

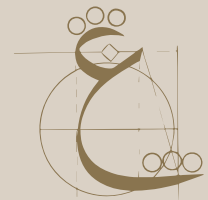


kadim

SAYI / ISSUE 10 • EKİM / OCTOBER 2025



IO



kadim

*“Kadim oldur ki
evvelin kimesne bilmeye”*

Kadim is that no one knows what came before.

kadim



Osmanlı arařtırmalarına münhasır, altı ayda bir (Nisan ve Ekim) neřredilen, açık erişimli, çift kör hakem sistemli akademik dergi

A double-blind peer-reviewed open-access academic journal that is published semiannually (April and October) in the field of Ottoman Studies

SAYI | ISSUE 10 • EKİM | OCTOBER 2025

İMTİYAZ SAHİBİ | PROPRIETOR

Burhan ÇAĞLAR

SORUMLU YAZI İŐLERİ MÜDÜRÜ | MANAGING EDITOR

Ömer Faruk CAN

İRTİBAT | CONTACT

Kadim • Sakarya Üniversitesi

Esentepe Kampüsü, İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Fakültesi, A Blok, Ofis: 110,
Serdivan/Sakarya (Türkiye) 54050

Telefon | Phone • 00 90 264 295 60 15

İnternet Adresi | Webpage • dergipark.org.tr/kadim • kadim.sakarya.edu.tr

E-posta | E-mail • kadim@sakarya.edu.tr

TASARIM | DESIGN Hasan Hüseyin CAN

BASKI | PRINTED BY

MetinCopyPlus • Artı Dijital & Baskı Merkezi

Türkocağı Cad. 3/A Cağaloğlu - Fatih / İstanbul

BASIM TARİHİ | PRINT DATE • EKİM | OCTOBER 2025

ISSN 2757-9395 • E-ISSN 2757-9476

ÜCRETSİZ | FREE OF CHARGE

Kadim'deki makaleler, [Creative Commons Atıntı-Gayriticari 4.0 \(CC BY-NC\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) Uluslararası Lisansı ile lisanslanmıştır. Bilimsel arařtırmaları kamuya ücretsiz sunmanın bilginin küresel paylaşımını artıracakı ilkesini benimseyen dergi, tüm içeriğine anında Libre açık erişim sağlamaktadır. Makalelerdeki fikir ve görüşlerin sorumluluđu sadece yazarlarına ait olup Kadim'in görüşlerini yansıtmazlar.

Articles in Kadim are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 \(CC BY-NC\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) International License. Kadim provides immediate Libre open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. Authors are responsible for the content of contributions; thus, opinions expressed in the articles belong to them and do not reflect the opinions or views of Kadim.

“Kadim oldur ki
evvelin kimesne bilmeye”

DergiPark



EDİTÖR
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

YAYIN KURULU
EDITORIAL BOARD

KİTAP İNCELEME EDİTÖRÜ
BOOK REVIEW EDITOR

YAZIM VE DİL EDİTÖRLERİ
WRITING AND LANGUAGE
EDITORS

İNGİLİZCE DİL EDİTÖRLERİ
ENGLISH LANGUAGE
EDITORS

TÜRKÇE DİL EDİTÖRLERİ
TURKISH LANGUAGE
EDITORS

MİZANPAJ VE SOSYAL
MEDYA EDİTÖRÜ
LAYOUT AND SOCIAL MEDIA
EDITOR

YAYIN SEKRETERİ
SECRETARIAT

Arif BİLGİN | Yükseköğretim Kurulu

Necmettin ALKAN | Sakarya Üniversitesi
Serpil ATAMAZ | California State University, Sacramento
Zahit ATÇIL | Boğaziçi Üniversitesi
Fatih BOZKURT | Sakarya Üniversitesi
Ömerül Faruk BÖLÜKBAŞI | Marmara Üniversitesi
Büşra ÇAKMAKTAŞ | Sakarya Üniversitesi
M. Talha ÇİÇEK | University College Dublin
Filiz DIĞIROĞLU | Marmara Üniversitesi
Ella FRATANTUONO | University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Selim KARAHASANOĞLU | İstanbul Medeniyet Üniversitesi
Miraç TOSUN | Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi
Kenan YILDIZ | İstanbul Medeniyet Üniversitesi

Ömer Faruk CAN | Sakarya Üniversitesi

Burhan ÇAĞLAR | Sakarya Üniversitesi
Burak ÇİTİR | Sakarya Üniversitesi
Mehmet KERİM | Sakarya Üniversitesi
Bünyamin PUNAR | Sakarya Üniversitesi

Didar Ayşe AKBULUT | Marmara Üniversitesi
İrem GÜNDÜZ-POLAT | Sakarya Üniversitesi
Hacer KILIÇASLAN | Sakarya Üniversitesi

Sedat KOCABEY | Sakarya Üniversitesi
Büşranur KOCAER | İbn Haldun Üniversitesi
Muhammed Emir TULUM | İstanbul Medeniyet Üniversitesi

Büşranur BEKMAN ERKAN | Sakarya Üniversitesi

Yusuf İslam YILMAZ | Sivas Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi

The Turkish Straits in British Strategy (1774-1923): Geography Balancing the Ottoman Empire, Britain, and Russia



İSMAİL EDİZ*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the strategic impact of geography on British foreign policy-making through the case of the Turkish Straits. It argues that geography functioned as a structural modifier, which shaped Britain's long-term diplomatic and military strategy between two contrasting paradigms. These are the policies of closure of the Straits, designed to contain Russia, and the policy of freedom, intended to preserve British naval access. Drawing on diplomatic records and treaty developments from the late 18th century through the post-World War I period, the study shows how Britain's shifting approaches to the Straits were driven not merely by immediate geopolitical changes but by persistent geographic constraints. The findings demonstrate the enduring influence of geographic chokepoints in shaping the logic and limits of great power diplomacy.

Keywords: Geography, Ottoman Empire, British Strategy, Turkish Straits, Russia.

İNGİLİZ STRATEJİSİNDE TÜRK BOĞAZLARI (1774-1923): OSMANLI İMPARATORLUĞU, İNGİLTERE VE RUSYA'YI DENGLEYEN COĞRAFYA

ÖZ

Bu makale, coğrafyanın İngiliz dış politika yapımı üzerindeki stratejik etkisini Türk Boğazları örneği üzerinden incelemektedir. Çalışmanın temel argümanı, coğrafyanın iki zıt paradigma arasında Britanya'nın uzun vadeli diplomatik ve askeri stratejisini şekillendiren yapısal bir değiştirici işlevi gördüğüdür. Bunlar, Rusya'yı kontrol altına almak için tasarlanan kapatma politikası ve Britanya'nın deniz erişimini korumayı amaçlayan özgürlük politikasıdır. 18. yüzyılın sonlarından I. Dünya Savaşı sonrası döneme kadar diplomatik kayıtlar ve anlaşmalardan yararlanan çalışma, Britanya'nın Boğazlar'a yönelik değişen yaklaşımlarının yalnızca anlık jeopolitik değişikliklerden değil, aynı zamanda kalıcı coğrafi kısıtlamalardan kaynaklandığını göstermektedir. Bulgular, coğrafi dar geçitlerin büyük güç diplomasinin mantığını ve sınırlarını şekillendirmedeki kalıcı etkisini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Coğrafya, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, İngiliz Stratejisi, Türk Boğazları, Rusya.



MAKALE BİLGİSİ | ARTICLE INFORMATION

Makale Türü: Araştırma Makalesi | Article Type: Research Article
Geliş Tarihi: 15 Haziran 2025 | Date Received: 15 June 2025
Kabul Tarihi: 5 Ekim 2025 | Date Accepted: 5 October 2025



ATIF | CITATION

Ediz, İsmail. "The Turkish Straits in British Strategy (1774-1923): Geography Balancing the Ottoman Empire, Britain, and Russia". *Kadim* 10 (October 2025). 49-83. doi.org/10.54462/kadim.1720292

* Assoc. Prof., Sakarya University, Faculty of Political Sciences, Department of International Relations, ismailediz@sakarya.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0003-3058-3305.

INTRODUCTION

The Turkish Straits have long stood as a geographical fulcrum shaping empires' security anxieties and strategic designs. As narrow maritime arteries binding the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, they emerged as structural determinants of great power diplomacy. Britain, whose imperial supremacy depended on naval dominance and the secure passage to India and beyond, regarded the Straits as an indispensable hinge in the architecture of global commerce. Russia, confined within the enclosed basin of the Black Sea, perceived them as the essential outlet to the Mediterranean's coveted "warm waters" and thus a recurrent object of ambition and contestation. On the other hand, for the Ottoman Empire, the ability to command and defend these narrow waters was not merely a matter of strategic advantage but a question of survival, safeguarding the capital, sustaining imperial sovereignty, and preserving a fragile balance against encroaching great powers. In this context, the Straits' geography did not remain a silent backdrop; it exerted itself as an active force, shaping interests, constraining choices, and directing foreign policy trajectories.

This study explores how the Turkish Straits' geography functioned as a structural determinant of British foreign policy from the late eighteenth century to the post-World War I period. The central question addressed is how the Straits shaped Britain's strategy and diplomacy. Three sub-questions guide the study: how British perceptions of the Straits evolved with shifting geopolitical balances; why Britain at times upheld Ottoman sovereignty and at other times sought to curtail it; and how Britain attempted to reconcile structural maritime interests with emerging multilateral legal frameworks. The central argument is that the geography of the Straits consistently acted as a structural modifier of British policy, creating enduring incentives for both closure and freedom. Britain's overarching foreign policy objective was to preserve imperial security and maintain maritime supremacy, particularly safeguarding the sea route to India and the Suez. This prevented any rival, especially Russia, from gaining control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. In the context of the Straits, Britain consistently sought to maintain the balance of power in Europe, preserve the Ottoman Empire as a buffer, and ensure the freedom of imperial sea lines of trade. To achieve these aims, Britain employed alternating strategies depending on historical circumstances. In the 19th century, it adopted the policy of closure, codified in treaties such as the 1841 Straits Convention and the 1856 Treaty of Paris, which barred Russian warships from passing through the Straits.¹ This strategy used international law and alliances to lock Russia inside the Black Sea. In the post-World War I period, Britain shifted to a policy of freedom of the Straits, seeking guaranteed access for its own navy to the Black Sea. This strategy involved proposals for demilitarisation, League of Nations oversight, and international commissions, which reflect declining British power and the need for multilateral solutions. In both phases, geography conditioned British strategy and diplomacy, ensuring that the bottleneck of the Straits remained a focal point of imperial security.

From this structural perspective, a series of hypotheses emerge. The Straits determined strategic priorities for Britain because they formed a vital corridor to India and, later, to the Suez Canal. Their preservation under Ottoman sovereignty ensured imperial cohesion

1 For a comprehensive overview of agreements, conventions and contracts related to Turkish Straits, see United States Department of State, *The Problem of the Turkish Straits* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947).

and protected the maritime economy of the Eastern Mediterranean. Britain's commercial supremacy was thus structurally tied to denying Russia control of the Straits and preventing rival powers from altering the balance of power. On the other hand, due to its geography, Russia's strategic goals reflected a vision opposite to that of Britain. Whereas Russia's confinement to the Black Sea imposed an enduring drive for expansion through the Straits toward the Mediterranean, Britain's reliance on global sea lines of communication compelled it to resist such access. Thus, the same geographic chokepoint generated opposed strategies, which highlights how geography acted as the structural determinant of rivalry. Geography also played a direct role in shaping the evolution of diplomacy and alliance strategies. Shifting alliances among the Ottoman Empire, Britain, Russia, and France, primarily shaped by their strategic interests in the Straits, would elucidate this dynamic. For Russia, geography imposed persistent constraints. The Black Sea, closed from world markets, made access to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles indispensable. The lack of warm-water outlets structurally limited Russia's trade and industrial development, which compelled repeated attempts to expand toward the Straits. The vulnerability of Russian exports to external control reinforced the urgency of secure passage, while control over the Straits promised both economic integration with Europe and the capacity for global power projection. These hypotheses lead to a broader structural proposition. If a great power lacks secure access to strategic maritime passages or forward bases, its capacity to project power and sustain its status as a global actor is severely constrained.

The literature on the Turkish Straits consistently underscores their significance as both a strategic chokepoint and a site where geography imposes powerful structural constraints on international politics. From the early foundations of classical geopolitics, scholars have emphasized that geography is not a passive stage but an enduring determinant of state behavior. Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory demonstrated the view that spatial positioning and access to maritime corridors condition the distribution of global power, while Gray and Sloan later argued that "geography endures while strategy adapts", which highlighted the asymmetry between fixed spatial realities and the flexibility of political choices.² Applied to the Straits, these theoretical insights help explain why Britain, Russia, and Turkey consistently treated control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles as central to their foreign policies. Historical accounts reinforce this structural reading. Yusuf Hikmet Bayur reveals the intense diplomatic maneuvers in the years immediately preceding World War I, which illustrate how the Straits problem was embedded in both Ottoman survival strategies and great-power rivalries.³ Robert J. Kerner underscores Russia's diplomatic maneuvers during World War I, particularly the agreement in 1915, which shows how geographic imperatives drove the quest for Istanbul and the Straits.⁴ A. L. MacFie places British diplomacy at the forefront, while emphasizing how naval and imperial commitments shaped Britain's preference for internationalization and demilitarization.⁵ His work reveals Britain's recurring dilemma that was balancing recognition

2 Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", *The Geographical Journal* 23/4 (1904), 421-437; Colin S. Gray - Geoffrey Sloan, "Why Geopolitics", *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy*, ed. Colin S. Gray - Geoffrey Sloan (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 3.

