

## SCIENCE

## Home Affairs TikTok security review found data security protections 'inadequate'

ABC Science / By technology reporter [Ariel Bogle](#)

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The popular video app TikTok has come under scrutiny in Australia. (Getty Images: John MACDOUGALL/AFP)

The popular video app TikTok is at the centre of a national security showdown between the United States and China.

But while the Trump administration has pushed for the platform to be banned, citing concerns it could share user data with Chinese authorities, the Federal Government has not yet followed America's lead.

In early August, Prime Minister Scott Morrison [said the Government had taken "a good look"](#) at TikTok and found no evidence of local data misuse.

However, the scale and detail of Australia's investigation of TikTok remains unclear.

Partly redacted documents, obtained by the ABC under freedom of information laws, show that the Department of Home Affairs completed a security assessment in January and recommended the app be banned or restricted on department devices.

That risk assessment of TikTok found controls on its use within Home Affairs to be broadly "inadequate".

### Key points:

- A Home Affairs internal security assessment of TikTok found data security protections were "inadequate"
- In August, Scott Morrison said there was no evidence TikTok data had been misused in Australia
- The Trump administration has cracked down on the app and threatened to ban downloads in the US

The four risk events assessed by the department's Cyber Risk Services Branch included a nation state gaining access to data and personal information — an event that was considered "possible" with "major" consequences.

There was also a risk that "users may be assumed to represent the agency through association and or content" — a scenario that would seem to apply to all social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram.

The report's recommended action was to restrict use of TikTok on corporate devices by the end of February.

Home Affairs' TikTok security risk assessment in January found current controls to be "inadequate" on department devices. *(ABC News: Home Affairs FOI)*

Justin Warren, founder of PivotNine, said the risk assessment appeared " cursory" and lacked any significant explanation of the basis of the department's decision-making process. The document calls it a "short form risk assessment".

"For an [department] that is a critical part of Australia's cyber security mechanisms... I expected more from them," he said. "This does not inspire confidence."

The assessment seemed narrowly focused, according to Fergus Ryan, an analyst with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

As it looked solely at whether TikTok should be used on corporate devices within Home Affairs, it did not examine whether the app poses a broader national security threat to the community at large.

"It also appears that the Home Affairs investigation only looked into the data security side of the equation without looking at the other important national security concern — that the app could be used to shape information flows to the benefit of the Chinese government," he said.

[The ABC reported in January](#) that the Australian Defence Department had banned TikTok on work devices. It also restricts the use of WeChat, a Chinese social media and messaging app.

A Home Affairs spokesperson said decisions around the use of applications on department-issued devices were ultimately a matter for individual agencies and departments.

"The Department of Home Affairs regularly assesses the risk of applications on department issued devices," he said. "Where the risk is unacceptable to the department, the use of these applications is blocked."

## Scale of Australia's TikTok security review unclear

While the January security assessment of TikTok focused on internal risks in Home Affairs, [reports from early August](#) suggest the Federal Government was also conducting two complementary investigations into the app — one reportedly undertaken by security agencies, and one by Home Affairs.

Days after the ABC report, Prime Minister Morrison told the Aspen Security Forum the Government had looked into the concerns raised by TikTok and its relationship to the Chinese Government via its parent company ByteDance.

"There's nothing at this point that would suggest to us that security interests have been compromised or Australian citizens have been compromised because of what's happening with those applications," he said.

"But people should know that the line connects right back into China and that they should exercise their own judgement about whether they should participate in those things or not."

He did not say on what review or evidence his comments were based, or whether Home Affairs' January assessment was considered.

TikTok executives [recently appeared before a Senate committee](#) examining the risk of foreign interference through social media in Australia.

The company's general manager in Australia Lee Hunter told the committee that the Australian government inquiry had "concluded that there was no reason to restrict us".

But representatives from TikTok also claimed to committee chair Jenny McAllister that Home Affairs had not contacted them directly about their investigation, which she described as "quite incredible".

TikTok reached out to a range of federal politicians, including every member of the Australian Cabinet, according to its director of public policy for Australia and New Zealand Brent Thomas.

"We did have discussions with the relevant ministers' offices who were in charge of those departments, but we were not asked to engage directly with those agencies," he said.

On August 6, US President Donald Trump published executive orders declaring TikTok and WeChat would be blocked from processing transactions for US citizens and from being downloaded in US app stores.

Mr Trump later suggested the ban could be averted if TikTok sold its US business to an American company.

While Microsoft was considered a frontrunner to purchase the app's US operations, Oracle and Walmart [announced a deal](#) in September to purchase a stake in TikTok Global.

TikTok insists user data is stored in Singapore and the US, with "strict controls" on employee access.

"TikTok does not share the information of our users in Australia with any foreign government, including the Chinese Government, and would not do so if asked," a spokesperson said.

The Prime Minister's office declined to comment.

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