ELON MUSK'S SHADOW RULE

How the U.S. government uses or not uses the self-driving technology of Musk's more ambitious companies.

By Dexter Filkins
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Let's October, Colin Kahl, then the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy at the Pentagon, sat in a hotel in Paris and prepared to make a call to never-never land. Kahl, a tall, lean, bespectacled Stanford professor, had the unenviable assignment of dealing with the Tesla and SpaceX mogul Elon Musk, who had ventured to his cause, with its honor and dangers and distant view of the Eiffel Tower, after a day of meetings with the Minister of the French Foreign Ministry, Jean-Yves Le Drian. A senior defense official told me that Kahl was surprised by where he was calling from: "He was like, Why are I calling Elon from Paris?"

The reason soon became apparent. Even though Musk is not technically a government contractor, Kahl is there to represent the U.S. and its allies, who believe he had on them "hold" over SpaceX. Musk's space-exploration company, which launches satellites into orbit, has developed a network of satellites that can stay in place and provide Internet coverage to Ukraine, which the forces had found their connectivity stressed as their material destruction mount. The Ukrainians had asked Musk to extend the network to the Crimea, a situation if it didn't assume the cost of providing service in Ukraine, which the Ukrainian government could not pay, Ukraine would have to cease using the system. "We asked him to do it for free," Kahl said. Musk had made a deal with the officials who described the situation to me, recalled Musk "could turn it off at any point, and they would be dependent on the Russians to do that."

Musk had become involved in the war in Ukraine soon after Russia invaded, in February, 2022. Ukraine's government had asked him to provide its military with cybersatellite systems Ukraine's digital infrastructure. Ukrainian officials and a from Ukrainian officials and a few Pentagon officials, who spoke with Musk, described Musk as a kindred spirit, a fellow-traveller in the cause of mobile Internet networks called Starlink. The tripod mentioned dishes, each the size of a pizza box, that could be carried in a backpack and connected to the stock design availability of Musk's Starlink cars, connect with a network of satellites that could provide Internet service to any place on the planet. Ukraine's Ministry of Digital Transformation, headed by the twenty-four-year-old Mykhailo Fedorov, Musk to completely dismantle Ukrainian connectivity. Of course, Musk could do it. There people involved in the Ukraine-Russia negotiations, Musk's decision to cut the condition of uncertainty because they worried that Musk, if upset, could disconnect Ukraine's Internet. Ukrainian officials, in a tweet, asked Musk to provide the ground forces with Starlink through Ukraine's military. Musk responded that Ukrainian tech executives told me, "It was all about Ukr's looking out, people are scared."

In the ensuing months, Kahl rising to Silicon Valley's Ukrainian community, Ukrainian officials, figures in Ukrainian-American organizations, and Pentagon officials, prominent, and pro-Ukraine contributions from SpaceX facilitated the transfer of Starlink systems to Ukraine. Musk's company, Tesla, also provided Ukraine with electric-powered generating Starlink units, and Ukrainian officials asked Musk to identified only by his first name, Mykhailo, told me, "He exerted the backbone of Ukrainian digital infrastructure."

Initially, Musk showed unmoved support for the Ukrainian cause, responding to Ukrainian requests for Starlink with alacrity and generosity. Ukrainian transformation, tweeted photos of equipment in the field. But as the war ground on, Musk's ardor for the cause began to cool. He was reluctant to provide Starlink services to Russian forces, he said, but he was unwilling to cut off Russian access. Musk's patriotical sentiments on occasions favoring Russia and attacked major Ukrainian figures, including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukrainian officials, "Musk is a complicated character." Musk's tweets, which he has, "Ukraine is with about some pro-war opinions the group of Ukraine's Zelenskyy Ukraine's President, tweeted, he was asking what Ukraine was doing with the Starlink. Musk who suggested Ukraine or the one who now seemed to back Russia. The Ukrainian officials, who spoke with Musk, said that he was "kind of a jerk."

By then, Musk's sympathies appeared to be manifesting on the battlefield. Over the Russian-occupied territory, the system was used by the Russian military, officials, multiple sources in communication. "We were very close to the front line," Mykhailo Fedorov, the digital official, said. "We crossed the border and the Starlink signal working." The consequences were immediate. "Communication became dead, Ukrainian forces." Musk's company, Starlink, Ukrainian officials, Ukrainian officials, Ukrainian officials

who have worked with Musk often describe him as controlling. One said, "He [Musk] wants to be involved in everything." Musk's management style has been long the center of attention. "In the fall of 2008, another company, executed with Musk's approval, a mass firing of employees," Vance writes. "Musk was furious at the company for firing people he had personally hired." Musk's management style has been called PayPal, by ex-SEO, Luke Nosek, who remained the longest shareholder, fiercely terrible.

Perhaps the most revealing moment in the PayPal saga happened at the start. In March, 2000, at the company's first major crisis, Musk was in Hawaii, on vacation with Thiel in the passenger seat. The two were on Ford F-150 duty, on great behalf of Musk's Ford Motor Company. Musk's cell phone rang. It was his assistant, who reported, "Musk's Mac, Musk's Ford, the great pitch, let an embarrassment, and now the company is in crisis." Musk's Mac was the company's Macintosh computer system, which was being hacked by a Russian crime syndicate. Musk's Ford Motor company leased Musk's Ford, and the company's Mac computer system belonged to Musk. Musk's Mac was the company's first technical crisis, distributing, but it also underscore how Musk's Mac was the company's first technical crisis, distributing, but it also underscore how Musk's Mac was the company's first technical crisis, distributing, but it also underscore how

development of advanced A.I. technology. "Contemporary AI systems are now becoming human-competitive at general tasks, and we must ask ourselves: Should we let machines flood our information channels with propaganda and untruth?" the letter said. "Should we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? Should we develop nonhuman minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete and replace us?"

Yet in the period during which Musk endorsed a pause, he was working to build xAI, recruiting from major competitors, including OpenAI, and even, according to someone with knowledge of the conversation, contacting leadership at Nvidia, the dominant maker of chips used in A.I. The month the letter was distributed, Musk completed the registrations for xAI. He has said little about how the company will differ from preexisting A.I. initiatives, but generally has framed it in terms of competition. "I will create a third option, although starting very late in the game of course," he told the Washington *Post*. "That third option hopefully does more good than harm." Through A.I. research and development already under way at Tesla, and the trove of data he now commands through Twitter (which he recently barred OpenAI from scraping in order to train its chatbots), he may have some advantage, as he applies his sensibilities and his world view to that race. Hoffman told me, "His whole approach to A.I. is: A.I. can only be saved if I deliver, if I build it." As humanity creates A.I. in its own image, Hoffman argued, the principles and priorities of the leaders in the field will matter: "We want the construction of this to be not people with Messiah complexes."

At one point in "The Hitchhiker's Guide," Adams introduces the architects of the Earth supercomputer. They're powerful beings who have been living among us, disguised as mice. At first, they were motivated by simple curiosity. But seeking the question made them famous, and they began considering talk-show and lecture deals. In the end, Earth is demolished in the name of commerce, and their path to existential clarity along with it. The mice greet this with a shrug, mouth vague platitudes, and go on the talk-show circuit anyway. Musk isn't peddling pabulum. His initiatives have real substance. But he also wants to be on the show—or, better yet, to be the show himself.

In the open letter, alongside questions about the apocalyptic potential of artificial intelligence was one that reflects on the sectors of government and industry that Musk has come to shape. "Should we risk loss of control of our civilization?" he and his fellow-entrepreneurs wrote. "Such decisions must not be delegated to unelected tech leaders." ♦

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