

The richest man in the world: Elon Musk and material power

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Elon Musk

Ben Johnson -Elon Musk, the world's wealthiest individual, has become [increasingly involved](#) in international politics and conflicts. Perhaps the most significant of his ventures is the deployment of Starlink satellites, produced by his company SpaceX, in the war in Ukraine. These satellites provide Ukrainian soldiers and citizens access to the internet, which is vital to Ukrainian success. However, recent comments by Musk have cast doubts about Starlink's continued role in the war and revealed the power that non-state actors can have on international conflicts.

A [non-state actor](#) is a broad label that includes individuals, companies, social movements, and terrorist organizations, among other groups. Each non-state actor has goals and viewpoints; understanding these can help us predict how they will act. In the case of Elon Musk, his immense material power, primarily funded by his companies, Tesla and SpaceX, has allowed him to insert himself in various conflicts. [Material power](#) refers to what we traditionally think of as power. When looking at a country, its economic strength, the size of its military, and industrial might all

contribute to material power. Musk's wealth has allowed him to provide and fund the Starlink satellite system, a critical element of Ukrainian battlefield successes. One might assume his position as a non-state actor has given him the freedom to pursue policies and a personal agenda relatively unconstrained; this is not the case. Recently, Musk has said that he cannot continue to pay for Starlink services, when in fact, according to newly released documents, Britain, Poland, and the United States have assisted in providing funding to SpaceX. While he has since rescinded these comments, they, alongside his proposed peace treaty that would have Ukraine allow Russian annexation, a plan publicly supported by the Kremlin, reveal a man under pressure.

Much of this pressure can be tied to Musk's complicated relationship with China. Many of his business interests, particularly Tesla, have deep ties to Beijing, which has expressed disapproval of Starlink being used in Ukraine. Musk's wealth has given him more influence than many countries, but that power has also made him vulnerable to outside pressures. His material power can be put into play, but also limited, because of larger patterns of [relational power](#). Whatever happens in the coming days, the world's richest man will likely be in the middle of it.