

The geopolitics of undersea cables in the Indo-Pacific

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Undersea cables underpin global communication and the digital economy, with between 95-99% of data for international banking, e-commerce, video calls, and intelligence sharing travelling via these largely hidden transoceanic routes. However, this critical multi-billion-dollar infrastructure faces increasing risks from shipping accidents, natural disasters, geopolitical tensions, and sabotage threats. Meanwhile, in the Indo-Pacific region US-China tech competition is leading to a fragmented cable network with contrasting standards and governance models. Great power competition is forcing Southeast Asian nations into making political choices over what should be engineering decisions. So how are nations navigating this difficult balancing act and what role should regional frameworks play? And with digital data flows rising sharply, what steps are needed to enhance the resilience and protection of undersea cables? Maritime security researchers Elina Noor from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Cynthia Mehboob from the Australian National University take a deep dive into the world of these ocean-spanning data conduits. With host Sami Shah.

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Image: Fastening protective split piping around submerged cables. Credit: US Pacific Fleet.