

Position before Power: Assembling Submarine Cable Statecraft from Privately Owned Infrastructure

RISHABH MAHAN

Doctoral Candidate

Centre for European Studies, School of International Studies

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

Submarine fibre-optic cables carry close to all intercontinental data traffic, yet accounts of digital sovereignty rarely descend to the seabed. This paper examines how a state accumulates influence over infrastructure it neither owns nor repairs. India offers an instructive case, since fifteen of roughly seventeen international systems come ashore within a six-kilometre stretch of a single Mumbai beach, an exposure tolerated for two decades and then addressed after 2020 through India-originated trunk systems. Drawing on infrastructural power, geoeconomics, and weaponised interdependence, the analysis distinguishes infrastructure position from infrastructure power and specifies a conversion sequence running from geography, market size, and threat perception through anchoring, diversification, coalition building, and state enablement to network centrality, relational leverage, and, conditionally, structural power. A comparative case study combining process tracing with congruence analysis examines the Reliance Jio-led India-Asia-Xpress and India-Europe-Xpress systems, the Google-led Blue-Raman bypass of Suez, and SEA-ME-WE 6, each coded by the strength of the evidence for state causation. The record indicates that India has acquired position considerably faster than power: anchoring and diversification are documented, relational leverage over littoral neighbours remains unevidenced, and governance influence remains largely announced.

Keywords: Submarine cables, Infrastructure power, Digital statecraft, Network centrality, Weaponised interdependence, Geoeconomics, India

INTRODUCTION

Fifteen of India's roughly seventeen international cable systems come ashore within a six-kilometre stretch of Versova beach in Mumbai, with Chennai serving as the secondary gateway (Khanna, 2025)¹. Singapore, on 733 square kilometres of territory, distributes twenty-six systems across three separate landing sites. That an economy whose growth depends on transoceanic data flows tolerated such concentration for two decades, and then moved sharply after 2020 to originate trunk systems

of its own, is the observation from which this paper proceeds. The reversal invites a question the literature has not posed directly: through what mechanisms does a state accumulate influence over a network that private consortia own, foreign firms manufacture, and foreign vessels repair?

The accepted reading of India as a digital power attends to software exports, information technology services, and more recently Digital Public Infrastructure such as the Aadhaar identity system and the Unified Payments Interface (Alonso *et al.*, 2023; Jiang and Belli,

1. The count refers to international systems rather than to landings, since a single system may terminate at more than one station. Reported totals differ across industry sources because branch landings and systems still under construction are counted inconsistently.

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2024; Nilekani, 2018). That reading operates at the application layer, passing over the ocean floor across which an estimated 99 per cent of intercontinental traffic moves (International Telecommunication Union, 2025; Starosielski, 2015)². With India's services trade valued at roughly USD 341 billion in 2023-24 and projected to approach USD 618 billion by 2030, the security of the physical layer is tied closely to the security of the growth model itself (Khanna, 2025). Digital sovereignty, theorised largely through law, data, and jurisdiction, acquires a different character when read through cable landings, fibre pairs, and repair queues (Couture and Toupin, 2019; Floridi, 2020; Pohle and Thiel, 2020).

Attribution poses the central methodological difficulty, since most of the infrastructure at issue is privately owned and much of it would plausibly have been built for commercial reasons alone. Two tests separate statecraft from market-driven connectivity here. The first asks whether the state initiated, financed, negotiated, or approved a decision rather than merely benefited from it. The second asks whether a route, landing, or supplier choice departs from what commercial logic alone would predict, as with a bypass that adds cost to avoid a jurisdiction, or an award that departs from the lowest bid³. Applying both consistently produces a more cautious account than the announcement record suggests.

The contribution concerns networked infrastructure statecraft under private ownership. Accounts of infrastructural power assume a state acting on assets it controls, and accounts of weaponised interdependence assume a hub the state already commands; neither addresses the condition examined here, in which position is assembled out of other people's capital through consortium participation, landing-site regulation, coalition diplomacy, and supplier politics. Two questions organise the analysis. The first concerns the mechanisms through which cables contribute to statecraft. The second concerns how far position has converted into relational leverage, meaning bargaining over cable use and consortium shares, and how far leverage has produced structural power, meaning durable influence over routes, supply chains, repair capacity, and rules. Section 2 locates

the gap in four literatures, Section 3 develops the conversion framework, Section 4 sets out the design, Sections 5 and 6 present and compare the evidence, Section 7 examines why conversion has stalled, and Section 8 concludes.

