

## **App wars: TikTok aside, Trump WeChat ban could be bigger deal; President Trump's executive order seeks to ban the messaging app WeChat. What is it - and why would restrictions matter?**

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### **Body**

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President Donald Trump's move to ban TikTok has dominated tech news headlines since early August. But while negotiations over the viral video app race on, there's been scant attention to another executive order, announced the same day, that could prove more consequential. The order prohibits WeChat, a "super app" unfamiliar to most Americans but ubiquitous in China.

What is WeChat, and why has it been targeted?

WeChat, owned by the Chinese company Tencent, is an app used by more than 1 billion people, according to Tencent CEO Pony Ma - mainly in China, but also by the Chinese diaspora in other countries, and some 20 million people in the United States. The app enables messaging, phone calls, and video chats, as well as social media, playing games, banking, and electronic payments online and at stores. Many people in the U.S. use the app to stay in touch with friends, family, and contacts in China, while U.S. businesses employ it for advertising in China.

An executive order issued by President Trump on Aug. 6 would prohibit transactions related to WeChat in the U.S. on national security and economic grounds, saying WeChat captures "vast swaths" of data from its users, giving China's ruling Communist Party access to Americans' information, while also allowing it to keep "tabs on Chinese citizens who may be enjoying the benefits of a free society for the first time in their lives." In China, multiple laws can compel companies, organizations, and individuals to share data with the government. WeChat user content undergoes surveillance, and contents considered politically sensitive by China's authorities are censored.

How would restrictions impact users in the U.S.?

WeChat is one of the few mobile apps accessible in both China and the U.S., in part because so many competitors have been blocked in mainland China, including WhatsApp, Telegram, LINE, and Facebook Messenger. A ban in America would inconvenience millions of people who rely on WeChat to stay in touch and conduct business - especially those who speak only Chinese. "Most Chinese Americans use this app. ... It's for comprehensive communication," says George Shen, a Chinese American technology consultant from Massachusetts. "It is all-encompassing right now - in a way it's more powerful than Facebook."

Still, Mr. Shen says alternatives to WeChat do exist, including Skype, Zoom, Letstalk, and Signal. He understands the data, privacy, and security risks of WeChat, having discovered to his surprise last year that his own WeChat

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messages and account were being censored. "Thousands of people do the manual work to look into each and everyone's messages, to see if it is in accordance with the [Communist] Party's narrative. If it is not, they will block it and delete it," says Mr. Shen, a U.S. citizen.

Some argue a ban is too strong. A group of Chinese American lawyers has formed a nonprofit organization, the U.S. WeChat Users Alliance, that has filed a lawsuit against Mr. Trump and Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross seeking to block the executive order. While acknowledging the risks of using WeChat, the group argues users should be able to decide whether to accept them or not. "If there are bugs in your house, you call an exterminator. You don't burn down the house," writes Song Yi, a Washington-based attorney who is working pro bono on the case.

What would a ban mean for the U.S. and China?

Exactly how the U.S. government will carry out the executive order remains to be seen. The order directs the secretary of Commerce to determine by Sept. 20 the "transactions" that will be "prohibited." "The worst-case scenario is WeChat gets pulled out of the app stores," said cybersecurity expert Melissa Hathaway in an August webinar hosted by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. The administration's goal is to protect national security, by preventing "an extraordinary amount of personal data that goes back to mainland China," she said, but that could be complicated by laws protecting communication channels.

However it plays out, the WeChat action is another sign of the technological decoupling between the U.S. and China. "I do see this as part of the journey of decoupling that started years ago and has definitely accelerated with this administration," Ms. Hathaway said. Ultimately, technology experts say what is needed is not tit-for-tat actions against individual companies, but a broad multinational agreement on data flows and transparency.

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