

New Delhi presses ahead with plans for an Indian “Suez Canal”

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The Indian government is proceeding with plans to dredge a deep-water canal in the Palk Strait between southern India and northern Sri Lanka despite opposition in both countries from fishermen and environmentalists. The aim of the Sethusamudram project is to facilitate commercial shipping and particularly to allow more rapid deployment of the Indian navy.

Hailed as India's Suez Canal, the trench costing 20 billion rupees (\$US550 million) will be 167 kilometres long, 300 metres wide and 14.5 metres deep. When completed in 2008, it will stretch from Tuticorin port on India's southern coast to Adams Bridge in the Gulf of Mannar and northward to the Bay of Bengal.

Launching the project in July, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared that when completed it would be “a catalyst for industrial development, spur trade and commerce, promote coastal shipping and generate employment”.

The idea was first mooted by the British Commander of the Indian Marines, A.D. Taylor, in 1860 and was floated again by Indian governments in 1955 and subsequently. However, the project was only given the go-ahead this year in line with India's developing economic and strategic interests.

Over the past decade and a half, India has opened up its economy and attracted substantial foreign investment, particular in the IT sector. But as Finance Minister P. Chidambaram recently commented: “Infrastructure remains the major bottleneck for the potential surge in growth in India.”

The Sethusamudram canal will cut the time and costs for shipping from India's east coast to western ports and beyond to the Middle East and Europe. At present, ships have to sail around Sri Lanka. The project is expected to directly benefit the south Indian ports of

Nagapattinam, Rameshwaram and Tuticorin.

New Delhi's main interest in the project, however, is strategic. The canal will greatly enhance the ability of the Indian navy to move warships between the Indian east and west coasts and to different parts of the Indian Ocean. This fits with Indian ambitions to expand its naval influence throughout the region.

India's new maritime doctrine, released last year, outlined a fundamental shift from defending the Indian coastline to aggressively pursuing the country's interests throughout the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The doctrine declared that the seas from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Straits were now India's “legitimate area of interest.”

Emphasising the new doctrine, naval chief Admiral Arun Prakash told a news conference this month: “The Indian Ocean is now the highway along which over a quarter of the world's trade and energy requirements move”. Thus, he concluded: “The Indian Navy is a key component of the nation's foreign policy.”

For the first time, the Indian navy has established its own exclusive operational base and port, located on the west coast at Karwar in the south Indian state of Karnataka. The Karwar base is part of Project Seabird, which will include an air force station, a naval armament depot and missile silos. When completed, the project will be the largest naval port in Asia.

The Sethusamudram canal will be an obvious complement to Karwar base, enabling warships to move more quickly to India's eastern coast and the Bay of Bengal. The reduced sailing distance of 402 nautical miles is likely to be far more critical from a military standpoint than for commercial shipping. While the planned canal will only allow medium-sized ships through the Palk Strait, it could be readily dredged to allow larger vessels in the future.

Immediately, the canal would greatly improve the capacity of the Indian navy and coast guard, in collaboration with the Sri Lankan military, to intercept vessels operated by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At present, one of the LTTE's main supply routes runs through the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu and then via sea into northern Sri Lanka. "[H]opefully that [the canal] will be a deterrent to the LTTE," Admiral Prakash said recently.

Unlike the Suez and Panama canals, which were dug through solid land, the Sethusamudram project involves dredging a passage through 30 kilometres of shallow sand shoals that effectively form a land bridge between India and Sri Lanka. It will cut through the Adams Bridge reef between the Indian island of Pamban and Talaimannaram in Sri Lanka, where the water depth is just two to three metres.

Environmentalists have warned that the project will have far-reaching consequences for the region's fragile ecosystem. Sanjeev Gopal from Greenpeace warned in May: "This dredging will disturb a large amount of underwater sediment. It will wreck coral reefs and affect the nearby Gulf of Mannar marine reserve, home to more than 3,600 species."

The area has the highest concentration of seagrass species on the Indian coast and also the first marine reserve in South and South East Asia. It contains five different species of endangered marine turtles as well as many other species of fish, molluscs and crustaceans.

Gopal pointed out that constant dredging would be required to keep the canal open. "This will spread the sediment far and wide. It will eventually smother the coral reef systems, and if they are smothered the reefs will collapse." The impact on fish stocks and other species could be disastrous.

According to Sri Lanka's National Aquatic Research Authority (NARA), the increase in water flow from Bay of Bengal to Gulf of Mannar could also affect the gulf's delicate eco-system.

Many of the 500,000 people living in fishing communities in northern Sri Lanka and coastal Tamil Nadu could lose their livelihoods. According to an article on the *Asia Times* website, fishermen could face restrictions and entire villages may be displaced to make way for repair yards and other facilities.

The Indian government has dismissed objections, saying the sensitive ecological zone is 20 kilometres

from dredging zone. But neither fishermen nor ecologists are convinced. Thousands of Indian fishermen have been involved in protests since July. In Arakattuthurai in Tamil Nadu, police stopped fishermen boarding some 200 fibreglass boats to block work on the canal.

In promoting the project, Indian Prime Minister Singh declared that it would assist "our neighbours". In fact the result will be the opposite. Some 60 percent of transshipment goods through Sri Lanka's main port of Colombo presently come from India. The canal will allow a portion of Indian commercial shipping to bypass Sri Lankan ports.

Significantly, New Delhi did not consult the Sri Lankan government before announcing the project. According to the International Law of the Sea, a country is obliged to exchange feasibility studies and reports with its neighbours for a project involving a shared stretch of sea.

In early July, Sri Lanka's then foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar told parliament that the government would take India to the International Court of Justice if the project had a negative impact. He also pressed for "joint monitoring and assessment of any adverse implications". Since then, Colombo has virtually dropped any opposition, possibly in return for Indian assurances that the canal will help to curb the LTTE.

India's determination to proceed unilaterally simply confirms that the canal is an integral part of New Delhi's ambitions for a greater strategic and economic role in the region and internationally.



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