What Existing Accounts Leave Unexplained

Scholarship on cables as security objects has grown quickly and remains geographically concentrated. Starosielski (2015) reframed the undersea network as a material infrastructure with a spatial history, showing that contemporary routes often retrace nineteenth-century telegraph geographies and that the network concentrates into an asymmetric topology dictated by commercial efficiency (see also Blum, 2012; Parks and Starosielski, 2015), while historians had already traced the mutual constitution of cable geography and imperial power in the telegraph era (Headrick, 1991; Winseck and Pike, 2007). Bueger and Liebetrau (2021) mapped cable protection as a problem of international security governance, and subsequent work extended the agenda to critical maritime infrastructure in Europe (Bueger and Liebetrau, 2023; Franken *et al.*, 2022). The centre of gravity of that work lies in the Euro-Atlantic, the Baltic, and the Pacific islands, where the Indian Ocean appears as terrain rather than as the site of an actor.

A second body of work traces the political economy of the infrastructure. Against a baseline of commercialisation histories (Abbate, 1999; Greenstein, 2015), media and platform scholars have examined how ownership of the physical layer confers economic and political power on private actors (Amoore, 2018; Mosco, 2014; Plantin *et al.*, 2018; Srnicek, 2017), and communication scholars have followed the movement of content providers from renting capacity to owning it (Lai, 2025; Winseck, 2017). A parallel literature reads the state-led counterpart, tracing how China's Digital Silk Road couples subsidised construction, national suppliers, and port access within a single programme (Cheney, 2019; Greene and Triolo, 2020; Shen, 2018). What this debate does not address is the reverse movement, in which a state converts privately built infrastructure into public

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2. The figure is an industry estimate rather than a measured quantity. Satellite capacity carries a small residual share, concentrated in remote, maritime, and backup applications, and low-earth-orbit constellations have not yet altered the order of magnitude.
 3. Neither test can be applied to decisions taken informally. Where a preference is conveyed through consultation rather than through licensing or finance, the documentary record is silent, so the coding scheme is more likely to understate state involvement than to overstate it.

position without nationalising it.

Conceptual tools for thinking about infrastructure power come from a third body of scholarship. Hirschman (1945) observed that interdependent ties generate reciprocal influence as well as supply effects, an insight formalised in theories of complex interdependence and structural power (Keohane and Nye, 1977; Strange, 1988), and geoeconomics developed the deliberate creation of such dependencies as an instrument of statecraft (Blackwill and Harris, 2016; Luttwak, 1990; Wigell and Vihma, 2016). Grewal (2008) identified convergence on a standard as the source of network power, and Farrell and Newman (2019) theorised how the governments of central nodes may derive panopticon leverage over the periphery and chokepoint leverage over flows, though such leverage is qualified in peacetime by diversification and boomerang effects (Drezner *et al.*, 2021; Gjessvik, 2023). These models begin where centrality is already held, and say little about how a hub is assembled.

Indian foreign policy scholarship reproduces the same silence at the physical layer. Work on India's maritime rise has attended to naval rivalry in the Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2014, 2018; Khurana, 2008; Mohan, 2012), to the eastward turn (Chacko, 2014; Grare, 2017; Ladwig, 2009), and to institutional hedging through the Quad (Envall, 2019; Medcalf, 2020; Pant and Joshi, 2017). Digital statecraft enters that literature mainly through Digital Public Infrastructure and its promotion as an alternative to both American platform capture and Chinese surveillance models (Jiang and Belli, 2024; Nilekani, 2018). Cables, landing stations, and repair capacity remain largely outside the frame, perhaps because infrastructure has been treated as the domain of internet governance rather than of foreign policy (DeNardis, 2014; Mueller, 2017). Taken together, the four debates leave an explanatory gap: no account specifies how influence is exercised over transnational infrastructure that is privately owned, jointly governed through multinational consortia, and located partly beyond national jurisdiction.

From Infrastructure Position to Infrastructure Power

Definitions and indicators

Infrastructure power is used restrictively here. Ownership, consortium participation, landing-station counts, designed capacity, and geographic centrality are properties of position, and position precedes power rather than constituting it. Infrastructure power denotes the demonstrated or plausibly developing capacity to alter another actor's choices, bargaining position, routing options, switching costs, or governance arrangements by virtue of a place in physical networks. The distinction carries weight because the record on cables consists overwhelmingly of position indicators, which are announced and easy to count, while power indicators are behavioural and scarce.