3 Yusuf Hikmet Bayur, "Boğazlar Sorununun Bir Evresi (1906-1914)", *Belleten* 7/28 (20 October 1943), 89-218.

4 Robert J. Kerner, "Russia and the Straits Question, 1915-17", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 8/24 (1930), 589-600.

5 A. L. MacFie, "The Straits Question: The Conference of Lausanne (November 1922-July 1923)", *Middle Eastern Studies* 15/2 (1979), 211-238; A. L. MacFie, "The Straits Question in the First World War, 1914-18", *Middle Eastern Studies* 19/1 (1983), 43-74.

of Turkish sovereignty with the necessity of guaranteeing maritime freedom, a tension less ideological than geographic in origin. A *longue duree* approach is offered by Anadi Bhusan Maity that traces the issue from antiquity to the mid-twentieth century.⁶ Maity emphasizes the Straits' dual economic and strategic roles, while observing how their location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia consistently shaped great-power politics across centuries. The same maritime bottleneck that influenced the diplomacy of Catherine II and Palmerston remained decisive at Lausanne and Montreux. International law scholarship adds another layer to this discussion. Erik Brüel underscores how geography drove successive attempts to regulate passage through treaties such as the London Convention (1841), the Treaty of Paris (1856), and the Montreux Convention (1936).⁷ Yet, as Brüel shows, these arrangements often proved fragile, undermined by shifts in the balance of power; the geographic centrality of the Straits rendered their legal codification inherently unstable. Cemil Bilsel offered one of the earliest systematic analyses of the Straits from the perspective of international law and Turkish diplomacy.⁸ He framed the Straits as both a legal arrangement and a geopolitical problem. Bilsel underlined the historical necessity of Turco-Russian relations and showed how sovereignty, security, and diplomacy intersected in the Straits question. Hurewitz reinterpreted the Straits issue as a product of persistent geopolitical ambition rather than valid legal rights.⁹ Rozakis and Stagos offer a comprehensive study of the Turkish Straits by combining historical, political, and legal perspectives.¹⁰ They trace the issue from antiquity to the Montreux regime and analyze its distinct status within the broader law of the sea framework.

The present study diverges in scope and method within this extensive historiography. This research explicitly integrates geography into a structural-constraint framework. Rather than treating geography as background context, it advances the thesis that geography functioned as a primary independent variable shaping the formation of British strategy over the Straits. Situated within realist theory, the study bridges historical narrative with theoretical explanation. It demonstrates that Britain's alternating policies of closure and freedom of the Straits were not merely tactical adjustments but structurally conditioned responses to a persistent geographic dilemma. In this way, the contribution lies in reframing the Straits as a contested diplomacy site and a structural constraint that continually compelled Britain to recalibrate its diplomacy, naval posture, and legal initiatives. Earlier scholarship emphasized diplomatic bargains, treaty provisions, or balance of power politics; this study instead foregrounds geography as the enduring factor that is shaping both strategic interests and the instability of international arrangements. Doing so addresses a clear gap in the literature and demonstrates that geography, often dismissed as static, operates as a dynamic determinant of foreign policy and great-power rivalry. In this way, it reframes the "Eastern Question" not only as a diplomatic puzzle but as a geopolitical one rooted in immutable geography. The Turkish Straits thus exemplify how chokepoints of global commerce and security continue to

6 Anadi Bhusan Maity, "The Problem of the Turkish Straits," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 15/2 (1954), 134-152.

7 Erik Brüel, *International Straits: A Treatise on International Law* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag, 1947).

8 Cemil Bilsel, "The Turkish Straits in the Light of Recent Turkish-Soviet Russian Correspondence," *The American Journal of International Law* 41/4 (1947), 727-747.

9 John C. Hurewitz, "Russia and the Turkish Straits: A Revaluation of the Origins of the Problem," *World Politics* 14/4 (1962), 605-632.

10 Christos L. Rozakis - Petros N. Stagos, "The Turkish Straits," *International Straits of the World*, ed. G. J. Mangone (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 15-25.

condition state strategies regardless of ideology, regime type, or short-term political interests, and reaffirm the centrality of geography in shaping world politics.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative historical analysis based on treaties, diplomatic correspondence, and memoranda as primary sources, supplemented by secondary literature in strategic studies and international history. This approach enables tracing continuity and change across diplomatic eras while situating them within a broader structural and geographical logic. The article is structured to develop this argument in a logical progression. The first section sets out the policy of closure. It examines the nineteenth-century policy of Britain's closure and collaboration with the Ottomans and other European powers to institutionalize restrictions on Russian warship access. The second stage, the post-World War I policy of freedom, analyzes Britain's strategic shift as it sought to secure its own naval passage under new conditions of nationalism and shifting power balances. This section examines British efforts to safeguard access through demilitarization schemes, League of Nations oversight, and strategic compromise, which underscores how the new international environment reshaped Britain's long-standing approach to the Straits. The conclusion synthesizes these findings to argue that British strategy over the Straits cannot be understood apart from the geographic structure of the waterways, which persistently conditioned policy choices and limited the scope of imperial diplomacy.

1. Theoretical Propositions: Geography as a Structural Constraint in Foreign Policy and Strategy

Geography is not merely a passive stage upon which history unfolds, but it is an active structural force shaping the behavior of states. Morgenthau stresses that geography stands out as the most stable among the various foundations of national power. Unlike military capabilities or economic resources, which fluctuate over time, geography forms a constant framework that shapes states' power potential and strategic options.¹¹ It influences human settlement, economic life, and cultural practices and defines vulnerabilities, alliances, and strategic outlooks. States situated along critical corridors or chokepoints naturally accrue leverage in projecting power, while geographically constrained nations often struggle to overcome their limitations.¹² This dynamic underscores Spykman's reminder that natural features such as seas, rivers, and mountains do not change with political winds, but persist and define strategic behavior.¹³ These constraints cannot be wished away; they must be managed. Taliaferro similarly stresses that geography influences whether states emulate, innovate, or persist with existing strategies.¹⁴

The role of geography in world politics has been recognized from the earliest geopolitics theories to contemporary international relations debates. Halford Mackinder's Heartland thesis linked territorial control to global dominance, while Alfred Thayer Mahan emphasized

11 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 80.

12 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

13 Sarah Scholvin, *The Geopolitics of Regional Power: Geography, Economics and Politics in Southern Africa* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), 274-283.

14 Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 214.

maritime geography and sea power as determinants of national strength.¹⁵ Kenneth Waltz's structural realism and the work of Colin Gray and Geoffrey Sloan have revived attention to geography as an enduring structural constraint.¹⁶ According to Gray, geography may be considered the mother of strategy, as the spatial configuration of land and sea shapes both the strategic policies of individual states and the collective orientations of alliances. It exerts a dual conditioning influence and highlights the asymmetry between mutable political choices and fixed spatial realities.¹⁷

Geography, a structural modifier of power, magnifies or mutes the reach of states. Landlocked powers like Russia face economic and diplomatic disadvantages, while maritime powers like Britain translated insularity into global naval supremacy. Britain is in a position, separated by the English Channel, yet close enough to continental Europe. It enabled both natural defense and seaborne projection, which provided the foundation for its imperial trade system. Similarly, America's oceanic buffers encouraged both isolationism and eventual global expansion.¹⁸ At the same time, geographic burdens can constrain rising powers: Germany's central position exposed it to two-front wars, while the Ottoman Empire's dispersed territories created perpetual overextension.¹⁹ The Straits, on the other hand, constitute a critical factor in how states secure their survival. The rise and fall of empires reflects this interplay. Spain's decline after the loss of Gibraltar, Italy's maritime weakness following the loss of Corsica and Malta, and the Ottoman reliance on Red Sea chokepoints illustrate how strategic passages shape power trajectories.²⁰ Geography thus functions as a source of advantage and a constant modifier of vulnerability. Geography exerts its most substantial influence through narrow passages that funnel trade and military routes. Mahan observed that control of maritime arteries such as the Mediterranean or English Channel dictated the regional power balance.²¹ Today, strategic studies extend this insight to passages such as the Straits of Malacca or Bab el-Mandeb. In these spaces, geography concentrates geopolitical risk, intensifies rivalry, and makes legal regimes fragile. The Turkish Straits are a paradigmatic case: their geography funnels the ambitions of continental powers like Russia and the maritime priorities of Britain into direct conflict, transforming the Bosphorus and Dardanelles into perpetual diplomatic flashpoints.

While classical geopolitics offered deterministic accounts and structural realism largely abstracted away from geography, contemporary scholarship has yet to fully theorize geography as a persistent structural constraint. Much work addresses geography descriptively, mapping vulnerabilities or cataloguing chokepoints, but fewer studies conceptualize geography as both material reality and strategic narrative shaping foreign policy over time. This study situates

15 Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1902); Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History"

16 Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War" *International Security* 25/1 (2000), 5-41.

17 Gray - Sloan, "Why Geopolitics" 3.

18 Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012), 31.

19 Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 179.

20 Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power*, 18-19; For a study analyzing the Ottoman Empire's maritime strategies and rival powers like Spain, Portugal, and Italy in the Mediterranean through the lens of geography as an independent variable, see İsmail Ediz, "Mediterranean Prisoners Versus Guardians of Narrow Passages: Ottomans' Geography, Maritime Strategies and Their Rivals During the Age of Exploration," *Tarih İncelemeleri Dergisi* 40/1 (Temmuz 2025), 43-80.

21 Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power*, 16.

itself within a framework emphasizing how geography interacts with systemic pressures to shape foreign policy. Unlike approaches that foreground ideology or leadership alone in foreign policy analysis, this perspective underscores geography as an enduring external logic. It addresses that gap by examining the Turkish Straits as a prism for understanding how geography structures strategy. Britain's alternating policies of closure and freedom of the Straits illustrate the structural tension between geographic fixity and strategic adaptation. The study contributes by integrating strategic geography into foreign policy analysis, showing how enduring spatial realities condition the actors' diplomacy, international law, and maritime posture. From this theoretical framework emerges a central hypothesis: If a great power lacks secure access to vital maritime passages or forward bases, its capacity to project power and sustain great power status is severely constrained. Conversely, control or allied access to these chokepoints enhances resilience, reach, and global influence. This hypothesis will be tested through the historical case of the Turkish Straits, tracing Britain's fluctuating strategies from the late eighteenth century to the aftermath of World War I.

2. Russia's Quest for Hegemony over İstanbul and Britain's Strategy of Locking Russia in the Black Sea

The case of the Turkish Straits demonstrates how geography, sovereignty, strategic calculations, and diplomacy have long intersected, with effects that persist in contemporary geopolitics. Their control determined trade routes, security, and political dominance, from the Trojan War to the rise of Athens, Rome, Byzantium, and the Ottoman Empire. Geography made them the permanent axis of conflict and expansion, while embedding the Straits at the center of ancient and modern world power struggles.²² The Black Sea and the Turkish Straits history reveals the persistent struggle between the Ottoman Empire and foreign powers, especially Britain and Russia, over control of this strategically vital waterway.²³ The geography of the Straits, narrow passages connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, magnifies their importance in foreign policy and military strategy. Controlling one of the two Straits prevents ships from passing from one sea to another, while maintaining both makes such passage possible.²⁴ Whoever controls the Bosphorus and Dardanelles effectively controls naval access between two major seas. This gives a sovereign a unique position as gatekeeper and regional power broker. The Straits' geography constituted a strategically indispensable corridor, central to the Ottomans' survival and the security calculations of Russia and Britain.²⁵

At the height of its power in the 17th century, the Ottoman Empire exercised complete and exclusive sovereignty over the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and the entire Black Sea coast. The Straits were treated as internal waters, with the Sultan holding absolute authority to regulate or deny passage to any foreign ships, whether commercial or military. For centuries, foreign vessels were forbidden from navigating beyond the Dardanelles into

22 Rozakis - Stagos, "The Turkish Straits", 15.

23 For a study that examines the status of the straits in a historical context, see Bülent Şener, "Türk Boğazları'nın Geçiş Rejiminin Tarihi Gelişimi ve Hukuki Statüsü", *Tarih Okulu Dergisi* 2014/17 (Aralık 2013).

