

## The geopolitical dimension of the Istanbul Canal project in the system of international relations (2011–2025)

*The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical dimension of the Istanbul Canal construction project as a strategic initiative of the Republic of Turkey in the period 2011–2025. The historical genealogy of the idea of creating an alternative waterway between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara is examined – from ancient projects and Ottoman attempts to its reactualization in contemporary political discourse. The geopolitical context of the project within the system of international relations is investigated, with particular attention to its potential impact on the regime of the Black Sea Straits established by the Montreux Convention of 1936. It is demonstrated that the Istanbul Canal is not so much an infrastructural undertaking as a powerful geopolitical instrument aimed at transforming the regional balance of power and strengthening Turkey's strategic autonomy in the Black Sea-Mediterranean basin. Special attention is devoted to analyzing the positions of key global actors (the United States, the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, and the European Union) regarding the project's implementation and its consequences for the regional security architecture. It is established that the emergence of an artificial waterway formally excluded from the jurisdiction of the Montreux Convention creates real preconditions for the erosion of the established international legal regime and may provoke an intensification of geopolitical rivalry in the Black Sea region. The domestic political context of the project is revealed, characterized by acute polarization of Turkish society and the use of the canal as a symbol of Neo-Ottoman revival in the ideological discourse of the ruling elite. Based on the conducted analysis, prognostic assessments are formulated regarding the further development of the situation surrounding the Istanbul Canal and its impact on the transformation of the Black Sea region's security architecture in the medium-term perspective.*

**Keywords:** Istanbul Canal; Black Sea Straits; Montreux Convention; geopolitics; international security; Republic of Turkey; regional balance of power; history and theory of international relations.

**Problem Statement.** Turkey's geopolitical positioning is a unique phenomenon in world politics, determined by its role as a natural bridge between Europe and Asia, as well as a key transit hub between the Black Sea and Mediterranean basins. For centuries, the Ottoman Empire, and subsequently the Republic of Turkey, acted not merely as a geographical barrier or corridor, but as an active subject in shaping the balance of power. Whereas in the Early Modern era the Porte's might was based on military expansion and control over international trade routes, from the end of the 17th century a prolonged period of stagnation and geopolitical retreat began. Military defeats, territorial losses, and the rise of national liberation movements transformed the empire into the «Sick Man of Europe», turning the «Eastern Question» into one of the central problems of the Vienna system of international relations in the 19th century. Despite modernization attempts (Tanzimat), the deep structural crisis culminated in the catastrophe of the First World War and the threat of complete dismantlement of statehood.

A cardinal geopolitical turnaround occurred thanks to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), who not only saved national sovereignty in the War of Independence but also laid the foundations of a new state identity, deliberately limiting its Pan-Turkist and Neo-Ottoman ambitions in favor of Westernization and the territorial status quo. Neutrality during the Second World War and subsequent integration into NATO (1952) secured Turkey's status as the Alliance's southeastern flank and a buffer zone between the Soviet Union and the West. However, with the end of bipolar confrontation and the dissolution of the USSR, a gradual yet irreversible activation of Turkey's own subjectivity took place. Beginning in the 2000s, against the backdrop of internal transformations and the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, Ankara's foreign policy doctrine evolved from defensive Kemalism toward a proactive strategy. The central nerve of this new geopolitical tension remains the issue of the Black Sea Straits (the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles). The Straits are not merely a waterway but a kind of «geopolitical throttle<sup>1</sup>», control over which allows for the regulation of the naval presence of global players in the Black Sea basin. The Montreux Convention of 1936, which limits the tonnage and duration of stay of warships of non-Black Sea states, long served as a guarantor of regional stability, balancing the interests of the USSR/Russia and Turkey's Western allies. However, in the conditions of the 21st century, this regime is increasingly perceived in Ankara as restricting its own capabilities for power projection and economic exploitation of transit potential.

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<sup>1</sup> A «geopolitical throttle» refers to a strategically critical chokepoint in international communications – such as a strait, canal, or narrow sea corridor – the control of which enables a state to regulate, restrict, or facilitate the movement of military and commercial vessels, thereby exerting disproportionate influence over regional and global power dynamics.

With the coming to power of R.T. Erdoğan (Prime Minister in 2003–2014, President since 2014), the question of revising the status of the Straits moved from the realm of academic discussions into the sphere of concrete infrastructural initiatives. Announced in 2011, the «Istanbul Canal» project became the quintessence of Turkey's new geopolitical ambition. Formally justified by the need to relieve congestion in the Bosphorus and enhance navigational safety, it is de facto an attempt to create an alternative reality in the sphere of maritime law. The emergence of an artificial waterway not subject to the Montreux restrictions is potentially capable of fundamentally altering the balance of power in the Black Sea region, providing Ankara with an unprecedented lever of influence over the naval logistics of both NATO and other extra-regional actors. Thus, the problem lies in a profound analysis of the Istanbul Canal not as an engineering and technical undertaking, but as a key geopolitical instrument designed to ensure Turkey a new level of strategic autonomy and to strengthen its role in shaping the future world order in the «Wider Mediterranean» zone.