Six indicators operationalise the concept. Physical position is evidenced by landing sites, trunk terminations, and route ownership; network centrality by the share of regional routes that transit a territory rather than branch to it; bargaining leverage by concessions obtained, terms altered, or participation secured; dependence by the cost, delay, or absence of a partner's alternatives; governance influence by participation in standard-setting, resilience coordination, and rule-making; and structural effects by durable change in topology, supply chain, or rule system. Observed capability is kept apart from inferred potential. The panopticon effect theorised by Farrell and Newman (2019) is retained as a possibility rather than an empirical category, since hosting a landing station confers jurisdiction over a terminus and does not by itself indicate visibility into the traffic crossing it⁴.

The conversion sequence and its moderators

Stated as a sequence rather than as a set of parallel dimensions, the argument runs as follows. Geographic position, the size of the domestic digital market, and threat perception are the inputs. Four mechanisms convert them: anchoring, through which trunk systems originate and terminate on national territory; route diversification, through which exposure to a single corridor is reduced; coalition building, through which partners are recruited into shared arrangements; and state enablement, through which regulation, finance, and diplomacy make privately funded builds attractive. The intermediate outcome is network centrality; the power outcome, where it

4. The distinction is legal as well as analytical. Jurisdiction over a landing station governs the terminal equipment and its operator, whereas access to the traffic itself would require separate legal authority and technical arrangements that public sources do not document.

materialises, is relational leverage over specific partners in specific bargains; and the longest-term and least certain outcome is structural power, in which topology, supply chain, and rules reflect the state's preferences whether or not it bargains.

Each step is conditioned by moderators capable of arresting the sequence, and Fig. 1 renders both the path and the conditions attached to it. Private ownership means the assets through which position is acquired answer to commercial rather than sovereign logic; foreign supply of cable, ships, and repair services places a segment of the chain outside national control; the availability of alternative routes caps the leverage any single route generates; limited repair capacity converts an incident into an extended outage; geopolitical instability can disable a diversification route as readily as the corridor it was built to avoid; and hyperscaler autonomy means the largest owners of capacity may route around a state rather than through it. Breakdown, following Star (1999), renders an otherwise invisible system politically legible, and the attention that follows feeds back into investment.

Four mechanisms and the scope of the claim

Four expectations follow. On anchoring, a state seeking infrastructure power will pursue control over the location and diversification of landings, and will seek to originate and terminate trunk systems on its own territory rather than accept branch status on systems designed

for other markets. On relational leverage, position will produce leverage where partners face meaningful switching costs, limited alternatives, or bargaining dependence, and not otherwise. On diversification, a state exposed to an external chokepoint will sponsor alternative routes, and diversification will reduce exposure to that chokepoint while redistributing vulnerability into other geopolitical spaces rather than removing it. On governance, position will generate influence only where the state can shape standards, regulation, resilience arrangements, or repair coordination. Table 1 sets out the lineage, mechanism, and observable form of each.

Three scope conditions bound these expectations: a coastal state whose landing geography is technically viable and politically controlled, a domestic traffic market large enough that commercial builders have reason to land there without subsidy, and at least one feasible route alternative, since a state with no alternative can diversify only on paper. India satisfies all three, which makes it a most-likely case rather than a representative one.

Research Design

Three levels are kept apart. India is the national strategic setting; the individual cable system, with its consortium, route, suppliers, and regulatory environment, is the unit of analysis; and evidence about a single system is not read as evidence about Indian strategy in general. The design is a qualitative comparative case study