24 Bayur, "Boğazlar Sorununun Bir Evresi," 89-218.

25 Barbara Jelavich, *The Ottoman Empire, the Great Powers, and the Straits Question, 1870-1887* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 14.

the Black Sea, and cargoes destined for Black Sea ports had to be transferred to Ottoman ships. This strict policy aimed to protect the security of İstanbul and maintain Ottoman dominance over the region. However, the balance began to shift in favor of Russia at the end of the 17th century. Russia's geopolitical ambitions were constrained by both natural and political barriers, as its access to open seas was blocked by the ice-bound Baltic, dominated by Sweden and Denmark, and by the Ottoman Empire's control of the northern Black Sea coast, the Bosphorus, and the Dardanelles.²⁶ At the end of the 17th century, while Russia expanded southward, it captured Azov in 1696 and demanded access to the Black Sea for commerce.²⁷ Once Russia gained control of key river outlets to the Black Sea, such as the Dnieper and the Don, the latter linked to the Black Sea through the Sea of Azov, it could legitimately assert riparian status, inevitably altering the fundamental situation.²⁸

The Ottoman Porte vehemently opposed this, fearing that a Russian naval presence would threaten İstanbul's security.²⁹ This resistance fueled decades of conflict. Over time, through treaties such as Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, the Ottomans reluctantly granted Russia the right to free navigation in the Black Sea and passage through the Straits under stringent conditions. This marked the beginning of the end of Ottoman exclusivity over the Black Sea and introduced the Straits into international law.³⁰ Despite these concessions, the Ottoman government maintained strict control over the passage of Russian ships, which required permissions and inspections to preserve its sovereignty.³¹ Though it gained merchant access through the treaty, Russia saw this as fragile and aimed for dominance through war or partition. Catherine II promoted liberating İstanbul and reviving the Eastern Christian Empire. From Catherine II onward, Russian policy consistently sought to undermine the Ottoman Empire and transform the Black Sea into a springboard for controlling the Straits and gaining access to the Mediterranean, central to Russia's geopolitical ambitions.³² However, this conflicted with the interests of other European powers, which led to frequent proposals to divide the Ottoman Empire, with İstanbul designated for Russia and Egypt for France. This rivalry over the Straits demonstrates how geography sets enduring parameters for state behavior. For the Ottomans, the Straits functioned as a natural bulwark preserving imperial security; for others, they were the geographic key to being a global power. The struggle illustrates how chokepoints embed structural incentives and constraints into foreign policy, which makes geography not a backdrop but an active driver of geopolitical contestation.

This issue involved the safety of İstanbul, the potential use of the Straits by Russian naval forces, and the ability of other powers to threaten Russia through the Black Sea. Over a century, this became a primary strategic concern where the Ottomans' role diminished,

26 Rozakis - Stagos, "The Turkish Straits," 16.

27 Alan W. Fisher, "Azov in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 21/2 (1973), 161-174.

28 Hurewitz, "Russia and the Turkish Straits," 605-632.

29 For a detailed study on Russia's policy on the Straits and the Eastern Question, see Sergey Goryanov, *Rus Arşiv Belgelerine Göre Boğazlar ve Şark Meselesi* (İstanbul: Ötüken, 2006).

30 Kemal Beydilli, "Boğazlar Meselesi," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (erişim 2 Ekim 2025); see Bing Bing Jia, *The Regime of Straits in International Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) for a detailed legal status quo of the Straits all over the World.

31 The National Archives (TNA), CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits", November 15, 1922.

32 Rozakis - Stagos, "The Turkish Straits," 19.

and the contest became primarily between Russia and Western powers.³³ Despite adopting a non-conquest policy, Russia's ambition for naval supremacy in the Straits remained constant and aroused suspicion from Britain. Russian diplomacy sought exclusive access to the Straits for its warships, and this provoked consistent British distrust that shaped relations until 1907. Even peaceful cooperation was viewed as a potential step toward long-term Russian dominance. Until 1915, Britain followed a closing of the Straits policy, aimed at keeping the Russian Black Sea fleet out of the Mediterranean rather than ensuring the British fleet's entry into the Black Sea. British politicians believed that, since the Straits were closer to Russian naval bases than Britain's own, keeping them close to the Russian fleet rather than open to the British fleet was preferable.³⁴

The Straits issue was central to Ottoman-Russian-British relations and integral to the European balance of power. Although commercial significance relatively declined in the 16th century, its military and strategic value grew steadily into the 19th century.³⁵ Control of the Straits remained pivotal to Britain, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire, as these waterways were vital to military security, economic interests, and imperial ambitions, all of which drove their diplomacy and alliances.³⁶ From the mid-19th to the early 20th century, British policy on the Straits centered on blocking Russian naval access while maintaining a fragile regional balance of power.³⁷ On the other hand, Russia sought to escape its near-landlocked constraints from the early 19th century.³⁸ The 1904 incident during the Russo-Japanese War, where Russian ships abused commercial cover to conduct military operations, emphasized Russia's ambition to overcome constraints, further solidified Britain's stance against any unilateral exploitation of the Straits.³⁹

Geographical limitations imposed significant burdens on Russia, foremost among these was the economic strain. The prohibitive overland transport cost meant uninterrupted maritime access was essential for commerce, national prestige, and security. The geographical confinement of the Black Sea structurally determined Russia's dependence on the Straits for access to European and global markets. Its long-standing desire for warm-water access has historically driven its confrontational posture toward the Straits. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia's exports through the Straits had accounted for an average of 45% of the Empire's total exports.⁴⁰ The Straits were Russia's vital economic and strategic lifeline, carrying over 87% of its grain exports and most of its oil, manganese, and iron to world markets. The inability to transport goods exported via the Straits by rail, because railway transport was much more expensive, underscores the decisive role of geography in shaping trade patterns. Transportation costs were a major concern, and it was necessary to reduce them. The commodities passing through the Straits, such as wheat and raw materials,

33 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits".

34 TNA, FO E 13027/27/44, "Memorandum by Mr. H. G. Nicolson Respecting the Freedom of the Straits" November 15, 1922.

35 Nevzat Ünlü, *The Legal Regime of the Turkish Straits*, ed. G. J. Mangone (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2002), 11.

36 Ünlü, *The Legal Regime of the Turkish Straits*, 11.

37 Erik Goldstein, "Great Britain and Greater Greece 1917-1920", *The Historical Journal* 32/2 (1989): 339-356.

38 Hurewitz, "Russia and the Turkish Straits", 605-632.

39 TNA, FO E 13027/27/44, "Memorandum by Mr. H. G. Nicolson Respecting the Freedom of the Straits"; During the Russo-Japanese War, when two Russian volunteer fleet vessels passed through the Straits disguised as merchantmen and committed hostile acts in the Red Sea, Britain protested, leading to the revocation of their commissions and the payment of reparations.

40 Jelavich, *The Ottoman Empire, the Great Powers, and the Straits Question*, 17.

are heavy but low in value. This makes them economically unviable for overland shipment without losing competitiveness in foreign markets. This geographical dependence was dramatically demonstrated during the Italo-Turkish War. Ottomans' temporary closure of the Straits inflicted a monthly loss of 30 million rubles on Russia, which reveals the strategic economic vulnerability of this maritime route.⁴¹ The Russian position on the Straits in the early 20th century reflected a strategic doctrine linking geography, industrial development, and economic security. Russia's lack of warm-water access hindered its economic development and pushed it toward expansionist ambitions over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Control, or at least assured authority, over the Straits was deemed indispensable for safeguarding Russia's expanding southern industrial base and the Black Sea trade from both geopolitical whims and wartime disruptions.

Geography also profoundly shaped Russia's naval strategy, as access to the Mediterranean would remove the burden of maintaining multiple costly fleets. The Straits were considered a strategic lifeline, indispensable to national security and great power status. By controlling the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, Russia could secure its Black Sea fleet, reduce naval expenditures, guarantee Mediterranean access, and extend its influence into the Balkans and Asia Minor. Freedom of the Straits was therefore viewed as a non-negotiable geopolitical necessity, since only direct control could transform the Black Sea fleet into a true open-sea navy while limiting the need for several separate major fleets.

The straits also guaranteed Russia's great power status. Control of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles would open the gates of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean to Russian influence and provide a base for expansion into the Balkans and Asia Minor, regions of deep historical interest to Russia. Russia considered this solution, the only one consistent with its status as a Great Power and essential for fulfilling its global mission. These could only be completed by establishing its authority over the Straits, thereby resolving the Straits question once and for all. The Straits would allow them to safeguard the coasts more effectively, since the narrow geography concentrated movement and made control easier.⁴² Thus, the Straits question can only be solved through direct Russian control over the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles, the Aegean islands, and an adequate hinterland. Only then would Russia's possession in the region be secure, and both its economic and strategic concerns, whether active or passive, would be resolved in a firm and final manner.

Motivated by these aims and apprehensions, Russian policy toward the Straits in the early nineteenth century transformed from pursuing religious conquest into a calculated quest for strategic dominance. This evolution was marked by a series of shifting alliances and treaties that reflected the broader geopolitical contest among the European powers, especially in the context of the Napoleonic Wars and their aftermath. Under Emperor Alexander I, Russia shifted from pursuing the conquest of İstanbul to maintaining Ottoman weakness for strategic advantage.⁴³ Influenced by Count Koçubey's advice, Alexander I preferred preserving the Ottoman Empire as a compliant neighbor rather than partitioning it.⁴⁴ This policy

41 Bilsel, "The Turkish Straits in the Light of Recent Turkish-Soviet Russian Correspondence", 727-747.

42 Goryanov, *Rus Arşiv Belgelerine Göre Boğazlar ve Şark Meselesi*, 46.

43 Goryanov, *Rus Arşiv Belgelerine Göre Boğazlar ve Şark Meselesi*, 29.

44 Goryanov, *Rus Arşiv Belgelerine Göre Boğazlar ve Şark Meselesi*, 29.

prioritized Russian access and influence over the Straits without provoking European opposition. Early 19th-century Russian diplomacy with the Ottoman Empire focused on excluding all other warships from the Black Sea while maintaining privileged Russian access. A treaty in 1805 formalized this arrangement, affirmed the Black Sea as closed to other naval powers, and granted Russia wartime access to the Straits with Ottoman support.⁴⁵

3. Britain's Response and International Politics

Britain's stance against Russia's aspirations was no less resolute than its rival's. It reflects a determined effort to counterbalance Russian influence in the evolving geopolitical landscape. Its global commercial supremacy was structurally dependent on control of the Turkish Straits, which drove its consistent policy of upholding Ottoman sovereignty and preventing Russian expansion.⁴⁶ British intelligence and military planning throughout the 19th century focused on possible Russian scenarios.⁴⁷ William Pitt saw Russian control of the Straits as a threat to British naval supremacy and trade routes. Russian naval activities in the Mediterranean, often under British support at first, later triggered British alarm, especially as Russia positioned itself as the protector of Orthodox Christians in the region. Russia's insistence on the Straits highlighted how geography dictated foreign policy aims, while Britain worried about a new "Gibraltar" at the Mediterranean's entrance if Russia gained control.⁴⁸ During the Napoleonic Wars, the struggle over the Turkish Straits intensified as both Russia and France sought to use the region to advance their strategic ambitions, while Britain reacted defensively to preserve its empire and naval dominance.⁴⁹ The Napoleonic era heightened the strategic value of the Straits. Despite shifts in alliances, Russia consistently pursued control of the Straits to expand its influence in the Mediterranean. Napoleon, focused on destroying British sea power and threatening India, saw the Levant as key and alternated between courting Russia and the Ottoman Empire to achieve this. The 1798 Franco-Russian-Turkish conflict led to a rare alliance where Ottomans allowed Russian warships to pass the Straits. The Ottoman Empire allied with Russia and Britain in response to French actions in the Mediterranean.⁵⁰ For the first time, Russia was granted passage for its warships, and its fleet actively operated in the Mediterranean. However, growing British suspicion of Russian naval presence led to tensions, especially after Tsar Paul abruptly switched sides and aligned with Napoleon in 1801, threatening British interests in Asia.

After the Treaty of Tilsit, Napoleon sought to exploit Russian ambitions by proposing the partition of the Ottoman Empire. Still, the talks collapsed when Alexander demanded full control of İstanbul and the Dardanelles, terms Napoleon rejected to prevent Russian

45 J. C. Hurewitz, "The Background of Russia's Claims to the Turkish Straits - A Reassessment", *Belleten* 28 (1964), 459-502; In this study, Hurewitz provides an in-depth analysis of the 1805 Ottoman-Russian treaty and reproduces the treaty's full text in the appendix.

46 Rozakis - Stagos, "The Turkish Straits" 18.

47 Gültekin Yıldız, "How to Defend the Turkish Straits against the Russians: A Century-Long 'Eastern Question' in British Defence Planning, 1815-1914", *The Mariner's Mirror* 105/1 (Şubat 2019), 40-59.

48 Kerner, "Russia and the Straits Question, 1915-17", 589-600.

49 Hurewitz, "Russia and the Turkish Straits", 605-632.

50 Beydilli, "Boğazlar Meselesi".

expansion into the Mediterranean.⁵¹ This diplomatic impasse was soon followed by a major strategic setback for Russia: after Napoleon's victory at Friedland in June 1807, the treaty compelled Tsar Alexander to cede the Ionian Islands to France and withdraw the Russian Mediterranean fleet. Storm-damaged ships bound for the Baltic sheltered in Lisbon, where Britain, now at war with Russia, seized them in 1808, while Black Sea vessels, denied passage by the Ottomans, were handed to France. The 1805 treaty ended, far from securing joint Straits defense, and Russia's first serious Mediterranean bid.⁵² Without the Ionian base, Russia lost the means to normalize its naval presence in the Straits and to gain even limited Ottoman consent for passage. This setback to its strategy for over 25 years is a clear illustration that geography functions as a structural determinant in foreign policy, where strategically located bases shape the scope and durability of great power influence.

