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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Cables Under the Sea: India's Fight for Digital Sovereignty

THE HINDU

5 July 2026 · SCIENCE & TECH · GS3 GS2

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Cables Under the Sea: India's Fight for Digital Sovereignty

The Hindu 5 July 2026 GS3 GS2

Source: ujiyari.com — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped

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THE LIFT LINE

The internet does not live in the cloud; it lives on the seabed. The nation that owns, protects and lands the cables owns the future of its own data.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The announcement of the India-Southeast Asia (I-2SEA) submarine cable on July 2, 2026, is a rare current-affairs anchor that lets you connect infrastructure, cybersecurity, data governance and maritime law in one answer.

GS Paper 3: Infrastructure (digital), cybersecurity, protection of critical information infrastructure, and technology as a driver of the economy.

GS Paper 2: Data governance, the DPDP framework and the international law of the sea as it applies to cable protection.

Prelims relevance: Submarine cable landing stations, the DPDP Act and its rules, UNCLOS Article 113, the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region, and the roles of TRAI and CDSCO-style licensing authorities. Concrete facts and body names are examinable here.

Mains relevance: "Digital sovereignty (https://ujiyari.com/terms/digital-sovereignty/)" is a maturing GS3 theme. Examiners want you to move beyond the software layer (apps, data localisation) to the physical layer (cables, landing stations, chokepoints) and to link both to strategic vulnerability.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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Roughly 95 to 99 per cent of intercontinental data crosses the planet not by satellite but through fibre-optic cables lying on the ocean floor. These cables carry banking transactions, cloud services, government traffic and the vast data flows now feeding artificial-intelligence systems.

On July 2, 2026, a consortium of Lightstorm, Microsoft, Singtel and Tata Communications launched the build of the India-Southeast Asia (I-2SEA) cable: a roughly 3,600 km system running from Singapore to India, with new Indian landing stations at Machilipatnam in Andhra Pradesh and at South Chennai, and a Ready-For-Service target of the fourth quarter of 2029. It is designed for the surging bandwidth demand of AI training and inference on the India-Southeast Asia corridor.

India already hosts over a dozen international subsea cables across five coastal cities (Mumbai, Chennai, Cochin, Tuticorin and Trivandrum), with Mumbai and Chennai as dominant hubs. TRAI, in its June 2023 recommendations on submarine cable landing, has pushed for a far larger network of landing stations so that India can become a genuine global data-transit hub rather than a mere destination.

The urgency comes from a darker trend abroad. In the Baltic Sea, cables were damaged in November and December 2024 and again in 2025, with suspected sabotage by shadow-fleet vessels dragging anchors (attribution remains under investigation). Cables off Yemen in the Red Sea were cut, with repairs delayed for months by a shortage of cable-repair ships. These incidents show that the pipes carrying a nation's data are exposed, contested and hard to fix.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Digital sovereignty (https://ujiyari.com/vocab/sovereignty/) has two layers that must be secured together: the **physical layer** of cables, landing stations and chokepoints, and the **governance layer** of where data is stored, processed and who may access it. India is now moving on both, but each has a distinct vulnerability (https://ujiyari.com/vocab/vulnerability/).

Layer one: owning and landing the pipes

Owning capacity on a cable is not the same as controlling it. A cable can be sabotaged in international waters, cut by an anchor, or throttled at a foreign landing point. Diversifying landing stations (Machilipatnam and South Chennai add geographic redundancy) reduces the risk that a single point of failure severs the country's connectivity. More landing stations also mean more transit revenue and a stronger case for India as an AI and data hub.

Layer two: governing the data

The Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, with its rules notified on November 13, 2025, empowers the government to restrict cross-border transfer of specified categories of personal data by Significant Data Fiduciaries, though the exact list is not yet notified. The RBI's 2018 mandate (https://ujiyari.co

m/vocab/mandate/) already requires all payment-system data to be stored only in India. Localisation keeps data on Indian soil, but data on Indian soil still travels out through these very cables.

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Layer three: protecting cables in law

The international framework is thin. UNCLOS Article 113 requires states to criminalise the wilful or negligent breaking of a submarine cable on the high seas by their flag vessels, and Articles 87 and 58 guarantee freedom to lay cables. But protection inside territorial waters is weak, and many states never wrote Article 113 into domestic law.

DIMENSION	THE ASSET	THE VULNERABILITY	INDIA'S LEVER
Physical infrastructure	Subsea cables, landing stations	Sabotage, anchor cuts, repair-ship shortage	New cables (I-2SEA), diversified landings
Data governance	Personal and payment data	Foreign access, uncontrolled transfer	DPDP Act 2023, RBI 2018 localisation
Legal protection	Cables in high seas and EEZ	Weak enforcement of UNCLOS Article 113	Domesticate cable-protection law
Strategic transit	AI and data-hub status	Dependence on foreign transit points	More landing stations, TRAI push

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Use the **stack frame**: unbundle "digital sovereignty" into layers (physical, governance, legal) and ask, for each, who owns it, who can disrupt it, and at what cost it can be secured. A debate framed as "we have data localisation (https://ujiyari.com/terms/data-localisation/), so we are sovereign" collapses the moment you notice that localised data still exits the country through cables that a foreign vessel can cut. Sovereignty is secured layer by layer, not by a single law or a single cable.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

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Data created in India -> stored under DPDP and RBI localisation -> but transits out via subsea cables -> cables exposed to sabotage abroad -> secure by diversifying landings, building cable-protection law and joining protection coalitions -> layered digital sovereignty
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WAY FORWARD

1. **Build and diversify landing stations.** Act on TRAI's 2023 recommendations so India lands many cables at many coastal points, removing single points of failure and capturing transit revenue.

2. **Legislate cable protection.** Domesticate UNCLOS Article 113 with criminal penalties for damaging cables, and designate cables as critical information infrastructure.

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3. **Create a repair and resilience (https://ujiyari.com/vocab/resilience/) capacity.** Invest in cable-repair ships and maintenance agreements so cuts are fixed in days, not months.
4. **Complete the DPDP architecture.** Notify the categories of restricted data with clarity, balancing sovereignty against the cost to legitimate cross-border business.
5. **Join protection coalitions.** Work with the International Cable Protection Committee and partner navies to monitor and safeguard cables through Indian waters and chokepoints.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly asked about cybersecurity, critical information infrastructure and the strategic implications of emerging technologies (for example, questions on data protection, cyber threats and the role of technology in national security). This editorial connects those themes to the concrete physical layer of the internet.

Practice question (Mains, GS3, 15 marks): "Digital sovereignty is incomplete if it secures data on land but ignores the cables under the sea." In the light of India's subsea cable expansion, examine the physical, legal and governance dimensions of protecting the country's data infrastructure. (250 words)

Sources: The Hindu (https://www.thehindu.com/opinion)

Source: Cables Under the Sea: India's Fight for Digital Sovereignty — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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