

Digital sovereignty outweighs Musk's convenience

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OPINION

Elon Musk recently launched an offensive against India's regulatory pace over his company Starlink, a SatCom service not getting the licence to operate despite compliance with Indian authorities. Expressing his frustration over delayed commercial approvals, Musk accused "oligarchs" of keeping a monopolistic chokehold on the Indian market, going as far as calling the delays a "crime against the people". It was, to be honest, quite amusing to see a trillion dollars' worth oligarch himself have a go at others, and a misplaced attack at that. While his ire was directed at the telecom companies that have partnered with him, his aim was to hit out at the Indian government. The government has rightly and firmly pushed back, saying that its regulatory framework is fair, transparent, and uniformly applied, and also confirmed that all major satellite communication licensees, including Starlink, Bharti Airtel-backed Eutelsat OneWeb, and Reliance Jio Satellite Communications, are currently at the exact same stage of security evaluation.

So why the tantrum? Does Elon believe that processes can be bypassed to accommodate him if he tries arm-twisting? It isn't how this works! In fact, there has been a long-standing concern about allowing Starlink permits to operate in India. As part of the Standing Committee on IT & Communications, I had repeatedly expressed concerns about the IT Ministry and Telecom Ministry's red-carpet welcome to Starlink. It took the Home Ministry to go through the checks and balances and rigor-



The illustration shows SpaceX founder Elon Musk (c), Chairman of the board of directors of Bharti Airtel Sunil Bharti Mittal (l), and managing director of Reliance Industries, the parent company of Jio Platforms, Mukesh Ambani.
● MAYANK TIWARI/DECCAN CHRONICLE

ous procedures when dealing with strategic communication infrastructure, national security, and digital sovereignty. These issues must outrank the convenience of an impatient foreign corporation. While Starlink presents itself as a simple broadband provider designed to bring high-speed internet to remote villages, beneath it lies a not-so-noble intent because whatever price band the SatCom is offering, as per publicly available information, makes it an expensive proposition. However, the concern is not merely pricing; the company is a vital asset for the American military and its intelligence apparatus. SpaceX holds highly classified contracts with US intelligence agencies to build

robust spy satellite networks. For a nation like India — where an entity deeply intertwined with a foreign military apparatus could control vital communication nodes without exhaustive vetting — this is a proposition fraught with risks. Furthermore, the Ministry of Home Affairs and Indian intelligence agencies have also raised concerns over Starlink's terminal vulnerabilities. Reports that Starlink terminals were active inside Iran during intense unrest — bypassing local telecommunications authority and monitoring — served as a major warning sign for Indian policymakers. If a US-based provider can have its equipment smuggled across borders and activated without state sanction, India faces a legitimate risk of foreign satellite signals spilling into sensitive border zones, where insurgent groups or external bad actors could exploit unmonitored communication lines. The most compelling argument for India's caution lies in Starlink's turbulent track record in active conflict zones, most nota-

bly Ukraine. In the early days of the Russia-Ukraine war, Musk was hailed for activating Starlink terminals to keep Ukrainian forces connected. However, the limits of relying on a whimsical, single-source foreign billionaire quickly became clear. Musk famously denied Ukraine's military request to extend Starlink coverage near Crimea to thwart a Russian naval attack, citing personal fears of escalating the war. This arbitrary exercise of a geopolitical "kill switch" proves that SpaceX keeps ultimate control over where, when, and how its network functions, regardless of local sovereign needs. Furthermore, because Starlink's primary satellite repositories, operations, and technical commands are based in the United States, the US government holds immense regulatory and strategic leverage over the company. If India were to face a critical border escalation with a neighbour, it cannot afford to rely on an infrastructure provider that might shut down connectivity based on the commercial interests of its owner, or under geopolitical



