.6. Conclusion

The analysis chapter aimed to explain how the TikTok ban can be understood through a techno-realist lens and specifically, what it says about the increasing role of techno-nationalism in international relations. Looking at the findings and the analysis from the four interrelated tenets of

techno-realism, the chapter has demonstrated that the TikTok ban is not a uniquely isolated incident but rather a reflection of a broader change in how states view technology, power and security in an era of increased geopolitical competition.

First, the analysis demonstrated that U.S. discourse and policy towards TikTok are grounded in the view that technology is a critical part of national power. The chapter was able to document legislative initiatives, policy documents and executive actions increasingly emphasise the importance of leadership in critical and emerging technologies as vital to military superiority, economic gain and global influence. Another key piece of analysis found in the chapter is how non-state actors, especially large technological firms, have become important players in the techno-nationalist dynamics. The chapter showed TikTok and its parent company ByteDance were able to accrue power as a private firm because of its global user base, unique algorithm and data extraction, making it the target of techno-nationalist policies. This finding shows how techno-nationalist policies can be encouraged by domestic firms who would have a lot to gain from the restriction of foreign competition and the promotion of domestic firms.

Thirdly, this chapter established that securitisation is a rational and useful way in which techno-nationalist objectives are advanced. Building on the work of the Copenhagen School of security studies, the analysis showed that TikTok was constructed as a national security threat mainly through speech acts by U.S. officials and not from any empirical harm. Hypothetical concerns over the influence of the Chinese government on U.S. data access and content visibility were emphasised, with focus placed on what TikTok could do instead of what it had done. Courts and policymakers admittedly accepted this precautionary framing, justifying the use of exceptional measures despite no evidence of wrongdoing. A techno-realist perspective informs that uncertainty is an inherent part of digital technologies, because of the proprietary and complex nature of algorithms making traditional risk assessment very difficult. Securitisation therefore functions as the logical mechanism to enable the U.S. government to intervene decisively in a traditionally liberal digital market whilst maintaining the legitimacy of its actions. Finally, the analysis has placed the TikTok ban within the broader context of U.S.-China technological competition, demonstrating the importance of control of technology as a key part of said competition. The chapter demonstrates how the ban of TikTok aligns with a wider pattern of U.S. policies aimed at restricting China's technological rise through reducing dependence and diversification of supply chains.

The analysis chapter directly responds to the dissertation's research questions. The primary question, of how the U.S. government ban of TikTok signifies the role of techno-nationalism in

international relations, is answered at two levels. The first is at the case study level, which reveals that the ban demonstrates that techno-nationalism now dictates how digital platforms are regulated, how national security threats are created and institutionally validated and how the benefits of the digital economy are increasingly sought by states and private companies. At the macro level of international relations, the ban is significant as it shows an increasing trajectory of techno-nationalism as a structural part of the international system. As established in the chapter, TikTok ban represents the most advanced and clearest stage in a pattern of escalating techno-nationalist intervention. The secondary question of how the ban has affected U.S.-China relations is addressed by noting that the TikTok ban has heightened the technological rivalry between the two countries. This led to mutual techno-nationalist escalation and thrust platform governance into the mainstream great-power rivalry. TikTok is not just a social media platform that has attracted geopolitical attention, instead it is a precedent for platform governance and techno-nationalism as permanent features of the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and China.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

## 7.1. Introduction

In the introductory chapter, the study was contextualised and delineated. In that chapter, the research aim, objectives, and research questions, among other elements, were presented. The purpose of this concluding chapter is to provide a critical synthesis of the central argument of the dissertation and, importantly, to demonstrate how the research questions and objectives have been addressed. For this reason, the chapter is organised into several distinct yet interrelated sections. The first section explicitly responds to the research questions that have guided this study. Following that, the chapter advances the significance and contribution of the dissertation to the existing literature on techno-nationalism, international relations and digital governance. The chapter then recognises areas where future research is necessary. Finally, the chapter ends with concluding remarks of the dissertation.

