

Eastern Ukraine and the Balance of Power in the Black Sea

Will the Montreux Convention Prevail?

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The current deterioration of any hopes of a lasting “ceasefire” in the eastern Ukraine, have brought not only the long smoldering conflict back into the forefront of global media attention, but have also presented an opportunity for several geopolitical rivals to take advantage of the situation for their own perceived benefit. Russia responded rapidly to immediate signals from the Kiev government that it fully intended to explore yet another military campaign to resolve the long-standing stalemate in the Donbass and a possible invasion of the Crimean Peninsula.

On March 29th, the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) officially adopted Resolution No. 5312, which is a clear departure from the Minsk Agreement and labels Russia as the unequivocal aggressor and responsible party for the conflict. Within days, the Ukrainian Armed Forces began moving large amounts of heavy equipment and materiel up to the line of contact and advanced some units within the demilitarized zone. The Zelensky government made very public calls for support from NATO, the United Kingdom and the United States, which were reciprocated in short order. Russia responded with warnings to Kiev to deescalate, coupled with deployments of military units along the south-eastern border with Ukraine, and reinforcement of units tasked with safeguarding the Crimea.

Within a week of the provocative parliamentary vote, over 100 former Turkish Navy officers committed their signatures to an open letter criticizing the Erdogan government’s decisions related to maritime matters and demanded that he maintain Turkey’s commitment to the Montreux Convention. Ten former admirals that signed the letter were swiftly arrested and painted as traitors planning a governmental coup. This story was briefly covered by corporate media, but quickly dropped off the radar. Was this incident aimed at undermining the Erdogan government, or a diplomatic ploy created by the Erdogan government? There are ample reasons to support either assertion. The timing of the incident, in close relation to developments vis-à-vis Russian and Ukraine, are far from coincidental.

Erdogan himself has made a number of statements regarding his administration’s willingness to re-evaluate whether the Montreux Doctrine should be revised or abandoned. Most of these comments were linked to media questions regarding the proposed Istanbul

Canal, a \$10 billion project that would construct a canal parallel to the busy Bosphorus Strait. The Istanbul Canal project has been proposed off and on since 2011, with referrals for proposals from likely contractors solicited since 2013. But why the sudden reinjection of the topic of the Montreux Doctrine in such a dramatic fashion now? The timing seems far from a coincidence.

Is Turkey signaling a possible departure from the international compact, signed in 1936, as an attempt to put pressure on Russian efforts to defend Crimea and respond to NATO assurances of support for Ukraine? What benefits would be achieved by Turkey pulling out of the treaty? Ukrainian president Zelensky made an official visit to Turkey and met with Erdogan on April 10th to discuss defense cooperation amongst numerous other topics. Erdogan reiterated his administrations commitment to Ukraine's national sovereignty yet saw the Minsk Agreement as the vehicle to achieve a solution to the current impasse. He also voiced support for the official inclusion of Ukraine as a full member of the NATO alliance in the future. More than a few mixed messages to say the least.

Montreux Convention: A Brief Overview

The Regime of the Straits as first adopted by signatories in 1936 in Montreux, Switzerland attempted to govern the movement of commercial and military traffic through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits. This treaty once adopted, replaced the previous Lausanne Treaty of 1923. Clearly a major diplomatic victory for Turkey, the nation maintained sovereignty over the maritime territory of the Bosphorus Strait, Strait of Dardanelles, and the Sea of Marmora and gave it the ability to close this major maritime traffic lane to any belligerent of Turkey in time of war. More importantly, it has minimized the ability of any nation whose territory does not border the Black Sea to transit significant amounts of naval warships into the Black Sea. This was a major concern of many of the signatories at the time of its adoption at the onset of the Second World War, chief amongst them the Soviet Union.



The strategically important maritime bottleneck that is controlled by Turkey and governed by the Montreux Convention. Approximately 50,000 vessels a year move through this waterway, along with 3 million barrels of oil every day.

On one hand, aggregate tonnage limitations imposed on non-Black Sea powers severely limits the size and total number of surface warfare vessels that can transit the straits and enter the Black Sea, and these vessels can only remain in the Black Sea for a period of 21 days. On the other hand, the limitation on movements of vessels through the straits does affect the naval movements of the Black Sea nations. The movement of submarines is significantly hampered by Article 12 as follows:

Black Sea Powers shall have the right to send through the Straits, for the purpose of rejoining their base, submarines constructed or purchased outside the Black Sea, provided that adequate notice of the laying down or purchase of such submarines shall have been given to Turkey.

Submarines belonging to the said Powers shall also be entitled to pass through the Straits to be repaired in dockyards outside the Black Sea on condition that detailed information on the matter is given to Turkey.

In either case, the said submarines must travel by day and on the surface, and

must pass through the Straits singly.

Understanding how the limitations imposed by the Montreux Convention effect Russian submarine movements illustrate a major challenge for Russian submarine deployments in the Mediterranean. A Russian naval base capable of major repair, supply and retrofitting is required outside of the Dardanelles (such as Tartus, Syria) is required to facilitate a sustained Russian submarine presence in the Mediterranean.

