

The Importance of The Turkish Straits and The Montreux Convention Regarding The Russia and Ukraine War

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Abstract-The article aims to underline the important Turkish straits and the Montreaux Convention in the contextual analysis of the Russia-Ukraine war. The paper provides a historical and geopolitical analysis of the Turkish Straits, underlining their importance as the critical maritime passage. Further, the country's adherence to the Montreux Convention, the effect this has had on the maritime security situation in the Black Sea, and the greater geopolitical dynamics between NATO, Russia, and Ukraine will be discussed. It further analyzes the implications of Russian military and maritime doctrines in the Black Sea region, with regard to the policies and developments of Turkey that might be conceptualized on the basis of the results of regional security concerns. Based on recent empirical data, scholarly research, and a critical review of the existing literature, the present research aims to provide an analytical view of the importance of the Turkish Straits in view of the ongoing conflict.

Keywords: Turkish Straits, Montreux Convention, Russia, Ukraine, Black Sea, Maritime Security, And North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

I. INTRODUCTION

The Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, signed in Montreux, Switzerland, on July 20, 1936, remains crucial legislation for the regulation of military and commercial vessels passing through the Turkish Straits (Nilufer, 2017).

As it is stipulated in Article 122 of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a "semi-enclosed sea" is defined as a body of water comprising mainly the territorial seas and exclusive economic areas of more than one coastal state. Two or more states encircle it and link it with other seas or the ocean through narrow passages. The Montreux Convention plays a very important role in finding a balance of regional security, especially during periods of tension-as it is with the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. The Turkish Straits, which include the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, are the only passage between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, taking into consideration the strategic interest of global powers and the Black Sea coastal states (Baldıran, Bayer, & Gençer, 2022).

The Straits link the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea. It also function as the continental boundary. Consequently, it provides not only a crucial maritime trade path from and to Black Sea ports but also offers a highly significant geographical benefit for the safety of the Black Sea coastal states (Baldıran et al., 2022).

As a result of the Turkish Straits attracting considerable economic, political, and social concern from both Black Sea coastal nations and non-regional actors, regional states have traditionally seen them as a security problem. Over the past three centuries, maritime nations have engaged in conflicts to establish control over the Turkish Straits as well as the Black Sea. The significance of the Straits has grown due to the expansion of the region, which has led to a need to ensure the security of Turkey and the coastal states of the Black Sea. The Montreux Straits agreement is implemented to govern transit and navigation through the Turkish Straits. On July 20, 1936, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which later disintegrated in 1991, as well as Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, France, England, and Japan, formally approved the pact at Montreux, Switzerland. The legislation came into force on November 9, 1936. The treaty provides the main foundation for peace in the Black Sea region (Baldiran et al., 2022).

The paper discusses the geopolitical importance of the Turkish Straits and the role performed by the Montreux Convention during the Russia-Ukraine War. The paper thus puts the Montreux Convention within a broader regional context, framing an understanding of its role through an analysis of Turkish maritime policy, NATO engagement, and Russia's Black Sea strategy.

II. THE GEOPOLITICAL HISTORY OF THE TURKISH STRAITS

The Turkish Straits constitute an area of strategic choke, both geographically and politically, for a long period of time. Their importance is linked to ancient times, given that mythological accounts, such as Jason and the Argonauts' expedition, also indicate the difficulty of navigating this narrow passage (Nilufer, 2016).

The control of the Straits has been traditionally related to political and military supremacy in the region. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Straits were seized by the Ottoman Empire, marking a critical turning point to an uninterrupted maritime stronghold for centuries during which the straits formed part of an essential element in the strategic power of the Ottoman Empire. The control over the Straits, however, was a focal point of international diplomacy and conflict throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Treaty of KüçükKaynarca in 1774 gave Russia navigation rights through the Straits (Tulun, 2020). Hence became the starting point of foreign intervention that marked the gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire for the next century or so. The 19th century witnessed a power struggle between major European powers for access to and control of the Turkish Straits. One of the conflicts that took place over the key waterways was the Crimean War of 1853–1856. The control of Straits would alone affect all trade routes and military maneuvers in view of a weakening Ottoman Empire, and thus tenuous hold over the region (Figes, 2011).

The fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War turned the question of control over the Straits into a matter for international compromise. It was the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 that sought to put the Straits under international control, but it proved short-lived due to resistance of the Turks and their inevitable War of Independence under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The Treaty of Lausanne back in 1923 gave a novel régime to the Straits and granted the sovereignty over them to Turkey yet kept them under freedom of passage supervised by an international commission. The changing geopolitical environment in the 1930s, and most pressingly, the rise of Nazi Germany, impelled Turkey to seek revisions to this regime. This led to the 1936 Montreux Convention, which granted Turkey Straits control, with certain restrictions on military passage, hence establishing a regime that created a peculiar legal framework for the Black Sea (Tulun, 2020).

The Convention had provided a strategic buffer for Turkey, while the security of the Black Sea coastal states was ensured through the regulation of naval access. In this way, the Convention established a legal framework that lasted until nowadays and balanced interests of both the littoral and non-littoral states of the region.

Meanwhile, the expansion of the global trade routes and the strategic importance of the region within global energy security further enhanced the historical importance of the Turkish Straits. It is within such a historical context that the role of the Montreux Convention can be understood in the modern geopolitical landscape, especially in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

III. MONTREUX CONVENTION AND ITS PROVISIONS

The Montreux Convention regulates the passage of warships through the Turkish Straits through its 29 articles and three technical annexes. The key provisions of the convention are that there shall be regulation over the tonnage of naval vessels that may enter the Black Sea and the duration they can stay. Non-Black Sea countries are subject to strict controls, where any warships must provide prior notification to Turkish authorities before transiting the Straits (Nevitt, 2022).

One of the most important stipulations of the Convention, especially for the times of war, is Article 19. In circumstances of war, this article provides Turkey with a right to close the Straits to the warships of belligerent states, in case Turkey itself does not take part in the war. The passing of merchant ships, on the other hand, remains free unless endangered is Turkey itself. This, in that respect, is a serious clause that would give Turkey a quite substantial right in controlling the traffic during wartime over the straits, thus allowing it to shape the strategic environment in the Black Sea. The Montreux Convention thus serves as protection of the sovereignty of the Black Sea littoral states and an instrument for regional stability (Nevitt, 2022).

It also entails mechanisms through which Turkey could, in peacetime and wartime, institute modifications in response to the dynamic nature of its security challenges. For example, under Article 21, Turkey can regulate warship passage on grounds of immediate danger threatening it. These are indicative of the flexibility contained within the Convention and its ability for change and evolving geopolitical realities that can be done toward regional stability (Ünlü, 2002).

The importance of the Montreux Convention does not lie just in its maritime rules. It reflects the regional balance of power in the Black Sea and makes sure non-littoral states can't create any permanent military presence in the region. In history, the Convention has prevented the militarization of the Black Sea and thus allowed all the coastal countries could enjoy their sovereignty and security without intervention from anybody else.

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MONTREUX CONVENTION IN WAR TIME

The Montreux Convention grants Turkey the significant authority to regulate the passage of warships through the Straits in time of war, placing that country in an influential position as leading player in the regional stability. This provision has become highly relevant in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War. Against this background, when, in early 2022, the conflict escalated, Turkey invoked Article 19 to refuse passage to Russian warships that were not based in the Black Sea, underlining its strategic neutrality and making use of international law in the process (Nevitt, 2022).

There are a number of geopolitical considerations regarding the application of the Convention in wartime. For example, access through the Straits is crucial for Russia, as the country depends on its Black Sea Fleet to project power and protect its maritime borders. Russia utilizes these Straits as a shortcut to redeploy its warships between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea; this has become an integral part of its strategy in regional conflicts, like those in the Syrian Civil War and the current crisis in Ukraine. Any restriction to its naval traffic passing through the Straits now constitutes a major challenge to its military

doctrine. Meanwhile, with relatively scarce naval capabilities, Ukraine counts on the international community for protection against Russian military expansion in the Black Sea, among which are Turkey and NATO.

