

The decade-old feud behind Elon Musk's \$100bn takeover bid
Proximity of ChatGPT founder Sam Altman to the new president is unsettling America's 'first buddy'
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Donald Trump has a fondness for big numbers, photo ops and gigantic infrastructure investments. The announcement of a \$500bn (£400bn) "Stargate" artificial intelligence project contained all three. The new president stood in the White House with Masayoshi Son and Larry Ellison, the billionaire SoftBank and Oracle founders, as well as Sam Altman, the chief executive of ChatGPT owner OpenAI, to tout the move as a "declaration of confidence in America".

The three executives loudly credited Trump. Altman told him that they "wouldn't be able to do this without you, Mr President" – neatly avoiding the fact that the project had in fact started under the Biden administration. Work on the first site in Texas actually began last year.

In turn, Trump praised the "high-quality people" working on it.

Stargate is a techno-futurist symbol of the American advance that the second Trump administration wishes to accomplish. So it was less than ideal that Elon Musk, who was not present at the unveiling, immediately poured cold water on the project.

Musk spent the two days before claiming that OpenAI and SoftBank did not have the funds for what they are proposing – as well as firing social media jabs at Altman, a one-time ally turned enemy.

"They don't actually have the money," Musk tweeted the announcement, adding: "SoftBank has well under \$10bn secured. I have that on good authority." He also called the announcement "fake" and referred to Altman as a "grifter".

They don't actually have the money

— Elon Musk (@elonmusk) January 22, 2025

Trump: 'I have certain hatreds of people too'

The clash between Musk and Altman forms part of a long feud, which intensified on Monday after the Tesla billionaire made a provocative \$97bn takeover bid for OpenAI.

Musk vowed to "make sure" the company returned to "the open-source, safety-focused force for good it once was", to which Altman responded on X: "No thank you, but we will buy Twitter for \$9.74bn if you want."

The difference with Stargate, however, was that in picking the fight, Musk appeared to directly contradict Trump, who had fulsomely praised the Stargate project.

Trump shrugged off Musk's criticism. "The people in the deal are very, very smart people – but Elon, one of the people he happens to hate. But I have certain hatreds of people too," he said.

However, things may not have been so harmonious behind the scenes.

According to Politico, Trump's staff are "furious" with Musk. One ally told the site: "The problem is, the president doesn't have any leverage over him and Elon gives zero f---s."

Steve Bannon, the former Trump aide and Maga guru, called Musk "out of control", saying he "should not reverse what the president's already talked about".

Donald Trump's allies says the president's staff are 'furious' with Elon Musk Credit: Brandon Bell/Reuters

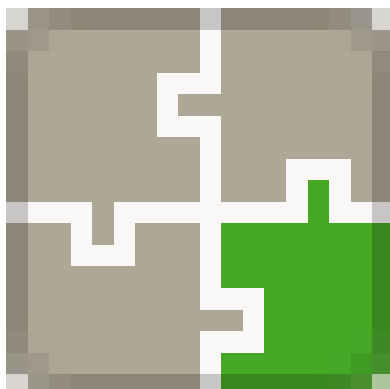
It seemed like the first hint of a long-predicted wedge between the leader of the free world and the world's richest man.

Since Trump was elected with the help of Musk's unprecedented donations and social media boosting, many observers have mused about how long the marriage can last and whether an alliance of two alpha masters of attention – both prone to grudges and averse to being undermined – is inherently unstable.

AI 'dictatorship'

Musk and Altman set up OpenAI a decade ago as part of a joint effort to develop artificial intelligence (AI) safely after Google had bought DeepMind, the world-leading London lab.

Musk quit in a power struggle and has since accused the company of abandoning its non-profit status and betraying its principles in the quest for riches.



OpenAI claims Musk wanted to merge the company with Tesla and control the company. Musk hit out at a deal with Microsoft and claimed the company was falling behind Google, which risked creating an AI “dictatorship”.

The rivalry has intensified since the release of OpenAI’s ChatGPT in 2022, which sparked a surge in AI investment, both in terms of scarce talent and the power-thirsty data centres where advanced systems are trained.

Musk has set up his own AI company in part staffed by former OpenAI employees, and built one of the world’s most powerful AI supercomputers, the Colossus facility in Memphis.

He has also repeatedly sued OpenAI, claiming Altman broke the company’s founding contract, and suggested that the 39-year-old’s position has “corrupted” him.

Musk’s antagonism might have explained why Altman had a less-than-plum slot at Trump’s inauguration.

While Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Google's Sundar Pichai and TikTok's Shou Zi Chew were all given prominent seats, Altman

who donated \$1m to the inaugural fund – was spotted taking selfies with YouTube influencers Logan and Jake Paul in the overflow room.

Sam Altman with YouTube influencers Jake and Logan Paul at Donald Trump's inauguration Credit: Al Drago-Pool/Getty Images North America

Musk has also spent time pointing to old tweets from Altman in which the OpenAI chief talked about “a project to stop Trump” and thanking Democratic donors.

But Trump loves a convert, and Altman claimed to have “changed his perspective”, adding: “I think he will be incredible for the country in many ways!”

The Tesla boss suggesting that Altman's conversion is anything less than genuine is unlikely to have pleased Trump. And this may only be the start.

Zuckerberg, Pichai and Bezos – competitors to Musk in the fields of AI, social media, self-driving cars and space – have all sought to ingratiate themselves with the new president.

Any success they have on that front may irritate Musk, who has positioned himself as “first buddy”. It could also test an alliance that until recently looked steadfast.