

Subsea Cables in the Indo-Pacific: Advancing Indo-French Cooperation

Anirudh Suri

Summary

India and France are at the cusp of a fruitful and productive partnership in the subsea cable domain by leveraging France's industrial strength and technical expertise, and India's dynamic market, strategic geography and investment appetite.

India and France share a profound and abiding strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific. With extensive maritime domains, the security and resilience of subsea cable infrastructure form an indispensable strategic component of their maritime security orientation. Cooperation between New Delhi and Paris has been limited in this critical domain. Now, there is scope to imagine and chart a more comprehensive and ambitious agenda for Indo-French cooperation in subsea cables.

Divergent Strategic Positions

France and India generally approach the subsea cable landscape from fundamentally different positions. France is an established, major player for whom the protection of this infrastructure is a national security objective. A pivotal wake-up call for France and Europe occurred with the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022, which dramatically accelerated efforts by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union to support the protection of critical undersea assets.

France's industrial might is rooted in Alcatel Submarine Networks (ASN), which has long been a major global force, commanding over 35 per cent of the global market share in the subsea cable space. Recognising the threat, Paris nationalised ASN in 2024. The strategic rationale was twofold: achieving technological sovereignty and securing the crucial technological know-how related to cable design, manufacturing, installation and repair.

India has largely neglected the protection of subsea cable infrastructures. Indian officials have not paid commensurate attention to the crucial network that powers their thriving digital economy. However, of late, their attitude has changed, given their dependency on foreign-owned and foreign-operated subsea cables, which they also rely on for maintenance and repair. Indo-French subsea cable cooperation was formalised in the 2023 bilateral Roadmap for the Indo-Pacific. Two new subsea cable systems – India Europe Express (IEX) and SEA-ME-WE-6 (SMW6) – are being constructed to enhance connectivity, linking Marseille to either Mumbai or Chennai. The IEX is jointly owned by India-based Reliance Jio Infocomm and other undisclosed owners in China, with SubCom serving as the supplier, while SMW6 is owned by Bharti Airtel and Orange.

Reciprocal Strategic Capabilities

In this context, both countries can do more on subsea cables to build capabilities and protect critical assets. France has three core strengths – substantial industrial capacity, Marseille as a vital global landing hub and the state-owned subsea juggernaut, ASN. The combined assets of ASN and Orange/Elettra provide France with global reach, experience and a massive operational footprint.

India brings an expanding digital market, its crucial strategic location in the Indian Ocean, and a vigorous private sector. India currently has 17 cables landing within its borders. So far, Bharti Airtel and Reliance Jio are driving subsea cable activity through their strategic investments that could reduce India's reliance on legacy cables and drive high-speed connectivity.

The Scope for Enhanced Partnership

Given this convergence, France and India have a clear opportunity to forge a more ambitious subsea cable agenda, given the industry's massive growth potential and strategic importance. This growth presents a significant opening for French and Indian companies to establish joint ventures, allowing them to create synergies through capabilities and investments. Demand will likely remain robust with firms like Meta, Amazon, Google and Microsoft expanding across Asia with the escalating adoption of artificial intelligence and the burgeoning data centre market.

How could this cooperation manifest? First, both countries should invest in developing sovereign subsea repair capacity. India currently lacks a sovereign vessel for subsea cable repair and maintenance, relying instead on vessels often based in the Middle East or Southeast Asia – a significant strategic vulnerability. Indian companies could partner with French companies to build, finance or lease a dedicated sovereign vessel based out of India, potentially leased from ASN, mirroring an arrangement such as NEC Japan's lease from a United Kingdom company. Relatedly, India and France could explore the co-development of autonomous underwater vehicles capable of diving to substantial depths to monitor sensitive installations, such as submarine cables.

Second, a deeper partnership on maritime situational awareness through [India's Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region](#), the [Regional Coordination Operations Centre](#) in the Seychelles, and the [Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre](#) in Madagascar could facilitate continued crucial information-sharing on suspected cable attacks.

Third, jointly funded efforts under the existing [FRIND-X](#) (France-India Defence Startup Excellence) initiative can help develop bespoke software and hardware solutions to prevent and track espionage and data siphoning from these cables, reducing dependence on third parties for these critical solutions.

Finally, France should commit dedicated investments to building subsea cable infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific, similar to [the United States' CABLES program](#), with India. India is

strategically positioned to serve as an alternative to Singapore, which is the other primary subsea cable landing hub in Asia. ASN should begin prioritising Indian landing stations in its future plans, aligning with the ultimate customers – the Big Tech firms—for whom India is an extremely important market. ASN could also provide technical training to Indian telecommunication operators. This programme could be expanded across the Indo-Pacific through a regional centre similar to the [Australian Cable Connectivity and Resilience Centre](#).

India-France subsea cable cooperation has great potential in a maritime order that remains in flux. Moving beyond connectivity projects, the focus can shift toward leveraging the growing US\$25 billion (S\$32.2 billion) subsea cable industry. This partnership could then help address shared security vulnerabilities through developing sovereign repair capacity, advanced monitoring, and enhanced information fusion across the Indian Ocean region. The potential benefits will not be bilateral alone but also regional by supporting economic security and resilience as economies continue to digitise.

.

Mr Anirudh Suri is author of *The Great Tech Game: Shaping Geopolitics and the Destinies of Nations* and host of 'The Great Tech Game Podcast'. He is also a non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Managing Partner of India Internet Fund, an early stage venture capital fund. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.