

Starlink in India: National Security Must Guide Commercial Policy

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Introduction

India is fully justified in making an independent and carefully calibrated decision on Starlink. The issue is not whether India welcomes foreign investment or technological competition. It plainly does. The question is whether a foreign-controlled satellite communications network, with implications for military operations, internal security, border management and national cohesion, can operate under enforceable Indian sovereign authority. That question has become sharper in recent weeks. Elon Musk has publicly criticised the delay in Starlink's entry, and the [government](#) has rejected his allegations as baseless. The controversy deserves a calm, evidence-based answer.

Where Things Stand

Starlink has cleared most regulatory stages. It holds a Department of Telecommunications licence with authorisation for global mobile personal communication by satellite (GMPCS), granted in June 2025. It received the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (IN-SPACe) authorisation in July 2025 and [provisional spectrum](#) in August 2025. Only final security clearance from the Ministry of Home Affairs remained. In October 2026, the [Minister of State for Communications](#) confirmed that this clearance was still pending and stressed that it had "nothing to do with one company."

[Communications Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia](#) has made the same point. Responding to Musk's criticism, he noted that Starlink, Jio's satellite arm, and Eutelsat OneWeb all hold licences, and that each can start operations only after meeting the security conditions individually. Draft rules issued in June 2026 for the [administrative assignment](#) of satellite spectrum also require a separate

security clearance before any consumer launch. In other words, the process is uniform. It is slow because the stakes are high, not because one operator is being singled out.

The Legal and Regulatory Foundation

The constitutional position is clear. Entry 31 of [List I](#) of the Seventh Schedule, read with Article 246, places telecommunications, wireless, and broadcasting within Parliament's legislative competence. Entry 1 separately addresses India's defence.

Parliament has used that competence. The [Telecommunications Act, 2023](#) provides for the administrative assignment of satellite spectrum rather than auction. Section 20 empowers the government to take temporary possession of any telecommunication service or network in a public emergency or in the interest of public safety. That power is meaningful only if the government can actually exercise it over every network operating in India.

The Department of Telecommunications translated these principles into specific conditions in May 2025. Satcom operators must route Indian traffic through gateways in India and provide lawful interception linked to the national monitoring system. They must be able to restrict service to particular users or areas during hostilities, and must observe special monitoring zones along the land border and coast. They must also integrate [India's Navigation with Indian Constellation \(NavIC\) navigation system](#) and localise part of their ground segment over time. The [Telecom Regulatory Authority of India](#) (TRAI) separately recommended a spectrum charge of 4 per cent of adjusted gross revenue, with an additional annual fee for urban subscribers.

These conditions are demanding but not unusual for strategic infrastructure. They are the practical expression of sovereignty.

Nine Reasons for India to Make Its Own Call

1. National sovereignty must prevail over commercial interests: Satellite communication is no longer merely another broadband service. It is strategic infrastructure that shapes intelligence, surveillance, military operations, internal security, and crisis management. Starlink is no small player. By [March 2026](#), it reported more than 10 million subscribers in 164 countries and about 9,600 satellites in orbit. No company, however advanced, can claim an automatic right to operate outside the host nation's security framework.

2. **The Manipur experience warrants serious examination:** In December 2024, security forces recovered Starlink-type equipment during operations against suspected insurgents in Manipur. [Elon Musk](#) responded that Starlink beams were switched off over India. Whatever the device's actual use, the episode showed how terminals can cross borders and surface in conflict zones. Unauthorised satellite connectivity in such areas presents a genuine challenge for security agencies.
3. **The drone–satellite nexus is emerging along India's borders:** Pakistan-linked networks have been using increasingly sophisticated drones to smuggle narcotics, arms and ammunition into Punjab. Reports indicate that [Starlink hardware](#) has been seized in drone-linked drug cases on the Punjab border. At sea, [Andaman police](#) found that smugglers carrying more than 6,000 kg of methamphetamine in 2024 had navigated with a Starlink device. The broader danger is unmistakable. Satellite connectivity reduces dependence on conventional radio links and complicates surveillance and interdiction.
4. **Ukraine demonstrates the risks of strategic dependence:** In 2022, [Elon Musk](#) declined Ukraine's request to enable Starlink coverage for an attack near Crimea, citing the risk of complicity in a major act of war. In 2025, [Reuters](#) reported that American negotiators had raised the possibility of cutting Ukraine's Starlink access during minerals talks. Most recently, in October 2026, speed caps imposed on Ukraine's Starshield military terminals disrupted its drone operations. [Reuters](#) reported that the order came from within the White House. [President Donald Trump](#) denied that the White House had ordered the restrictions. Starshield differs from commercial Starlink, but both rely on SpaceX infrastructure. The lesson is clear. India cannot allow essential communications to depend on the uninterrupted discretion of a foreign company or government.
5. **Sovereign control over communications and data is indispensable:** India must insist on auditable domestic gateways, enforceable lawful interception, terminal authentication, geofencing, and appropriate emergency controls. Regulatory assurances are insufficient unless they are technically demonstrated under realistic conditions. Encouragingly, the technology exists. In October 2025, [SpaceX](#) disabled more than 2,500 Starlink kits near suspected scam centres in Myanmar. A provider that can switch off terminals in one country can be required to meet enforceable controls in another. Such conditions must apply equally to domestic and foreign operators, with safeguards against arbitrary surveillance.

