

When a CEO Plays President: Musk, Starlink, and the War in Ukraine

Description

Explosive [reports](#) from major news outlets in September declared that, last year, tech guru and billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk had shut down the Starlink service for the Ukrainian military in Crimea, thwarting Ukraine's ability to conduct a major counteroffensive against the Russian navy. Following these reports, Musk publicly acknowledged that he had refused a request from Ukraine to activate Starlink around the port city of Sevastopol meant to enable Ukrainian command and control of a counteroffensive against the Russian fleet. Musk [stated](#) on X:

“The obvious intent (of the Ukrainian military was) to sink most of the Russian fleet at anchor. If I had agreed to their request, then SpaceX would be explicitly complicit in a major act of war and conflict escalation.”

The Russian-annexed peninsula Crimea is home to Russia's Black Sea fleet. Following Russia's invasion in February 2022, the unhindered combat fleet bombarded Ukraine's coastal cities and imposed a naval blockade. Ukraine's Prime Minister of Innovations and Digital Transformation, Mykhailo Fedorov, privately urged Musk to enable Starlink connectivity so that Ukrainian kamikaze sea drones could carry out an attack on the Russian fleet. A successful offensive would have prevented further bombardment and blockade. Musk refused. The implications were [reportedly](#) serious enough to be discussed in a meeting between President Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley.

In an [interview](#) with his biographer, Musk reportedly asked, “How am I in this war? Starlink was not meant to be involved in wars.” I ask a similar question here: How did we get to this point? How did we enable a CEO of a commercial firm unparalleled influence to impact and affect foreign affairs at a level normally reserved for the Department of Defense, Department of State, and presidents?

We should start with the history of Starlink's involvement in Ukraine.

On February 24, 2022, hours before their full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia accomplished a [cyberattack](#) that took down a commercial satellite communications network in Ukraine that was managed by the commercial arm of broadband communications firm Viasat. Russia knowingly disrupted Ukraine's battlefield command and control during the first hours of the invasion, successfully disconnecting thousands of civilians from the internet both in Ukraine and across Europe.

The growing threat of Russian attacks on Ukraine's critical telecommunications infrastructure made Ukraine officials desperate for a quick fix, and Starlink presented a lucrative solution. The company was the first satellite communications firm to emplace a robust [network](#) of thousands of low-cost, Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellites to enable high-speed commercial broadband connectivity almost anywhere on the globe. On February 26, two days into Russian invasion, Fedorov [tweeted](#) to Musk and SpaceX, "While your rockets successfully land from space Russian rockets attack Ukrainian civil people! We ask you to provide Ukraine with Starlink stations." By the end of the day, Musk had publicly informed Fedorov that he had activated Starlink service over Ukraine and that the company was preparing to provide terminals.

Within weeks, Starlink became a backbone of communications infrastructure across Ukraine, helping to maintain government operations, keep businesses open, and assist in humanitarian efforts. As the *New York Times* [reported](#) this July, "More than 42,000 Starlink terminals are now used in Ukraine by the military, hospitals, businesses and aid organizations. During Russian bombing campaigns last year that caused widespread blackouts, Ukraine's public agencies turned to Starlink to stay online." Starlink's contribution toward maintaining critical state, regional, and local infrastructure has been among its most effective applications.

Yet, while Musk's move to supply Ukraine with Starlink in the face of the Russian aggression seemed altruistic on the surface, it was arguably anything but. Musk and Starlink executives boasted openly of supplying free satellite communications service to Ukraine. However, as it turns out, Starlink has hardly fronted the bill. According to the Harvard Kennedy School [Belfer Center](#) for Science and International Affairs, as of September 2022, "based on the figures shared directly by the company, around 85 percent of the terminals and 30 percent of the internet connectivity provided were paid for by the United States, Poland, [U.K.] and other groups." The more likely scenario for Musk's swiftness to deliver Starlink to Ukraine was that the war provided SpaceX a global stage from which to showcase the new Starlink services: to expand their market and grow their consumer base. It is no accident that valuation of SpaceX since then rose by [billions](#), and that Musk secured significant capital investment following Starlink's deployment in Ukraine.

