# Amid war danger in Black Sea, Turkey threatens Montreux Convention

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As NATO escalates threats against Russia and China, a bitter conflict has erupted in the Turkish state machine over the Montreux Convention, an international treaty signed in 1936 governing passage between the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Sections of the navy are objecting to President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's talk of using plans for an Istanbul Canal to scrap the Convention, which limits warship deployments to the Black Sea. This could allow NATO to deploy warships from the Mediterranean, at will, to threaten Russia's coast.

The Istanbul Canal would accommodate large tanker and merchant shipping, bypassing the narrow Bosporus straits by linking the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara. In 2018, the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong worried that the project could "trigger an arms race in the Black Sea," adding: "China is watching closely." At that point, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Y?ld?r?m had said the Istanbul Canal would not be subject to the Montreux Convention.

This issue is more even explosive since Biden's inauguration as US president, after Ukraine announced plans to invade Crimea with NATO support and seize Russia's Black Sea naval base at Sevastopol. This issue was widely discussed in Turkish media after a reporter asked Parliament Chairman Mustafa ?entop whether Erdo?an "might dissolve the Montreux Convention." ?entop, a member of Erdo?an's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), replied, "Technically, yes."

On April 3, 104 retired Turkish admirals issued a declaration opposing the opening of the Montreux Convention to discussion. They said: "The opening of the Montreux Convention to debate as part of Canal Istanbul and the authority of the annulment of international treaties is met with concern."

The admirals, all longstanding NATO officials, declared that questioning the convention is not in Turkish national interests. They noted that it "governs not only the passage through the Turkish Straits, restoring full sovereignty to Turkey over Istanbul, Çanakkale, the Marmara Sea and the Straits, but also is a major diplomatic victory" for Turkey.

Two days later, the Turkish government had ten of the admirals arrested and alleged that they were preparing a coup, referring to the failed NATO-backed coup attempt of July 15, 2016. ?entop said "Expressing one's thoughts is one thing, preparing a declaration evoking a coup d'état is another." Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said the admirals aimed to "harm our democracy, negatively affect the morale and motivation of Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) personnel, and gratify our enemies," while Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu warned: "Do not let them try our patience."

Erdo?an said the admirals' declaration "cannot be labeled as freedom of speech" and repeated that he might cancel the Convention: "We currently have neither any efforts nor intention to leave the Montreux Convention. However, if such a need presents itself in future, we will not hesitate to review every convention to introduce a better one for our country. And we will open them to international discussion."

Yesterday, Russian President Vladimir Putin called Erdo?an to oppose scrapping the Montreux Convention. The Kremlin press service published a brief announcement, declaring: "In regards to Turkey's plans for construction of the Istanbul Canal, Russia emphasized the importance of preservation of the 1936 Montreux Convention in order to ensure the regional stability and safety of the regional Black Sea straits regime."

Earlier, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova stressed: "Any attempt to revise the convention affects the interests of our country. We see this convention as a key factor in stability and security in the Black Sea basin, especially regarding warship traffic." Russian Ambassador to Turkey Alexey Erkhov had said

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that the dredging of an Istanbul Canal would not invalidate the Montreux Convention, which would still be binding on Turkey.

On Wednesday, Erdo?an accused the bourgeois opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) of "trying to whitewash this declaration that has coup sentiments." He also said some of the admirals were CHP members.

The declaration has divided the CHP and its allies, including the far-right Good Party. While CHP leader Kemal K?l?çdaro?lu called the government's response an "artificial agenda," the CHP's Kurdish-nationalist ally, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), said Erdo?an's decision to "invent a coup threat from a written statement is nothing but political cunning and opportunism."

While Good Party leader Meral Ak?ener criticized the declaration, calling it "silly behavior," his ?zmir deputy Aytun Ç?ray defended the retired admirals and their statement.

In reality, Turkey's government and bourgeois opposition parties are aligning themselves with the NATO imperialist powers' war drive amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because of the Erdo?an government's murderous "herd immunity" policy on the pandemic, prioritizing the profits of big business over lives, daily new cases reached 54,740 and the death toll 276 on Wednesday. Both figures are records since the pandemic began. There is mounting social anger and strike activity in the working class in Turkey and internationally against the social murder imposed by the ruling classes' reactionary health policies.

The Turkish government's threats to scrap the Montreux Convention come as NATO tightens its ranks to prepare for war, threatening both Russia and China. In particular, tensions between Russia and the NATO-backed regime in Ukraine on the Black Sea's north shore are the highest since the far-right forces overthrew Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 in a US- and German-backed coup.

While the Turkish government has signed major arms deals with Ukraine and backs NATO's Ukraine policy, its relations with NATO, Russia and China are all deeply fraught.

A critical factor in Ankara's increasingly difficult relations with Washington was its fierce hostility to US ties with Kurdish nationalist forces in the now decade-long war for regime-change in Syria. While the Islamic State (ISIS) militias gained power in Syria and invaded Iraq, the imperialist powers turned to Kurdish nationalist groups as a proxy force. Erdo?an could not adapt to these sudden, violent shifts in imperialist war policy, and his imperialist allies came to see him not as a "strategic partner," but as an unreliable one.

Washington and Berlin responded with an attempted military coup against Erdo?an in 2016, while Biden was Barack Obama's vice president. The coup's failure further undermined Ankara's relations with NATO.

Despite threats of US sanctions, Turkey bought S-400 air defense systems from Russia and signed a strategic natural gas pipeline agreement with Moscow. Though Turkey and Russia repeatedly were on the verge of direct conflict in the NATO proxy wars in Libya and Syria, as well as in the recent Armenia-Azerbaijan war, they always managed to avert a direct clash, which would risk precipitating all-out global war between NATO and Russia.

Erdo?an has worked to improve relations with Washington after Biden's inauguration as president, though despite all his efforts, conflicts continue between Washington and Ankara. US officials oppose Turkey's purchase of a Russian-made S-400 air defense system and Ankara's broader relations with Russia and China. This week, the US State Department imposed sanctions on a Turkish defense agency and four of its officials after Ankara refused to abandon plans to purchase the S-400 system.

Erdo?an also criticized Biden's comment denouncing Russian President Vladimir Putin as a "killer." Erdo?an said that this term for Putin was "unacceptable."

In these explosive conditions, discussion of canceling the Montreux Convention is a warning to workers around the world of the rapidly accelerating threat of war between the major powers.

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