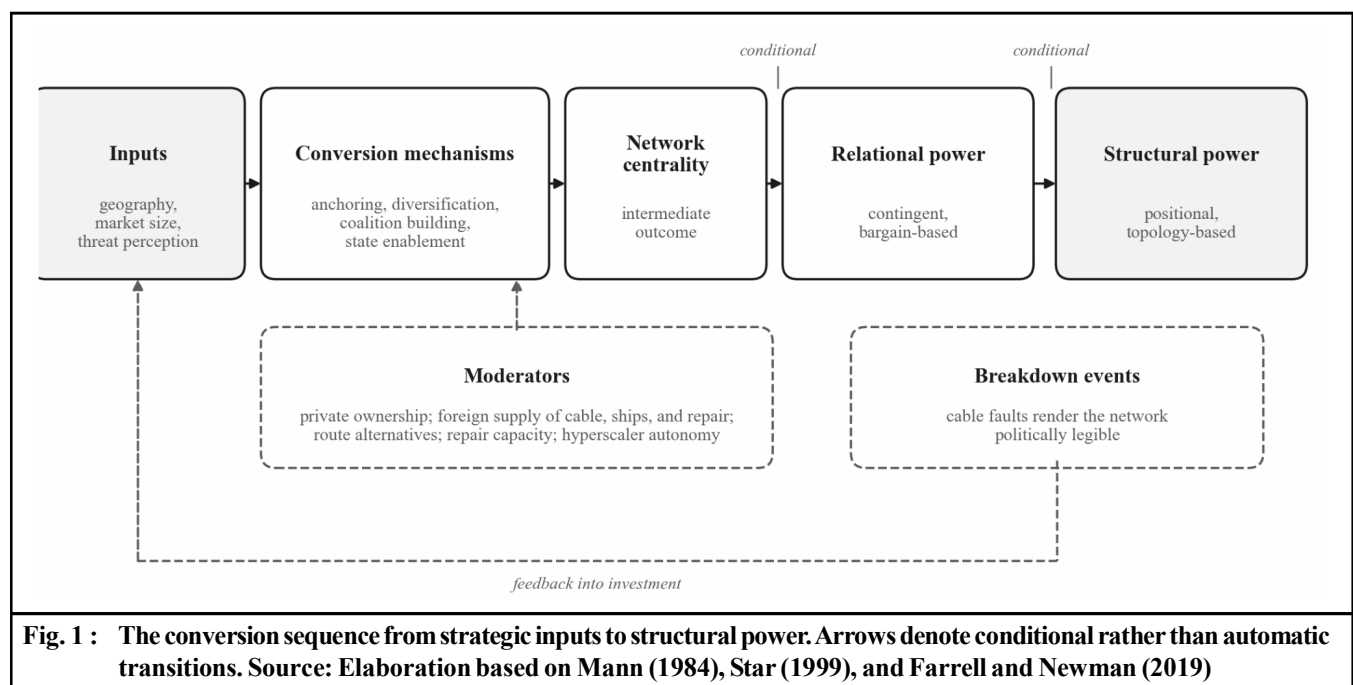


Table 1 : The four mechanisms of infrastructure power and their observable forms

Mechanism	Theoretical lineage	Strategic form	Observed in the Indian case (position unless otherwise stated)
Anchoring	Star (1999); Starosielski (2015); Easterling (2014)	Controlling where cables land and terminate	Landing stations at Versova and Chennai; the Chennai-Andaman system; critical-infrastructure designation
Relational leverage	Hirschman (1945); Blackwill and Harris (2016)	Creating littoral dependence on India-anchored routes where switching costs are material	Branch landings serving the Maldives and Sri Lanka; India as a regional content gateway
Diversification	Farrell and Newman (2019); Luttwak (1990)	Building bypass and redundant routes around vulnerable corridors	Blue-Raman bypass of Suez; eastward and westward trunk diversification
Governance leverage	Farrell and Newman (2019); Grewal (2008)	Shaping standards, resilience norms, repair coordination, and landing regulation	Undersea Domain Awareness; Quad cable partnership; standard-setting proposals

Source: Author's compilation

combining process tracing with congruence analysis (Blatter and Haverland, 2012; George and Bennett, 2005). Process tracing clarifies the link between India's consortium, landing-station, and coalition choices and the outcomes of routing centrality and reduced chokepoint exposure. Congruence analysis tests whether observed features fit the expectations in Table 1, treating discrepancies as informative rather than as noise. The time frame runs from 2020, when India-centric projects were initiated, to early 2026.

Each case is coded by the strength of the evidence for state causation. A case is state-directed where the state initiated, financed, or directed the decision; state-enabled where it supplied policy, regulatory, diplomatic, or financial enablement without which the decision would have been materially harder; and state-compatible where the outcome serves Indian interests but the evidence does not support a claim of Indian causation. The residual category is a statement about the available record rather than a finding that the state was inactive.

Case selection follows a diverse-cases logic, with each system chosen for the dimension it renders observable⁵. India-Asia-Xpress and India-Europe-Xpress are the most-likely case for the claim that New Delhi is asserting structural power, since they are India-originated

and India-led, so weak evidence there counts heavily against the argument. Blue-Raman is a revelatory case, because the deliberate bypass of Egypt makes chokepoint mitigation observable as a design decision rather than as an inference. SEA-ME-WE 6 is a crucial case for the manufacturing dimension, since the displacement of a Chinese supplier occurred under conditions that favoured the incumbent bid on price alone. Evidence is drawn from industry datasets (TeleGeography, 2025b), official documents (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2023; The White House, 2024), corporate disclosures (Bharti Airtel, 2024, 2025; Google, 2021; Reliance Jio, 2021), and investigative reporting (Brock, 2023). No causal claim rests on a single corporate release. Capacity figures are design figures reported by builders, and since no traffic data are public for these systems, capacity is not read as evidence of routing centrality⁶.

