

Turkey plans to increase control over vital international waterways

By Jippe Witteveen, March 9th, 2025

The Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits are among the most important shipping routes in the world. Dividing Europe and Asia, these natural passages connect the Black Sea with the rest of the world. Although they run through Turkey, the straits are basically considered international waters.

Onur, traffic controller in Eceabat, at the tip of the Gallipoli Peninsula, explains that Turkey does not make much money from what could be its geographical goldmine. International trade agreements, he says, ensure the free passage of ships. In particular the Montreux Convention, signed in 1936, prevents Turkey from gaining significant financial profits from shipping through its territory. This differs from man-made passages such as the Suez Canal or the Panama Canal, for which its host countries are able to generate a significant tax-income from passing cargo.

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has plans to increase Turkish control over the waterways. He wants to construct a new canal on the western side of Istanbul, which would bypass the Bosphorus Strait. A canal could ease congestion and reduce waiting times for ships to enter the Bosphorus, which is one of the main official reasons. It would also enable Turkey, however, to tax shipping through the canal as it would not fall under the Montreux Convention.

There is also a possibility, however, that geopolitical shifts will play out in Turkey's favour in this regard anyway. The Montreux Convention is a prime example of the rules-based international order, which today is losing ground. In a world in which hard power once again takes centre stage, Erdoğan finds himself in a good position. US president Trump openly threatens to take back control over the Panama Canal. If that were to happen, a precedent could be set which might appeal to Turkey to follow.