6. National cohesion is a legitimate security consideration: India's linguistic, religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity is a civilisational strength. It can also be exploited by hostile information operations, extremist mobilisation, and coordinated disinformation. Satellite internet can sustain communications beyond terrestrial network controls. [Indian agencies](#) reportedly paused Starlink's final clearance in mid-2026, partly over concerns that its terminals could operate in Iran during unrest there. The concern is not hypothetical.

7. India does not have to choose between Starlink and digital isolation: India has invested heavily in 4G, 5G, optical fibre, and digital public infrastructure. Satellite broadband offers additional benefits for Himalayan settlements, islands, maritime users, disaster relief, and remote communities. Both [Bharti Airtel and Reliance Jio](#) signed agreements in March 2025 to distribute Starlink services, reflecting genuine commercial demand. Satellite broadband should complement terrestrial networks, especially where they fall short, rather than become an indispensable foreign-controlled backbone.

8. Strategic autonomy requires resilience, redundancy and competitive neutrality: India should avoid dependence on any single constellation, whether American, European, or eventually, Indian. Alternatives are emerging. The Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) commercial arm launched [GSAT-N2](#), a high-throughput Ka-band satellite covering the Indian mainland and island territories, in November 2024. Indian Authorities have found [Jio's](#) proposed low-earth-orbit constellation of about 1,600 satellites to be technically sound by Indian authorities. Every operator should face the same transparent and technically demonstrable standards.

9. A calibrated, conditional approval is preferable to either unconditional entry or a reflexive ban: A phased rollout, independent security testing, periodic compliance audits, incident-reporting obligations, and enforceable suspension provisions would protect national interests while allowing India to benefit from innovation.

The Wider Strategic Context

India's caution reflects a global trend. Major powers increasingly treat satellite constellations as instruments of national power. [China](#) is building two state-backed constellations, Guowang and Qianfan, each planned at well over 10,000 satellites, in part to avoid dependence on Starlink. [Chinese military researchers](#) have also studied ways to disable or degrade Starlink in a conflict. If

the world's largest constellations become strategic assets for their home states, India must assume that access to them may one day be shaped by politics rather than contracts.

At the same time, balance requires acknowledging the benefits. Low-orbit broadband can connect remote border villages, support armed forces in areas without terrestrial coverage and keep communications alive during disasters. Competition among Starlink, OneWeb, Jio and others would lower costs and widen access. The objective is not to keep Starlink out. The goal is to let it in on terms India controls.

We also need to distinguish between civil and military use. Commercial broadband for villages, ships and disaster teams can tolerate some dependence on a foreign operator, provided Indian controls are robust. Military command, control and drone operations cannot. For these, India needs sovereign or firmly controlled capacity, whether through Indian constellations, reserved bandwidth on Indian satellites or contractual guarantees that survive a crisis. The Ukrainian experience shows that a commercial service can become a military lifeline almost overnight. Planning should therefore assume that any network widely used in India will, in a conflict, be drawn into military use, and should regulate accordingly.

Conclusion

India is neither anti-Starlink nor anti-technology. It is pro-connectivity, pro-competition, and above all, pro-national security. In a neighbourhood marked by hostile states, terrorism, cross-border narcotics networks, and increasingly sophisticated drone warfare, communications cannot be assessed through commercial considerations alone.

India has demonstrated its commitment to digital empowerment through a remarkable expansion of terrestrial communications. Satellite broadband should strengthen that achievement, not introduce avoidable strategic vulnerabilities. India welcomes global technology, investment and competition. It retains the sovereign right to decide who operates its critical communications infrastructure, under what conditions and with what safeguards. Commercial convenience cannot outrank national security.

The Ukraine experience reinforces one fundamental strategic lesson. A nation must never discover during a crisis that the ultimate switch controlling its essential communications lies beyond its sovereign authority.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies [CAPSS])

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