While Russia stands aside, Napoleon's expansionist ambitions in the Mediterranean alarmed Britain at the prospect of French dominance over the Straits. This concern led to the 1809 Treaty of Kale-i Sultaniye between the Ottoman Empire and Britain, which affirmed that the Straits would remain closed to foreign warships during peacetime.⁵³ The economic value of the Eastern Mediterranean as a crossroads of global trade structurally reinforced Britain's determination to preserve regional stability by blocking rival control of the Straits. This agreement was a significant milestone, as it elevated an internal policy to an internationally recognized norm, which sets the stage for future multinational regulation, most notably the 1841 London Straits Convention.⁵⁴ By anchoring the Straits' status in international agreements, Britain sought to reduce potential future risks. In this sense, international law was not regarded as an abstract norm but as a practical instrument of power, one that could enhance Britain's security by constraining the actions of its adversaries.⁵⁵ This agreement marked the first formal international endorsement of the Ottoman Empire's "ancient rule" and signaled a shift from unilateral Ottoman discretion to multilateral constraints on naval passage. Following the Napoleonic Wars, Russia's influence in the Mediterranean remained limited, and British success in securing the closure of the Straits against Russian warships persisted. Despite the treaties of 1799 and 1805, Russia's access was not renewed in the Treaty of Bucharest (1812), and its fleet still had to travel from the Baltic.

Although Russia failed to gain lasting naval control over the Straits during the Napoleonic era, the War of Greek Independence reignited its ambitions. It led to strategic decisions that prioritized indirect dominance over outright conquest. This provided a new opportunity for Russian involvement and culminated in naval engagement at Navarino. Russia participated militarily, but still lacked direct access to the Straits, which emphasized its continued naval limitations in the region. After defeating the Ottoman Empire in the war, Russia again faced the question of whether to dismantle the Ottoman Empire or maintain control through influence. Russia chose to preserve the Ottomans as a weak dependent, recognizing that outright occupation of İstanbul would provoke a European coalition and destabilize the balance of power. This strategic restraint shaped the Treaty of Adrianople (1829),

51 Rozakis - Stagos, "The Turkish Straits", 22.

52 Hurewitz, "Russia and the Turkish Straits", 605-632.

53 Rozakis - Stagos, "The Turkish Straits", 23.

54 Beydilli, "Boğazlar Meselesi".

55 René Pithon, "Karadeniz ve Boğazlar Meselesi", çev. H. Nuri, transkr. E. Keleş, *Tarih Okulu* 6 (Ocak-Nisan 2010), 73-93.

which granted commercial, but not military, access to the Straits. Russia prioritized political leverage over territorial conquest, avoiding confrontation with other powers while keeping its influence over İstanbul intact. This also illustrated the role of the Straits in shaping European diplomacy and maintaining the balance of power among the great powers.

The role of geography in shaping alliances was clearly illustrated by the case of the Straits, where strategic location dictated shifting alignments and rivalries. In regions defined by critical geographic positions, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, alliances proved inherently fragile, as any change in the control of key checkpoints like the Straits inevitably altered the strategic interests of the Great Powers. This dynamic was evident in the aftermath of Mehmed Ali's revolt, when Russia exploited the crisis to send troops to İstanbul and secure the Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi in 1833. This marked a turning point by binding the Ottomans to Russia, reducing their sovereignty, and ensuring Russia's dominance in the Black Sea.⁵⁶ The secret bilateral treaty granted Russia privileged military access to the Straits and marked the peak of its political dominance over the Ottoman Empire. This was a defensive alliance that secretly required the Ottoman Empire to close the Dardanelles to all foreign warships except those of Russia.⁵⁷ Thus, Russia gained exclusive naval rights in the Straits, effectively establishing a quasi-protectorate over İstanbul. By presenting itself as the "Ottomans' protector", Russia gained a strategic advantage at a critical moment of Ottoman vulnerability. Yet this attempt to reshape the regional balance provoked alarm in Britain and France, whose opposition ultimately limited the treaty's effectiveness, which illustrates how geography again reshapes alliances and renders them fragile and contested.⁵⁸ At this time, once more, geography compelled rival states to form temporary or shifting alliances when their security depended on access to trade routes, naval bases, or buffer zones. France and Britain immediately protested the treaty. They feared it would give Russia dominance over the Eastern Mediterranean. Both powers warned they would not recognize or respect any Russian military intervention under the treaty. This signals a potential future conflict. British leaders, notably the Duke of Wellington, condemned the treaty as violating the principle that the Straits should remain closed to all warships. He viewed Russian access as threatening the European balance of power and Britain's global maritime interests.⁵⁹

4. British Balancing and Consolidation as a Protector of the Straits: Legal Containment of Russia

Faced with diplomatic isolation, Russia soon realized the treaty overreached and refrained from enforcing its full terms. The backlash led to a cautious shift in Russian behavior, as maintaining diplomatic ties with other European powers became more pressing than asserting unilateral dominance over the Straits.⁶⁰ The 1840 Quadruple Agreement, addressing the threat that Mehmed Ali posed, marked the shift's beginning by allowing collective European intervention to defend the Ottoman capital. This ended Russia's exclusive protectorate role and

56 Rozakis - Stagos, "The Turkish Straits", 22.

57 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits".

58 Ünlü, *The Legal Regime of the Turkish Straits*, 12.

59 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits".

60 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits".

reestablished the Ottomans' nominal independence with multilateral guarantees. The 1841 Convention of the Straits institutionalized the closure of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to foreign warships in peacetime and transformed the Straits from a point of Russian dominance into a matter of collective European security and reinforced Ottoman sovereignty, albeit with new limitations.

The 1841 Convention of the Straits formally codified the principle that no foreign warships could enter the Straits in peacetime without Ottoman permission. Britain, France, Austria, Prussia, and Russia agreed to respect this rule, which reinforced Ottoman sovereignty in international law.⁶¹ Lord Palmerston ensured that the treaty's legal basis rested on the "ancient rule of the Ottoman Empire," which was reaffirming Britain's longstanding view that the Ottoman Empire retained territorial control over the Straits.⁶² This interpretation emphasized Ottoman sovereignty rather than turning the closure into a European-imposed rule. Nevertheless, by signing the Convention, the Ottoman Empire relinquished some of its discretion, as it could no longer open the Straits unilaterally. While the Sultan still controlled access, it was now bound by an international agreement requiring consent from the other signatories for any change. A key British victory was preventing the Russians from applying the closure rule during wartime and preserving British strategic flexibility in the event of war. This clause allowed Britain to access the Black Sea if allied with the Ottoman Empire, giving it a clear advantage over Russia in future conflicts like the Crimean War. The Convention bound all signatory powers not only to respect Ottoman sovereignty but also to consult one another before any changes could be made to the status of the Straits. This established a multilateral framework that would shape European diplomacy in the Near East for decades.

The Crimean War significantly reshaped the balance of power over the Black Sea and the Straits. Western powers curtailed Russian naval capabilities, reaffirmed Ottoman sovereignty, and entrenched a multilateral regime of control over regional security. The war began with Britain invoking exceptions to the 1841 Straits Convention by citing Russia's aggression and the need to protect Christian populations in İstanbul. The British justified the entry of their fleet into the Straits on the grounds of imminent threat and humanitarian necessity, effectively suspending treaty obligations under the doctrine of urgent necessity. The Treaty of Paris (1856) concluded the war and imposed unprecedented naval restrictions on Russia and the Ottoman Empire in the Black Sea. The Black Sea was declared neutral and closed to warships, with both empires prohibited from maintaining naval arsenals or significant military fleets in the region. In addition to these demilitarisation clauses, the 1841 Convention of the Straits was reaffirmed and incorporated into a wider system of treaties binding Russia and the Ottoman Empire to specific naval limitations. This multilateral framework now required the consent of all signatories for any modifications, which institutionalized collective oversight over the region. While these provisions aimed to stabilize the region, many contemporaries saw the terms as overly harsh and politically unsustainable. Critics warned that humiliating Russia would only encourage future efforts to overturn the restrictions, especially as they severely limited Russia's strategic autonomy. Nonetheless, the Treaty addressed a genuine strategic concern: Russia's Black Sea fleet, though restricted from leaving the region, was widely

61 Rozakis - Stagos, "The Turkish Straits", 22.

62 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits".

perceived as a latent threat to the Ottoman Empire and Europe. By neutralising the fleet, the Allies sought to contain Russian influence and reduce the incentive for further aggression.

5. Strategic Transition and Imperial Caution in an Age of Uncertainty

The late 19th century introduced strategic uncertainty for Britain, as Russia grew bolder and the Ottoman Empire further weakened, but Britain opted for diplomatic over direct military intervention. The deneutralisation of the Black Sea in 1871 marked the erosion of the post-Crimean War settlement, as Russia, taking advantage of geopolitical upheaval, successfully overturned naval restrictions while maintaining the collective framework for control of the Straits.

In the years following the Treaty of Paris (1856), international attention focused on specific ship passages through the Straits rather than broader treaty revision. Western governments, particularly Britain, closely monitored the Ottomans' exercise of their limited discretion, and consistently protested any perceived violations of the strict neutrality provisions. Russia, however, remained intent on reversing what it viewed as humiliating limitations on its naval sovereignty in the Black Sea. Although invited by Austria and France to act earlier, Russia waited for a favorable international moment, specifically, the Franco-Prussian War, to challenge the treaty framework. In 1870, Russia unilaterally declared that it no longer considered itself bound by the Black Sea clauses of the 1856 Treaty. This move targeted the restrictions on naval armament in the Black Sea but did not immediately claim rights of passage through the Straits. Britain responded by convening a conference in London in 1871, which asserted that no single state could withdraw from international treaties unilaterally. The conference ultimately validated Russia's position but under multilateral supervision, formally abrogating the Black Sea neutralisation and armament limits. While the Straits remained closed officially under the 1856 arrangement, the 1871 settlement introduced a crucial exception. The Sultan was now permitted to open the Straits in peacetime to warships of friendly nations if he deemed it necessary to uphold the Treaty of Paris, thus weakening the blanket prohibition and restoring some Turkish discretion under international oversight. The treaty ended the Black Sea neutrality and lifted peacetime restrictions on the Straits. It granted the Ottoman Empire the crucial right to admit allied navies, a significant gain for them and a strategic setback for Russia.⁶³

Two primary considerations shaped Britain's policy on the Straits between the 1890s and early 1900s. First, to contain Russia's expansion toward İstanbul, the Balkans, and the Straits by mobilizing as many European, Mediterranean, and Balkan powers as possible, supporting the Ottoman Empire if it resisted Russia, or opposing it if it aligned with Russia. And second, to divert Russia's attention toward the Near East as a tempting field of expansion whenever Russia was preoccupied in Central or East Asia, thereby reducing direct confrontation with Britain in Asia.⁶⁴ Russia's geographically disadvantaged position critically undermined its strategy in the war with Japan. Control of maritime checkpoints determines the balance of power, since denial of access weakens a rival's ability to project force beyond its immediate

63 Beydilli, "Boğazlar Meselesi".

64 Bayur, "Boğazlar Sorununun Bir Evresi", 89-218.

region. This dynamic was vividly demonstrated during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), when the restrictions of the Straits Convention became a decisive limitation for Russia. Bound by international agreements that prohibited warships from passing through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, Russia was unable to deploy its Black Sea fleet to support operations in the Far East. As a result, Russian strategy depended on the Baltic fleet and northern ports, which increased transit times and heightened operational risk. Russia's eventual defeat was partly attributed to this regime, with Russian statesmen themselves acknowledging that the inability to move the Black Sea fleet was a major factor in the loss.⁶⁵ Geography and the control of maritime checkpoints once more shaped diplomacy and alliance formation, as states with shared interests in securing strategic passages align to contain rivals and protect trade routes. At this time, Britain, allied with Japan, closely monitored potential Russian treaty violations.

6. From Anglo-Russian Entente to the Dardanelles Campaign

By the early 20th century, while Russia was weakened by defeat in the Far East and internal unrest, Britain shifted its strategy from seeking accommodation with Germany to forging the Entente Cordiale with France and moving toward rapprochement with Russia. Defeat against Japan underscored the untenable nature of the status quo from Russia's perspective. Geography remained a persistent curse for Russia. Despite possessing a significant naval presence in the Black Sea, the inability to project that power during a major war highlighted the strategic disadvantages imposed by the existing regime. Following the war, Russian diplomacy increasingly focused on revisiting and revising the legal constraints governing access to the Straits. Meanwhile, systemic shifts in the late 19th century brought a profound transformation in Britain's policy toward the Straits. The growing weakness of the Ottoman Empire, the resurgence of Russian ambitions, and the rise of new alliance dynamics in Europe forced Britain to reconsider its traditional commitment to preserving Ottoman control. By the last quarter of the century, Britain's attitude had shifted from unconditional support of the Ottoman status quo to a more flexible and interest-driven approach to the Straits question. Britain's stance on the Turkish Straits shifted due to its control over Cyprus (1878) and Egypt (1882), which secured vital sea routes to India. Capture of two key Eastern Mediterranean centers removed a major handicap and launched a new era in its geography-based strategy. By 1903, shifting international conditions led the British Imperial Defence Committee to conclude that Russia's potential seizure of İstanbul and the Straits would not alter the balance of power in the Mediterranean.⁶⁶ Rising German influence in the Ottoman Empire, including military aid and ambitions in the Mediterranean, prompted Britain and Russia to negotiate over Russian warship passage in 1907.⁶⁷ In this case, geography, as a structural force, shaped alliance flexibility by compelling states to recalibrate partnerships when control of vital trade routes or military bases shifts, once again demonstrating its decisive influence on foreign policy. This implied that the security of the Straits had the power to unite two long-time enemies, who had been in conflict for much of the 19th century. German influence in İstanbul was considered a greater threat than Russian influence by Britain.

