

Musk and Mittal agree India Starlink deal

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Elon Musk has reached an agreement to introduce Starlink to India in a tie-up with local telecoms tycoon Sunil Mittal, as the billionaires join forces to bring satellite internet services to the world's most populous nation.

The partnership between Musk's SpaceX and Mittal's Bharti Airtel was announced yesterday and pitches the pair against Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Jio. Asia's richest man had previously been joined by his longtime domestic adversary Mittal in attempts to convince the government to auction spectrum for space-fed internet. Musk's view has been that spectrum should be directly allocated.

This deal with Mittal marks Musk's latest effort to break into India, a market in which his businesses have struggled to make headway owing to tariffs and regulatory issues that have stymied

efforts to introduce Tesla cars to the country.

Neil Shah, the Mumbai-based co-founder of Counterpoint Research, said Ambani's Jio — the country's largest telecoms operator that runs a near duopoly in India alongside Airtel — was unlikely to halt its attempts to prevent Starlink's entrance.

"Obviously the domestic players don't want to have much competition from outside," he said. "SpaceX is way ahead of others when it comes to competition. I think that is one of the reasons why Airtel partnered with them so they can get a head start."

Musk's troubles in India appear to have eased since he took up a position as key confidant to US President Donald Trump. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Musk in Washington last month, where they discussed issues including space and technology.

The partnership with Airtel also suggests a softening on Musk's approach to

his competitors, choosing to join forces with one of the nation's powerful billionaires in an effort to crack the market.

Airtel said yesterday that the agreement with SpaceX would enable the two telecoms groups "to further explore how Starlink can complement and expand Airtel's offerings, and how Airtel's expertise in the Indian market complements SpaceX's direct offerings to consumers and businesses".

Mittal's company, which already has regulatory approvals to launch satellite internet services in India through its joint venture with Anglo-French group Eutelsat OneWeb, noted that SpaceX would need to receive its "own authorisations to sell Starlink" in the country. Starlink's licence to operate in India is still under review.

Amazon is also expected to soon join the race to offer the internet through satellite constellations in India, via its Kuiper Systems service.

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