

Mongolia-SpaceX Deal Provokes a Security Stir in China

Chinese commentators warn Starlink's nearby satellites could support US military in a conflict and breach the Great Firewall of China

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Mongolia's recent decision to adopt SpaceX's Starlink internet services is stirring security concerns across the border in China, both as a potential military threat and a possible way around Beijing's strict censorship regime on perceived as "harmful" foreign websites.

On July 6, the Communications Regulatory Commission of Mongolia issued [special licenses](#) for SpaceX, founded by American billionaire tycoon Elon Musk, to operate as a service provider using low-orbit satellites and for Starlink to provide internet services in the country.

The decision, part of the country's ongoing digital transformation and New Recovery Policy, was announced ahead of the annual [Mongolia Economic Forum 2023](#) held on July 9-10.

"A network of fiber optic cables already provides wide-reaching access to high-speed internet across Mongolia," **Minister for Digital Development and Communications Uchral Nyam-Osor** said on July 7.

"But Starlink's technology will provide greater access to hard-to-reach areas of the country. Herders, farmers, businesses and miners living and working across our vast country will be able to access and use information from all over the world to improve their lives," the minister said.

Currently, people in China cannot access foreign websites blocked by the Golden Shield Project, also known as the "Great Firewall of China," unless they use virtual personal networks (VPNs). China has not adopted Starlink's internet services due to national security concerns.

Some Chinese pundits have an alarmist view of the satellite deal.

“Mongolia is our neighbor. The satellite cannot provide its services to one area and sharply draw a line and stop providing them in another area,” Chen Jiesen, a Shanghai-based commentator, [says](#) in his vlog. “The network capacity can easily spill over to nearby places. Will it break our Great Firewall?”

Chen says even if Starlink promises not to cross the line, it has already planned to provide services in Mongolia and Pakistan, neighbors of China’s Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang regions, respectively. He writes if destabilizing social events happen in either neighbor, the related news may influence people in China through Starlink’s services.

He also says that, with Starlink’s autonomous services, countries that use its services cannot opt to shut down internet services in such situations.

Some Chinese commentators have said that Starlink’s dual-use satellites could pose a threat to China’s [information](#) and [national security](#), especially during wartime.



A Falcon 9 rocket carrying Starlink 4-27 payload launches from Space Launch Complex 40 at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station on August 19, 2022. Photo: US Space Force / Joshua Conti

SpaceX did not immediately reply to Asia Times’ request for comment.

A spokesperson of the Mongolian Ministry of Digital Development and Communications asserted, however, that the use of Starlink’s services will not affect Mongolia’s relations with neighboring states.

“Cross-border communications infrastructure and connectivity are governed by international treaties that have been mutually agreed upon by all countries, including Mongolia and its neighboring states,” the spokesperson said. “These treaties serve as a foundation for fostering cooperation and understanding among the nations involved.”

He said Mongolia maintains friendly bilateral relations with its neighbors and holds the utmost respect for the sovereignty of all nations.

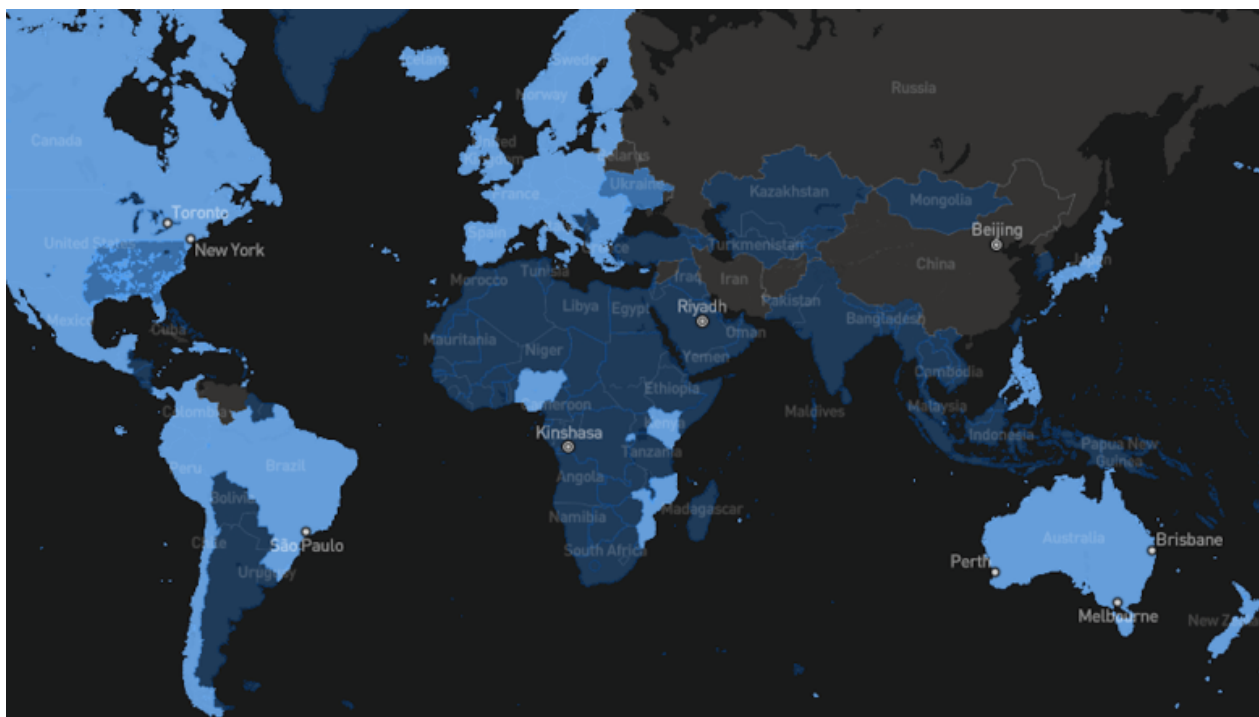
“As for China, it has established its own regulations and monitoring mechanisms concerning such technologies,” he said. “Consumers in China will be governed by their own jurisdiction in accordance with their country’s laws and regulations.”

