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NEW CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL SECURITY: ASSESSMENT OF THE ISTANBUL CANAL CONSTRUCTION CONSEQUENCES FOR STABILITY IN THE BLACK SEA BASIN

The Istanbul Canal is not merely an infrastructure project but a geopolitical tool that could fundamentally alter the balance of power in the Black Sea region. Research on this issue is critically important, as the project's implementation threatens to revise the 1936 Montreux Convention and could provoke an international crisis amid an already aggravated situation due to the war in Ukraine. A comprehensive analysis of the project's geopolitical consequences is necessary for developing preventive strategies to ensure regional stability and protect the national interests of Black Sea states.

The Istanbul Canal construction project, officially announced by then-Prime Minister of Turkey R. T. Erdoğan in 2011, represents not simply a large-scale infrastructure initiative but a powerful geopolitical instrument capable of fundamentally transforming the security architecture of the Black Sea region. The canal, 45 km long, 150 m wide, and 25 m deep, is intended to connect the Black and Marmara Seas, creating an alternative to the Bosphorus Strait [7]. However, behind these technical parameters lies a much deeper objective – revision of the existing regime of the Black Sea Straits and strengthening of Turkey's geopolitical positions in the region. The research relevance stems from the fact that the project's implementation could provoke a revision of the 1936 Montreux Convention, which for nearly nine decades has ensured relative stability in the navigation regime through the Straits. In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and intensifying geopolitical competition in the Black Sea basin, any changes to the status of the Straits acquire particular significance for regional and global security.

The Black Sea Straits have traditionally constituted a fundamental vector of foreign policy strategy for both the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. The 1936 Montreux Convention established a regime that differentiates passage rights for

Black Sea and non-Black Sea states, limiting the tonnage and duration of military vessels' presence in the Black Sea [5]. This regime ensured a balance of interests between regional and global actors for decades. However, in April 2021, President R. T. Erdoğan stated the possibility of revising any convention in the future if necessary to improve conditions for Turkey, while the speaker of the Turkish parliament confirmed the country's right to withdraw from the treaty at its own discretion. This indicates that the Istanbul Canal is viewed by Turkish leadership as an instrument for circumventing Montreux Convention restrictions, since, according to R. T. Erdoğan, the canal should be "completely outside the scope of this international treaty" [3, p. 4].

The potential abolition or revision of the Convention creates a complex geopolitical puzzle where the interests of leading world powers collide. Russia historically regards the Black Sea as a zone of its privileged interests, and President Putin in April 2021 directly emphasized the importance of preserving the Convention for "ensuring regional stability and security," which represents a transparent signal of readiness to defend the status quo [3, p. 7-8]. Abolishing the convention would deprive Russia of its guaranteed right of passage for military vessels through the Straits and open possibilities for increased NATO presence near its southern borders. The United States views the Black Sea region as a zone of strategic significance, reflected in the Black Sea Security Act of 2022, which, although not enacted into law, demonstrates Washington's clear strategic intent regarding "increasing NATO presence and capabilities" and promoting "greater freedom of navigation" in the Black Sea [1]. Behind this lies the aspiration to create a counterbalance to Russian naval dominance in the region.

China has shown the strongest interest in financing the project, proposing a \$30 billion deposit with investment potential up to \$65 billion [3, p. 5-6, 9], which fits into the Chinese "Maritime Silk Road" initiative and creates risks of "debt trap diplomacy" that could threaten Turkish sovereignty. Black Sea states – Ukraine, Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania – are concerned about possible revision of the convention, as this directly affects their national security and economic interests [4, p. 852-856].

The official position of the Turkish government asserts that the canal will not replace the status of the straits under the Montreux Convention but will merely serve as an

alternative route [2]. However, this position raises justified doubts, as creating an alternative waterway that formally does not fall under the convention's jurisdiction de facto creates a legal precedent for circumventing its provisions. It is significant that in April 2021, 10 retired Turkish admirals were detained after their open criticism of the project, when 104 retired admirals signed an open letter warning against withdrawal from the international treaty but were accused of "conspiracy to commit crimes against state security and constitutional order" [6]. This demonstrates the seriousness of internal political divisions in Turkey regarding the project and its geopolitical consequences.

Based on the conducted SWOT analysis of the Istanbul Canal project, the following key recommendations in the geopolitical dimension can be formulated: Turkey needs to develop a balanced strategy regarding the future regime of the Black Sea Straits that takes into account the geopolitical interests of all Black Sea states. Instead of unilateral revision of the 1936 Montreux Convention, which could provoke an international crisis, it is advisable to initiate multilateral consultations to form an updated consensus on the navigation regime. Such an approach would preserve Turkey's role as guarantor of regional stability. Considering growing tensions in the Black Sea region, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is recommended to integrate the Istanbul Canal project into the broader European security architecture. This should include developing special protocols regarding the passage of military vessels during crisis periods and creating an international system for monitoring navigation. To ensure geopolitical balance, it is critically important to avoid excessive dependence on Chinese investments, which could lead to a "debt trap diplomacy" scenario. It is recommended to develop mechanisms for international co-management of the canal while maintaining overall Turkish sovereignty over the territory.

Thus, the Istanbul Canal represents a complex challenge to regional security in the Black Sea basin that extends far beyond an ordinary infrastructure project. The project creates preconditions for revising the 1936 Montreux Convention, which could lead to destabilization of the entire region; therefore, it is recommended to initiate multilateral consultations to form an updated consensus on the navigation regime that takes into account the interests of all Black Sea states and does not disturb the balance of power. The future of the Istanbul Canal will depend on the Turkish leadership's

ability to balance geopolitical ambitions with economic realities and environmental requirements, while for the international community it is critically important to remain engaged in dialogue with all Turkish stakeholders regarding this controversial megaproject, as its implementation will have long-term consequences for the security of the entire Black Sea region.

References:

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