Evidence from Four Systems

India-Asia-Xpress and India-Europe-Xpress

The IAX and IEX systems, led by Reliance Jio and built by SubCom, represent the clearest assertion of India-centric infrastructure position (Reliance Jio, 2021). Together they span more than 16,000 kilometres and carry over 200 Tbps of design capacity⁷. IAX runs eastward

5. The vocabulary of most-likely, revelatory, and crucial cases follows the case-selection typology in the methodological literature cited above. Assigning a case type in advance fixes what would count as disconfirming evidence before the evidence is examined.
6. Utilisation data are held by operators and consortium members and treated as commercially sensitive. In their absence, capacity indicates what a system could carry, while routing centrality would require measurement that no public source supplies.
7. Design capacity denotes what a system is engineered to carry once fully equipped, which is not the capacity lit at service entry. Operators typically activate a fraction of the total and add wavelengths as demand develops.

from Mumbai and Chennai to Tuas in Singapore, with branches to Matara, Satun, Morib, and Hulhumale; IEX runs westward from Mumbai to Bergeggi near Savona in Italy, with landings across the Middle East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean (TeleGeography, 2025b).

Three features carry the strategic weight. The systems invert a topology in which India was a spur off cables built for other markets: by originating trunks at Mumbai and Chennai, India becomes a terminus rather than a branch, the positional change at the core of any migration from relational toward structural power. IAX gives the eastward turn in Indian foreign policy a physical layer, creating the connectivity interdependence that Hirschman (1945) treated as the precondition of influence, with the Maldives landing, that country's first direct high-capacity link, emblematic of it. The pair also diversifies Indian routes away from corridors exposed to Chinese influence.

Operational history disciplines these headline claims. Announced for service in 2023 and early 2024, both slipped: IAX entered service in the second half of 2024, evidenced by the activation of its Matara branch by Dialog Axiata, with IEX completing subsequently through its Italian and Greek landings. The delays reveal regulatory, financial, and geopolitical frictions that qualify announced ambitions.

Attribution requires equal care. Reliance Jio initiated both systems, financed them from its own balance sheet, and contracted SubCom directly, and no public evidence indicates that the Indian state initiated, funded, or directed either build. The state supplied enablement through landing-station licensing, incentive schemes that improved the economics of domestic telecom investment, and the diplomatic relationships within which branch landings were negotiated. Both cases are therefore state-enabled rather than state-directed, and they support anchoring strongly while leaving relational leverage unevidenced: no public source indicates what alternatives the Maldives or Sri Lanka retain, what switching would cost, what share of their traffic transits India rather than Singapore, or any instance in which India has obtained a concession by reference to the connection⁸.

Blue-Raman

Where IAX and IEX anchor, Blue-Raman bypasses,

and it bears most directly on the diversification expectation. Led by Google with Telecom Italia Sparkle and Omantel, the 12,700 kilometre system connects Europe to India through 16 fibre pairs with a projected capacity of 218 Tbps at an estimated cost near USD 400 million (European Investment Bank, 2025; Google, 2021). The Blue segment extends from Genoa and Marseille through Greece and Cyprus to Tel Aviv; the Raman segment touches Aqaba, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Djibouti before reaching Mumbai, where Sify Technologies provides the landing. A terrestrial segment across Israel, carried by Bezeq, joins the two and sidesteps Egypt altogether.

The design addresses the Suez problem, namely the concentration of Europe-Asia exchange in a single congested and contested bottleneck (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2025). Its integration into the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, the Global Gateway, and the Mattei Plan situates a commercial build within a geoeconomic programme (European Commission, 2021; Middle East Institute, 2025; The White House, 2023b). Indian agency is limited and should be stated as such: Google initiated and financed the build, Sify provided the landing, and Bharti Airtel purchased capacity under the Sparkle brand in September 2024 (Sparkle, 2024). The case is state-compatible, and its value lies in what it reveals about chokepoint politics rather than in any evidence of Indian direction.