**Analysis of Recent Research and Publications.** In contemporary academic discourse, the issue of the Istanbul Canal is covered fragmentarily, with the majority of works focused on specific aspects – legal, economic, or environmental – while a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical component within the dynamics of Turkey's foreign policy strategy remains insufficiently developed. Among the seminal studies, several directions can be distinguished.

First, a group of authors analyzes the project through the prism of the Black Sea Straits regime. As early as 2011, M.Akgün and S.Tiryaki concluded that the implementation of the canal creates prerequisites for revising the 1936 Montreux Convention, thereby threatening regional stability [2]. Eldem T. develops this thesis, emphasizing the strategic interests of the United States, Russia, China, and the EU, and underscoring that even without a formal denunciation of the treaty, the emergence of an alternative waterway de facto alters the balance of power in the Black Sea basin [6]. Israeli researchers R.Daniel and G.Lindenstrauss (INSS) supplement this with an analysis of domestic political opposition and the international consequences for Ankara's relations with Moscow, Athens, and Jerusalem [4].

Second, a substantial body of literature is devoted to the domestic political and ideological dimensions of the project. Pehlivanli E. and Eslen-Ziya H. reveal the mechanisms of discursive struggle between the ruling AKP and the opposition CHP, demonstrating how both sides employ «scientific» rhetoric to legitimize their respective positions – ranging from appeals to Ottoman grandeur to the exposure of corruption schemes [16]. Simavoryan A. systematized the evolution of the project's parameters, documenting discrepancies between official promises and the actual state of the feasibility study, which provided grounds for classifying the canal as a politically motivated rather than an engineering-driven initiative [20]. A critical analysis of the project's economic unfeasibility, particularly the absence of a proper feasibility study even a decade after its announcement, is presented in the report «Kanal İstanbul'un Ekonomisi» [12].

Third, the ideological underpinnings of the project are explored in the works of M.Armağan and M.Dreßler. They link Erdoğan's «crazy project» with the broader Neo-Ottoman paradigm of the «New Turkey», wherein infrastructural megaprojects (alongside the reconversion of Hagia Sophia) serve as symbols of the revival of imperial sovereignty and the consolidation of the nationalist electorate [3; 5].

Finally, the research of C.Özçelik and K.Benli deserves special attention, as they introduce into academic circulation the concept of the «Marmara Canal» – a potential second man-made waterway across the Gallipoli Peninsula. The authors argue that only a combination of both canals would ensure Turkey's complete control over the maritime connection between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, thereby opening a new dimension for analyzing the future of the Montreux Convention [15]. Despite the availability of the aforementioned works, there remains a lack of an integrated approach that would combine geopolitical, legal, and security analysis in the context of the current events of 2022–2025.

**The aim of the article** is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical aspect of the Istanbul Canal project as a multidimensional strategic initiative of Turkey, and to determine its geopolitical significance in the context of regional politics and the international legal status of the maritime straits from the beginning of planning (2011) to the present stage (2025).

**Presentation of the Main Material.** Geopolitical control over the Black Sea Straits (the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles) has for centuries served not merely as an element of foreign policy strategy, but as the existential foundation of the regional status of the Ottoman Empire and its successor, the Republic of Turkey. The unique geostrategic position at the junction of continental and maritime communications of Eurasia has transformed the Straits into a kind of «geopolitical throttle», capable of regulating the naval presence of global actors in the Black Sea basin. From the moment of establishing full Ottoman control over both shores of the Bosphorus following the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the reduction of the Crimean Khanate to vassalage in 1478 until the end of the 18th century, the Black Sea de facto functioned as an «internal lake» of the empire, closed to foreign navigation.

