The Evolution of the Maritime Boundary—The UK Experience in the Southern North Sea and Channel

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The Southern North Sea and Channel form a relatively narrow stretch of water between the United Kingdom and her European neighbours of the Netherlands, Belgium and France. The coasts are broadly opposite and between 80 n.m. apart in the north of the area, narrowing to 20 n.m. through the Dover Strait and opening out to 82 n.m. apart in the west before the coasts take on an adjacent aspect. Maritime boundary-making in this area has taken the UK some 26 years to complete and reflects the development of the law and State practice in this field. This chapter highlights this process and demonstrates that complex issues can be resolved by using all the armoury available to negotiators provided the political will is there.

UK/Netherlands—Continental Shelf Boundary, 1965 (Fig. 2)

Following the enactment of the Territorial Waters Order in Council 1964 and the Continental Shelf Act 1964, reflecting the United Kingdom’s ratification of the Geneva Conventions on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone and on the Continental Shelf, the way was open for hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation to begin in earnest in the highly prospective North Sea. To enable the maximum potential for the area to be realized agreed maritime boundaries were required. In the area under discussion, the first Agreement to be reached, was the UK/Netherlands continental shelf boundary. The northern end of the boundary was

* The opinions expressed are the author’s own and do not necessarily represent those of the Ministry of Defence or other Government departments.

Figure 2  Delimitation of the Continental Shelf between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (1972).