65 Bayur, "Boğazlar Sorununun Bir Evresi", 89-218.

66 Yıldız, "How to Defend the Turkish Straits against the Russians", 40-59.

67 Ünlü, *The Legal Regime of the Turkish Straits*, 13.

The transformation of international alignments following the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 prompted Russia to pursue long-standing ambitions regarding the Straits. Still, conflicting treaty interpretations and diplomatic resistance, particularly from Britain, highlighted the complexities of modifying established European legal frameworks under shifting geopolitical conditions. The 1907 Anglo-Russian Agreement significantly altered the diplomatic landscape of the Near East. It offered Russia a potential opportunity to advance its strategic goals in the region. Following the agreement and amidst the broader destabilization triggered by the declaration of the 2nd Constitution in İstanbul, the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Balkan conflicts, Russia sought to gain naval access to the Mediterranean via the Straits. Additionally, Russia aspired to control İstanbul and its surrounding territory eventually, should the Ottoman Empire collapse in Europe.

Although the Straits were not addressed in the 1907 agreement or the 1908 Reval meeting, British officials anticipated Russian efforts to revise existing restrictions. Strategically, the Committee of Imperial Defence concluded that Russian naval access through the Straits would provide only limited advantages and would not fundamentally alter the Mediterranean balance of power under the prevailing conditions. This assessment gave the British government political flexibility to consider a shift in its position on the matter. The debate then turned to whether such a change could be implemented without violating existing treaty obligations. Citing Lord Salisbury's remarks at the 1878 Congress of Berlin, some British officials argued that treaty obligations only bound Britain to respect the Sultan's decisions, by implying that Britain could support Russian passage if the Ottoman Empire independently permitted it. However, previous Russian statements, particularly those by Count Shuvalof, asserted that the 1841, 1856, 1871, and 1878 treaties imposed multilateral obligations among all signatory powers, making unilateral changes impermissible.⁶⁸ Subsequent negotiations revealed diverging interpretations of treaty law between Britain and Russia. While Russian diplomats now argued that they could resolve the issue bilaterally with the Ottoman Empire, Sir Edward Grey maintained that any change required the collective consent of all signatories.⁶⁹ Though Britain was prepared to reconsider its substantive position, it insisted on a multilateral diplomatic framework. This exemplifies how treaty obligations, while often considered fixed, are frequently subject to reinterpretation based on shifting political and strategic priorities.

Russian Foreign Minister M. Isvolsky⁷⁰ attempted to leverage the post-1907 Entente atmosphere to secure peaceful revisions to the Straits regime in Russia's favor.⁷¹ His proposal to Sir Edward Grey involved allowing Russian warships passage through the Straits without reciprocal access to the Black Sea for other naval powers. Sir Edward Grey, however, noted this deviated from earlier discussions with Count Benckendorff and raised strategic concerns about the imbalance such a unilateral arrangement would create, particularly during wartime. Following consultations with the British Cabinet, Sir Edward Grey informed Isvolsky that

68 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits".

69 TNA, CAB 37/108/184, "From Grey to Lowther", December 12, 1911.

70 Izvolsky was a Russian diplomat who served as Foreign Minister (1906-1910) and later as Ambassador to France. He played a central role in the Bosnian Crisis of 1908-1909 and was noted for his involvement in the Straits Question.

71 William L. Langer, "Russia, the Straits Question and the Origins of the Balkan League, 1908-1912", *Political Science Quarterly* 43/3 (Eylül 1928), 321-363.

while the principle of opening the Straits was not objectionable, any such change must be made on equal terms for all powers and with the Ottomans' voluntary consent.⁷² The British government emphasized that the timing was inappropriate and made clear that the matter would only be reconsidered if the Ottoman Empire showed willingness to negotiate. Despite initial discussions, the proposal lost momentum as attention shifted to the Serbian crisis, and Isvolsky was soon reassigned as Russian Ambassador to Paris. Although no formal change occurred, the issue persisted in Russian diplomatic correspondence and remained on the agenda, particularly during the Italian-Turkish War (1911) and the Balkan conflicts (1912–13). Even after leaving office, Isvolsky remained active in pushing for the Straits' revision. He continued to urge the French government to support Russia's ambitions by viewing control over or access through the Straits as central to Russian strategic interests.⁷³ Isvolsky remained deeply engaged and sought French support by drawing parallels between France's interests in Morocco and Russia's strategic imperatives in İstanbul. Russia framed its demands as essential for national dignity and regional security, even implying that French backing was owed in exchange for Russian support in North Africa.⁷⁴ However, the complexity of the legal framework, Ottomans' reluctance, and British insistence on multilateral agreement continued to stall progress.

Between 1911 and 1914, Russia pursued an increasingly assertive policy toward securing control over the Turkish Straits, driven by strategic concerns, nationalist ambitions, and shifting geopolitical alignments. While earlier efforts focused on diplomacy and alliance-building, by 1914, Russian strategy evolved toward military preparedness, which was an indicating a decisive turn from negotiation to potential force in resolving the centuries-old "Eastern Question." Russia simultaneously pressured the Ottoman Empire for a bilateral agreement that would open the Straits to Russian warships. However, this effort was stymied by British insistence that any alteration of treaty obligations required collective European approval.⁷⁵ In December 1911, the Turkish Embassy reported that Russia proposed an agreement to allow mutual free passage of the Straits, excluding warships of other powers. Russia offered to help defend the Straits with the Ottoman Empire against foreign attacks, support railway projects in Asia Minor, and mediate with the Balkan States. The British Government, referencing past treaties (1841, 1856, 1878) and Sir E. Grey's stance, sought clarity on whether these arrangements would threaten British interests before considering any new agreement on the Straits' status.⁷⁶ Russian diplomats expressed frustration that Britain's requirement for Turkish consent both delayed progress and strengthened Turkish resistance, undermining Russia's position. By 1912, Russian foreign policy hardened. Sazonof's correspondence reveals a growing skepticism toward legal guarantees and an emphasis on actual control over the Straits. He rejected internationalisation or neutralisation schemes. The Russian leadership concluded that only physical dominance would ensure strategic security, especially amid threats posed by rising Turkish nationalism and increasing German influence in İstanbul. Faced with a revitalized Ottoman Empire and a real prospect of German ascend-

72 TNA, CAB 37/108/184, "From Grey to Lowther"

73 Langer, "Russia, the Straits Question and the Origins of the Balkan League", 321–363.

74 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits".

75 TNA, CAB 37/108/184, "From Grey to Lowther"

76 TNA, CAB 37/108/174, "Aide-mémoire Communicated by the Councillor of the Turkish Embassy", December 7, 1911.

ancy in the region, Russia convened high-level conferences in early 1914 to plan for a future in which it might have to seize İstanbul militarily. A confidential memorandum approved by Tsar Nicholas II outlined the goal of extending Russian dominion over both the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. This marks a significant shift from passive diplomacy to military contingency planning.

On the eve of World War I, Russia's ambitions for control over the Straits eclipsed even its interests in the Balkans. The expected collapse of Ottoman authority and the threat of German entrenchment in the Near East heightened the urgency of decisive action. This priority was formalised in early 1915, when Russia secured British and French recognition of its postwar claims to İstanbul and the Straits, which demonstrated how central the issue had become to its war aims. Geography again was transforming alliance relations by compelling states to realign their partnerships around the strategic value of critical regions and choke-points. In this case, Anglo-French recognition of Russian claims illustrates how alliances can be reshaped according to the nature and scale of threats directed at geography, as states recalibrated their commitments to secure the Straits and contain German influence.

7. Britain's Strategic Response to Changing Geopolitics

Geopolitical shifts and changing international conditions transform states' geographical doctrines, as seen in Britain's transition from a closing of the Straits policy based on Ottoman compliance to a freedom of the Straits that acknowledged new strategic realities. The outbreak of World War I, current systemic pressures, and the Ottoman-German alliance compelled Britain to revise its policy. The concept of the freedom of the Straits emerged as a vital component of British strategic doctrine. It reflects a broader geopolitical contest between naval and continental powers in changing international affairs. While the closing policy assumed the Ottoman Empire would ultimately grant Britain access, the freedom policy recognised that by 1915, it likely would not.⁷⁷ Until 1914, Britain's objective had been to block the Russian Black Sea fleet from reaching the Mediterranean; thereafter, the goal shifted to guaranteeing that, if necessary, the British Mediterranean fleet could pass into the Black Sea.⁷⁸

The resurgence of Türkiye and Russia after the war and disunity among the Allies significantly undermined Britain's capacity to impose and enforce its preferred solution. The differing interpretations of freedom of the Straits reflected deeper rivalries and incompatible visions for postwar Europe and the Near East and placed Britain's maritime strategy at odds with the continental ambitions of France and the resurgent presence of Russia and Türkiye. After the war, the conditions of 1915 had disappeared for Russia. Tsarism had collapsed, the Bolsheviks had taken power, and they were pursuing a foreign policy that appeared markedly different from that of the Tsarist regime. However, Russia remained bound to the same geography, which continued to impose enduring constraints and shape the continuity of its foreign policy objectives. This meant that the Turkish Straits still function as strategic and

77 TNA, FO E 13027/27/44, "Memorandum by Mr. H. G. Nicolson Respecting the Freedom of the Straits".

78 A. L. MacFie, "The Straits Question: The Conference of Lausanne (November 1922-July 1923)", *Middle Eastern Studies* 15/2 (May 1979), 211-238.

structural determinants of security, which compelled great powers to pursue control over them regardless of regime type or ideology.

Ottoman Empire's stance on the Straits also remained consistent, as geography continued to impose enduring security pressures that shaped its foreign policy choices. After 1907, Ottomans, while sensing diminished British support against Russia, aligned increasingly with Germany and prompted efforts to secure the safety of İstanbul. Meanwhile, Russia began lobbying for access to the Mediterranean through diplomatic overtures within the Entente.⁷⁹ With the onset of World War I and Russia becoming a wartime ally, Britain agreed in 1915 to grant Russia İstanbul and key surrounding territories, a plan later voided by Russia's withdrawal from the war and separate peace treaties with Germany and Türkiye.⁸⁰

In March 1915, the British Cabinet agreed in principle to Russia's postwar claim to İstanbul, while safeguarding British and French interests, ensuring free passage through the Straits, and reinforcing forces in Mesopotamia.⁸¹ This meant British policy prioritized the guarantee of free passage through the Straits over the question of sovereignty, viewing secure access as more critical than determining which power controlled İstanbul. Britain responded to Russia's expanded territorial demands, particularly regarding İstanbul and the Straits, by stressing that agreeing in principle already marked a dramatic reversal of Britain's traditional policy and was a major gesture of friendship. This signaled the abandonment of the traditional strategy of closing the Straits. While Britain accepted Russia's control over the requested territories without attaching political conditions, it sought two commercial assurances once Russia took possession of İstanbul: establishment of a free port for goods in transit to and from non-Russian territories and commercial freedom for merchant ships passing through the Straits, as Russia's Foreign Minister Sazonov had previously pledged.⁸² In the aide-mémoire of 4 March 1915, Sazonov declared that recent events made it necessary to resolve the İstanbul and Straits question in accordance with Russia's "centuries-old aspirations." He stated that any settlement would be incomplete and unstable unless İstanbul, the western shore of the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara, the Dardanelles, and southern Thrace up to the Enos-Midia line were incorporated into the Russian Empire. For strategic reasons, Russia also sought the Asian coastline between the Bosphorus, the Sakarya River, and a point on the Gulf of İzmit, as well as the islands of the Sea of Marmara, Imbros, and Tenedos. Sazonov assured France's and Britain's special interests in the region would be respected and expressed hope that the Allies would view these demands sympathetically, and promised reciprocal support for their ambitions in other parts of the Ottoman Empire and beyond. This British communication stressed that, aside from aiding the common Allied cause, the Dardanelles operations would yield no direct postwar gains for Britain, as Russia alone would benefit territorially if the campaign succeeded. Therefore, Britain urged Russia not to hinder cooperation from any power willing to assist, especially Greece, whose naval forces could greatly help in the Straits. On the British side, one of the main goals in launching the Dardanelles campaign was to draw neutral Balkan states, particularly Bulgaria and Romania, into the Allied camp. Sir Edward

79 TNA, CAB 37/108/137, "From Grey to Carnegie", October 26, 1911.

80 Bilsel, "The Turkish Straits", 727-747.

81 TNA, CAB 37/125/28, March 9, 1915.

82 TNA, CAB 37/126/33, "From Buchanan to Edward Grey, Enclosure 1 in No 1, Aide-mémoire Communicated by M. Sazonof", March 9, 1915.

