

Class Activity: Surveillance, Civil Liberties, and the TikTok Debate

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, students should be able to:

1. Analyze how debates around TikTok ownership reflect deeper issues in U.S.–China economic relations and technology governance.
2. Evaluate competing policy priorities—national security, privacy, and freedom of expression—in the context of global digital competition.
3. Connect domestic data protection gaps in the United States to broader questions of international influence and regulatory power.

Pre-Class Activity

Reading:

- *“TikTok may not be Chinese-owned anymore, but there still is a privacy problem”* (Brookings, 2025). [Link →](#)

Tasks:

1. Students summarize the main argument of the Brookings article in 3–4 bullet points.
2. Briefly research recent U.S. efforts to force TikTok’s sale or ban (e.g., the 2024–2025 legislative proposals).
3. Identify one key question or concern the Brookings article raises about whether ownership transfer actually resolves privacy and security risks.
4. Reflect (in a short paragraph) on how this case fits into the larger themes of surveillance, state power, and global technology competition.

In-Class Activity: “Who Owns Your Data?”

Duration: 55 minutes

1. **Framing Lecture (10 min)**
 - Instructor introduces the central dilemma posed in the Brookings article: even if TikTok is no longer Chinese-owned, systemic privacy issues persist due to weak U.S. data governance.
 - Briefly connect this to the broader context of U.S.–China economic relations—how tech rivalry, national security, and economic protectionism intersect.

2. **Small-Group Role Debate (25 min)**

Students are divided into three stakeholder groups:

- **U.S. Policymakers:** Argue for a TikTok sale or ban on national security grounds.
- **Tech and Data Rights Advocates:** Argue for privacy reforms and regulation without singling out foreign apps.
- **Corporate Stakeholders:** Emphasize economic impact, innovation, and consumer choice.

Each group prepares a 3–5 minute policy statement using the Brookings article plus additional research.

3. **Whole-Class Discussion (20 min)**

After presentations, open a moderated discussion with guiding questions:

- Does changing ownership resolve the underlying privacy risks identified by Brookings?
- How does this debate reveal weaknesses in U.S. domestic regulation versus foreign policy framing?
- In what ways does the TikTok case illustrate both cooperation and competition between the U.S. and China?
- Should the U.S. prioritize building internal data protections before targeting foreign firms? Why or why not?

Post-Class Activity

Written Reflection (250–300 words):

Students write a short analytical reflection connecting the TikTok case to the broader themes of the module (economic rivalry, surveillance, and the politics of technology). They should:

- Reference at least one key point from the Brookings article.
- Draw one broader implication for U.S.–China relations or digital sovereignty.
- Reflect briefly on how this case reframes the notion of “security” in a globalized digital economy.