Before undertaking this, it is important to restate what the dissertation has argued. This dissertation has argued that the United States government's sustained and escalating decision to ban TikTok is not as a response to any verifiable national security threat but rather as a deliberate act of techno-nationalism. The argument is grounded in the theoretical framework of techno-realism, which this dissertation identifies as a necessary and useful augmentation to the realist tradition. This is primarily because of techno-realism's ability to account for the structural role of technology and digital platforms in contemporary great power competition. The TikTok ban is a case study of how techno-nationalism is increasingly operating as a key characteristic of international relations.

## 7.2. Response to the Research Questions

This dissertation was guided by a primary research question which was: To what extent does the U.S. government ban of TikTok signify the role of techno-nationalism in international relations? Furthermore, this primary research question was supported by two other research questions: What are the implications of the TikTok ban on U.S.-China relations? and what does the increasing role of techno-nationalism mean for international relations? These questions were sufficiently responded to in several different ways throughout the study. For instance, this dissertation began answering the questions in the chapter 2. It was in this chapter where literature was reviewed and discussed. It was also in this chapter where the dissertation made clear how the response to the questions would be different from the currently available literature on the matter. Chapter 5 and 6 were able to provide a more detailed analytical response to the identified questions. In response to

the primary research question, this dissertation reaffirms that the TikTok ban is one of the clearest and most consequential acts of techno-nationalism in practice within contemporary international relations. The process that produced the ban, involving speech acts that framed the platforms as security threats, institutional endorsement by multiple presidential administrations, and the dismissal of regulatory measures in favour of changing ownership, aligns with what techno-realism describes. Applying this to the level of international relations reveals that techno-nationalism is no longer limited to export controls, semiconductor restrictions and industrial hardware industries. Techno-nationalism increasingly determines who owns and runs digital platforms, as well as how they function, within a country's territorial boundaries. The mandated sale of ByteDance's U.S. operations, now formally enshrined in PAFACA and affirmed by the Supreme Court, demonstrates that governing digital platforms is not merely a matter of technical regulation but a facet of great power rivalry.

As a result, the dissertation finds that the extent to which the TikTok ban signifies the role of techno-nationalism in international relations is extensive. Through the documentation of various empirical records, the dissertation has shown a clear bipartisan and multi-institutional push to exclude a foreign-owned platform from the U.S. digital ecosystem. This is significant because this effort was not driven by new evidence of the threat at different stages but was able to still hold momentum because of the precautionary framing. A key part in supporting this argument is the rejection of TikTok's "Project Texas" data localisation proposal which would have successfully dealt with any security concerns by the U.S. government. This was still not enough because the singular problem was about who owned the platform and not how data was managed. This conclusion by itself negates any national security motivations and it is where this dissertation finds its strongest footing. As mentioned before, this dissertation argues that the rejection of Project Texas is explained by the techno-nationalist logic which restricts foreign owned companies in favour of national firms.

In response to the first secondary question of the dissertation: What are the implications of the TikTok ban on U.S.-China relations? The dissertation concludes that the TikTok ban has intensified and institutionalised technological rivalry as a lasting feature of U.S.-China relations. Using China's 2020 export controls on ByteDance's recommendation algorithm, along with its conveniently timed willingness to consider divestment amid escalating tariffs under the Trump administration, this dissertation has shown that platform governance has become embedded in bilateral geopolitical strategy. TikTok found itself being explicitly used as leverage in geopolitical trade negotiations. The implication is that both countries now understand that commercially

successful digital platforms owned by the other will face regulatory exclusion and forced restructuring. Furthermore, both states have outwardly expressed their desire to best the other in technological innovation and capacity. This understanding is likely to shape every technological dispute between the United States and China going forward.