Establishing Starlink in Ukraine gave Musk another, even more concerning edge. It demonstrated how a tech entrepreneur, billionaire, and CEO could play both general and president, shifting the tide of war with a tweet, a phone call, or simple inaction. Musk has engaged [directly](#) with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and top Ukrainian officials in regard to both Starlink and the war in Ukraine. And he has even [stated](#) that he personally spoke with Russian president Vladimir Putin. Indeed, he seems to revel in the power and influence that comes with his status as owner and CEO of several highly influential global firms. This is exemplified in public statements like the [tweet](#) he made in April: "Between

Tesla, Starlink & Twitter, I may have more real-time global economic data in one head than anyone ever.â?•

Starlink was quickly integrated into Ukraineâ??s military communications architecture, primarily for command and control of combat operations and direct control of drones and weapons. In November 2022, at the Web Summit in Lisbon, Portugal, Fedorov [lauded](#) this military application stating, â??Starlink technologies changed this war.â?• And in an [interview](#) with the *New York Times* in July, Fedorov stressed the importance of Starlink for Ukrainian operations: â??Starlink is indeed the blood of our entire communication infrastructure now.â?• However, Starlink service for Ukraineâ??s military operations has not been completely reliable for a variety of reasons. In September 2022, Musk demanded more payment from the Pentagon for the service in Ukraine. And in October, service over Ukraine temporarily went [offline](#), halting Ukrainian military operations until behind-the-scenes talks with the US government quelled Musk.

Perhaps worse, Musk and Starlink executives have, time and again, denounced the offensive military employment of Starlink. On February 8, SpaceX President and Chief Operating Officer Gwynne Shotwell addressed the companyâ??s concerns openly, [stating](#), â??(Starlink was) never meant to be weaponized. However, Ukrainians have leveraged it in ways that were unintentional and not part of any agreementâ?!. We know the military is using them for comms, and thatâ??s OK. But our intent was never to have them use it for offensive purposes.â?•

Shotwell then revealed that the company had been actively taking measures to prevent Ukraineâ??s military from using Starlink services for offensive combat operations, drone control, and targeting. â??There are things that we can do to limit their ability to do thatâ?!. There are things that we can do, and have done.â?• According to his biographer, Musk [asserted](#) that if Starlink had been used to help the Ukraine military destroy the Russian fleet at Crimea, â??It would have been like a mini Pearl Harbor and led to a major escalation. We did not want to be a part of that.â?• Musk believed Ukraine was â??going too far and inviting strategic defeat.â?•

Yet, by openly condemning Ukraineâ??s use of Starlink to enable their command and control of military combat operations, Musk and his Starlink executives demonize our ally in its ongoing defense against a foreign aggressor and staunch mutual adversary. This is not only naÃ¯ve, but also gives aid and comfort to our enemies. Musk, and those like him, bury their heads in the sand and disregard an age-old black-and-white truth of war: War involves killingâ?!and there are real, usually violent, consequences associated with reluctance to kill the enemy at every possible chance. Mykhailo Podolyak, top advisor to Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, adequately [summarized](#) the consequences of Muskâ??s Crimea decision:

By not allowing Ukrainian drones to destroy part of the Russian military fleet via Starlink interference, Elon Musk allowed this fleet to fire Kalibr missiles at Ukrainian cities. As a result, civilians, children are being killed. This is the price of a cocktail of ignorance and big ego.

Equally concerning are Musk's apparent nods to Russia and Putin. Whether intentional or not, Musk has faced criticism for what many see as a [pro-Russia](#) position on the war. Last year, he suggested that Ukraine should cede Crimea to Russia, along with other concessions, in a move that earned him direct condemnation from Ukrainian President Zelenskyy. Musk [retorted](#) that he is clearly supporting Ukraine because his financial support for Russia is \$0. Yet, most recently, he doubled down and urged that both sides should agree to a truce. Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian president and now deputy chairman of Russia's security council, even [applauded](#) Musk for his decision to not enable the offensive on the Black Sea fleet: "It looks like Musk is the last adequate mind in North America." It is reasonable to say that if Russian leaders are applauding your position, you may be supporting the wrong side. While Musk is a private citizen and is therefore empowered with the right to free thought and free speech on foreign policy and the military actions in Ukraine, business leaders like him should understand and respect the power and influence they wield as critical technology providers. In 2019, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos summed this quite well in [speaking](#) at the Reagan National Defense Forum: "If big tech is going to turn their backs on the Department of Defense, this country's in trouble." If only Amazon's Starlink equivalent, [Project Kuiper](#), was online in time for the Ukraine fight.

