

# Trade in the Bosphorous Strait

One of the most narrow straits in the world is responsible for over 3% of the global trade in oil (1). The Bosphorus Strait, a 17-mile waterway that passes through Istanbul, connects the Black Sea with the Mediterranean Sea. The strait is a necessary commodity for nations like Russia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan that wish to further progress trade products through waterways such as the Suez Canal and the Strait of Gibraltar. For these countries, the Bosphorus Strait is the primary export route. Other countries that border the Black Sea like Bulgaria, Romania, and Georgia rely heavily on trade by way of the Bosphorus Strait.

Because the strait is so essential to trade, “[a]bout 48,000 vessels transit the straits each year, making this area one of the world’s busiest maritime gateways, according to the U.S. government” (2). The intercontinental nature of the strait underlines its importance to the world leaders of trade. Despite the war in Ukraine, trade through the strait has remained largely unaffected (3). This proves the prioritization the strait takes among countries across Europe, Asia, and the rest of the world. It allows for countries to shorten trade routes efficiently, justifying its evident busy nature. But with the busyness of the strait comes extreme difficulty bypassing it.

Control of trade in the Bosphorus Strait ultimately falls into Turkish hands. The Montreux Convention of 1936 decided that Türkiye holds full control over the Bosphorus Strait and the Dardanelles Strait, a waterway further southwest down the Turkish coast (4). The 1936 Convention decided that trade and travel in the Bosphorus Strait is free for commercial ships. It also restricted travel through the strait by military ships whose countries do not have a coastline on the Black Sea (5). This ban has been extended to all countries following the commencement of the war in Ukraine. This regulation was particularly devastating for Russia who frequently relied on the waterway for mobilizing its high-level military, especially during its invasion of Ukraine.

The Montreux Convention also grants Türkiye the right to close the waterway at any time. Ankara claims that it has used this rule “‘properly and impartially’ for more than seven decades to ensure the security and stability of the Black Sea” (6). In 1952, the Soviet Union found these rules to be exceedingly strict and unfair. Moscow decided that it would jointly oversee the strait. Türkiye found this move rather assertive and promptly joined NATO out of caution later the same year. Because of this, Türkiye tends to side with the Western Bloc more often, and favors those nations more when it comes to trade in the Bosphorus.

Because trade in the Bosphorus Strait can become increasingly difficult given Türkiye’s restrictions and the inherent popularity of the strait, Türkiye is in the process of building a second option for countries interested in pursuing trade between the Black and Mediterranean Seas. In 2021, Türkiye began constructing the Istanbul Canal, an artificial waterway a few dozen miles west of the Bosphorus Strait. This route, like the Bosphorus Strait, will connect the Black Sea with the Mediterranean Sea by way of a north-south canal. But unlike the Bosphorus Strait, this proposed canal will cost money for ships that wish to pass through it. While this alternative may seem attractive given its less busy nature compared to the Bosphorus Strait, Türkiye reserved itself the right to charge commercial vessels traveling through.

Many analysts believe that this is a strategy by Türkiye to bypass the Montreux Convention. The country may, in the near future, have a much higher influence on trade in the region and the world. Construction of the new canal is yet to be complete, but once it is, Türkiye’s increased control over international trade may place it in global turmoil.