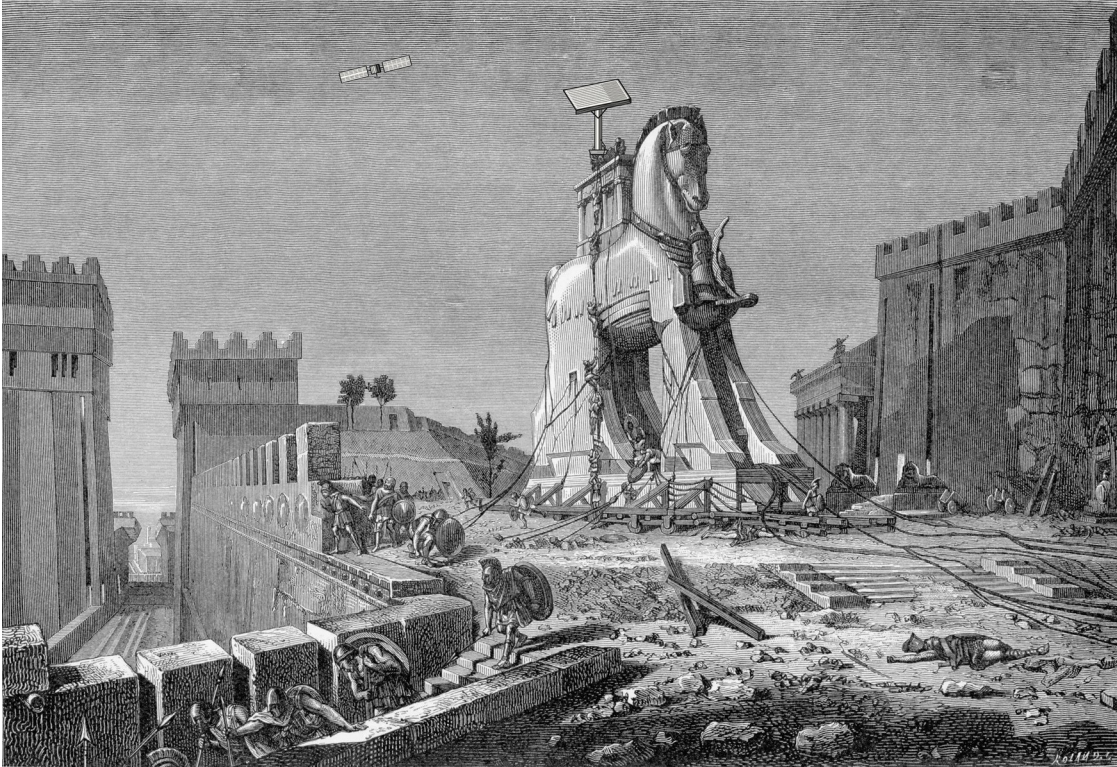


Is Starlink a Trojan horse?

It arrived as a gift. It became indispensable. And the keys stayed with one man.



One side of the argument. This article deliberately presents only the case against, to stimulate debate. Its companion piece, “So many new opportunities”, makes the case for. A balanced assessment, with full references, is set out in the investigation on which both are based.

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The Trojans thought they had won. After ten years of siege, the Greeks had sailed away, leaving behind a magnificent wooden horse. An offering to the gods, they were told. Bring it inside and the city will be safe for ever. A priest warned them: *beware of Greeks bearing gifts*. Nobody listened. They dragged it through the gates, and that night the city fell.

In February 2022, as Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, another gift arrived. Within two days of a request from Kyiv, Elon Musk’s SpaceX switched on its Starlink satellite internet over the country, and dishes followed. It was hailed as a miracle. Four and a half years later, Ukraine’s army, hospitals, emergency services and shelters depend on it. So do the US military, millions of homes, airlines and ships in more than 160 countries.

And the keys to all of it are held by one man.

One company, one man, one switch

Starlink is the largest communications network ever put into space: about 11,100 satellites, more than 12 million customers. All of its internet traffic comes down to SpaceX ground stations before reaching the wider internet. Every dish is registered to a SpaceX account. And SpaceX can switch off a single dish, a list of dishes, a region or an entire country, without touching anything on the ground.

SpaceX became a public company in June 2026, worth around \$2 trillion on its first day of trading. Don't imagine that shareholders can restrain it. Elon Musk owns about 42% of the shares but, thanks to super-voting stock, controls about 82% of the votes. In plain terms: what Musk decides, happens.

He has not been shy about what that means. In March 2025 he wrote: "My Starlink system is the backbone of the Ukrainian army. Their entire front line would collapse if I turned it off." He added that he never would. But a promise is not a contract.

The switch has already been used

This is not a hypothetical worry. The power to decide who gets connected in a war has already been exercised:

- **Crimea, 2022.** Ukraine asked for coverage to attack Russian warships with sea drones. Musk said no.
- **Kherson, 2022.** According to Reuters, Musk personally ordered coverage cut during a Ukrainian counter-attack, and a Ukrainian military source said this helped wreck an attempt to encircle Russian troops. Musk denies turning off terminals.
- **2023.** SpaceX restricted Ukraine's use of Starlink to control weapons such as drone boats.
- **2025.** Reuters reported that American negotiators raised the threat of losing Starlink in tough talks over a minerals deal with Ukraine. This, too, was denied.