This dissertation responds to the secondary question: What does the increasing role of techno-nationalism mean for international relations? This dissertation argues that the increasing role of techno-nationalism in international relations represents a significant structural shift in how states perceive threats, use power and compete for strategic advantage. The trajectory outlined in this study, from the exclusion of Huawei from 5G infrastructure and the 2022 semiconductor export controls to PAFACA and the TikTok divestiture, illustrates that each techno-nationalist intervention has exhibited an increasingly extensive institutional reach, expanding both in scope and in depth than the one before. It is for this reason that the dissertation argues that techno-nationalism is a governing principle that is increasingly becoming more prevalent in legislative and judicial levels as well as in bilateral relations between states. The implication for international relations is a world in which the liberal economic norms of free markets, non-discriminatory regulation and open trade that once formed the dominant logic of the global economy are now steadily giving way to a logic of fragmentation and more restrictive practices. The consequences stretch beyond how states relate to one another and include how global technology governance is structured, leading to implications on how digital platforms operate across national borders and who those platforms are owned by.

#### 7.4. The Significance and Contributions Made by the Study

This dissertation advances existing scholarship in multiple ways and thereby consolidates its significance within the discipline. Its contributions can be broadly categorised as empirical, theoretical, and analytical. Empirically, the dissertation is among the first comprehensive academic studies to examine the entire trajectory of the TikTok ban, tracing developments from the emergence of initial concerns through to the finalised divestiture. The real-time nature of the research affords an exceptional degree of analytical granularity and contextual sensitivity, enabling insights that are likely to remain less accessible to subsequent retrospective accounts. Additionally, the dissertation also extends the collective understanding of techno-nationalist from its historical focus on industrial hardware industries to being concerned with social media and digital platforms. In the age of social media and AI, this study will remain a key work explaining the new world.

From a theoretical perspective comes perhaps the most significant contribution of this dissertation. The introduction and application of techno-realism as a theoretical framework for international relations is an ambitious but very well executed addition to the rich realist tradition of international relations. While scholars like Capri (2024), Sukma (2024) and Drezner (2019) have examined the relationship between technology and international relations, none have done so with an advanced coherent techno-realist framework that places significance on digital platforms, non-state actors and securitisation at the heart of the realist tradition. This dissertation does exactly that. Through the four interrelated tenets of techno-realism, the dissertation presents a coherent and empirically grounded framework which other scholars can use to examine relevant cases. Importantly, techno-realism extends the realist tradition making it fit for the contemporary digital world.

The dissertation makes an analytical contribution through its demonstration that national security framing and techno-nationalist logic are not mutually exclusive but are structurally intertwined. Much of the scholarship on the TikTok ban treats the platform's alleged national security risks as genuine threats that justify governmental action. This dissertation contends that such a framing creates a misleading binary. Drawing on securitisation theory as a component of techno-realism, it demonstrates that the construction of a threat narrative around TikTok functioned as a legal and political strategy to allow the United States to advance a techno-nationalist agenda. The nature of threat under securitisation need not to be proven as the mere invocation of speech acts that classify it as a threat is enough to warrant action. This dissertation argues that the findings have implications that go beyond TikTok, asserting that securitisation is a transferable tool of techno-nationalist policy that can be used against social media platforms today and foreign toys in the future.

## 7.5. Areas of Future Research

While this dissertation has advanced the understanding of techno-nationalism in international relations through the case of the TikTok ban, it also finds several important questions that future research should address. Therefore, possible future research could include:

- The governance of artificial intelligence as the next frontier of techno-nationalist competition. Considering the AI race between states, it would be worthwhile to understand how techno-nationalism works given that context.
- The long-term consequences of digital fragmentation for the global order and international relations.

- How techno-nationalism is operationalised in different political systems.

## 7.6. Concluding Remarks

This dissertation argued that U.S. ban on TikTok is a clear instance of techno-nationalism in practice. The case shows how digital platforms and technologies have become a central part of geopolitical power competition and how national security discourse is being used frequently to justify control over these foreign owned assets. By examining the TikTok ban in real time, the study has been able to observe gradual escalation of the ban providing a truly unique perspective. More broadly, the findings point towards a potentially worrying trend in which there will be conflict over platforms, data and digital infrastructure to maintain a digital hegemony. Under these conditions, this would place techno-nationalism as perhaps the most important issue in international relations. The advent and widespread adoption of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies require that we take heed to the potential brought about by techno-nationalism.

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