The bypass carries vulnerabilities intrinsic to its own logic. The land bridge substitutes one geopolitical exposure for another, binding the route to the stability of Israeli-Arab relations, which the war following the October 2023 attack on Israel has severely strained, and the same conflict stalled the political preconditions of the corridor initiative the cable was meant to serve (Middle East Institute, 2025). Delays on the Raman segment, attributed to elevated insurance costs and Houthi threats in the Red Sea, left the western Blue segment operational in early 2026 while end-to-end service to Mumbai remained unconfirmed. Blue-Raman therefore supports the diversification expectation in the form in which it was stated: diversification redistributes exposure rather than removing it, and the conditions that motivate a bypass can obstruct the bypass itself.

8. Demonstrating leverage would require route-alternative inventories, wholesale price comparisons for transit through Singapore against transit through India, and evidence of switching behaviour following outages. None of these is publicly available for the littoral states in question.

SEA-ME-WE 6

SEA-ME-WE 6, the 21,700 kilometre trunk linking Singapore to Marseille via Egypt, renders supplier politics observable. Bharti Airtel secured roughly one fifth of the investment, took one of the six trunk fibre pairs, and built a four-pair private network spanning Singapore, Chennai, and Mumbai, landed at Mumbai on 30 December 2024 and at Chennai in early 2025, with a headline capacity of 220 Tbps for India (Bharti Airtel, 2024).

The greater significance lies with the supplier. Investigative reporting has documented that HMN Tech initially won the build in 2020 with a bid near USD 475 million against SubCom's roughly USD 600 million⁹, and that the award shifted after sustained American intervention: USD 3.8 million in training grants from the US Trade and Development Agency to route carriers, ambassadorial lobbying in at least six countries, and the sanctioned withdrawal of China Telecom and China Mobile from a planned 20 per cent stake (Brock, 2023). The episode illustrates the decoupling of the cable supply chain along geopolitical lines, a contest that Grewal's (2008) account of standard-setting power and Farrell and Newman's (2019) attention to supply-chain jurisdiction jointly illuminate.

The causal roles should be kept separate. The documented intervention was American, the decision was the consortium's, and India's contribution was participation: an anchor investment, a fibre pair, and landings on a trunk built by a non-Chinese supplier. No evidence indicates that Indian action produced the supplier reversal, and the case is coded state-compatible. A competing interpretation, that Indian preferences operated informally through the consortium, cannot be excluded on the available record, but neither can it be supported by it.

Supplementary landings and the domestic case

A wave of additional landings thickens the anchoring pattern without testing it. The 2Africa Pearls branch of Meta's 45,000 kilometre system reached Mumbai in March 2025 through a partnership of Bharti Airtel, Meta,

and center3, adding over 100 Tbps and linking India directly to Africa and Europe (Bharti Airtel, 2025). Project Waterworth, announced in February 2025 as a roughly 50,000 kilometre system connecting the United States, India, Brazil, and South Africa, embeds India further within hyperscaler-owned topology, and its inclusion in a joint leaders' statement indicates that governments read it strategically (Meta, 2025; The White House, 2025).

The domestic dimension supplies the one clearly state-directed case in the set. The Chennai-Andaman and Nicobar Islands system, inaugurated in 2020 at a cost near 1,224 crore rupees¹⁰ under the Universal Service Obligation Fund and built by NEC, connected Port Blair and seven islands to the mainland with 2 x 200 Gbps on the trunk and 2 x 100 Gbps onward (NEC Corporation, 2020; Press Information Bureau, 2020). Because the archipelago sits astride the western approaches to the Malacca Strait, the system functions at once as a connectivity project, an eastward-facing strategic asset, and an enabler of the communications on which Undersea Domain Awareness depends (Baruah, 2020; Upadhyaya, 2020). Two qualifications belong with that reading. Government financing and commissioning make sovereign control clearer here than in any international system. And maritime domain awareness concerns vessels and the physical environment; no available evidence indicates that a landing confers visibility into the data a cable carries.

Cross-Case Assessment

Table 2 records, case by case, the state's role, the position acquired, the alternatives available to partners, and the evidence bearing on leverage and structural effect. Fig. 2 plots the same material along the conversion sequence, and the pattern is consistent: physical position is documented everywhere, centrality is partial, and leverage and structural effect are largely unevidenced.

