

Video: The Istanbul Canal as an Instrument of Erdogan's Multipolarity

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From Father of Turks to Father of Ottomans

Turkey's president Erdogan will no doubt go down in history as the leader who overturned the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and ended the country's experiment as a secular nation-state. Perhaps that experiment was doomed to fail from the start—Turkish leaders over the decades have never found a workable formula for including the Kurds in the larger Turkish body politic, except through policies of forcible assimilation.

Erdogan, however, was the first to decide to put an end to it and instead reorganize Turkey around principles of neo-Ottomanism and pan-Turkism, in which the economically powerful, politically viable, and culturally proximate Turkish state would no longer seek to join the European Union. Instead it would become a source of international governance, development, and security assistance to the polities which emerged from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, and even to those which were not part of the empire.

As this policy was guaranteed to provoke a negative reaction from every other power player in the region, including Turkey's ostensible allies in NATO, Erdogan ended up pursuing a policy of "equidistance" with every politically relevant player in his neighborhood. NATO, yes, but also S-400 from Russia. Allowing Russian military flights to use Turkish airspace, yes, but also sales of Bayraktar attack drones and other military equipment to Ukraine. Turkish Stream, yes, but also the Istanbul Canal.

https://southfront.org/wp-content/uploads/video/FPD_Istanbul_Canal_280320.mp4

Ending Montreaux

The 1936 Montreaux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits is but one of many Atatürk's legacies. Signed in 1936 in the Montreaux Palace in Switzerland, it is arguably the only arms control treaty of the interwar era still extant. At the time, it represented an effort to put an end to the centuries of conflict over the control of the Black Sea Straits by giving Turkey control while at the same time limiting other powers' ability to project naval military power in or out of the Black Sea. In some respects the restrictions on the passage of warships are very real. For example, the Convention allows no more than nine warships with a total displacement of 15 thousand tons to pass through the Straits at any one time. In practice it means a single US AEGIS cruiser or destroyer, and while nothing prevents additional ships from passing later, the total tonnage of foreign warships belonging to powers that do not have Black Sea coastlines of their own cannot exceed 30 thousand tons (45 thousand in exceptional cases), which, again, limits the US Navy to no more than 2-3 AEGIS ships. Combined with a ban on capital ships, which includes aircraft carriers, from

foreign navies, it means NATO would be hard-pressed to mount a serious aeronaval operation against any target on the Black Sea. While Montreaux was not greatly tested during World War 2, and the Warsaw Pact aerial and naval preponderance meant challenging it would be a futile exercise in the first place, it has proven its worth in the last decade, particularly after the reunification of Crimea with the Russian Federation. Had it not been in place, NATO's demonstrations of force in the Black Sea might have been considerably more muscular, to the point of accidentally triggering an armed confrontation. While Russia has always been a supporter of the Montreaux Convention, its current relative military weakness in the Black Sea, where it faces the navies of three NATO member states and currently also that of Ukraine, means the Convention is all the more important to its security.

However, the proposed Istanbul Canal is not covered by the Montreaux Convention, as it specifically pertains to regulating military traffic through the Straits. To be sure, interested parties are bound to argue the intent of the Convention was to cover the passage of naval warships in and out of the Black Sea, and establish a certain level of collective security there. With that in mind, it should not matter whether foreign warships enter the Black Sea via the Straits or through the new Istanbul Canal. Moreover, even when the Canal is functioning any warship entering the Black Sea will have to have passed through one of the two straits—the Dardanelles, since the Istanbul Canal, if completed, will bypass only one of the two straits. The Montreaux Convention specifically refers to the “regime of the Straits”, not a regime of the Bosphorus. Nevertheless, one can be equally certain that some interested parties will make the legalistic argument that that the Montreaux Convention only regulates the passage of warships that pass through both of the straits. Ships may, after all, gain access to the Sea of Marmara that separates the two straits without restrictions placed on ships passing into the Black Sea. Turkish officials have been ambiguous on the future status of the Montreaux Convention, should Istanbul Canal enter into operation.

Gas Warfare

The second dimension of the proposed canal is economic. While the Montreaux Convention does not regulate the passage of cargo ships through the straits, the Bosphorus in particular remains a relatively narrow and convoluted passageway. When one also considers the high population density on both banks of the Bosphorus, the use of this strait by oil tankers and liquefied natural gas (LNG) carriers raises particular safety concerns. Indeed, up to about 2015 the Turkish government prohibited LNG carriers from traversing the Bosphorus. While this changed during Erdogan's rule, the ever-present danger of a serious incident means it is only a temporary solution.

Thus even if Turkey opts to apply Montreaux Convention rules on passage of warships remain unaffected, Istanbul Canal will have the potential to considerably increase tanker traffic in and out of the Black Sea. In view of Erdogan's interest in building up relations with Ukraine, and Ukraine's search for alternative sources of natural gas, the Canal would have the effect of increasing Turkey's sphere of influence over the Black Sea. At the moment, there is not a single LNG terminal anywhere on the Black Sea. However, that could change once the construction of the canal moves forward. The most likely candidates are Ukraine, with a proposed site in Odessa, and Romania, with the natural location being Konstanta. US interest in promoting its own interests and expanding political control through oil and gas exports means that either or both projects would be met with enthusiastic US support.

The Mentally Sick Man of Europe

While even the most optimistic estimates do not predict the canal could be built in less than a decade, at a cost approaching \$100 billion. Turkey's own financial situation is not such that it can allow itself such a luxury without undermining other projects, and Erdogan's ability to alienate other leaders means outside funding might be difficult to come by, particularly if outside funding means outside control over the canal. Yet the whole idea behind the canal is that it should serve the sovereign needs of Turkey. In such circumstances, who would be willing to bankroll Erdogan's unpredictable whims? No amount of refugee crises is liable to extract that kind of a contribution from the European Union, and US funding would naturally come with US control. So it is no surprise the project's initial construction start date of 2013 has slipped rather dramatically. Even right now, in 2020, the Turkish government is only talking about launching a tender to select firms that would be engaged in its construction.

Therefore at the moment Istanbul Canal is confined to the realm of pipe dreams. In order for it to be completed, it would have to become the biggest state priority in Turkish politics, and would require international financial and possibly also technological support. While there is no doubting Erdogan's determination to transform Turkey into a power player capable of dictating its will to its geopolitical neighbors and rivals, the country he governs lacks the capacity for transforming his dreams into reality.

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