Yet there are some who [say](#) Musk has acted from behind-the-scenes collaboration with US government and military officials. They cite Musk's insistence that because of US sanctions on Russia at the time, Crimea was not an authorized Starlink coverage area in the first place, as it was *within* sanctioned Russia when the Ukrainian forces requested service for their counterassault. Never mind the vital fact that Crimea was the first Ukrainian territory invaded and annexed by Russia in 2014, and was and is of critical strategic importance to Ukraine's independence. These individuals also cite SpaceX's [Starshield](#) development—a version of Starlink being specifically built for the US government and military. But Starshield is an effort between Starlink and the US government wholly separate from the Ukraine situation (and which, incidentally, renders moot any virtue-signaling by Starlink and Musk in regard to militarization of Starlink technology). Pro-Musk pundits seem to honor Musk as a demigod and cling to a belief that he has kept the war in Ukraine from escalating to the point of nuclear and world war. They defend that Musk has been ethically right in his actions on Ukraine in the face of US saber-rattling, and that anyone opposing his position on Ukraine is a warmonger. In his recent [Newsweek](#) commentary, Professor Max Abrahms of Northeastern University nonsensically referred to those of us condemning Musk's influence in Ukraine as "American war enthusiasts."

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In reality, our concern has nothing to do with "enthusiasm" for this or any war and everything to do with the end goal of liberating the Ukrainian people from Russia's tyranny.

The United States' position on Ukraine is clear: Ukraine is a sovereign democratic ally, and its liberation from Russian aggression and occupation is necessary for defense of the sacred principles of freedom and justice we hold dear as Americans and vital to our national security and that of our allies. Speaking in Lithuania in July, President Biden [proclaimed](#), "We will not waver". Our commitment to Ukraine will not weaken. We will stand for liberty and freedom today, tomorrow, and for as long as it takes. Unfortunately, the actions and statements of one CEO, whose company is currently providing the backbone for communications and command and control in Ukraine, go directly against this commitment and present a significant foreign policy and security problem. General James Dickinson, commander of US Space Command, [testified](#) to the Senate Armed Services Committee in March that, in light of the ongoing issues with deployment of Starlink in Ukraine under Musk's control, the government must from now on establish clear guidelines between commercial providers and the military in times of war.

Whether or not you agree ethically or strategically with Musk's position on the Ukraine-Russia war and his actions to limit the use of Starlink in Ukraine's combat operations, the level of power and influence he has brandished within the US national security and foreign policy sphere sets a dangerous precedent. The United States is not a plutocracy. Our [constitution](#) grants the powers of foreign relations and the employment of military capability to the legislative and executive branches of our government: to elected representatives and their vetted military and civilian appointees. As a country, we may never find ourselves in unanimous agreement with the policies or strategies of these elected representatives and officials. However, our republic demands we entrust them with the power to make and execute such decisions in the interest of the American people. The influence that Musk has flaunted over Starlink's involvement in the Ukraine-Russia war presents a very real, if indirect and unsanctioned, plutocratic power. By enabling Musk, we have allowed a billionaire to wave a scepter of authority over one of our most sensitive foreign affairs to an extent that government and military officials anxiously [deliberate](#) the implications of his every move and decision. Authorities should never have allowed this scenario to unfold.

