

## The Straits – between geopolitical best card and bone of contention in the Turkish-Russian relations. Kanal Istanbul Projesi

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**Abstract:** *The Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits transformed Turkey into a binder between continents and seas, but this geographical advantage is, at the same time, a geopolitical and geostrategic bone of contention, drawing arguments not only with the neighbouring states of the Black Sea, but also with the European powers, Russia in this case. The past two centuries are a long series of discussions and discordant episodes related to The Straits, especially after Turkey joined NATO and found itself in the position to be impartial toward The West and Russia. The current challenge is to find a neutral path, independent, and in the same time stronger, but will it be a satisfactory solution for all the involved actors and it will be this one a peaceful one?*

**Key words:** Straits, Turkey, Russia, Black Sea, Kanal Istanbul, Geopolitics

Over the centuries, the states have been disputing the Straits territories, on the account of domination and hegemony. In the case of the great powers, these reasons have been translated through the gain of vast territories and political influences; in the contemporary period, through the control of the underground resources and of the key points, if we look from a geostrategic point of view. In order to understand a certain space from this perspective, we need, first of all, to set the borders, the temporal framing, the actors, and moreover, their interests and behaviour.

The analysis of a situation like this one implies two types of geopolitical approaches: a historical one, focused on the past and on evolution that have shaped a certain space, and another one, which has a predictable character, and which

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takes into account the projection of some scenarios with an anticipatory character<sup>1</sup>. However, this research will merge the two approaches, and will try to analyze the resources and the economic profile of the chosen space, the behaviour of the implied actors, their potential, and especially the interests they have in that space.

This kind of analysis can be applied to the context of The Black Sea Basin, more concretely, to the area of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, important territorial strips, not only for the resources, but also for their geographical position, which have transformed them into a geostrategic and geopolitical key for the Turkish Republic.

The Bosphorus (30 km long) links the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea, and the Dardanelles (68 km long) links the latter to the Aegean Sea, the two of them separating Europe from Asia. The Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits have the status of international navigation ways, connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>2</sup> From a political, economic, cultural and social point of view, they belong to the Turkish profile and they subordinate to its government.

### **The Straits – the bone of contention in the Turkish-Soviet/Russian relations**

The Black Sea Basin has been disputed for a long time by the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire and other European powers and, after that, by the successors of these empires, but the change of its status was most frequent in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The review of a few landmarks (The Treaty of Adrianople in 1829, The Treaty of Paris in 1856 after the Crimean War, the Versailles System of Treaties after World War I – The Treaty of Sèvres, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the Montreux Convention of 1936) is illustrative: ever since 1841, the control of the ships transit through The Straits has been under international control, and their status has been rediscussed and established in Montreux (1936), authorizing Turkey to militarize the strategic waters and, if

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<sup>1</sup> Constantin Hlihor, *Geopolitica și geostrategia în analiza relațiilor internaționale contemporane*, Editura Universității Naționale de Apărare „Carol I”, București, 2005, p. 297; See also Gerard Dussouy, *Quelle géopolitique au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle?*, Editions Complexe, Paris, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See more in C. G. Fenwick, “The New Status of the Dardanelles”, *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (October, 1936), pp. 701-706; Paul Gogeanu, *Strâmtoarele Mării Negre de-a lungul istoriei*, Editura Politică, București, 1966.

threatened by imminent war, to allow or reject the passing of war ships through the Straits.<sup>3</sup>

Even if, territorially speaking, they are narrow geographical areas, through their position, they are geostrategic keys, which is the reason why the powers in the area have had an interest in changing their status. A defining moment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for this space, is the Treaty of Lausanne (24<sup>th</sup> of July 1923), through which Turkey loses the full rights of possession over the Straits. The provisions guaranteed the free trade, but the principle of the free passing was restricted especially for warships, military aircraft and aircraft carrier: what a state could send through The Straits, during a war, did not have the right to exceed the dimensions of the dominant fleet in the Black Sea. Also, the states could “reserve themselves the right to send into the Black Sea, at all times and under all circumstances, a force of not more than three ships, of which no individual ship shall exceed 10,000 tons”.<sup>4</sup>

