

# India says no to Google Earth's peering

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Concerned over distinct satellite images of its strategic installations that Google makes available online, India has decided to mask some of the sensitive images itself.

Minister of State Prithviraj Chauhan said the prime minister's office on Thursday instructed the country's defense and science and technology ministries to evaluate images of sensitive Indian locations and proceed with measures for masking them.

"A meeting was held yesterday to discuss the issue, which was attended by representatives from various departments including defense and IT," said a source from India's Department of Science and Technology, "and the Department of Information Technology has been authorized to devise the method and strategy to ensure that images of sensitive sites appear in a manner that can pose no danger to the country."

Although according to the ministry official the method to be used for masking these images haven't yet been decided, reports doing rounds suggest that the images could either be blocked or, high-resolution imagery could be replaced with low-resolution images "making it difficult for subversive elements to take a close look at important sites and pinpoint their gradient and location."

Officials at the Internet search engine were not available for comments on this latest development, but officials from Google India's public-relations agency said that Google is willing to cooperate with the Indian Government and has taken the governmental concerns about Google

Earth and Google Maps "very seriously."

In June 2005 Google launched its Google Earth tool, powered by Keyhole Technology from Keyhole, a company that Google acquired earlier. By combining satellite images and other cutting-edge technologies like GPS data, GIS tools, an intuitive video-game like interface, powerful graphics, video-streaming and 3-D capability of computers, Google Earth claims that it "transports" a user to any address in the United States, Canada or Western Europe.

Google also claims that Google Earth is the only service that offers high-resolution images for most parts of the world on the Internet. It offers other hi-tech features like 3-D "walkthrough" capability as well as a "measurement" feature that permits one to get approximate distances. Information can be overlaid over "layers" so that themes like hospitals, hot-spots, restaurants and libraries can be separated into layers and super-imposed when needed. The results can be stored, printed or e-mailed.

In September 2005 Google included India in its service by releasing satellite images of New Delhi, South Bombay (Mumbai), Bangalore and Hyderabad. But although many in India hailed the new inclusion as something "amazing that would delight anyone," the country's securities agencies weren't pleased at all, saying the service also revealed sensitive sites like a dock in Bombay that berths Indian naval ships, official residents of its prime minister and president, some of the country's air force bases, airports like Delhi's Palam Airport and even some of the country's "sensitive" nuclear installations.

One of India's most vocal critics of the service was none other than President A P J Abdul Kalam, who says that it poses a significant security risk to the country.

Speaking at a top-level security meeting soon after Google included

India in its service, the president said, "Earth observations by Google Earth, most of you may or may not be aware (makes) high resolutions pictures freely available on the Internet provided by many sites including [www.fas.org](http://www.fas.org) and Google Earth; I am going to demonstrate the aerial pictures of some of the sensitive locations of India. Let us also look at similar areas elsewhere. You will realize that some of the developing countries, which are already in danger of terrorist attacks, have been singularly chosen to provide such high resolutions about them. When you look deeper into it, you would realize that the specific laws in some countries, regarding spatial observations over their territory and U.N. recommendations about the display of spatial observations is inadequate. I would urge all of you to discuss amongst yourself and come up with the possible solutions for the government to take up."

India is not the only country that is objecting to Google Earth and similar services. Citing that Google Earth offers "just the kind of raw material terrorists need to mount an attack," the governments of Australia, Russia, South Korea and Thailand too are reportedly demanding that Google blur images of their sensitive assets that can be viewed clearly on the Earth site.

In fact, the United States too has blanked out images of the White House and other sensitive sites from the Web site.

Interestingly though, the defense arm of the Indian government is not losing sleep. Defense Ministry sources say that the country's armed forces have always factored in the threat of satellite imagery of their military bases available freely on the Internet, in their defense strategies. For instance, frontline air force bases have adequate protection systems in place, while satellite images of ships of India's naval core do not make any difference, since ships are always on mobile platforms.

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