Also, the invocation of the Montreux Convention by Turkey refers to its role in mediation in the region. Simultaneously with not compromising its commitments within NATO, Turkey has tried to balance its relations with Russia and Ukraine, following the letter of the Convention. In this case, Turkey limits the passage of non-Black Sea warships in order not to promote further building up of military forces in the region, which would only increase violence. In turn, the implementation of the Convention by Turkey testifies that it intends to continue acting as a neutral player and taking care of maintaining the rule of law and ensuring regional security (Adzinbaia, 2017).

The current war between Russia and Ukraine has also brought to the fore the significance of the Convention as a tool of both law and diplomacy. Ukraine, upon whom Russia has enforced a naval blockade and mounted a military invasion, has urged on Turkey the need to block access via the Straits to all Russian warships. In so doing, Turkey has sought an appropriate balance by invoking the Convention to permit the return of Russian ships back to their home bases in the Black Sea. This cautious treading and balance reflect the complex geopolitical considerations of Turkey's economic and political relationships with both Russia and Ukraine (Segell, 2023).

Besides, the Convention has enabled Turkey to play a mediator in this conflict. While the country maintains the Straits under its control and implements its principles of the Convention in a just manner, it has emerged as an important diplomatic player who can convene negotiations or regional security dialogues. This strategic posture provides stability both for the national interests of Turkey and for the broader region.

V. TURKISH MARITIME SECURITY INITIATIVES IN THE BLACK SEA

Turkey attracted a strategic position in the Black Sea through which its maritime security policies over the decades have been set. During the Cold War era, Turkey was the only NATO member in the region asked to be responsible for containing Soviet influence. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey set regional cooperation underway through initiatives such as the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) (Oral & Oğuz, 2021).

In 2004, Turkey initiated the Operation Black Sea Harmony (OBSH) to promote naval security against asymmetric threats like terrorism, smuggling, and human trafficking, and to create confidence among littoral states. Given the limitations of the Montreux Convention on non-littoral navies' presence in the Black Sea, this operation was to fit with the NATO security framework while respecting the concerns of the littoral states totally (Bayram & Tüfekçi, 2018).

Likewise, Turkey has been modernizing its naval capability in order to project power and secure its maritime interests in the region. The expansion of the Turkish Navy demonstrates a commitment to ensuring security within the Black Sea and upholds the principles set by the Montreux Convention. Further proof of the strategic place it occupies in regional operations conducted by Turkey is the different missions that have been carried out by the Turkish Navy over issues such as maritime surveillance and search-and-rescue operations.

Despite Turkey's proactive maritime policy, a series of challenges still emanate from the region. The Black Sea neighborhood is located close to several flashpoints, such as Ukraine and Syria, while the presence of strategic energy routes makes the sea a hotbed of geopolitical rivalry. This balancing act of Turkey enshrines ensuring its security without coming into direct confrontation with Russia underlines the

complex dynamics at play in the region. The Montreux Convention remains the cornerstone of Turkey's strategy, providing a legal framework that supports its regional security objectives.

VI. RUSSIAN BLACK SEA STRATEGY AND 2015 MARITIME DOCTRINE

The geopolitical interests and concerns about security drive Russia's military and maritime strategies in the Black Sea. According to the 2015 Russian Maritime Doctrine, the Black Sea is considered a priority area for ensuring national security, protecting economic interests, projecting naval power, and safeguarding Russia's strategic maritime routes (Davis, 2015). The Doctrine specifically underlines the involvement and activities of NATO in the Black Sea and identifies them as a threat, still more convincing Russia of the need to maintain a robust naval posture in that region. The Doctrine underlines that Russia is determined to further strengthen its naval forces with the aim of holding a leading position in the region.

The annexation in 2014 and the current war in Ukraine have underlined Russia's determination for dominance in the Black Sea. Access to Crimea gave Russia a strategic military foothold, expanding its capacity to project power and control of critical maritime routes. The establishment of advanced military infrastructure has taken place to improve Russia's capability for power projection and challenge the influence of NATO in the region. In sum, due to that very fact alone, Russia considers the straits as a crucial chokepoint for economic activities and military (Kuzio, 2022).