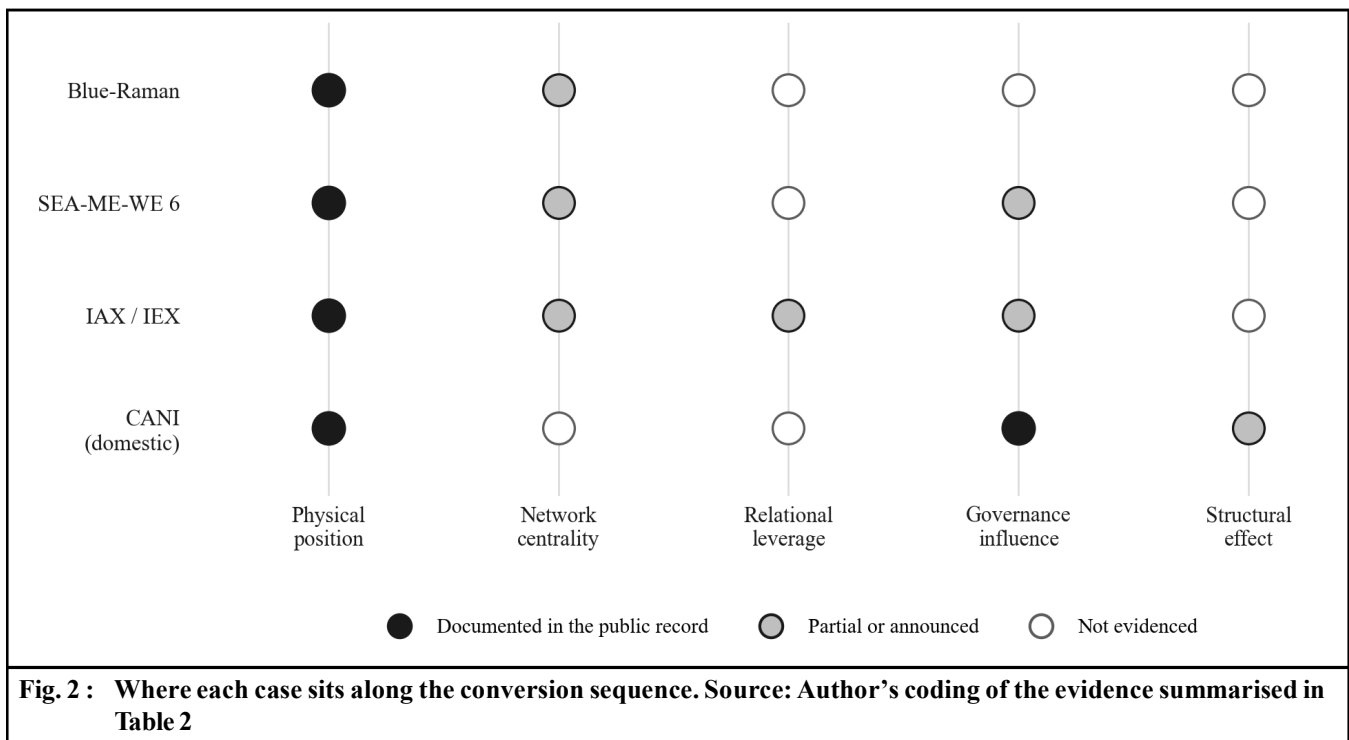
Read across the cases, the portfolio suggests a strategy of plural options rather than of concentrated control, since India-led systems, a hyperscaler-led bypass with an Indian terminus, and consortium participation on

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9. The bid figures are reported by investigative journalism drawing on consortium sources rather than taken from audited disclosure. They are used here as an indication of relative magnitude, which is what the argument requires, rather than as exact contract values.
 10. One crore is ten million rupees, so the figure is approximately 12.24 billion rupees. Comparison with international system costs is imprecise, since the domestic project was procured under universal-service financing rules rather than on commercial terms.

Table 2 : Case-by-case evidence for infrastructure position and infrastructure power

Criterion	IAX / IEX	Blue-Raman	SEA-ME-WE 6	CANI
Indian state role	State-enabled: licensing, incentives, diplomacy for littoral branches	State-compatible: Indian landing partner, later capacity purchase	State-compatible: carrier participation; the documented intervention was American	State-directed: public financing and commissioning
Physical position acquired	Trunk origination at Mumbai and Chennai; littoral branches; landing in Italy	Mumbai terminus of a Europe-India route avoiding Egypt	Mumbai and Chennai landings; a private four-pair network	Chennai-Port Blair trunk; seven island landings
Alternatives for partners	Not documented; Singapore remains a competing switching point	Egypt corridor still available and cheaper for most flows	Numerous; one trunk among several	None; satellite was the prior alternative
Evidence of leverage	Interdependence documented; switching costs not evidenced	None claimed	None attributable to India	Not applicable; the dependent party is domestic
Evidence of structural effect	Topology changed; manufacture, repair, traffic control unchanged	Exposure redistributed; no Indian control of the alternative	Participation rather than causation	Sovereign control of a domestic segment
Overall reading	Strong position, relational potential, not structural power	Diversification as redistribution; weak Indian agency	Participation, not causation	Clearest state direction, smallest external reach

