

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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May 13, 2025

Mr. Arne B. Baker
Acting Inspector General
Department of State
1700 North Moore Street
Arlington, VA 22209

Dear Mr. Baker,

I write regarding recent reporting that the Department of State (the Department) is advocating for foreign countries to approve licenses for Elon Musk's Starlink satellite internet platform to the potential detriment of other American companies that offer low Earth orbit (LEO) satellite-based internet services. Following President Donald Trump's tariff announcements, agency records show the Trump Administration has pushed countries to grant operating licenses to Starlink and numerous countries have reportedly worked to license Starlink with the express desire to improve their standing with the Trump Administration.¹ Mr. Musk's position in the Trump Administration while serving as the chief executive of Starlink's parent company creates a conflict of interest. It signals to the American people and to countries around the world that the doors of the White House can be opened by enriching the President's wealthiest donor and employee. I request that the Department of State Office of the Inspector General investigate any potential involvement by the White House or Mr. Musk in the Department's decision to urge countries to approve usage of Starlink, as well as any way the Department may have considered Starlink licensure as part of any trade or tariff negotiations.

On May 7, 2025, the *Washington Post* reported that, shortly after President Trump announced sweeping tariffs on nearly all U.S. trading partners, several countries considered removing regulatory barriers and granting licenses to Starlink to gain influence and improve their bargaining position with the White House. For example, two weeks after President Trump levied 50% tariffs against the African nation of Lesotho, Lesotho awarded Starlink the first-ever satellite internet service license for that country. A Department memorandum explicitly tied this decision to trade negotiations with the U.S., saying, "As the government of Lesotho negotiates a trade deal with the United States, it hopes that licensing Starlink demonstrates goodwill and intent to welcome U.S. businesses." India also reportedly approved the use of Starlink to assist in trade deals with the United States. According to the *Washington Post*, the Indian government considered the Starlink approval as "an important lubricant that facilitates a deal." Starlink's

¹ *U.S. Pushes Nations Facing Tariffs to Approve Musk's Starlink, Cables Show*, Washington Post (May 7, 2025) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/05/07/elon-musk-starlink-trump-tariffs/).

approval in India is especially noteworthy, as just 1% of India's consumer broadband market could result in as much as \$1 billion in annual revenue for Mr. Musk's company. Such approvals, given Mr. Musk's official government position and his \$277 million donation to President Trump and Republican candidates, raise serious concerns about conflicts of interest and corruption.²

Although the Department has a history of promoting U.S. companies overseas, and specifically encouraging the use of American satellite internet providers, the Trump Administration appears to have taken this a step further by asking Department employees to specifically promote Starlink.³ Former Secretary of State Anthony Blinken had previously instructed embassies to adopt Starlink and other satellite-based internet services, but Secretary of State Marco Rubio has gone further, "instructing post staffers to persuade the countries where they are to choose [satellite-based internet]" and sending a cable to Department staffers citing Starlink by name and stating that "U.S. government advocacy is essential to maintain and extend their global 'first-mover' advantage."⁴ This conduct is a departure from historical practices and a potential violation of the law. Federal law expressly prohibits federal employees' "use of their Government position or title or any authority associated with their public office to endorse any product, service, or enterprise."⁵

The Trump Administration, however, has repeatedly promoted Starlink. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) expanded contracts with Starlink; the Department of Commerce changed the rules of the Broadband Equity, Access, and Development (BEAD) program to make Starlink eligible for grant funding; and Starlink was installed at the White House despite security concerns.⁶

To understand what influence Mr. Musk may be exerting over the Department's promotion of Starlink and how the Trump Administration may be conditioning trade benefits on foreign governments' licensure of Starlink, I ask that you investigate the following concerns and provide a staff-level briefing by May 27, 2025, regarding your findings:

² *Id.*

³ *U.S. Pushes Nations Facing Tariffs to Approve Musk's Starlink, Cables Show*, Washington Post (May 7, 2025) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/05/07/elon-musk-starlink-trump-tariffs/).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ 5 C.F.R. § 2635.702 (2025).

⁶ See Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Minority, *Press Release: Rep. Emily Randall and Ranking Member Randall Spearhead Oversight Investigation Into Elon Musk's Conflicts of Interest at the Department of Transportation* (Apr. 10, 2025) (online at <https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/news/press-releases/rep-emily-randall-and-ranking-member-connelly-spearhead-oversight-investigation>); Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Minority, *Press Release: Vice Ranking Member Crockett and Ranking Member Connolly Launch Investigation Into Elon Musk's Obvious Conflicts of Interest at Department of Commerce* (Apr. 8, 2025) (online at <https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/news/press-releases/vice-ranking-member-crockett-and-ranking-member-connelly-launch-investigation>); Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Minority, *Press Release: Ranking Members Brown and Connolly Launch Investigation Into White House's Use of Elon Musk's Starlink* (Apr. 7, 2025) (online at <https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/news/press-releases/ranking-members-brown-and-connelly-launch-investigation-white-houses-use-elon>).

1. Please identify any documents or communications regarding the promotion of satellite internet permitting in foreign countries, including but not limited to the use of satellite internet permitting as a tool for trade negotiation. Please provide an assessment of whether these communications discuss specific companies, including but not limited to SpaceX, Starlink, or any other company in which any member of the Trump Administration has a financial interest, and what the Department communicated to staff stationed abroad related to satellite internet permitting;
2. Please identify any communications that have occurred between any individuals associated with the White House, including but not limited to Mr. Musk, and any individuals associated with the Department, including but not limited to Secretary Rubio, regarding promotion of satellite internet technology abroad and promotion of Starlink, in particular;
3. Please provide an assessment of whether the Department has directly or implicitly conditioned any trade agreements or other negotiations with foreign actors on the licensing of Starlink or any other specific U.S. company;
4. Please provide an assessment of whether federal statutes, regulations, and directives governing the use of public office for financial gain were violated by any Department activities; and
5. Please evaluate all communications between the Department and officials employed by Starlink, or its parent company SpaceX, regarding any subject, including usage of Starlink abroad.

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Committee Democratic staff at (202) 225-5051. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Gerald E. Connolly
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable James Comer, Chairman