Another important dimension of Russia's Black Sea strategy involves taking advantage of the Montreux Convention. Given the permanent stations of a fleet in the Black Sea, using the corresponding legal restrictions that affect non-littoral states, Russia can limit NATO's naval impact in the region. This shows just how much the Convention is an instrument for Russia to further certain geopolitical interests within the sensitive regional balance (Flanagan et al., 2020).

The Maritime Doctrine reflects Russia's strategic objective of developing itself into a global maritime power. It charges the Black Sea Fleet to take up a leading role intended not only for regional defense but to serve also as an instrument of power projection in the Mediterranean and beyond. More recent operations, such as the intervention in Syria and the contemporary crisis unfolding in Ukraine, further illustrate how maritime dominance forms a keystone in the military and geopolitical interest of Russia.

The Montreux Convention is at the core of the Russian strategy, as this convention enshrines some sort of legality and limits non-littoral naval presence in the Black Sea region. As long as the security dynamic of the region is favorable for Russia, then Russia can prevent any meaningful NATO naval presence. Moscow has used the Convention in support of its strategic interests in pointing out its adherence to international law while using military power in order to affect the political landscape in the region.

VII. NATO, MONTREUX CONVENTION, AND TURKEY'S BALANCING ACT

NATO's presence has been increasingly deployed in the Black Sea, even more so since the annexation of Crimea. NATO has done joint exercises, patrols, and surveillance missions with the aim of enhancing the maritime security posture within this region. However, the Montreux Convention imposes some limitations on the deployment by NATO of its naval force in the Black Sea, such as a limitation of tonnage and duration of the warships present in the area pertaining to non-littoral states (Adzinbaia, 2017). At this point, Turkey, being a member of NATO and the guardian of the Straits, has the leading role of taking critical decisions in finding a way out through these constraints.

While NATO has sought to increase naval exercises and its presence in the Black Sea, Turkey has underlined the need to respect the Convention's provisions and adding that regional security should be a littoral state primarily responsibility. Such a position has made Turkey follow closely NATO activities in the Black Sea to ensure that the provisions of the Convention are not violated.

Furthermore, Turkey has been actively striving to avoid permanent presence of non-regional naval forces in the Black Sea, referring to the Montreux Convention as lawful root for its actions. Such a position sometimes drives Turkey into odds with its NATO allies specially, the United States, that have favored a more robust naval presence.

Yet, Turkey's action to reaffirm adherence to the Montreux Convention underlines its commitment to maintaining regional stability and blocking the expansion of conflict right on its doorstep. This, too, is part of a wider Turkish strategy in balancing its NATO obligations with its economic and political steer toward Russia (Oğuzlu, 2016).

The Montreux Convention also gives some leverage for Turkey in NATO's strategic planning for the Black Sea .By regulating the passage of naval forces, Turkey can influence the scale and nature of NATO's maritime activities in the region. This power therefore places Turkey as a key player in shaping the Black Sea security dynamics and enhances its strategic importance within the alliance.

VIII. TURKISH STRAITS ADMINISTRATION AND MARINE SECURITY

The Turkish Straits are managed for safe navigation by the Directorate General of Coastal Security. In view of the challenges created both by raised maritime traffic and geopolitical tensions, Turkey has instituted a number of measures, which include the Vessel Traffic System established in 2003 (ApAydin, 2018). It consists of communication equipment, radar, and observation towers reporting movements of vessels, while at the same time, it provides real-time data for safe navigation and adherence to the Montreux Convention. The VTS now plays a crucial role in the efforts of Turkey in ensuring safe passage through the Straits, protecting the marine environment, and enhancing maritime security.

In addition to VTS, Turkey enacted rules concerning maritime traffic, environmental protection, and navigational safety, such as the obligation of compulsory reporting for the vessels passing through the Straits, the use of pilotage, and the prohibition on the carriage of hazardous cargo. Furthermore, the measures taken by Turkey to promote maritime security show its commitment to the implementation of the Convention in light of modern security and environmental topics.