The evolution of the international legal regime of the Straits in the 18–19th centuries represents a classic example of the gradual erosion of unilateral sovereignty in favor of multilateral regulation, driven by changes in the global balance of power. Three key bifurcation points can be identified that radically transformed the established order. The first was the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca of 1774, which for the first time in history opened

the Straits to commercial navigation by foreign states, striking a blow to the concept of exclusive Ottoman dominance. The second was the series of Russo-Turkish treaties at the turn of the 18–19th centuries, which created an unprecedented model of de facto Russian control over the Straits while simultaneously prohibiting the passage of warships of other states. The third, decisive point was the London Straits Convention of 1841, which for the first time enshrined the principle of multilateral international control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, definitively burying St. Petersburg's plans for unilateral dominance in the region. Subsequent international legal acts – the Treaty of Paris of 1856 and the London Convention of 1871 – preserved the regime of the so-called «ancient rule of the Ottoman Empire», which provided for the free passage of merchant vessels while maintaining substantial restrictions for warships until the outbreak of the First World War [1].

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War and its de facto dissolution radically altered the configuration of forces around the Straits. The struggle for control over this strategic artery took on the character of a direct clash of interests among the victorious powers, as reflected in the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920. The latter, guaranteeing complete freedom of navigation for all vessels in times of peace and war and establishing international control over the Straits zone, openly lobbied the interests of the British Empire, but was revised following the successful national liberation struggle of the Kemalists. The Lausanne Conference of 1923 established a compromise regime: restrictions for warships coupled with the demilitarization of the Straits zone and the creation of an international supervisory commission. However, the favorable geopolitical conjuncture of the 1930s – the rise of revanchist sentiments in Europe and the interest of Western democracies in strengthening Turkey as a barrier against Italian expansionism – allowed Ankara, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, to achieve a fundamental revision of the status of the Straits. The Montreux Convention of 1936 not only restored Turkish sovereignty over the Straits zone through remilitarization but also introduced a differentiated regime for Black Sea and non-Black Sea states, which constituted an unprecedented diplomatic success for the young republic and laid the foundation for its formal neutrality until 1945 [18].

Throughout the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries, control over the Black Sea Straits remained a key instrument for strengthening Turkey's regional leadership. After the Second World War, the USSR attempted to revise the Montreux regime by demanding joint management of the Straits; however, the consolidated position of Western states and Turkey's subsequent accession to NATO in 1952 blocked Soviet ambitions. The dissolution of the Soviet Union created a fundamentally new security situation in the region, and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) lent unprecedented urgency to the issue of the Straits' status. Ankara found itself in a situation of complex balancing between allied commitments within NATO and pragmatic relations with Moscow, most vividly manifested in the implementation of Article 19 of the Montreux Convention regarding the closure of the Straits to warships of belligerent parties [19].

It is precisely in the context of the permanent restrictions imposed by the Montreux Convention on the passage of warships, combined with the growth of commercial shipping traffic through the Bosphorus, that the idea of constructing a bypass canal emerged as an instrument for strengthening Turkey's geopolitical subjectivity. The historical genealogy of this project dates back to antiquity, attesting to its deep roots in the geographical determinism of the region. As early as the Roman Emperor Trajan (98–117 AD) considered the possibility of connecting the Gulf of İzmit with Lake Sapanca, and during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527–565 AD), practical engineering works commenced to create a waterway via the Sakarya River. During the Ottoman period, this idea was repeatedly revived – from Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566) to Abdülaziz (1861–1876), notably with the involvement of the distinguished architect Mimar Sinan (1489–1588) (Appendix 1).



Appendix 1. The Canal Project During the Ottoman Empire [14, p. 54]

However, the implementation of these ambitious plans was postponed each time due to military campaigns, lack of financial resources, and opposition from influential political factions. In total, seven distinct attempts to implement a canal project between the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea have been recorded in the history of the Ottoman Empire [3; 23].

The reconsideration of the canal idea in modern times occurred thanks to a publication by Ministry of Energy advisor Y.Önem in the journal «Science and Technology» of the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) in 1990, where, for the first time at a contemporary scientific level, the prospects for creating an alternative waterway were analyzed [10]. However, the concept gained genuine political momentum only after its inclusion in the election program of the Democratic Left Party (DSP) led by B. Ecevit for the local elections of 1994 [23]. This historical context is fundamentally important for understanding the nature of the project: from the very outset, it was positioned not as a technocratic solution to a transportation problem, but as a persistent political concept capable of adapting to changing circumstances while retaining its key features – ambition, symbolism, and an orientation toward strengthening national sovereignty.

On April 27, 2011, on the eve of the parliamentary elections, Prime Minister R.T. Erdoğan officially presented the «Istanbul Canal» project as one of the initiatives intended to symbolize Turkey's entry into the centennial of the Republic in 2023 (Appendix 2).



*Appendix 2. The Istanbul Canal Project [17]*

The Turkish leader's rhetoric was imbued with messianic motifs: «Turkey more than deserves to enter 2023 with such a crazy and magnificent project... Istanbul will become a city through which two seas pass» [22]. Despite the ambitious declarations and initial optimism, over the subsequent decade, the full-scale implementation of the project failed to commence due to a complex set of internal and external factors, including economic instability, lack of domestic consensus, and international pressure.