As of July, the Biden administration and Congress had allocated over [\\$75 billion](#) in humanitarian, financial, and military support to Ukraine, with Biden recently seeking another [\\$24 billion](#) from Congress. Most US assistance to Ukraine is in the form of weapons and weapons systems, training, and intelligence services. However, the US government should have paid equal attention to Ukraine's military communications architecture. DoD's Joint All Domain Command and Control (JADC2) [doctrine](#) warns that: "In the current global security environment, the United States military

faces agile adversaries who increasingly seek to undermine our strategic and operational strengths by impeding, and, where possible, denying our command and control (C2) capabilities. In this time of strategic competition against Russia, China, and their allies, and as we strive to maintain US [overmatch](#), our military understands the need for a robust and resilient communications architecture. Yet, in rolling out rapid assistance to Ukraine, we failed to address known gaps in Ukraine's command, control, and communications architecture and instead applied duct tape with Starlink, neglecting to position Ukraine with the necessary communications dominance over its Russian aggressors. In Starlink's proliferation throughout Ukraine's military, we enabled a force-wide communications architecture that is neither secure nor resilient. It is concerning that, aside from the physical redundancy that comes with thousands of space-born nodes in a [mega-constellation](#), Starlink does not meet the strict ruggedization and transmission security standards of most military communications. Accordingly, its vulnerabilities have already been [exploited](#) by the Russians and others. Moreover, we failed to foresee the power that Musk would exercise over the Ukraine government and military to enable or disable communications services on a whim and to influence the outcome of military and diplomatic efforts.

Was the famed US defense industry positioned to deploy a constellation of secure LEO satellites to provide connectivity not only to the Ukraine military, but to all Ukrainian network users? The truth is: not within the time, and at the relatively low cost, that they were able to deploy Starlink. While our defense industry employs specialized and secure satellite networks for the military and government, it remains in the interest of national security that we do not allow just anyone to use these networks. That said, the US military industrial base had other resilient communications solutions at hand which, given more planning and investment on part of both Ukraine and US officials, could have been deployed for Ukraine's utilization in lieu of Starlink.

Why hadn't a constellation of secure militarized LEOs already been developed and deployed by the US defense industry ahead of a commercial company like Starlink? The answer lies simply in the money trail. Starlink, as a commercial enterprise, has had massive incentive to build a global constellation, and to develop and launch thousands of satellites toward that end, in order to garner the huge global revenue stream that will come from supplying high-speed broadband capability to every corner of the world. This incentive definitely played a part in Musk's zeal to deploy Starlink to Ukraine in the first place, any altruism aside. The defense industry, given its narrow and focused market, has neither that same financial incentive nor the mission to do so. There is a figurative army of professional defense contractors in America across dozens of established firms who are always at the ready to develop, build, and field anything the US military and our allies need. And these firms will never deny capabilities or service based on the political views or emotional sentiments of executives. However, defense innovation, research, and development is driven almost solely via requirements

directly or indirectly communicated from the US government. And most firms simply could not afford to take on the risk that would come with building something like a global LEO architecture *without* significant signaling from the government or DoD that there would be a funded market for their investment. With that in mind, it is vital, moving forward, that US government representatives clearly and transparently communicate and collaborate with defense industry professionals toward exactly what is needed, and what will be funded, in order to meet current and future requirements.

Commercial technology firms have a valuable place within our defense infrastructure, and Starlink is no exception. However, US government representatives and military officials have a crucial imperative to integrate commercial technologies into US and allied operations strategically. This demands an examination of all players involved in the national security sphere, and how they influence national security objectives either *toward* our interests or *away* from them. By no means should a non-state actor or CEO of any company—no matter how wealthy, famous, or influential—wield the level of power that Musk has had to single-handedly affect the outcome of allied combat operations and sway the tide of foreign policy. Now and in the future, US government and military officials alike must make abundantly clear to any individual or commercial firm offering technology toward the national security interests of the United States or our allies: If you are going to enter the arena, enter the arena: we don't need solutions with caveats. And your technology, no matter how novel or critical, does not anoint you a diplomatic or military representative of the United States.

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Image caption: A Falcon 9 rocket carrying Starlink 4-36 payload launches from Space Launch Complex 40 at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, Fla., on Oct. 20, 2022. Starlink is the name of a satellite network developed by the private spaceflight company SpaceX to provide low-cost internet to remote locations. (Joshua Conti/U.S. Space Force)

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