

# India skirts maritime border dispute with Pakistan by fresh continental-shelf claim

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A view of Koteswar Temple, located on the extreme western coastal area in the Arabian sea of India and nearest to Pakistan. India expands maritime claim in Arabian Sea | Photo Credit: Vijay Soneji

India has increased its claim in the Central Arabian Sea, as part of its 'extended continental shelf' by nearly 10,000 square km but also modified an earlier claim to avoid a

**long-standing dispute with Pakistan** over the maritime boundary between the two countries, suggest documents submitted earlier this month with the United Nations.

Coastal countries have an 'exclusive economic zone,' (EEZ) which gives exclusive mining and fishing rights, upto 200 nautical miles from their coastlines. In addition to this, such states can make claims for more area in the ocean provided they can scientifically establish to a UN body, called the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), that this claimed area extends unbroken from their landmass all the way till the sea bed.

All of this oceanic area is considered part of a country's extended continental shelf. This gives them rights to commercially mine for valuable minerals, polymetallic nodules and oil reserves. India already has 12 nautical miles of territorial sea and 200 nautical miles of the EEZ measured from the baselines.

"With the anticipated addition of approximately 1.2 million square km of extended continental shelf from the two submissions to the ~2 million sq. km of EEZ, India's seabed and sub-seabed area would become almost equal its land area of 3.274 million sq. km," according to the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR), Goa.

India made its first claim in 2009 in vast stretches of sea spanning the Bay of Bengal, Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. Due to geology, the continental shelf of a country can frequently over-lap with another and the process of scrutinising and deciding upon the claims of countries can run into years.

While India's claims are still being weighed upon, Pakistan in 2021 objected to portions of India's claimed territory in the Western offshore regions on the grounds that nearly 100 nautical miles overlapped with a maritime border that was under 'dispute.'

Specifically, this referred to a dispute between the countries over the Sir Creek, a strip of water in the marshes of the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat. The creek roughly separates the Kutch region in India and Pakistan's Sindh province. While India countered these objections, the net result was that the CLCS, in March 2023 rejected the entirety of India's claim in the Arabian Sea region. However, the Commission gives leeway to countries to submit 'modified claims.'

It's in response to this that on the April 3, India split its original claim (in the Western Arabian Sea) into two 'partial ones.' Doing so, said an official in the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), is to ensure that India's claim in the Central Arabian Sea region isn't affected.

"Countries can submit any number of partial claims. Overall we have increased our claim by an additional 10,000 sq km based on additional data gathered," M Ravichandran, Secretary, MoES told *The Hindu*. "The remaining part can be discussed bilaterally. This strategy is part of our approach to ensure that at least (the region) without dispute, and which is very valuable, is awarded to us." Institutions of the MoES, such as the NCPOR, have played a key role in the technical aspects of determining India's continental shelf.

Some parts of India's continental shelf claims in the Arabian Sea overlap with that of Oman. However the two countries have an agreement in place since 2010 that while the continental shelf between them is yet to be delimited, it is 'not under dispute.'

On the eastern and southern coast, India has claimed about 300,000 square km in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean though these have faced contests by Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The CLCS is expected to begin a new session of consultations later this year.

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