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pressure from Washington. India's rules demand that all user traffic must be routed exclusively through Indian gateways, data centres and core networks must sit within the country, and data cannot be decrypted or mirrored abroad. Furthermore, strict geo-fencing must prevent signal leakage across borders, and authorities must have real-time terminal tracking access to combat smuggling. If Starlink genuinely wants to serve the Indian market, it must patiently satisfy these rigorous security checks, rather than taking to social media to cry foul and bully regulators. Finally, India's long-term digital resilience depends on supporting domestic entities that have true skin in the game. Domestic operations are bound directly by Indian law, answerable to local courts, and invested in the nation's socio-economic stability. Furthermore, tie-ins to local capability, such as the government's mandate to manufacture ground equipment domestically and integrate India's NavIC navigation system, will cultivate a robust private space industry alongside ISRO and IN-SPACE. India should welcome global competition to expand choices for its citizens, but it must not compromise sovereign control over the networks carrying its national data. Our domestic space ecosystem is currently undergoing a vibrant evolution, driven by pioneering private launch firms, satellite start-ups, and ISRO. Foreign service providers are welcome to compete in India's vast market, but they must do so by bowing to the laws of the land and the rules of engagement. India is not up for colonisation ever again or for new-age tech colonisers to dictate their terms.

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Who holds off switch?

Starlink, dependence, and India's satcom policy

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OPINION

Starlink poses significant risks to India. The central one is loss of control over availability. Starlink services may stay active where the government wants them halted, and go dark where the government needs them. A secondary risk is that Starlink could use sensitive user data for intelligence or commercial advantage. These risks exist with any foreign satellite service. We find them more acute with Starlink for three reasons. First, its technological lead. It operates the largest constellation, with over 11,000 satellites, and SpaceX's launch cadence is unmatched. Competitors will take years to catch up. Second, SpaceX's relationship with the US government. SpaceX is critical to American defence, intelligence, and space programmes. The leverage also



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runs the other way: SpaceX depends on Washington for contracts, spectrum, and licences. In a crisis, the US could press it to share data or deny coverage in ways that serve American interests over India's. Third, Musk's conduct. He restricted Ukraine's access, re-

fused a request near Crimea, and publicly boasted about his leverage over its front line. Starlink declined Indian requests for user details after the Andaman smuggling case. Its January 2026 privacy policy permits customer data to train AI models, and the merger with xAI followed short-

ly after. India's response has been serious. The Department of Telecommunications' May 2025 conditions require Indian gateways, bar routing through inter-satellite links, create monitoring zones near borders, and mandate 20 percent indigeni-

sation of the ground segment. IN-SPACE has cleared only Gen 1 satellites, while Starlink has re-applied for Gen 2 approval. These measures have limits. India can inspect gateways but not orbit, so key conditions rest on self-certification. Reports of Starlink use in Manipur have raised questions about the reliability of geofencing. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has questioned why unauthorised Starlink terminals remain active in Iran despite SpaceX's ability to disable them remotely. Direct-to-device services raise new routing and oversight questions that India's regulations have yet to resolve. Jamming is no substitute, since low-Earth-orbit terminals are hard to block. Above all, operational control remains with SpaceX, and India cannot independently guarantee continued service or the shutdown of all unauthorised connections. We therefore recommend combining compliance with structural measures that reduce dependence:

1. Expand the Digital Bharat

2. Nidhi to take terrestrial broadband to underserved areas and shrink demand for satellite internet.
3. Prioritise providers whose corporate structures give India leverage, such as joint ventures, Indian equity or jurisdictions with stronger enforcement.
4. Keep using Starlink for functions like disaster relief, but diversify vendors.
5. Discourage general retail use of foreign satellite internet to avoid a dependency that will be hard to reverse.
6. Frame a direct-to-device regulatory framework now, before the technology forces the issue.
7. Operationalise the INR 900-crore satcom monitoring facility.

These recommendations carry costs. Terrestrial expansion will be slower and more expensive for remote users, and alternative vendors are fewer than we would like. That said, we judge that the price of dependence on a single foreign operator is higher.

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