

The Final Frontier? Dividing the Outer Continental Shelf

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This paper addresses the potential for access to and exploitation of offshore hydrocarbon resources beyond 200M from the coast – outside current national jurisdiction.

From Morocco to South Africa, 24 coastal states can between them claim exploitation rights over a total of more than 3.9 million square kilometres of Exclusive Economic Zone (normally 200 nautical miles). Oil and gas licensing and exploration and production programmes are well advanced in many of these regions, and indications are that in general deep water and ultra-deep water prospects are very promising.

According to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, sovereign rights to development of resources in continental shelf areas beyond the 200M limit could cover a further 650,000 square kilometres of exploitable seafloor. Some estimates suggest that at the current rate of technological advance, these statutory “extended” continental shelf areas will be in production within the next decade.

Each coastal state is required to submit a claim to the United Nations within a strict timescale in order to secure these territories, which are naturally both in the deepest waters and by definition the furthest from land. In many instances around the world, oil companies (both NOCs and majors) have been instrumental in developing supporting cases to these claims. Successful claims will be submitted using a combination of geophysical and geological data, following a precise formula combining an evaluation of sediment thickness and seafloor morphology, thus contributing to a regional understanding of the prospectivity, and in some cases, slope stability, of these ‘frontier’ areas.

This paper examines the probable areal extent of these deepwater areas for West Africa and conjugate margins of South America, evaluates their hydrocarbon prospectivity and outlines a strategy by which their limits can be defined and established under international law.