Who decides is not even always Musk. Because SpaceX is an American company, its service is shaped by Washington: by Pentagon contracts, by sanctions rules, by political pressure. In early 2026, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, the US State Department quietly bought thousands of Starlink dishes and smuggled about 6,000 into Iran, weeks before American and Israeli bombs began to fall. In Gaza, Musk agreed that Starlink could operate only with Israel's permission.

Whatever you think of those choices, notice who is making them. Not the countries concerned. A private company, and the government of the United States.

Is anything stopping a switch-off?

Very little that anyone can see. The Pentagon's contracts with SpaceX reportedly include special terms, but they are secret. In 2023, five US senators asked the Defense Department what protected Ukraine against a unilateral cut-off. No public answer has been found. Senator Elizabeth Warren asked again in 2025, during a public feud between Musk and President Trump in which Trump threatened to cancel SpaceX's government contracts and Musk briefly threatened to retire the spacecraft that carries astronauts to the space station, before backing down. Neither side, it seems, has a reliable check on the other.

Ukraine's own adviser on defence technology insists that Musk is "first of all a businessman" and won't cut off a paying customer. Perhaps. But that is a hope, not a safeguard. Poland, which pays for more than 20,000 of Ukraine's subscriptions, has already warned it would look elsewhere if SpaceX proved "an unreliable provider". And on 4 October 2026, President Zelenskyy announced that Ukraine is building its

own satellite system: one, as the press put it, that Musk can't switch off. Countries don't build alternatives to things they trust.

A single point of failure

Even if no one ever presses the switch deliberately, Starlink puts an extraordinary amount in one basket.

On 24 July 2025, a fault in SpaceX's core software took the entire network down worldwide for about two and a half hours. Along Ukraine's front line, connectivity simply disappeared. During a separate outage, about two dozen US Navy drone boats off California lost contact with their operators for nearly an hour. One fault, in one company's software, reached from a Ukrainian trench to the Pacific.

Then there are attackers. Hours before Russia invaded Ukraine, its hackers broke into the ground systems of a different satellite network, Viasat, and wiped thousands of modems across Ukraine and Europe. Nothing similar has been reported against Starlink. But Starlink is run in exactly that way: from the ground, with software pushed to the whole fleet at once. Its own dishes have already been broken into by researchers. Russia and Iran jam its signals. Russian soldiers bought dishes on the black market, as did a paramilitary force in Sudan's civil war, until SpaceX stepped in. The more the world relies on one network, the more tempting a target it becomes.

And there is no spare. Europe's answer, IRIS², won't begin service until 2029. Amazon's rival network had launched only around 400 satellites by the summer of 2026. In Ukraine, experts say losing Starlink would not necessarily collapse the front, but it would "certainly go much darker".

Your data, their AI

Since February 2026, SpaceX has also owned xAI, the company behind the Grok chatbot and the social network X. Starlink's helpline is now answered by Grok, which handles more than 15,000 calls a day.

About two weeks before the merger, Starlink quietly rewrote its privacy policy. Unless customers opt out, their data can now be used "to train our machine learning or artificial intelligence models" and shared with unnamed "third-party collaborators". The data Starlink collects includes location, payment details and what the policy calls "communication data", including audio and visual information. The policy doesn't say whether this feeds Grok. SpaceX didn't comment.

SpaceX now owns the network, the phone connection, the AI, the social platform and the rockets. It has applied to launch up to a million AI "data centre" satellites, called Starlink, linked through Starlink. Few companies, if any, have ever held so many links in the chain of the world's communications.

From network to weapon

The final step is perhaps the most troubling. Through Starshield, its military arm, SpaceX builds spy satellites for the US government. It has won billions of dollars of contracts for "Golden Dome", America's planned missile shield: satellites to track missiles, a network to pass the warnings on and, possibly, interceptors that destroy missiles in space. In September 2026 the US Air Force Secretary confirmed, for the first time, that America already has "space-control weapons" in orbit.

Nobody has linked those weapons to Starlink. But the company that controls the world's largest communications network is becoming part of the chain that runs from a missile warning to a weapon. Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* warned of systems in which one person could set off a catastrophe that

nobody could call back. Starlink is not that. But it is closer to it than any communications network should be.

Beware of gifts

None of this requires anyone to be a villain. The danger is the structure: a network the world can no longer do without, controlled by one company, answerable to one man and one government, and growing into AI and weapons faster than anyone can regulate it. If anything goes wrong at the centre, by choice, by accident or by attack, everyone feels it at once.

The Trojans had their warnings. Laocoön spoke; Cassandra prophesied. They were ignored. Today the warnings come from Indian security officials, Polish ministers, American senators and Ukraine's own government. The question is whether, this time, anyone is listening.

The case for the prosecution, in brief

- One man controls about 82% of the votes in the company that runs it.
- Service can be switched off for any dish, region or country, and has been restricted in war.
- The safeguards in government contracts are secret.
- A single software fault took the whole network down in July 2025.
- Customer data is opted in to AI training by default.
- The same company is moving into missile defence and orbital AI.
- There is no comparable alternative before the end of the decade.

Some reports described here have been denied by those involved, as noted in the text.