Let us not forget that it was the blurry context, just before the World War II, when all the states were seeking for security and the Treaty of Lausanne was replaced by the Montreux Convention, which had reconfigured the status of The Straits. This allowed free access for the commercial navigation, but the military ships were again restricted; moreover, it limited the access of non-riparian states of the Black Sea to 21 days, a tonnage not bigger than 15,000 t, and maximum 9 ships, which means that the aircraft carriers could not have been transported through The Straits.<sup>5</sup>

Though the international regulations reconfigured the status of The Straits, it was not long until the incidents and dissensions reappeared. After the end of World War II, when Turkey oscillated between the West and Soviet Russia, a split in the Turkish-Soviet relations appeared, because of Russia’s wish to modify the status of The Straits to its advantage. The Turkish refusal led to the cancellation in

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<sup>3</sup> See articles 20 and 21 of the Montreux Convention. The Convention can be accessed on the website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/implementation-of-the-montreux-convention.en.mfa>.

<sup>4</sup> The Treaty can be consulted on the website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey: [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/ii\\_-convention-relating-to-the-regime-of-the-straits.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/ii_-convention-relating-to-the-regime-of-the-straits.en.mfa).

<sup>5</sup> The Convention can be accessed on the website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/implementation-of-the-montreux-convention.en.mfa>.

1945 of the 1925 “Treaty of Friendship and Non-Aggression with Turkey”<sup>6</sup>, and this was just one of the cases of disagreement and challenge at the beginning of Cold War.

In 1976, the Russian naval vessel *Kiev* passed through The Straits, with Turkish approval, heading to the Mediterranean Sea. The question was, if the passage conditions through The Straits were fully respected, since the Soviets declared the ship as an antisubmarine cruiser, but, in fact, it was projected to carry about 25-30 fixed-wing aircraft and about 25-30 antisubmarine helicopters, and Turkish authorities were signaled that indeed, that is what the vessel was carrying. The ship passed through Bosphorus, the Marmara Sea, Dardanelles and docked in the south of Crete. The dilemma was, if this ship fit the provisions of the Montreux Convention or not, because there was no clear classification or concrete provision about this kind of vessel, as it was declared by the Soviets.<sup>7</sup>

Even after Cold War ended, the incidents did not stop, therefore, the Straits’ status was redefined through the addition of some new provisions, through the decision of the government in Ankara, following the Nassia oil tanker incident (1<sup>st</sup> of July 1994). The speed and the dimensions of the ships were limited, and Turkey was allowed to close the straits in case of fire, sport, or environmental activities.<sup>8</sup> There is no need to mention how important the Straits are for the Turkish economy and foreign policy, one proof being that, in 2013 only, 45931 ships have passed through the Bosphorus Strait, out of which 6886 were freight ones, and 1561 oil tankers, making it one of the most transited points in the world.<sup>9</sup>

### **The current geostrategic and geopolitical importance of the Straits**

Certainly, the states from the Black Sea region would not have disputed over a few square kilometres, if that space had had no interest. Joshua Goldstein identifies the interests of a state in a region as: negotiable, non-negotiable and real

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<sup>6</sup> Bülent Gökyay, *Soviet Eastern Policy and Turkey, 1920-1991. Soviet Eastern Policy, Turkey and communism*, Routledge London & New York, New York, 2006, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> H. Gary Knight, “The Kiev and the Turkish Straits”, *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 71, No. 1, January, 1977, p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> Hugo Caminos, Vincent P. Gogliati-Bantz, *The Legal Regime of Straits. Contemporary Challenges and Solutions*, Cambridge University Press, London, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Bosphorus Strait News, Yearly ship statistics of Bosphorus strait, Accessed: <http://www.bosphorusstrait.com/2014/03/13/yearly-ship-statistics-of-bosphorus-strait-2013/>.

