

Musk Says He Restricted Ukraine's Use of Starlink to Avoid World War III

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Eccentric billionaire Elon Musk promised to prevent Ukraine's use of the Starlink network from escalating the conflict. The SpaceX, Twitter and Tesla owner initially supported Ukraine with the satellite internet constellation system, however, he finally limited support despite receiving a lot of criticism in the West.

"Starlink is the communication backbone of Ukraine, especially at the front lines, where almost all other Internet connectivity has been destroyed. But we will not enable escalation of conflict that may lead to WW3," Musk wrote on Twitter on February 13.

Earlier, SpaceX announced that it had restricted Ukraine's access to Starlink's satellite communications to control drones as the network was "never intended to be weaponised."

Musk likely believed that he would boost his and SpaceX's image and reputation by providing services to Ukraine. In the West, it undoubtedly did. However, the moment Musk realised that the Ukrainian military were using his technology to increase their combat capabilities, it was inevitable that Kiev would be cut off as it would negatively affect the company's long-term business prospects, particularly when trying to expand into non-Western markets.

Now, the Twitter boss is facing an avalanche of criticism for limiting the use of Starlink in Ukraine, but from the point of view of his commercial interests, it is a pragmatic decision. In fact, it was the tweets by former NASA astronaut Scott Kelly that prompted Musk to comment once again on Starlink's use in Ukraine.

Kelly on February 11 called on Musk to "restore the full functionality of your Starlink satellites."

"Defense from a genocidal invasion is not an offensive capability. It's survival," tweeted Kelly, whose twin brother, Mark Kelly, is unsurprisingly a Democratic US senator from

Arizona. A day later, Musk tweeted that “Starlink is the communication backbone of Ukraine,” before saying that SpaceX “will not enable escalation of conflict that may lead to WW3.”

“We have not exercised our right to turn them off,” Musk stressed in a separate tweet.

The Twitter exchange came after SpaceX President Gwynne Shotwell said that the company has been “really pleased to be able to provide Ukraine connectivity and help them in their fight for freedom” but that Starlink “was never intended to be weaponized.”

“Ukrainians have leveraged it in ways that were unintentional and not part of any agreement, so we have to work on that at Starlink,” Shotwell said, speaking at a space conference in Washington on February 8.

Shotwell stressed that using Starlink as a communications system “for the military is fine, but our intent was never to have them use it for offensive purposes.” She made reference to reports about Ukraine using Starlink “on drones.”

“I’m not going to go into the details; there are things that we can do to limit their ability to do that ... there are things that we can do and have done,” she added.

It was Elon Musk who put himself between a rock and a hard place by becoming involved in the Ukraine conflict. As said, it was likely an impulsive decision in the belief that it would boost SpaceX’s image, but then cold hard economic factors have forced a humiliating partial withdrawal from Ukraine.

Musk first responded to the appeal for aid made by Ukrainian Vice Prime Minister Mykhailo Fedorov in early 2022 by dispatching 20,000 SpaceX Starlink terminals to the country. Due to Russia’s effectiveness in knocking out Ukraine’s telecommunications infrastructure with missile strikes, the country relied on SpaceX’s technology for uninterrupted and secure internet access.

“Over 100 cruise missiles attacked energy and communications infrastructure. But with Starlink we quickly restored the connection in critical areas. Starlink continues to be an essential part of critical infrastructure,” Fedorov tweeted on October 12.

Despite the endless praise, Musk expressed his reservation on January 31 about the Ukrainian military using Starlink to fly drones carrying anti-tank grenades over Russian positions. He emphasised that he would “not allow” the practice to continue.

“SpaceX Starlink has become the connectivity backbone of Ukraine all the way up to the front lines. However, we are not allowing Starlink to be used for long-range drone strikes. This is the damned if you don’t part,” he tweeted.

Mykailo Podolyak, a senior adviser to Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, attempted to pressure Starlink in Kiev’s usual arrogant manner by issuing an ultimatum:

“Either they are on the side of Ukraine & the right to freedom, and don’t seek ways to do harm. Or they are on RF’s side & its ‘right’ to kill & seize territories. SpaceX (Starlink) and Mrs Shotwell should choose a specific option.”

However, Musk has made his position clear, tweeting on September 16: “Starlink is meant for peaceful use only.” This is also aligned with Starlink’s terms of service, which states: “Starlink is not designed or intended for use with or in offensive or defensive weaponry or other comparable end-uses.”

It is recalled that in October, Musk sparked controversy in the Western world when he tweeted his proposal to bring peace, which included territorial concessions to Russia and for Ukraine to be neutral.

“Redo elections of annexed regions under UN supervision. Russia leaves if that is will of the people,” Mr Musk said. “Crimea formally part of Russia, as it has been since 1783 (until Khrushchev’s mistake). Water supply to Crimea assured. Ukraine remains neutral. This is highly likely to be the outcome in the end – just a question of how many die before then. Also worth noting that a possible, albeit unlikely, outcome from this conflict is nuclear war.”

It is here that we first see Musk try to back out of the mistake he committed by involving his company in the war. By deciding to unnecessarily involve himself in a major geopolitical and military issue, he is now receiving criticism and condemnation from all across the Western World for restricting support to Ukraine, whilst having set in stone mistrust for any potential future clients from the non-Western world.

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