On June 26, 2021, a groundbreaking ceremony was held for the Sazlıdere Bridge, which President Erdoğan positioned as the official start of the canal's construction. In his speech, he appealed to the scientific validity of the chosen route (optimal among 5 alternatives), the involvement of 204 experts, including 51 academics from 11 universities, and the conduct of extensive engineering studies with the participation of 3,500 specialists from 35 countries [7]. In contrast, the opposition, represented by Istanbul Mayor E. İmamoğlu, subjected the event to scathing criticism, noting that the construction of the bridge had been planned since 2006 as part of road infrastructure development and had no direct relation to the excavation of the canal bed [8]. Such polarization of assessments vividly demonstrates that the project has been at the epicenter of acute domestic political struggle from the very beginning.

In academic discourse, the Istanbul Canal is unanimously interpreted not as a purely infrastructural undertaking, but primarily as a potent geopolitical instrument aimed at transforming the regional balance of power. Kundak S. and Baypınar M.B. qualify the project as a deliberate challenge to the existing navigation regime enshrined in the Montreux Convention and a potential catalyst for serious international disputes involving NATO and the Black Sea littoral states [14, p. 53]. In April 2021, R.T. Erdoğan explicitly stated the possibility of revising any international convention if it served Turkey's national interests. This position was immediately supported by the Speaker of the Turkish Parliament, who as early as March of that year had confirmed the country's right to withdraw unilaterally from the treaty. According to expert assessments, the canal is viewed by the Turkish leadership as a legal mechanism for removing the new waterway from the jurisdiction of the Montreux Convention, thereby allowing Ankara to independently regulate the passage of warships [13, p. 4].

At the same time, the official position presented on the project's dedicated website is considerably more restrained and legally nuanced: it asserts that the canal does not annul or replace the Montreux Convention but will function solely as an alternative route while fully preserving the existing regime of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles [11]. This duality of official discourse – aggressive rhetoric from the top political leadership versus cautious formulations in public documents – reflects the complexity of the diplomatic maneuvering in which Ankara is engaged. Domestic political tension surrounding this issue reached an unprecedented level in April 2021, when 10 retired Turkish admirals were detained after signing an open letter cautioning against Turkey's withdrawal from the Montreux Convention. Such actions by the authorities were qualified as a «conspiracy to commit a crime against state security and the constitutional order», demonstrating the ruling elite's readiness to harshly suppress any opposition to its geopolitical course [21].

The potential abrogation or revision of the Montreux Convention as a result of the Istanbul Canal's construction creates a complex geopolitical puzzle in which the interests of leading global actors intersect. A hypothetical annulment of the Convention would grant Ankara unprecedented control over naval access to the Black Sea, potentially legitimizing an expanded NATO presence near Russia's southern borders, yet simultaneously removing the regulatory buffer that prevents military escalation in the region. Revision of the Convention, which requires the unanimous consent of all signatory parties (including Turkey, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia), is highly likely to provoke a harsh response from Moscow. The Russian Federation has historically regarded the Black Sea as a zone of its privileged interests, and V. Putin's statement in April 2021 regarding the importance of preserving the Convention for «ensuring regional stability and security» serves as a clear signal of the Kremlin's readiness to defend the status quo by all available means [13, p. 7–8].

The strategic position of the United States of America regarding the region is clearly reflected in the Black Sea Security Act of 2022. Although this bill was only approved by the House of Representatives and did not become law, it serves as an important indicator of Washington's strategic thinking. The document envisages «increasing the presence and capabilities of NATO» and promoting «greater freedom of navigation» in the Black Sea, which, in the context of the ongoing implementation of the Istanbul Canal, reflects the coordinated efforts of Western states to revise the historical regime of the 1936 Convention [9]. Underlying this is the U.S. aspiration to create an effective counterbalance to traditional Russian naval dominance in the region and to secure a strategic foothold near Russia's southern borders, which will inevitably intensify geopolitical rivalry in the Black Sea basin.

Special attention is warranted by the conceptual development of C. Özçelik and K. Benli, who introduce the idea of the «Marmara Canal» into academic circulation – a potential second man-made waterway across the Gallipoli Peninsula that would allow bypassing the Dardanelles as well. The authors convincingly argue that only a combination of both canals – Istanbul and Marmara – is capable of ensuring Turkey's absolute control over the maritime connection between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Such a prospect creates fundamentally new geopolitical challenges, as it could potentially provoke not merely a revision but a complete dismantling of the Montreux Convention regime, triggering conflicts among Black Sea littoral states and global maritime powers, and significantly impacting the regional balance of power, especially in the context of China's «Maritime Silk Road» initiative and the access of non-Black Sea naval fleets to the Black Sea [15, p. 852–856].