(which are not declared usually), and obviously, some material, political or cultural reasons can be added to these.<sup>10</sup> The interests for this space did not belong to Turkey only, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century being a continuous argument between the European powers: Great Britain and Russia had divergent positions when the Montreux Convention was negotiated, while Soviet Russia and Turkey tried to negotiate several times after the Convention was signed in 1936 (Yalta, also Potsdam - when the USSR tried to obtain a privileged passing status through The Straits).<sup>11</sup>

Taking the recent context of Ukraine, Turkey could not rally to the Russian interests and trajectories, because of the tartars living on territories under Russian influence, but neither could it have a firm negative position, because of the dependency on the Russian gas (the Blue Stream pipeline, in this case). According to the provisions of the Montreux Convention, in case of a conflict or war that Turkey is not a part of, the provisions for the commercial ships remain unchanged. But if Turkey is involved in a conflict, the ships of the states Turkey is not at war with can pass freely, while the ones of the states which participate to the conflict are the subject of the choices and decisions of the government in Ankara.

Turkey will always be a bond between the Trans-Atlantic system and the Eurasian one<sup>12</sup> and the Straits can be perceived as a sort of geopolitical and geostrategic pendulum. In 2006, the international attention focused again upon Turkish Straits, in the context of the United States insistence to extend NATO's activities in the Black Sea, through "Operation Active Endeavour"<sup>13</sup>, when Turkey and Russia opposed. On the one side, Turkey feared of Russia's reaction and of a possible unbalance of forces in the area; on the other side, Russia would have never accepted the idea that the American influence could grow in the Black Sea. Two years later, in 2008, Turkey was confronted again with the situation of not being able to decide if to rally on the West, or on Russia, in the Georgian crisis (where Turkey was quite "shy" to criticize Russian invasion), yet, due to its

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<sup>10</sup> Joshua Goldstein, Jon C. Pevehouse, *International Relations*, Pearson Longman, London, 2007, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> J. C. Hurewitz, "Russia and the Turkish Straits: A Reevaluation of the Origins of the Problem", *World Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (July, 1962), p. 605.

<sup>12</sup> Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer, "Turkish-Russian relations: The challenges of reconciling geopolitical competition with economic partnership", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2000, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Under this operation NATO monitors the Mediterranean and tries to protect the region against terrorism. Accessed: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_7932.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_7932.htm).

NATO's membership, has allowed some US ships in the Black Sea, action that has enraged Russia.<sup>14</sup>

Taking into account the fact that Turkey is part of NATO, all the decisions of the Alliance in the Black Sea area depend on it. Taking a look upon the recent events in Ukraine, regarding the annexation of Crimea, Turkey was again confronted with the dilemma of supporting one side or another. Russia claims that, apparently, Turkey favoured U.S by breaking some articles from Montreux Convention, and argues this statement by bringing into attention the episode from July 2014, when the U.S navy warship USS Taylor, due to some technical issues, as it was officially declared, stayed 11 days over its limit<sup>15</sup> (according to Montreux Convention the limit is 21 days<sup>16</sup>). What was not brought into the spotlight is the fact that Russia also had had an advantage, because, by using the Straits, it was easier to carry armament to Syria.

### What comes next?

The Ankara's leadership unveiled, in 2011, a new project, called "Kanal İstanbul Projesi" (Canal İstanbul), considered by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – at that time Turkey's Prime Minister, now president of the country –, a big step in building the "New Turkey". The aim of this "new Bosphorus Canal"<sup>17</sup>, which is expected to be finished by 2023, is to move the activity, the commercial shipping, from Bosphorus to Canal İstanbul. From Erdoğan's declaration, the new channel is supposed to be around 45 kilometers long, 400 meters wide and 25 meters deep<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Mustafa Aydın, "Geographical blessing versus geopolitical curse: great power security agendas for the Black Sea region and a Turkish alternative", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 9, Issues 3, 2009, p. 280.