He said the Mongolian government has openly extended an invitation to all low-orbit connectivity providers to explore market opportunities within the country and Starlink was chosen as it was the first to enter the market.

Beijing’s Warning

As of May this year, Starlink had built a fast-growing network of more than 4,000 satellites in low-Earth orbit (LEO). The company has plans to boost that number to 42,000 by mid-2027.

Its services have so far been adopted by at least [32](#) countries with holdouts including China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and Iran, according to a company [map](#).



Starlink’s internet services will be available in most Asian countries, except China and North Korea.

Photo: starlink.com/map

In May last year, the People’s Liberation Army Daily, a Chinese military-run newspaper, published an [article](#) entitled, “Beware of Starlink’s barbaric expansion and military applications.”

“Although Starlink says it provides high-speed internet services for civil use, it has a deep background related to the US military,” the article said. “One of its launch centers is located inside the US Vandenberg Air Force Base and it tested a secure connection between its satellites and the US Air Force’s fighter jets.”

The article said Starlink’s satellites can boost the US military’s combat power, including through satellite-enabled remote sensing, communication, navigation and positioning

capabilities.

Last October, Musk [told](#) a Financial Times editor that Beijing had sought assurances that he would not sell Starlink in China.

“Starlink is the backbone of the Ukrainian army’s command and control system on the Ukrainian battlefield, and China also needs to have this capability,” a Jiangxi-based military writer [says](#). The safety factor and communication capabilities that come with having tens of thousands of Starlink satellites are far superior to relying on a few large satellites, he says.

The writer stresses that, as high-speed data transmission is essential in wartime, China’s demand for communication satellites will continue to increase. He says China has built a 5G network locally and will develop a low-orbit satellite network to serve Belt and Road countries.

On July 9, China successfully [launched](#) its first low-orbit satellite that can provide internet services, Xinhua reported.

Mongolia’s ‘Crazy Idea’

Apart from Starlink, Mongolia is seeking to form a partnership with Musk’s Tesla, the world’s largest electric vehicle (EV) manufacturer.

On June 7, Mongolian **Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai** asked Musk in a [virtual meeting](#) to start research on the use of Mongolia’s copper and rare earth elements to make Teslas in the country. He [said](#) that, although this idea may sound crazy for the moment, it could work.

He also suggested the establishment of a scholarship program to train Mongolia’s information technology (IT) engineers.

The Mongolian government said Starlink’s introduction is the first stage of its ambitious and wide-ranging program to develop a space economy. It said it is strengthening partnerships with G7 countries to explore space-related cooperation opportunities for peaceful purposes, including on communication satellites.

Mongolian Parliament Speaker **Gombojavyn Zandanshatar** told Asia Times in an interview that during this year’s Mongolia Economic Forum the government also entered into a partnership with the London-based What3Words, which operates a geocode system that can help streamline postal services and highlight tourism spots.

To attract more foreign investment, the government will also set up a private partnership center and an investment and trade agency, Zandanshatars said, adding that Parliament is committed to revising the Draft Law on Investment.

“China is a particularly important trading partner for Mongolia, representing 82% of our exports in 2021,” he said. “Further investment in this partnership from our side will ensure the success of our long-term development policies.”

He stressed that Mongolia will continue to create an environment that welcomes responsible foreign investors in all sectors and ensures that they are given the same level of treatment

as local businesses.

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Featured image: SpaceX's Starlink Mission in 2019. Photo: Starlink

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