Summarizing the analysis of the geopolitical dimension, T. Eldem notes that despite low public support within the country and a difficult economic situation, President Erdoğan persistently promotes the Istanbul Canal project out of considerations of geopolitical influence and personal political prestige. The researcher recommends that European politicians maintain constant communication with all stakeholders in Turkey, as the implementation of this controversial megaproject is capable of significantly affecting the security balance in the Black Sea region due to the potential revision of the Montreux Convention regime [6, p. 8].

**Conclusions.** The conducted analysis of the geopolitical dimension of the Istanbul Canal project in the period 2011–2025 demonstrates that this initiative is not so much an infrastructural undertaking as a strategic instrument for asserting Turkey's status as a regional leader capable of influencing the balance of power in the Black Sea-Mediterranean basin. The historical continuity of the idea of an alternative waterway – from ancient projects to seven Ottoman attempts – underscores its deep entrenchment in the geopolitical thinking of Turkish elites; however, it was precisely under the rule of R.T. Erdoğan that it acquired the character of a concrete lever of

pressure on the international legal regime of the Black Sea Straits. The emergence of an artificial canal formally excluded from the jurisdiction of the 1936 Montreux Convention creates a real threat of erosion of the established balance, as it opens the way to revising restrictions on the passage of warships of non-Black Sea states. This inevitably intensifies rivalry among key actors: Russia categorically rejects any revision of the Convention, perceiving it as a threat to its strategic interests, while the United States and NATO view the transformation of the Straits regime as an opportunity to strengthen their own naval presence in the Black Sea. At the same time, China demonstrates growing interest in the project within the context of the «Maritime Silk Road», adding a new dimension to geopolitical competition. The domestic political dimension of the project is characterized by acute polarization: the ruling elite employs it as a symbol of national revival, whereas the opposition emphasizes its economic unfeasibility and international risks. The prospect of constructing the «Marmara Canal» across Gallipoli, capable of ensuring Turkey absolute control over maritime communications, only reinforces alarming expectations regarding the complete dismantling of the Montreux regime. Thus, the future of the Istanbul Canal will depend on Ankara's ability to balance geopolitical ambitions with economic realities and international legal constraints, and the optimal strategy appears to be the initiation of multilateral consultations rather than a unilateral revision of the established regime, which, in the context of the war in Ukraine, could provoke uncontrolled escalation in the region.

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##### **Геополітичний вимір проекту Стамбульського каналу в системі міжнародних відносин (2011–2025)**

У статті здійснено комплексний аналіз геополітичного виміру проекту будівництва Стамбульського каналу як стратегічної ініціативи Турецької Республіки в період 2011–2025 рр. Розглянуто історичну генеалогію ідеї створення альтернативного водного шляху між Чорним і Мармуровим морями – від античних проєктів та османських спроб до її реактуалізації в сучасному політичному дискурсі. Досліджено геополітичний контекст проєкту в системі міжнародних відносин, зокрема його потенційний вплив на режим Чорноморських протоків, встановлений Конвенцією Монтре 1936 р. Доведено, що Стамбульський канал є не стільки інфраструктурним, скільки потужним геополітичним інструментом, спрямованим на трансформацію регіонального балансу сил та посилення стратегічної автономії Туреччини в Чорноморсько-Середземноморському басейні. Особливу увагу приділено аналізу позицій ключових глобальних акторів (США, російської федерації, Китайської Народної Республіки, Європейського Союзу) щодо реалізації проєкту та його наслідків для архітектури регіональної безпеки. Визначено, що поява штучного водного шляху, формально виведеного з-під юрисдикції Конвенції Монтре, створює реальні передумови для ерозії усталеного міжнародно-правового режиму та здатна спровокувати загострення геополітичного суперництва в Чорноморському регіоні. Розкрито внутрішньополітичний контекст проєкту, що характеризується гострою поляризацією турецького суспільства та використанням каналу як символу неоосманського відродження в ідеологічному дискурсі правлячої еліти. На основі проведеного аналізу сформульовано прогностичні оцінки щодо подальшого розвитку ситуації навколо Стамбульського каналу та його впливу на трансформацію безпекової архітектури Чорноморського регіону в середньостроковій перспективі.

**Ключові слова:** Стамбульський канал; Чорноморські протоки; Конвенція Монтре; геополітика; міжнародна безпека; Турецька Республіка; регіональний баланс сил; історія та теорія міжнародних відносин.

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