Grey pressed Russia to ease these states' fears about Russian control of the Straits and İstanbul and make cooperation attractive.⁸³ This would dismantle Russia's exclusive control and recast the region as a matter for multilateral diplomacy.

Russia assured her allied governments that she will sympathetically meet with the "realization of desiderata" which they may form in other regions of the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere.⁸⁴ In March 1915, Count Benckendorff conveyed Russia's appreciation for Britain's support in securing İstanbul and the Straits. Russia confirmed it would permit free transit of non-Russian goods through İstanbul and unrestricted passage for merchant ships in the Straits. From the very beginning of the Straits Question, Britain's dependence on maritime commerce compelled it to oppose Russian control of the Straits, since this would endanger the free flow of goods and threaten Britain's economic supremacy. From this perspective, Britain's trade security was assured, and it could also leverage it as a bargaining chip for its interests elsewhere. Russia agreed to cooperate in securing other powers' participation in the Dardanelles campaign. It endorsed keeping Muslim holy places under independent Muslim control, while favoring the separation of the Caliphate from Türkiye. Regarding Persia, Russia accepted Britain's claim over the neutral zone. Still, it sought the addition of Isfahan, Yezd, and a strategic area near Zulfagar to its sphere, along with priority rights for railways and economic projects. It also requested that issues concerning northern Afghanistan be resolved according to its earlier proposals.⁸⁵ This memorandum reinforced Anglo-Russian alignment on the Straits issue while fine-tuning their respective spheres of influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. Britain's decision to recognize, at least in principle, Russia's claims to İstanbul and the Straits represented a remarkable reversal of its historic closure policy. Yet, this shift was still geographically conditioned. London prioritized free passage over sovereignty by revealing that the key issue was not who ruled İstanbul but whether the maritime checkpoint could threaten British lifelines. Britain sought to safeguard its economic empire by insisting on commercial freedom while using geography as a bargaining chip to extract concessions elsewhere. The negotiations also showed how geography complicated coalition politics. Britain needed Balkan allies like Greece and Romania, but their willingness depended on assurances that Russian control of the Straits would not destabilize their security. In this sense, the geopolitical magnetism of the Straits pulled multiple actors into alignment or opposition.

Simultaneously, the Ottomans' violation of the Straits Convention, by admitting German warships in August 1914, and their aggressive control during the Gallipoli campaign, revealed the strategic danger posed by Turkish command of this maritime route for the British.⁸⁶ Thus, free passage through the Straits and İstanbul to be a free port became one of Britain's most important war aims in the World War I.⁸⁷ On the other hand the closure of the Straits in 1914, following the entry of the Ottoman Empire into the war on the side of the Central Powers, provides a striking confirmation of the thesis that geography dictated Russia's vul-

83 TNA, CAB 37/126/33, "From Buchanan to Edward Grey, Enclosure 3 in No 1, Memorandum", March 12, 1915.

84 TNA, CAB 37/125/28.

85 TNA, CAB 37/126/18, "Memorandum Communicated by Count Benckendorff", March 22, 1915.

86 A. L. MacFie, "The Straits Question in the First World War, 1914-18", *Middle Eastern Studies* 19/1 (Ocak 1983), 43-74; TNA, CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits".

87 David French, *British Strategy and War Aims 1914-1916* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 46.

nerability: without access through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, Russia was cut off from its Entente allies. This isolation prevented the flow of war materials and reinforcements from Western Europe, severely weakening Russia's military position.⁸⁸ Thus, geography shaped Russia's foreign policy goal before the war, which was securing a "warm-water outlet" to the Mediterranean, and determined its wartime fate. The inability to control or guarantee access through the Straits transformed a regional chokepoint into a decisive factor in the collapse of Russia's war effort and, ultimately, the Tsarist regime. And the situation was no different for Britain. The Straits' closure by the Ottoman Empire proved decisive, which drew the Allies into the Gallipoli campaign. Geography made the Straits a "paralyzing weapon" in global conflict.⁸⁹ They tried very hard to open the straits but could not succeed.

8. The Brief British Illusion: The Treaty of Sevres

Following World War I, the Treaty of Sevres embodied Britain's attempt to institutionalize the freedom of the Straits policy by elevating it from secret wartime agreements to international law and multinational ratification. The Treaty of Sevres had originally reflected Britain's vision of the Straits as an open corridor for commercial and military vessels, regardless of Türkiye's state of war or peace.⁹⁰ When drafting the Treaty, Britain interpreted freedom of the Straits to mean that, in both peace and war, commercial and naval vessels alike should have unhindered passage, for ensuring that Türkiye could never block the British fleet's access to the Black Sea.

Key to this arrangement was a framework of military oversight, international control, and the threat of revoking Turkish sovereignty over İstanbul if treaty obligations were breached. The Allies, in effect, reserved the power to ensure unimpeded naval access between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Firstly, the Straits were, in practice, internationalised by positioning Greece on one shore and Türkiye on the other, deliberately using geography to prevent exclusive Turkish control.⁹¹ For Britain, this spatial division was a strategic safeguard, which ensured that such a critical maritime corridor could not be dominated by a single potentially hostile power, thereby protecting British naval access, securing sea lines of communication, and reinforcing its broader foreign policy and security objectives in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond. This geographical engineering in the Straits also illustrates how Britain used territorial arrangements to institutionalize security objectives and contain potential adversaries.

However, the situation changed dramatically during the subsequent "peace" conferences. Türkiye had regained strength, Russia reemerged as a regional power, and Allied unity had fragmented. These developments rendered the Sevres framework increasingly impractical, both diplomatically and militarily. Britain continued to advocate a broad interpretation of

88 Rozakis - Stagos, "The Turkish Straits", 25.

89 Maity, "The Problem of the Turkish Straits", 134-152.

90 Ercan Karakoç, "Lozan Barış Konferansı ve Montröde Boğazlar Meselesi", in *Türk Boğazları*, ed. Nur Jale Ece, Hasan Kanbolat, ve Girayhan Alpdoğan (İstanbul: Engin Yayıncılık, 2011), 196.

91 TNA, FO E 13027/27/44, "Memorandum by Mr. H. G. Nicolson Respecting the Freedom of the Straits".

freedom of the Straits and sought guaranteed access for its fleet under all circumstances. This policy was driven by two primary concerns: first, the need to maintain wartime logistics and strategic communication with Russia when allied, and second, the threat posed by Russian dominance of a closed Black Sea if adversarial. Such a scenario would isolate Bulgaria, Romania, and other strategic zones, allow Russia unchecked military freedom, and undermine British influence in Eastern Europe. More broadly, Britain viewed the Straits as a dividing naval frontier between Europe and Asia, a “blue water line”, in contrast to France’s emerging strategy, which leaned on continental alliances and military prestige.⁹² France’s diplomatic orientation aimed to shape a geopolitical order rooted in land-based power structures across Eastern and Central Europe. If naval powers like Britain were barred from the Black Sea, France and potentially Russia could dominate the region’s political and military dynamics.⁹³ This states that Britain’s insistence on maritime freedom was not merely tactical but part of a larger ideological and strategic contest between naval and continental power systems.

9. Competing Visions of Regional Order: Challenges to Sevres

Britain’s concept of freedom of the Straits as a means to secure naval access and strategic dominance faced growing resistance from Türkiye, Russia, and France, each advancing distinct interpretations shaped by their own geopolitical aims. These competing visions eroded any cohesive Allied stance, as Britain’s strategy of controlling the Straits through international treaties was undermined by resurgent regional nationalism, diverging Allied priorities, and a weakening consensus on enforcing naval freedoms, which signaled a clear departure from the favorable conditions established under the Treaty of Sevres.⁹⁴ At this juncture, Britain resorted to instruments of coercion and exerted military pressure. By holding Chanak and Ismid, it aimed to secure a settlement of the Straits question in its favor, by interpreting freedom of the Straits as always maintaining naval access for warships to project power toward İstanbul if needed. While freedom for merchant ships posed no difficulty, this broader interpretation was unlikely to be accepted internationally. Britain recognized that other powers, such as France, Italy, and various Balkan states, would oppose arrangements granting Britain such strategic leverage. Accurate control could not be guaranteed without substantial forces on both sides of the Straits, and reliance on the League of Nations for such security was deemed unrealistic.⁹⁵ Meanwhile, Britain tried to overcome this weakness by negotiating with Ankara, which was now stronger. This shift reflected Britain’s recognition that holding Chanak indefinitely was untenable. That direct engagement with the Turkish Government offered the only realistic means of shaping the Straits arrangement in its favor. In line with this, the Admiralty was to instruct the Naval Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean that, if Ankara complied with War Office demands and military forces around Chanak withdrew from the neutral zone, the prohibition on Greek warships and transports entering the Sea of Marmora should remain. If Turkish troops did not withdraw, the ban would be lifted and Greek ships would be allowed

92 TNA, FO E 13027/27/44, “Memorandum by Mr. H. G. Nicolson Respecting the Freedom of the Straits”.

93 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, “Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits”.

94 MacFie, “The Straits Question”, 211–238.

95 TNA, CAB 23/39/58, “Conclusions of a Conference of Ministers Held at 10, Downing Street”, October 13, 1922.

entry, with the Greek authorities informed. Under no circumstances should the Greek fleet be expelled from the Sea of Marmara.⁹⁶

Britain's strategic insistence on unimpeded naval access through the Straits, central to maintaining influence in Eastern Europe and counterbalancing continental power, faced growing diplomatic and military obstacles. British planners recognized that without the right to send warships into the Black Sea, their influence across the Danubian region, from Bulgaria to Poland, would diminish in favor of France and Russia, whose continental ambitions were growing. Beyond its immediate concerns, Britain viewed the Straits issue as part of a larger contest between the continental (land-based military) and oceanic (naval) systems. Strategically, the question was whether the Straits would serve as a territorial bridge linking Europe and Asia or as a maritime frontier separating them. France aimed to consolidate a dominant position in Eastern and Central Europe through alliances and military prestige; if states like Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye were shielded from naval pressure by any power other than Britain, French influence would grow. Britain feared that the Danube's mouth could become a Russo-Turkish stronghold if denied access to the Black Sea, which would pull the "little entente" and surrounding states into the French or Russian orbit. Securing naval rights to Black Sea ports such as Varna, Constanța, and Odessa was thus essential to preserve British influence on par with, or greater than, that of France. France understood this dynamic, which at times led it to resist Britain's interpretation of the freedom of the straits.⁹⁷ The British hoped to preserve balance through naval power, especially as France aimed to consolidate dominance via land alliances and military prestige. This meant securing uninterrupted passage for ships to İstanbul, particularly in peacetime, but with careful wording to avoid conceding control over naval access in wartime. They recognized that no matter how secure the Dardanelles might be, access to the Black Sea would remain impossible if Türkiye or Russia controlled the Bosphorus. This is why England viewed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles as a single entity, and referred to them collectively as the "Straits," rather than treating them as separate waterways. This reveals a calculated approach, framing "freedom" to maintain the British naval advantage while guarding against geopolitical constraints.⁹⁸ The Soviet government aimed to keep Türkiye dependent on them, which meant opposing any arrangement that could expose Türkiye to Western pressure. They wanted Türkiye to retain complete military control of the Straits, including the right to fortify them, and, given their weaker navy, were unlikely to support free warship passage. Instead, they would interpret commercial freedom mainly as a limit on Britain's blockade capability and reject League of Nations involvement, while publicly casting any British proposal in the worst possible light.⁹⁹

Yet, other powers interpreted the freedom of the Straits differently, shaped by their unique geopolitical goals. In this case, Britain faced a complex challenge, as resolving the Straits issue in line with its own preferences proved exceedingly difficult. Türkiye, emboldened by diplomatic and military recovery, was deeply suspicious of Britain. It was believed that Britain aimed to enable its fleet to threaten İstanbul and to retain full control of the Straits. In a powerful diplomatic and military position, Ankara viewed British intentions as hostile and was unlikely

96 TNA, CAB 23/39/57, "Conclusions of a Conference of Ministers Held at 10, Downing Street", September 30, 1922.

97 TNA, FO E 13027/27/44, "Memorandum by Mr. H. G. Nicolson Respecting the Freedom of the Straits".

98 TNA, CAB 23/39/57, "Conclusions of a Conference of Ministers Held at 10, Downing Street".

99 TNA, FO E 13027/27/44, "Memorandum by Mr. H. G. Nicolson Respecting the Freedom of the Straits".

to accept any arrangement limiting its sovereignty. While pledging vague support for the commercial freedom of the Straits, Ankara sought to shift maintenance costs to Europe while keeping complete military control of both the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, which made it unlikely they would accept any treaty that compromised that control.¹⁰⁰ By 1922, the Western powers recognized Turkey's strengthened position, particularly Britain. In March of that year, during a meeting of the British, French, and Italian foreign ministers, Ankara was offered terms that diverged considerably from those of the Treaty of Sevres. Under this new proposal, Turkey would exercise sovereignty over a wide zone extending from the Mediterranean to the Straits and from the Caucasus to the borders with Iran and Iraq. Yet, Britain's policy regarding the Straits remained firm. While Turkey anticipated full sovereignty, Britain instead advocated placing the Straits under an international commission, creating a demilitarized zone, and extending demilitarization to all the islands of the Sea of Marmara, including those beyond the Dardanelles.¹⁰¹ This expresses the unique geography of the Straits, rendering Britain too vital to international security and trade to be left solely under national control, making territorial sovereignty subordinate to geographic necessity. From the British perspective, this principle translated into a policy designed to safeguard imperial lifelines. Britain sought to prevent any revival of Turkish power that could exploit the Straits' geography to threaten freedom of passage, while at the same time securing international oversight to ensure that Britain's naval access to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean remained unhindered. In essence, British strategy was rooted in the conviction that the Straits' geography was not only a Turkish concern but a global one, and thus required arrangements that prioritized Allied security and British maritime supremacy over exclusive Turkish sovereignty.

