



REWIRING THE INDIAN OCEAN: WHY THE WORLD'S DATA IS TAKING NEW PATHS

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For more than a century, the submarine cables carrying the world's communications largely followed the same paths as ships. The first transoceanic telegraph lines hugged colonial trade routes and their fibre-optic successors did much the same. Sea lines of communication were mirrored, almost faithfully, by seabed ones. That era is ending. In the Indian Ocean—a seascape that not only connects littorals but funnels data between Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Australia—submarine cables are being laid in places ships rarely go. The contours of the [global internet](#) are being redrawn, and the Indian Ocean is where the redrawing is most visible.

Submarine cables matter because they carry almost all our digital communications. Roughly 99% of international internet traffic moves through them. When these digital conduits fail, critical services including banks, governments, hospitals and cloud networks feel it. Over 600 such cables are now operational worldwide, and the Indian Ocean hosts a growing share of the newest and most ambitious projects.

Four forces are driving the rewiring.

The first is route saturation as the traditional landing hubs are full. Singapore—long the digital pivot of Southeast Asia—now hosts 32 operational cables and [strictly regulates new data centres](#) because its electricity grid cannot keep up. Mumbai, which lands cables carrying 70% of India's international data traffic, faces similar pressure on a narrow stretch of beach. When too many cables converge in one place, a single dragged anchor or errant trawling gear can sever several at once. India's own telecom regulator has [acknowledged](#) that geographic concentration is now a national vulnerability. Diversification is no longer optional.

The second is choke point friction. The Indian Ocean has always been defined by its narrow entrances—Malacca, Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb—and those bottlenecks now strain cables as much as ships. The Red Sea is the sharpest example. [Houthi attacks on shipping since late 2023](#) have damaged cables linking Europe and Asia, and repair vessels cannot safely enter Yemeni waters or secure permits from a fractured government. Repair times have ballooned. New cables are increasingly avoiding the Red Sea altogether, with planners exploring terrestrial routes through the Gulf states or even Arctic crossings. A choke point that once merely slowed trade is now reshaping the architecture of the internet itself.

The third is regulatory burden. Where states make cable work easy, cables go. Where they don't, cables go elsewhere. Indonesia's cabotage rules—which require Indonesian-flagged ships and crews for repairs in its waters—have produced [lengthy repair delays](#) on cables critical to regional connectivity. Several African states impose hefty permit fees that deter investment. By contrast, Oman has actively reformed its telecommunications regulation to court cable projects, and Australia operates a dedicated [Cable Connectivity and Resilience Centre](#) within its foreign affairs portfolio. The result is a sorting whereby predictable jurisdictions win the cables, complicated ones lose out.

The fourth, and perhaps most consequential, is the rise of the hyperscalers. Until about a decade ago, submarine cables were primarily laid by consortia of telecommunications companies—often national carriers—serving a broad mix of customers. That model is fading. Today, the heaviest builders of new capacity are American technology firms, including Google, Meta, Microsoft,

Amazon. Their motivation is not telecommunications in the traditional sense. It is the insatiable data demand of cloud computing and, increasingly, artificial intelligence, which requires ultra-fast links between data centre campuses on different continents.

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SUBCO's Oman-Australia Cable supports a "[Great Southern Route](#)" between Europe and Asia that avoids both Malacca and the Red Sea. Google has announced a flurry of new projects—[Umoja](#), [Dhivaru](#), [Bosun](#), [TalayLink](#)—knitting Australia, the Maldives, Christmas Island, Kenya and Thailand into a new mesh. Meta's [Project Waterworth](#), announced alongside the US-India joint leaders' statement in February 2025, will be the world's longest cable system—50,000 kilometres connecting five continents, deliberately bypassing the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea in a single sweep.

Taken together, these projects are creating a subsea "mesh" rather than the brittle, ship-following lines of the past. This dynamic creates a resilience gain. When one cable fails, traffic can be re-routed through others taking entirely different paths.

But the rewiring also carries two warnings.

The first concerns repair. Cables in remote stretches of the southern Indian Ocean can fall outside the traditional zone agreements that pool repair capacity. According to one industry report, [15% of planned new cables](#) will be laid beyond existing maintenance boundaries. A more dispersed network is more resilient against simultaneous damage – but slower to fix when damage occurs.

The second concerns dependency. The same American hyperscalers building the new routes often own them outright, rather than through consortia. As more of the Indian Ocean's data flows through cables owned by two or three American companies—answerable, arguably, to Washington—connected states are accumulating a new kind of strategic exposure. The risk is not sabotage, the usual focus of cable security debates. It is the quieter possibility of digital gatekeeping by a handful of private firms whose commercial decisions will shape who in the region gets fast, reliable connectivity, and on what terms.

The Indian Ocean's submarine cable map is no longer a faithful copy of its surface shipping lanes. It is being redrawn by route saturation, conflict, regulation and the demands of artificial intelligence. For the region's policymakers, the task is twofold: to make respective jurisdictions attractive enough to keep attracting new cables, and to think harder about what it means when digital seabed arteries are increasingly owned by foreign entities.

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