These measures have been gradually implemented to reduce the risk of accidents and unauthorized military movements in the Straits. The difficulty is that the waterways are narrow and congested, with very high volume and tense geopolitics in the area. Continuing efforts by the Turkish government to improve maritime security and infrastructure attest to its position as a responsible guardian of the Straits and an important security player in the region.

IX. THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MONTREUX CONVENTION

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine placed the Montreux Convention as an exceedingly critical fact in regional security, the blockade of Ukrainian ports by Russia in the Black Sea disrupted supply chains impinging on global food security and freedom of navigation. It was against this background that Turkey

invoked Convention provisions that enabled it to regulate the transiting warships through the Straits with the objective of maintaining strategic regional balance (Segell, 2023).

The Black Sea Grain Initiative, mediated by Turkey, the United Nations, Russia, and Ukraine in July 2022, with the aim of establishing a safe corridor for grain exports, serves an example of how the Convention can facilitate diplomatic efforts to address maritime security challenges. This initiative provided for an agreed safe maritime corridor for the exportation of grain, reflecting Turkey's ability to facilitate agreement between parties in dispute and consistent with international law.

However, the conflict also underlines the shortcomings of the Montreux Convention in dealing with current geopolitical crises. While Turkish control over the Straits would limit foreign warships' access, the Convention itself does not provide for any explicit mechanism for conflict resolution or enforcement. The strategic use of naval blockades by Russia and Convention-based responses from Turkey indicate the complexity of managing regional security within the existing legal framework.

The situation suggests the implications of great caution on the problem of Black Sea maritime security. As Turkey balances its relations with Russia, Ukraine, and NATO, the Montreux Convention is once again both a legal protector and a tool for diplomacy in the conflicts. The conflict showed that the effectiveness of the Convention depends very much on the ability of Turkey to use it effectively toward facilitating dialogue and preventing further escalation to protect regional stability.

X. FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL STABILITY

The Turkish Straits and the Montreux Convention will still to play an essential role in determining the security environment of the Black Sea. The restrictions that the Convention imposes on non-littoral naval presence reduce the prospect of militarization of the region and of an imbalance of power among the coastal states. Yet, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict and NATO's strategic interests put this precarious balance under pressure.

The diplomatic and maritime policies of Turkey will be pivotal to the management of these challenges. As a member of NATO and regional power, the task of Turkey is to balance relations with Russia and Ukraine along with the alliance, while adhering to the provisions of the Convention. Much about future stability in the region and the global maritime order is determined by this balancing act.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict underlines, in a broader perspective, the need to revisit international maritime law frameworks so that they are able to respond to modern security challenges. The Montreux Convention has served well so far in terms of regulating the movement of navies; however, it might need modification or additional agreements to respond effectively to new forms of the conflict that are now arising on the high seas—for example, the cyber-attack on the naval infrastructure and the use of merchant vessels for this purpose.

XI. CONCLUSION

The core of the geopolitical dynamics of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and regional security is represented by the Straits of Turkey and the Montreux Convention. The Convention gives Turkey considerable leeway in holding a sensitive balance between its commitments with NATO and its interests in the region through a legal framework over maritime movements. By referring to the Convention's provisions, Turkey has been able to navigate the complex dimensions of the war and underlined its role for mediation and stabilization in the Black Sea.

This conflict underlines the strengths as well as weaknesses of the Montreux Convention. While it prevents the permanent military presence in the Black Sea of non-littoral states, it cannot wholly address the complex nature of contemporary maritime security challenges. As the nature of the threats against the region has evolved over time, compliance with the Convention by Turkey and its corrective diplomacy will be the key factor in shaping the future of the security environment concerning the Black Sea.

Conclusion Given the strategic importance that the Turkish Straits depict and the legal powers of the Montreux Convention, the set approach to regional security needs to be broader and more adaptive. In light of the fact that competing global powers continue to compete for influence in the Black Sea, the Convention remains one of the key underpinnings of regional sovereignty and a very important diplomatic tool for relaxing the most sensitive aspects of international maritime law. Any future process toward securing a lasting peace in the region needs to consider the historical legacy of the Montreux Convention, the strategic importance of Turkey, and changes in the geopolitical environment.

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