An additional limitation of significance is the agreement's prohibition of the transit of aircraft carriers. The Montreux Convention describes an aircraft carrier under Annex II:

Aircraft Carriers are surface vessels of war, whatever their displacement, designed or adapted primarily for the purpose of carrying and operating aircraft at sea. The fitting of a landing-on or flying-off deck on any vessel of war, provided such vessel has not been designed or adapted primarily for the purpose of carrying and operating aircraft at sea, shall not cause any vessel so fitted to be classified in the category of aircraft carrier.

One of the reasons why the Soviet Union classified the *Kiev* class and *Kuznetsov* class vessels as "heavy aircraft carrying cruiser" was to circumvent this restriction. Their primary armament comprised of anti-aircraft missiles and anti-ship missiles, with the small complement of Yak-38 VTOL meant for fleet defense. The acceptance of the heavy aircraft carrying cruiser moniker under the Montreux Convention arguably required the acquiescence of friendly Turkey, especially one that was a NATO member.

Throughout the 85-year history of the convention, the Black Sea has remained largely demilitarized and stable, with the Black Sea states keeping modest fleets in this maritime area. Even during World War II, Turkey's neutrality and administration of the convention greatly limited the injection of large naval fleets into the Black Sea. Coupled with the impediment of Gibraltar, Nazi Germany only introduced small numbers of patrol boats and submarines to the region, with these having to make most of the transit overland, requiring them to be assembled and launched from Axis controlled territory along the coast.

2021: Ukraine Conflict Reignition?

As the situation along the conflict line in eastern Ukraine continues to further deteriorate, and the statements coming out of Ukraine, NATO and the U.S. become exceedingly provocative, the likelihood of a significant armed conflict reigniting on an even larger scale increase with each passing day. Russia has voiced its concerns and made its "red lines" know to all, has mobilized a large amount of personnel and military hardware, and positioned it close to the border with eastern Ukraine. It has reinforced the defense of Crimea significantly. Russia has conducted its movements of troops and materiel quite overtly, with no attempts to conceal them. This clearly communicates the Russian movements are in fact a reaction to developments in the region and are designed as a deterrent, not the signs of a premeditated offensive as the corporate media would have the world believe.

By contrast, the United States has sent numerous military transport aircraft loaded with unknown payloads to Ukraine in the past few days. Although the flights were not hidden per se, questions regarding their purpose were not answered by various Biden Administration

press secretaries. This can hardly be seen as an attempt to achieve strategic ambiguity, as the U.S. has been supplying Ukraine with billions of dollars in military aid since the conflict began in 2014. The United States requested transit approval from Turkey of the Straits for two U.S. Navy warships 15 days ahead of the proposed transit as required by the Montreux Convention. Turkey granted the request. Although the U.S. Navy's 6th Fleet routinely sends warships into the Black Sea and had three vessels in the area during the previous month, the official reasons given for this deployment were that the U.S. was providing a show of support for Ukraine and attempting to provide "stability" in the region. After a call between presidents Biden and Putin on April 15th, the U.S. Navy rescinded its transit request. This was a welcome step toward de-escalation.



USS Carney DDG 64 during a previous naval deployment that took her into the Black Sea and an official visit to the port of Odessa, Ukraine in 2017. She is currently in drydock undergoing a full modernization overhaul in Jacksonville, FL.

All the above developments are happening with the backdrop of the commencement of NATO operation Defender Europe 2021 back on March 15th. As the training exercise ramps up in May it will engage approximately 28,000 personnel from 27 participating countries. Approximately 20,000 of these troops will be deployed from the U.S., along with heavy equipment shipped to the continent for the U.S. Army's 2nd Brigade Combat Team and 3rd Infantry Division. The majority of armored vehicles and war materiel will be mobilized from pre-position depots in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. Exercises will simulate and test the response to a Russian invasion of NATO members and friendly nations, i.e., Ukraine. Exercises will take place in Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, and Ukraine.

Quite ironically, Air Force Gen. Tod Wolters, NATO's supreme allied commander stated after last year's Defender Europe 2020 that,

"We've seen a fair amount of response from Russia. They're not overly pleased with Defender Europe 20. We're concerned mostly about the readiness of our forces and we're doing all that in accordance with international law."

Somehow it is acceptable for the U.S. to move tens of thousands of troops and equipment thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean to conduct military exercises on foreign soil, yet it is unacceptable for Russia to conduct similar exercises on its own soil, yet both are clearly in accordance with international law. Could General Wolters grasp that Russia's displeasure might be influenced by the long list of broken promises related to NATO expansion into previous Warsaw Pact nations over the past thirty years? How about Operation Barbarossa of 1941, which saw a massive invasion of the nation by Nazi Germany, Bulgaria, and Romania, with Hungary and Italy also participating to a greater degree after the initial operation? Russia learned a tragic lesson in this case and one that it will never allow to happen again. Perhaps it would help for General Wolters to crack the binding of a history book or two about Russia in the near future.

What Role will Turkey Decide to Play?