<sup>15</sup> Viorica Marin, "Expert rus: Rusia și Turcia ar trebui să negocieze închiderea strâmtorilor Bosfor și Dardanele pentru navele militare ale statelor non-riverane Mării Negre", *Adevărul*, 7 august 2014, Accessed: [http://adevarul.ro/international/rusia/expert-rus-rusia-turcia-trebui-negocieze-inchiderea-stramtorilor-bosfor-dardanele-navele-militare-statelor-non-riverane-marii-negre-1\\_53e38ecb0d133766a816b58a/index.html](http://adevarul.ro/international/rusia/expert-rus-rusia-turcia-trebui-negocieze-inchiderea-stramtorilor-bosfor-dardanele-navele-militare-statelor-non-riverane-marii-negre-1_53e38ecb0d133766a816b58a/index.html).

<sup>16</sup> Article 18, paragraph 2, "Vessels of war belonging to non-Black Sea Powers shall not remain in the Black Sea more than twenty-one days, whatever be the object of their presence there". Accessed: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/implementation-of-the-montreux-convention.en.mfa>.

<sup>17</sup> *The Guardian*, "İstanbul's new Bosphorus canal 'to surpass Suez or Panama'", 27 April 2011, Accessed: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/27/istanbul-new-bosphorus-canal>.

<sup>18</sup> The declaration of the Turkish prime-minister, today's president, R.T. Erdoğan, "Karadeniz ile Marmara Denizi arasında 'Kanal İstanbul' yapıyoruz", din 27 aprilie 2011. Accessed: [http://www.basbakanlik.gov.tr/Forms/\\_Article/pg\\_Article.aspx](http://www.basbakanlik.gov.tr/Forms/_Article/pg_Article.aspx)

Reading behind the lines, this is a will for an independent foreign policy, a tendency to form an energetic bond between Central Asia, Middle East and Black Sea.<sup>19</sup>

Even though nowadays Turkey has all the necessary instruments to control and monitor the ships' transit in the Straits, the responsibilities are not very different from the ones in 1936, however, the international context is changed: Turkey is part of North Atlantic Alliance, which means that NATO's actions in Black Sea depend on Turkey, yet things are not that simple. An eventual enlargement of NATO into the Basin of Black Sea, through the Turkish partnership, could be perceived as a threat by Russia. This will eventually lead to a need of reshaping Turkish interests in the area, therefore, an eventual Turkish hesitation will be perceived as vulnerability.

“The crazy project” (“Çılgın Proje”), as many Turks called the new channel (inclusively Erdoğan, the only difference being that, in his vision, “crazy” has a positive connotation in this context)<sup>20</sup>, aims to cut the traffic through Bosphorus, and to connect Black Sea and Marmara Sea; it is obvious that an important part of the oil coming from Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Georgia to the Mediterranean will be distributed to the biggest oil companies from all around the world. This project not only seems, but it is, indeed, an ambitious one, because Turkey wants to build a parallel channel with Bosphorus, as well as a new town, near Istanbul, that can host more than 3 million people and worth an investment of about 30 mld dollars<sup>21</sup>.

Summing up, the advantageous position of Turkey near the Straits offered, during the past two centuries, the best card in negotiations with the great powers, and the key in controlling and supervising the activity in the area (a great achievement being the Montreux Convention), but it was also a bone of contention, especially in the Turkish-Russian relations, both willing to eliminate security

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<sup>19</sup> Christian Keller, “Kanal Istanbul: Pipedream or Politics?”, Institut Français des relations internationales, 27 July 2011. Accessed: <http://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/christiankellerfinal.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> *Hürriyet Daily News*, “Gov't gives green light to ‘crazy’ Canal Istanbul project”, 13 April 2013. Accessed: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/govt-gives-green-light-to-crazy-canal-istanbul>.

<sup>21</sup> Constanța Cătălina Apostoiu, „Dacă devine realitate, Canalul Istanbul va aduce cele mai mari petroliere ale lumii în Marea Neagră”, *Ziarul financiar*, 22 mai 2011. Accessed: <http://www.zf.ro/business-international/daca-devine-realitate-canalul-istanbul-va-aduce-cele-mai-mari-petroliere-ale-lumii-in-marea-neagra-8278858>.

issues. In order to understand and to identify the trends of the involved actors' behaviors in this space, one way is to follow the line of events, to spot the similarities and the evolution of interests, yet this does not mean that one can predict the future.