Source: Author's assessment based on the sources cited in Section 5. Entries record what the cited sources document, not what may be inferred from them.



a non-Chinese trunk each carry different risks and different dependencies. Plurality of this kind complicates any attempt to weaponise interdependence against India, since no single corridor or owner commands the whole, but it equally disperses the levers India might pull. Gjesvik's (2023) proposition that private ownership diminishes state

power appears too general on this evidence, yet the Indian record also qualifies the expectation, drawn from Farrell and Newman (2019), that a state accumulating routes accumulates coercive options along with them.

How far the account travels depends on the scope conditions. Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa satisfy all

three and have each begun to treat landing decisions as strategic rather than commercial; the argument should hold in weaker form in Kenya or Vietnam, where the traffic market supports landings but route alternatives remain thin, and should not hold where connectivity has a single feasible path. The Indian case is therefore instructive rather than typical, and the mechanisms are better read as a means of locating where infrastructure power is available than as a prediction that states will take it up.

Why Position Has Not Converted

The gap between position and power is a question about layers rather than about scale. Consortium shares confer a claim on capacity, not on routing: a one-fifth investment buys a voice in where a system lands and who builds it rather than control over either. Landing stations confer jurisdiction over a terminus, not over the path traffic takes to reach it, since traffic can be switched abroad and content cached elsewhere. Diversification changes the distribution of exposure without changing who manufactures cable, who owns repair ships, or who operates the exchanges at which networks interconnect. Structural power would require durable influence over topology, manufacturing, repair, and rules. India holds a growing share of the first, a negligible share of the second and third, and a consultative role in the fourth.

Under what conditions can privately owned infrastructure be converted into state power? The Indian record suggests four. Regulation converts where the state controls a scarce complement owners must obtain, such as landing rights or security clearance. Diplomacy converts where the state supplies access to third markets owners want, as with the littoral landings negotiated alongside Indian foreign policy. Security institutions convert where the state becomes the guarantor of an asset owners cannot protect, which is the logic of critical-infrastructure designation and of repair capacity. Coalition governance converts where the state helps write the rules under which all owners operate. The evidence shows the first two in use and the second two largely announced, so Gjesvik's (2023) proposition is better stated conditionally: private ownership diminishes state power wherever the state lacks a complement the owner needs.

A competing interpretation deserves acknowledgement. The post-2020 turn may reflect commercial convergence rather than statecraft, with domestic data demand, carrier vertical integration, and

hyperscaler routing preferences sufficient to account for the new topology. The evidence does not settle the question, and the coding scheme was designed to avoid pre-judging it. The two readings imply different futures: if the turn is commercial, the sequence stalls at centrality, whereas if it is strategic, the missing layers of repair, manufacture, and rules become the natural sites of the next investment.

Conclusion

Submarine cables emerge from this analysis as an under-examined instrument of statecraft, and India as a state responding to geographic exposure by accumulating position while experimenting with mechanisms that may in time convert position into power. Three registers of claim should be kept apart. The evidence documents that India has acquired infrastructure position: trunk systems now originate on Indian territory, additional landings have arrived, a bypass of the Suez corridor terminates at Mumbai, and an Indian carrier holds an anchor stake in a trunk built by a non-Chinese supplier. It suggests, without settling, that this position creates relational potential within the littoral neighbourhood and a consultative role in emerging governance arrangements. It does not indicate that India exercises asymmetric leverage over any partner, that Indian territory carries a share of regional traffic commensurate with its designed capacity, or that landing infrastructure confers visibility into the data crossing it.

The framework offers a template for distinguishing position from leverage and from structural power, and for locating where a state's claims actually rest. Its limits follow from the evidence base. Traffic and utilisation figures capable of separating designed capacity from actual routing are unavailable; route-alternative and switching-cost data for the Maldives and Sri Lanka are absent; and primary documentation of who initiated, financed, or approved each project remains partial. Where these are missing, the analysis has reported position rather than inferred power, and the two expectations most dependent on them are correspondingly the least resolved. Longitudinal tracking as the systems enter service, work on latency and capacity pricing, and research on how littoral states experience dependence on India-anchored routes would address part of that deficit. Overall, the case suggests that infrastructure power is negotiated rather than given, and that private ownership operates less as a barrier than

as a condition determining which instruments of conversion remain available to the state.

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