Turkey has a multitude of options open to it in case the current conflict in Ukraine develops

into open warfare between Ukraine and Russia. President Erdogan is a very shrewd and calculated politician, who would undoubtedly hedge his bets and alter Turkey's strategic position as the situation developed. Turkey's strategic calculus would depend largely on the level of response exhibited by Russia in its reaction to any move by Kiev to break the stalemate in the Donbass region, or any direct military threat on Crimea. A direct move on Crimea is highly unlikely, as Russia was totally unambiguous as to its stance in 2014. It will fight to maintain Crimea even if it means nuclear war.



Russia has been slowly modernizing the Black Sea Fleet. The Admiral Makarov pictured above is one of three Project 11356 FFGs commissioned and stationed there in the past few years.

Turkey would wait and gauge the NATO response to any Russian reaction to Kiev's escalation. If NATO moved forcefully and resolutely, Turkey would likely maintain the status quo and honor its responsibilities under the Montreux Convention up until such point that either NATO or Russia gains a clear advantage. Turkey is a NATO member and is bound by the treaty; however, Ukraine is not a member, and thus Turkey has no obligation under Article 5 to defend it, especially if Ukraine initiates hostilities. A propaganda war facilitated by western corporate media would be used to frame any conflict as a case of a Russian invasion to allow for NATO to initiate a conflict to defend a non-member state. If NATO gained a clear advantage, Turkey would align itself unequivocally with the military bloc, declare Russia a belligerent party to Turkey and bar all Russian naval and maritime traffic in the Straits as per the mechanisms available in the Montreux Convention. Turkey would cut off the major supply route from Russia to its forces stationed in Syria and would likely escalate the military situation in Syria in conjunction with NATO. This would only lead to a much wider conflict.

If Russia were to gain an early and clear advantage, Turkey would most likely remain "neutral" and maintain the status quo regarding the Montreux Convention; however, it would likely engage in covert warfare against Russia in both the Crimea and Syria via its proxies in both regions to take advantage of Russia's immediate focus on Ukraine. It could also reignite the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Its commitment to proxy warfare would be gauged by the pace and level of any Russian military success. Even in the case of an overwhelming victory on the part of Russia, I see little likelihood of Turkey abandoning the Montreux Convention and the adoption of a more favorable transit agreement with Russia. In regard to controlling this strategically important maritime bottleneck, Turkey holds all the cards. Russia has been keenly aware of this reality since the agreement was ratified in 1936. Alongside its desire to maintain an advantage in the natural gas trade to Europe, it is also for this reason that Russia has invested so much in stabilizing Syria and defeating Western/Saudi/Gulf Emirate efforts to eliminate Russia's most viable naval base of operations in the Mediterranean Sea in Tartus, Syria.

The Future of the Montreux Convention

There is very little chance of a major change in the status of the Montreux Convention in the immediate future. The greater possibility is that an open conflict between Russia and Ukraine would be the catalyst for Turkey and NATO to use the agreement to weaken Russia's position in Syria, where it would be of greatest effect. Erdogan has been very measured in his public statements regarding possible hostilities in Ukraine. While hosting an official state visit with President Zelensky and voicing support for Ukraine's sovereignty

(including Crimea), he has also voiced his support for the Minsk Agreement as the mechanism to resolve the issue; however, public statements are often quite different than the discussions that take place behind closed doors.

The Montreux Convention was perhaps the greatest political victory for Turkey in the past century, and President Erdogan undoubtedly grasps this reality. If the Istanbul Canal project ever actually breaks ground, it is a winning proposition for Turkey economically, although there are several ecological and civic planning concerns that pose a major challenge to the project. Such a project, if successful will bring all the economic benefits that both the Panama and Suez Canals have provided for Panama and Egypt. Although there is a natural, navigable waterway connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, this waterway is constricted and limited in the traffic volume that it can handle. If a man-made canal can significantly reduce voyage transit time, shippers stand to save significant amounts of money by utilizing it. The time saved equates to fuel savings, possible reduction of overtime labor costs in the next port of call or may determine if a vessel operator meets the contractual terms of a charter party. Russia aims to leverage the same advantages in promoting its own Northern Sea Route.



If Turkey ever completes the proposed Istanbul Canal it would alleviate some of the maritime traffic congestion in the Bosphorus Strait and provide a large amount of revenue for the state.

With or without the proposition of the Istanbul Canal, the Montreux Convention is a major strategic advantage for Turkey and the NATO Alliance, as long as Turkey remains a member state. For Russia it is a double-edged sword. Assuming Turkey remains an ally or a neutral party, it severely limits the ability of any foreign power to introduce a viable naval threat to the Black Sea and Russia's vital national interests in the region. In any scenario where Turkey becomes an active belligerent in any hypothetical conflict, Russia is forced to take decisive and overwhelming action to rest control of these navigable waterways from Turkey or else surrender its access to the Mediterranean. Turkey, Russia and NATO all clearly understand this strategic reality, and have been rational and logical enough to accept it. By so limiting the available options for naval escalation, the Montreux Convention continues to provide stability and ensure a naval balance of power in the region.

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