For a long time Turkey seemed to be satisfied with the control of the Straits, but the year 2011 changed this view. What seemed just an electoral promise became a serious project and the proof is that, in 2013, the Turkish government authorized the money allocation for this new channel<sup>22</sup>. Now that the world had seen this is more than a declarative ambition, we can spot some dilemmas: firstly, can the blend of cold and warm, of sweet and salt, of Black and Marmara Seas be possible without any environmental and economic consequences for the countries along these seas? Another question is: how will the map of Black Sea Basin would look like by 2023?

This fall, before the G-20 summit, the C-20 summit took place in Turkey, and even though many members of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) supported this mega project, World Wildlife Foundation Turkey delivered a report entitled "Ya Kanal ya Istanbul" ("Either the Kanal or Istanbul"), warning that this project implies reshaping Istanbul, population movements, local instability and huge economic investments, of about billions of dollars<sup>23</sup>. Looking at all of these issues, how is the new Istanbul going to look like?

Secondly, taking into account that this is a Turkish project entirely, this means that Turkey will be able to bring into the Black Sea aircraft carriers, without any international supervision. Also, although the new channel will be an open one, including for Russian oil tankers, the question still remains: how tempting will it be for Russia, not only economically, but geopolitical and geostrategic, since Russia sees in this project a sort of American tool: "the new canal is needed by the

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<sup>22</sup> Cengiz Aktar, "Erdogan's 'megalomaniac' projects", *Al Jazeera*, 25 March 2014, Accessed: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/03/erdogan-megalomaniac-projects-201432012171661127.html>.

<sup>23</sup> The report of World Wildlife Foundation Turkey, *Ya Kanal ya Istanbul. Kanal Istanbul Projesinin. Ekolojik, Sosyal ve Ekonomik Değerlendirmesi*, October 2015, Istanbul, accessed at: <http://awsassets.wwftr.panda.org/downloads/kanalistanul150915.pdf>. See also Erbatır Çavuşoğlu, Julia Strutz, "Producing force and consent: Urban transformation and corporatism in Turkey", *City*, No. 18, Issue 2, 2014, pp. 134-148.



US to boost its influence in the region and Russia will not be pleased with the fact”<sup>24</sup>.

Not long ago, the Turkish prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, stated that the three most important principles of Turkish foreign policy are: “to keep close relations with neighbors”, “to develop relations with distant regions” and to have a “rhythmic diplomacy”<sup>25</sup>, but, so far, none of these aims are fulfilled yet. Turkey seems to look for a “strategic depth”<sup>26</sup> based on national identity and geographical position, and one of the main goals is to be a dominant regional power but, this regional interest clashes with a similar Russian interest.

The foreseeable future becomes unpredictable when the equation has two ambitious actors, but reading between the lines, gestures and declarations, the focus tends to move from the Straits to the new Turkish project that plans to replace Bosphorus. If this project will, indeed, succeed, Turkey will be a crucial actor on two continents; this will be a strength for NATO due to Turkey’s partnership, but a major weakness will be represented by Russian perception. Russian’s fear of insecurity, the animosity toward United States, the skeptical attitude toward West, and the competition with Turkey are well known. We can guess Turkish intentions but, what will be the next Russian step? Actually, who will surprise us next?

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<sup>24</sup> Sergey Duz, “Turkey’s “new Bosphorus”: risks and benefits”, *Sputnik*, 26 April 2013, Accessed: [http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/2013\\_04\\_26/Turkey-s-new-Bosphorus-risks-and-benefits/](http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/2013_04_26/Turkey-s-new-Bosphorus-risks-and-benefits/).

<sup>25</sup> See Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik Turkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, Istanbul, Kure Yayinlari, 2001;

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<sup>26</sup> Stephen F. Larrabee, “Turkey's New Geopolitics”, *Survival*, No. 52, Issue 2, 2010, p.158.

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