France, though previously sympathetic to Turkish interests, was re-evaluating its stance due to Turkish policy towards foreign commercial presence. Nonetheless, France remained wary of Britain's naval dominance and may resist a policy that gives Britain free maritime access, especially fearing reciprocal benefits for Russia. Italy, under Mussolini, may shift from a traditionally conciliatory role toward a more assertive policy, though its past alignment with France complicated prediction. Smaller states like Romania, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria showed varied levels of support or disinterest. Romania favored Britain's stance but was constrained by its proximity to French and Russian spheres. Greece was a reliable ally for Britain. Yugoslavia's stance depended on French alignment, while Bulgaria remained focused on Aegean access, not naval passage. Militarily, Britain anticipated potential opposition coalescing around Türkiye and Russia, possibly joined by France and Italy. Due to their observer status, the lack of firm American involvement further weakened Britain's position.¹⁰² Thus, the Straits once again became more than a regional issue. They embodied the intersection of geography, strategic interest, and great power rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean.

10. British Policy must Pivot from Enforcement to Preservation

In light of diminished postwar leverage, Britain must reconsider how to secure its strategic interest in the Straits. British policy makers acknowledged that while the principle of free

100 TNA, FO E 13027/27/44, "Memorandum by Mr. H. G. Nicolson Respecting the Freedom of the Straits".

101 TNA, FO E 3446/5/44, "Pronouncement of the Allied Conference in Paris", March 27, 1922.

102 TNA, FO 608/83, No. 7442, "Statement of British Policy in the Middle East", April 16, 1919.

passage for warships remains central to its policy, the ability to enforce it through military guarantees was currently infeasible; therefore, any new treaty must balance immediate diplomatic necessity with long-term flexibility. British policy then pivoted from enforcement to preservation, which was maintaining its strategic position in principle while postponing a final solution until the geopolitical climate shifted more favorably. It was broadly agreed that Turkey could not, under any new arrangement, be left in control of both shores of the Dardanelles.¹⁰³ While Turkish sovereignty over Anatolia meant restoring civil authority on the southern side of the channel, it was emphasized that this authority should not allow Turkey to threaten free access to the Dardanelles in the future. Thus, although Turkey would remain at Chanak on the Asiatic side, the demilitarized zone was to be extended far inland, up to around sixty miles, to prevent any possibility of Turkish military preparations that might endanger access.¹⁰⁴

While Britain sought to preserve access to the Dardanelles and Bosphorus, three policy alternatives emerged, each shaped by shifting diplomatic alliances and the declining feasibility of military enforcement. Marshal Foch's first proposal recommended the demilitarisation of the Straits zones, which also became one of Britain's main war aims, enforced by international inspection under the League of Nations.¹⁰⁵ While not as strong as the Treaty of Sevres, it still inhibited Turkish militarisation and left Britain in a better position than in 1914. When this proved diplomatically unattainable, the second option was League of Nations oversight, ideally through a High Commissioner, preferably American, with powers limited mainly to inspection. This solution maintained an international presence, though its effectiveness was limited by the League's lack of physical enforcement power and Türkiye's likely disregard for moral authority alone. The final fallback was the commercial freedom of the Straits, to which all major powers, including France, Italy, Russia, and Türkiye, were nominally committed.¹⁰⁶

As Britain approached a new international conference on the Straits, it confronted the stark reality that the strategic dominance it once sought to codify through the Treaty of Sevres could no longer be enforced with the same authority. While reaffirming the principle of freedom of warship passage remained a goal, implementing and sustaining the military safeguards necessary to uphold this freedom had become nearly impossible without risking renewed conflict or unsustainable commitments. The Treaty of Sevres had envisioned full Allied control mechanisms, including military presence and punitive clauses against Türkiye, but such arrangements were no longer politically or militarily viable.¹⁰⁷ Any attempt to substitute this robust system with reduced Allied detachments or League of Nations oversight would likely prove ineffective, costly, and diplomatically fragile. Thus, Britain found itself in a moment of acute disadvantage, which lacked the military strength and international unity to enforce its strategic aims. Nevertheless, the current Turkish and Russian ascendancy was viewed as temporary. British policymakers attributed Türkiye's newfound assertiveness to a precarious alliance with Russia and the general disunity in Europe, both of which were

103 TNA, FO E 3542/5/44, "Revision of the Treaty of Sevres, Report on Debate in the House of Lords," March 30, 1922.

104 TNA, FO E 3542/5/44, "Revision of the Treaty of Sevres, Report on Debate in the House of Lords."

105 "British War Aims", *The Times*, January 7, 1918.

106 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits".

107 TNA, FO E 13027/27/44, "Memorandum by Mr. H. G. Nicolson Respecting the Freedom of the Straits"

considered transient. Britain thought that, historically opportunistic and politically reactive, Türkiye's foreign policy had consistently been shaped by "fear" rather than loyalty or ideology. British officials speculated that as Russia regained strength and became more threatening, Türkiye would naturally realign toward Britain once more.¹⁰⁸ Accordingly, Britain still insisted that the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosphorus remain open in both peace and war to the ships of the Allied and associated Powers, as well as to vessels of League of Nations member states and of non-member states approved by the League Council, provided they accepted the terms of the arrangement.¹⁰⁹ Under this provision, these waters could not be subjected to blockade, nor could any act of war or hostility be undertaken within them without a decision by the League of Nations Council. This strategy would secure Britain's uninterrupted maritime access while preventing any single state from establishing dominance over these strategic waterways. Until a more stable balance of power was restored in Eastern Europe, Britain argued that any permanent resolution of the Straits question was premature. Given these constraints, Britain had to seek a provisional settlement that facilitates peace but avoids long-term strategic entrapment. The central challenge was to uphold the policy objective set out in the Treaty of Sevres, namely, full freedom of passage for commercial and military vessels, while recognizing that the only way to guarantee this absolutely was through the physical and legal mechanisms Britain no longer has the power to impose.¹¹⁰

11. Three Alternatives: Cooperative Demilitarisation, the Strategic Use of the League of Nations, or Commercial Freedom of the Straits

Britain's prewar policy sought unqualified freedom of naval passage through the Straits. By the end of 1922, it had become evident that enforcing such a principle was diplomatically contentious and militarily unfeasible in current conditions. With the ideal of imposing full military guarantees outlined in the Treaty of Sevres now beyond reach, Britain must adopt a revised strategy to ensure continued access to the Dardanelles and Bosphorus. Confronted with the impracticality of enforcing its maximal objectives through military means, it had to pivot toward pragmatic diplomatic solutions, chief among them a modified demilitarisation scheme and the strategic use of League of Nations oversight, to preserve long-term access to the Straits without compromising immediate peace or international legitimacy. Shifting diplomatic dynamics and the limits of military enforcement made Britain weigh modified strategies. This necessitated a balancing principle with pragmatism and reassessing how to maintain strategic control without unilateral imposition, particularly through potential Allied cooperation around demilitarisation. While Britain could not secure the freedom of the Straits on its original terms, it could still attain a functional compromise, either through Foch's demilitarisation plan or League-supervised oversight, that restricts Turkish militarisation, preserves British access, and defers a more permanent settlement to a time of more favorable power dynamics. This recalibration of Straits policy illustrates how geography imposed unavoidable constraints on strategy. The geographic reality of the Dardanelles

108 TNA, FO E 13027/27/44, "Memorandum by Mr. H. G. Nicolson Respecting the Freedom of the Straits"

109 TNA, CAB 24/101/95, "Treaty of Peace with Türkiye, Administration of Waterways of the Straits and the Sea of Marmara", March 30, 1920.

110 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits".

and Bosphorus meant that no single power could fully impose its will without provoking broader conflict. As with Russia's earlier experience, any strategy concerning the Straits could not accommodate unilateral ambitions or excessive measures. Britain's prewar vision of absolute naval freedom faltered not only because of diplomatic resistance but because the fixed geography of the Straits magnified the stakes for every littoral and maritime power. By necessity, Britain's turn to cooperative demilitarisation and League oversight reflected an acknowledgement that geography rendered unilateral dominance unsustainable. The Straits' position at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and vital imperial sea lines of communication ensured they remained a collective concern, where compromise and shared supervision were the only viable means to preserve strategic access. In this sense, Britain's revised policy was less a retreat from principle than a recognition that geography dictated the limits of power projection, which was forcing strategy to adapt to the immutable configuration of the Straits.

Securing even more lenient provisions also required considerable effort at the negotiating table. At that rate, Britain feared it would stand alone in resisting Türkiye's bid for unchecked military control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus. With France and Italy appearing indifferent or unwilling to go beyond vague League of Nations guarantees, Britain faced the prospect of downgrading its goals to mere commercial access. However, political and diplomatic shifts in 1922 had offered a glimmer of opportunity. Türkiye's insistence on defending its territory had begun to alienate French public opinion. In Italy, the rise of Mussolini's Fascist government introduced a potentially more decisive and cooperative partner.¹¹¹ These developments raise hope that Allied unity, once fractured, might be reconstituted. A pivotal moment came with the 9th November discussions between Marshal Foch and the British military leadership. Foch strongly asserted that the Allies must not allow Türkiye to control the Straits militarily, since declaring the freedom of the Straits indispensable to preserving the fruits of Allied victory. His support, though important, was tempered by significant caveats. Foch's influence on Near Eastern matters was limited; he lacked clarity on whether "freedom" included warship passage, and it was uncertain whether the French government, under Poincaré, would adopt or enforce his position as a treaty condition. Nevertheless, Foch's statement reflected a growing recognition within military circles that unchecked Turkish control posed strategic risks. Among the three main policy paths in this evolving context, Foch's proposal was the most promising compromise. His proposal included complete demilitarisation of the Straits zone, destruction of all Turkish military and naval infrastructure in the region, and Turkish armed forces would be excluded from these zones, aside from a garrison in İstanbul. While less ambitious than the full Allied oversight envisioned in the Treaty of Sevres, this approach represents a significant constraint on Turkish sovereignty and an effort to neutralize the Straits as a military asset. It reflects a middle ground, which sought strategic stability without direct occupation or overt imposition and relied instead on collective Allied enforcement.¹¹²

Marshal Foch's proposal offered a realistic compromise that would hinder Türkiye's ability to fortify the Straits and improve Britain's position in any future conflict compared to the pre-1914 status quo. However, the support of key Allies remained uncertain. France, under Poincaré, may accept the Foch plan in principle but hesitated to pressure Türkiye into compli-

111 MacFie, "The Straits Question", 211-238.

112 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, "Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits".

ance. In anticipation of such reluctance, Britain considered an alternative strategy involving the League of Nations. Though not ideal, given that Türkiye and Russia were not League members and may resist its authority, this avenue offered a mechanism to internationalise oversight without direct confrontation. A possible solution lay in drafting a “statute of the Straits” grounded in precedent (such as the Danube and Suez Canal Conventions), preserving the appearance of Turkish sovereignty while entrusting oversight to a League-appointed High Commissioner, not a multilateral commission. This would limit the League’s role to inspection rather than control, which aimed to balance Türkiye’s sensitivities with Allied strategic interests. Such a model combined symbolic legitimacy with operational flexibility, which avoided overburdening the League with prescriptive authority.¹¹³

Britain’s ultimate option would be the commercial freedom of the Straits if neither an inter-Allied inspection system nor a U.S. High Commissioner under the League could be secured. While France, Italy, Russia, and Türkiye accepted this principle, disputes would centre on how it was interpreted, with possible maximum and minimum applications.¹¹⁴ The ultimate safeguard was the commercial openness of the Straits, a principle to which all major powers were officially pledged. This policy also had two forms. The first was that it would guarantee commercial navigation even during wartime, backed by physical demilitarisation or international controls. However, enforcing this could prompt Türkiye to demand full neutralisation of the Straits and weaken British strategic leverage. The second was viewing the Straits merely as an international waterway akin to the Danube. This would ensure peacetime navigation rights but fail to address wartime blockages, which makes it little more than a formalisation of the pre-war status quo. This third option, the commercial-only solution, offered the least protection and was preferred to be embraced only as a last resort. Britain’s primary aim remained to prevent Türkiye from exercising unilateral control over a vital naval corridor and safeguard the Royal Navy’s strategic interests and Allied influence in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The ideal solution was securing enforceable, albeit moderated, guarantees now, while preserving flexibility to renegotiate stronger terms as the balance of power evolves.¹¹⁵

Amid these protracted debates, at the Lausanne Conference, Britain secured the temporary yet most advantageous arrangement it had long pursued. The Lausanne Straits Convention of 1923 placed the Dardanelles and Bosphorus under international oversight while guaranteeing freedom of passage for all commercial and naval vessels in peacetime and demilitarization of the Straits.¹¹⁶ This outcome reflected Britain’s ability to transform geographic necessity into diplomatic leverage. As a chokepoint linking the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and beyond, the Straits for Britain remained too vital to imperial lifelines and global trade to be entrusted solely to Turkish sovereignty. This settlement reflected geography’s enduring influence by making the Straits indispensable to British trade routes and imperial security. By embedding international guarantees, Britain turned a geographic vulnerability into a managed asset, while limiting Turkish military control and preserving its own naval access. With international guarantees in the convention, Britain safeguarded its maritime supremacy and constrained

113 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, “Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits”.

