

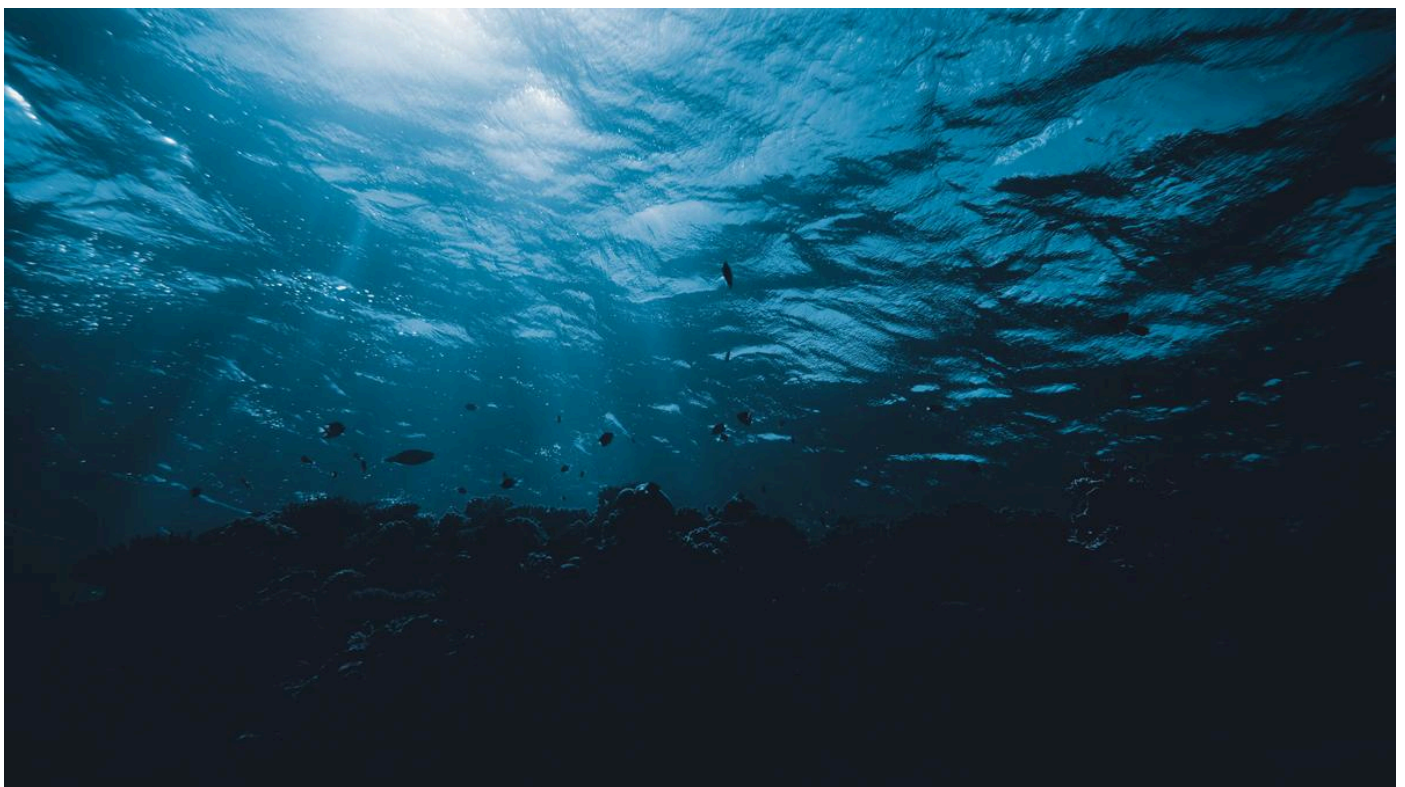
India gets licence to scour new part of Indian Ocean for precious metals

The government has signed a contract with International Seabed Authority to explore polymetallic sulphur nodules in the Carlsberg Ridge, a 3,00,000-sq km stretch that lies in the Indian Ocean

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JACOB KOSHY



The Carlsberg Ridge, is a 3,00,000-sq km stretch that lies in the Indian Ocean, specifically in the Arabian Sea and northwest Indian Ocean. Image for representation. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

India has bagged an exploration contract from International Seabed Authority (ISA) to look for a class of precious metals in the north west Indian Ocean.

This is the first licence granted globally, M. Ravichandran, Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences, told *The Hindu*, for exploring polymetallic sulphur nodules in the Carlsberg Ridge.

The agreement with the Jamaica-based ISA was signed in Delhi on Monday (September 15, 2025), he added.

These nodules are concentrations of rock found in the deep ocean and said to be rich in manganese, cobalt, nickel and copper.

The Carlsberg Ridge, is a 3,00,000-sq km stretch that lies in the Indian Ocean, specifically in the Arabian Sea and northwest Indian Ocean. It forms the boundary between the Indian and Arabian tectonic plates, extending from near Rodrigues Island to the Owen fracture zone.

India's application for rights

For exploration in areas part of the 'high seas' or part of the ocean that is so far away from any country, that it is not part of their territories, countries must obtain permission from the ISA, Jamaica. Nineteen countries have such exploration rights.

India too had applied in January 2024 for exploration rights in two regions of the Indian Ocean. While one in the Carlsberg Ridge has been granted, the second – the Afanasy-Nikitin Sea (ANS) mount – is yet to be approved.

The ANS is located in the Central Indian Ocean and the territory has been claimed by Sri Lanka for exploration rights. While countries can claim up to 350 nautical miles from their coasts as their 'continental shelf', those in the Bay of Bengal can, in theory, claim up to 500 nautical miles as per the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Previously, India had obtained such exploratory rights from the ISA in the Central Indian Ocean Basin. The first was signed in March 2002 and is set to expire on March 24, 2027, after two extensions.

The second was for polymetallic sulphides in the Indian Ocean Ridge. It was signed on September 26, 2016, between the ISA and India and is valid till September 2031.

Rights for strategic purposes

India has commissioned multiple surveys as part of these exploration permits. However, exploiting the deep ocean for mining rights is controversial as too little is known about the seabed in these regions to establish if mining in these regions is environmentally non-destructive.

Despite the potential, such minerals have not been actively sought by companies and countries due to the expense involved. However, countries claim exploratory rights for strategic purposes. With rising demand for critical minerals to power batteries, an exploratory right often acts as a way to block competing claims from other countries.

As *The Hindu* reported last March, India's applications to the ISA were, in part, prompted by reports of Chinese ships scouring the region. "Even if we don't get it, somebody else should not take away what can be ours," an official in the Earth Sciences Ministry said, declining to be identified.

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