114 TNA, FO E 13027/27/44, “Memorandum by Mr. H. G. Nicolson Respecting the Freedom of the Straits”.

115 TNA, CAB 24/140/8, “Suggestions for a British Policy in Regard to the Freedom of the Straits”.

116 MacFie, “The Straits Question”, 211–238.

the revival of Turkish military control over this strategic waterway. Geography thus dictated both the problem and the solution. The immutable bottleneck of the Straits ensured that Britain would never tolerate unilateral control, and Lausanne formalized this reality in international law. While the settlement was later revised at Montreux in 1936, Lausanne represented the culmination of a century-long British strategy that was transforming the Straits from a potential threat into a managed asset of the great powers, with Britain reaping the immediate strategic and economic security it required. The Lausanne Straits Convention underscored a fundamental truth that geography is not a passive backdrop but an enduring determinant of strategic behavior. The bottleneck of the Straits transformed regional disputes into global questions, which compelled Britain and other powers to frame their diplomacy around the immutable constraints of space. Strategy could shift from closure to freedom, from unilateral control to international oversight, but it continuously operated within the narrow confines dictated by the Straits' geography. Britain ensured that the Straits would remain an international concern rather than a purely Turkish prerogative by embedding geographic necessity into legal and diplomatic frameworks. This convergence of geography and strategy reveals why the Straits Question endured for centuries, and why Britain's policies, though adaptive in form, were ultimately consistent in substance, in preserving access through chokepoints where geography concentrated both vulnerability and power.

CONCLUSION

The Turkish Straits case affirms this study's central proposition that geography is a structural determinant of great power strategy. It compels states to pursue control over chokepoints regardless of ideology, regime type, or momentary diplomatic alignments. Across more than a century, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles shaped the strategic priorities of the Ottoman Empire, Britain, and Russia, and produced recurrent patterns of rivalry, shifting alliances, and legal innovation. The historical record substantiates the hypotheses advanced in this study and demonstrates the persistent interplay between geographic fixity and strategic adaptation.

The Straits confirmed multiple interlinked hypotheses for Britain. First, they proved that geography determined trade routes and imperial connectivity. Britain's reliance on uninterrupted access to India, and later the Suez Canal, made the Straits a vital maritime corridor. The evidence from successive treaties, from the 1809 Kale-i Sultaniye agreement to the 1841 Straits Convention, shows how Britain systematically upheld Ottoman sovereignty as a buffer to protect these lifelines. The Straits were structurally tied to Britain's maritime supremacy, which prevented Russian naval access, and this was not merely tactical but essential to preserving global commercial supremacy, ensuring the cohesion of the empire, and safeguarding the Eastern Mediterranean as an imperial crossroads. The oscillation between closure in the nineteenth century and freedom in the postwar era demonstrates the structural tension between geography and strategy. Even when British power declined, geography compelled Britain to seek arrangements through the League of Nations or international commissions that guaranteed naval access. This shows that maritime chokepoints remained indispensable for projecting power and maintaining great power status.

For Russia, the Straits embodied the structural vulnerabilities of geographic confinement. The Black Sea, enclosed and accessible only through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, forced Russia to pursue expansionist policies to secure warm-water outlets. The evidence from the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, the Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi, and Russia's repeated wartime negotiations underscores the structural imperative of gaining access. Geography shaped Russia's trade strategy by making grain and raw material exports dependent on maritime passage and conditioning its naval posture. Only by controlling the Straits could Russia consolidate its fleets and reduce the costs of maintaining multiple naval bases. The hypothesis that Russia's industrial and commercial growth was tied to maritime access is supported by episodes such as the Italo-Turkish War, where the closure of the Straits inflicted catastrophic economic losses. Similarly, World War I demonstrated the decisive weight of geography, when the Ottoman Empire sealed the Straits in 1914, Russia was cut off from its Entente allies, deprived of war materials, and ultimately weakened to regime collapse. Thus, the Russian case confirms that a great power's status and survival are fatally compromised without secure access to strategic maritime passages.

Geography both empowered and constrained sovereignty for Ottomans. The Ottoman Empire's early control of the Straits exemplifies how chokepoints can amplify regional power. Yet, the empire's geographic overextension and the rise of external rivals exposed the fragility of this position. Even when weakened, Ottoman sovereignty over the Straits remained indispensable to great power strategy, which forced Britain and Russia to bargain, pressure, or ally with İstanbul. By the 1920s, the revival of Turkish strength made geography once again the decisive arbiter, which compelled Britain to accept compromises it had previously rejected and underscored that no durable arrangement could bypass Turkish control. This affirms the broader structural hypothesis that the capacity for controlling chokepoints determines the strategies of great powers and elevates the bargaining position of local states that control them. The Straits are paramount to Türkiye, which has formed a core element of its national interest, existence, sovereignty, and security for over five centuries. As integral parts of Turkish territory, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles are internal waters under absolute Turkish sovereignty, a fact historically acknowledged even by Tsarist Russia and international legal scholars. Their control allows Türkiye to safeguard its independence, assert its rights in all negotiations concerning the Straits, and maintain them as "the very heart of Türkiye," which reflects the country's unmatched stake in their governance. Thus, the physical geography of the Turkish Straits is not just a backdrop to historical conflict; it also actively structures the strategic calculations of states and remains a critical factor in contemporary international relations.

The study's findings confirm the overarching hypothesis that if a great power lacks secure access to vital maritime passages or forward bases, its capacity to project power and sustain global status is severely constrained. Britain's maritime empire depended on ensuring openness; Russia's continental power was limited by exclusion; Türkiye's sovereignty was shaped by constant contestation over geography. The enduring influence of the Straits illustrates how spatial realities magnify strategic dilemmas, generate recurring diplomatic crises, and structure the limits of statecraft. This study demonstrates that geography creates structural incentives and constraints across regimes, ideologies, and alliances, and ensures that strategies evolve but objectives endure. The Turkish Straits thus provide a historical case of

Anglo-Russian rivalry and a prism for understanding the role of geography in world politics. Chokepoints remain critical in contemporary international relations, where control over narrow passages continues to dictate the balance of power, which confirms that geography endures while strategy must continually adapt.

Araştırma & Yayın Etiği: Bu makale, en az iki kör hakem tarafından incelenmiş ve *iThenticate* taramasıyla intihal ve benzerlik raporu oluşturulmuştur. Makale, araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygundur.

Etik Beyanı & Çıkar Çatışması: Bu makalenin yazarı çıkar çatışması bildiriminde bulunmamış, makalenin hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik kaidelere uyulduğunu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmalara atıf yapıldığını beyan etmiştir. Libre Açık Erişimli bu makale, [CC BY-NC 4.0](#) lisansına sahiptir.

Research & Publication Ethics: The article underwent a double-blind peer-review process involving two or more reviewers, and an *iThenticate* scan was conducted to detect potential plagiarism and similarity issues. The article was found to comply with established research and publication ethics standards.

Ethical Declaration & Conflict of Interest: The author of the article has disclosed no conflicts of interest and has affirmed that the manuscript was prepared in adherence to ethical and scientific principles and that all relevant sources were accurately cited. This is a Libre Open Access article under the [CC BY-NC 4.0](#) license.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archival Documents

United States Department of State. *The Problem of the Turkish Straits*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947.

“British War Aims.” *The Times*, January 7, 1918.

The National Archives (TNA)

TNA, CAB 24/140/8.

TNA, FO E 13027/27/44.

TNA, CAB 37/108/184.

TNA, CAB 37/108/137.

TNA, CAB 37/108/174.

TNA, CAB 37/125/28.

TNA, CAB 37/126/33.

TNA, CAB 37/126/18.

TNA, CAB 24/101/95.

TNA, CAB 23/39/57.

TNA, CAB 23/39/58.

TNA, FO E 3446/5/44.

TNA, FO E 3542/5/44.

TNA, FO 608/83.

2. Books and Articles

Bayur, Yusuf Hikmet. “Boğazlar Sorununun Bir Evresi (1906–1914)”. *Belleten* 7/28 (20 Ekim 1943): 89–218.

Beydilli, Kemal. “Boğazlar Meselesi”. TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi. Erişim 4 Ekim 2025. <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/bogazlar-meselesi>

Bilsel, Cemil. “The Turkish Straits in the Light of Recent Turkish-Soviet Russian Correspondence”. *The American Journal of International Law* 41/4 (1947): 727–747. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2193087>

Brüel, Erik. *International Straits: A Treatise on International Law*. Vols. 1–2. Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag, 1947.

- Cohen, Saul Bernard. *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.
- Fisher, Alan W. "Azov in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries". *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 21/2 (1973): 161-174. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41044733>
- French, David. *British Strategy and War Aims 1914-1916*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Goldstein, Erik. "Great Britain and Greater Greece 1917-1920". *The Historical Journal* 32/2 (1989): 339-356.
- Goryanof, Sergey. *Rus Arşiv Belgelerine Göre Boğazlar ve Şark Meselesi*. İstanbul: Ötüken, 2006.
- Gray, Colin S. – Geoffrey Sloan. "Why Geopolitics". *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy*. ed. Colin S. Gray – Geoffrey Sloan. 1-11. London: Frank Cass, 1999.
- Hurewitz, J. C. "Russia and the Turkish Straits: A Revaluation of the Origins of the Problem". *World Politics* 14/4 (1962): 605-632. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009311>
- Hurewitz, J. C. "The Background of Russia's Claims to the Turkish Straits- A Reassessment". *Belleten* 28/ (1964): 459-502.
- Jelavich, Barbara. *The Ottoman Empire, the Great Powers, and the Straits Question, 1870-1887*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973.
- Jia, Bing Bing. *The Regime of Straits in International Law*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
- Kaplan, Robert D. *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*. New York: Random House, 2012.
- Kerner, Robert J. "Russia and the Straits Question, 1915-17". *The Slavonic and East European Review* 8/24 (1930): 589-600.
- Karakoç, Ercan. "Lozan Barış Konferansı ve Montrö'de Boğazlar Meselesi". *Türk Boğazları*. ed. Nur Jale Ece, Hasan Kanbolat, and Girayhan Alpdoğan. 192-207. İstanbul: Engin Yayıncılık, 2011.
- Langer, William L. "Russia, the Straits Question and the Origins of the Balkan League, 1908-1912". *Political Science Quarterly* 43/3 (1928): 321-363.
- MacFie, A. L. "The Straits Question: The Conference of Lausanne (November 1922-July 1923)". *Middle Eastern Studies* 15/2 (1979): 211-238.
- MacFie, A. L. "The Straits Question in the First World War, 1914-18". *Middle Eastern Studies* 19/1 (1983): 43-74.
- Mahan, Alfred Thayer. *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1902.
- Mackinder, Halford J. "The Geographical Pivot of History". *The Geographical Journal* 23/4 (1904): 421-437. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498>
- Maity, Anadi Bhushan. "The Problem of the Turkish Straits". *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 15/2 (1954): 134-152.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948.

- Pithon, René. “Karadeniz ve Boğazlar Meselesi”. Çev. H. Nuri, Transkr. E. Keleş. *Tarih Okulu* 6 (2010): 73–93.
- Rozakis, Christos L. – Petros N. Stagos. “The Turkish Straits”. *International Straits of the World*. ed. by G. J. Mangone. 15–25. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987.
- Scholvin, Sarah. *The Geopolitics of Regional Power: Geography, Economics and Politics in Southern Africa*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2016.
- Şener, Bülent. “Türk Boğazları’nın Geçiş Rejiminin Tarihi Gelişimi ve Hukuki Statüsü”. *Tarih Okulu Dergisi* 2014/XVII (Aralık 2013). <https://doi.org/10.14225/Joh429>
- Taliaferro, Jeffrey W. *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Taylor, Alan John Percivale. *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848–1918*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Ünlü, Nevzat. *The Legal Regime of the Turkish Straits*. Edited by G. J. Mangone. The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2002.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. “Structural Realism after the Cold War”. *International Security* 25/1 (2000): 5–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2626772>
- Yıldız, Gültekin. “How to Defend the Turkish Straits Against the Russians: A Century-Long ‘Eastern Question’ in British Defence Planning, 1815–1914”. *The Mariner’s Mirror* 105/1 (2019): 40–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00253359.2019.1565339>