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Geopolitical continuity? An analysis of the Turkish Straits and Russian ambitions

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the Turkish and Russian interests in the Turkish Straits. The paper's main argument tests the traditional theoretical principle of the permanence of geography through a framework that deploys selected aspects of the model of neoclassical geopolitics. The application of this model – a cutting-edge development in the theory of geopolitics – constitutes one of the original contributions of this paper. After clarifying our theoretical and methodological choices, the paper provides the historical context and the legal background of the Straits to expand the scope for the analysis of the distribution of power in the region. The Turkish and Russian geopolitical agents' perceptions of space are also investigated, completing the methodological steps of the model. We performed tests of our main argument in three case studies: (1) the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, (2) the 2014 Annexation of Crimea, and (3) the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War.

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Introduction

The Turkish Straits (the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosphorus) have continuously played a vital role in history due to their central strategic importance in connecting the Black Sea with the Mediterranean Sea and, therefore, with open oceans.

The United Kingdom, Russia, and Turkey have traditionally been the dominant powers that have influenced the circulation of vessels in the Straits. The UK continues to be absorbed with the Mediterranean Sea, exerting control of its entrances through Gibraltar (the Rock of Gibraltar) and the Suez Canal (the British bases in Cyprus), as well as overlooking the trade routes within and is thus concerned with maintaining the status quo – the latter which the USA may certainly enjoy too. Russia has long sought access to the Mediterranean Sea, conveying its interest in the Straits – an integral part of its centuries-long struggle to obtain access to warmer seas as a strategic objective (Hale 2023). And Turkey tends to consider them as internal waterways, applying the corresponding force associated with 'domestic politics.'

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The main objective of this article is to explain the delicate balance of power in the region, namely, between the Turkish interest in exercising as tight authority over the Straits as possible and the Russian revisionist intentions of obtaining more leverage over the Straits, in line with the aforementioned centuries-long struggle. We also examine the Turkish and Russian geopolitical agents' perceptions of space and their role in shaping states' behaviour to better explain the regional balance of power.

In this way, and although it was noted that traditional naval powers (such as the UK) greatly influence the Mediterranean, analyzing either the British or the American perceptions of space regarding the Straits would fall outside the focus of the study. Consequently, we leave British and American perspectives to future research.

Our main argument centres on the permanence of geography by focusing on geographical position. We test the argument that whereas agents, ideologies, and parallel interests keep changing, the central geographical relevance of particular choke points – in the case of the Turkish Straits, gaining access to and out of the Black Sea – remains. We hypothesize, moreover, that the geopolitical agents' perception of space mediates the mentioned relevance between physical geography and the behaviour of the state in the international arena, in line with past research (Morgado 2022). This is a new insight into the geopolitical approach.

Although the topic has been researched before – and our paper noticeably builds on that previous research – one of the original contributions of this paper is the application of neoclassical geopolitics, a cutting-edge development in the theory of geopolitics. Therefore, this article contributes to that same literature with a novel theoretical-methodological framework. In addition, the paper brings predictive notions, which add up, simultaneously, to the practicality of political science literature, and develops the geopolitical research agenda further, by testing a new theory in the empirical realities of the Turkish Straits. As explained below in Section 1, our theoretical framework of neoclassical geopolitics upholds more substantial reasoning than the existing literature on the Straits through methodological innovations.

Concerning existing literature, it is clear that the topic of the Turkish Straits is relevant in itself. The Straits continue to be researched, involving studies from many perspectives, including (i) legal (Fournatzopoulou 2004; Acer 2023), (ii) political (Weaver 2016; Balta 2019; Segell 2023), and (iii) security (Antonenko 2009; Hajizada 2018). The legal perspectives tend to naturally lack the geopolitical focus and the subsequent geographical aspect, rather highlighting legal developments and their controversies (Fournatzopoulou 2004; Acer 2023). The historic-political studies, such as Segell (2023), assert the geographical and economic importance of the Straits as an international waterway – actually, one of the world's seven key maritime choke points – with transportation and commercial relevance, emphasizing its significance in warfare in European history. While recognizing Russia's continued interest in gaining control over the Straits, and Turkey's interest in keeping the balance of power in the region, Hale (2023) provides a historical analysis of the region and emphasizes the continuing patterns of confrontational and détente periods of the Turkish-Russian relations. Other works (Antonenko 2009; Hajizada 2018) stress the security aspect of the Black Sea region, focusing on the frozen conflicts and regional security cooperation, not specifically addressing the crucial role of the Turkish Straits. As stated before, none of these literature pieces happened to

study the Turkish Straits from the innovative methodological approach used in this paper.

Although we have stretched the timeline for the historical contextualization, we have tried to keep it to the last 25 years (approximately) to match the length of time Vladimir Putin and Recep Erdoğan have been in power.

In Section 1, we develop our theoretical framework and the methodology of the article. In Section 2, we historically contextualize the Straits. This is followed by a legal contextualization in Section 3. In Section 4, we analyze the relevance of the Straits during the Cold War and post-Cold War environments from a distribution of power angle, as well as the current Turkish and Russian geopolitical agents' perception of space. Finally, in Section 5, we examine the evidence for the strategic relevance of the Turkish Straits, filtered through our model, in three case studies: (1) the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, (2) the 2014 Annexation of Crimea, and (3) the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War.

Among the main results, the paper shows that Turkish geopolitical agents are interested in preserving the status quo (i.e., continuing to enforce the Montreux Convention), whereas Russian geopolitical agents intend to overcome the geographical encirclement of the country in the region. The paper further predicts that the current Russian geopolitical agents will tend to carry on taking measures to gain more leverage over the Turkish Straits, which is explained by both systemic constraints and their perception of space.

Theoretical and methodological framework

We aim to apply Chauprade and Thual's principle (no. 7) of 'geopolitical continuities' (Chauprade and Thual 1998, 498). According to this principle, geopolitics is necessarily a science of continuities, or in other words, a science that observes the 'dynamics of continuity' in foreign policy that prevails in certain geographical spaces. As mentioned in the introduction, the main argument that we put to the test emerges from the basic idea of the permanence of geography. Within the list of geographical aspects, we selected geographical position as the main geopolitical factor for our research (although this choice will be accompanied by other geographical factors under examination, as explained below). We further contrast the permanence of geography (position) with changes in agents, ideologies, resources, and parallel interests by providing, first, a historical overview in Section 2 and, second, by explaining crucial elements of the Turkish and Russian geopolitical agents' perceptions of space in Section 4. Section 3 – devoted to describing the context of international law, together with Section 5 – dedicated to explaining the distribution of power and the different interests of other powers in the region – provides the legal and political context without which the test of our argument would be flawed. We intend to shed light on the fact that concerning the topic of the Turkish Straits, the geographical position and configuration of the Straits by themselves constitute the primary significance, which can be identified throughout history; however, the study of the Turkish Straits requires an operationalization in a thoughtfully conceived and ground-breaking theoretical-methodological framework.

For that reason, we selected the cutting-edge model of neoclassical geopolitics developed by Morgado (2023) to conduct our research. The model posits that the behaviour of the state (dependent variable) can be explained by both (1) a set of geopolitical factors (e.g., space, position, circulation, resources) that constitute the

potential of the state and, therefore, determine the distribution of capabilities (independent variable); and (2) the geopolitical agents' perceptions and capacities, which filter the potential and the distribution of capabilities through a plastic group of beliefs and individual capacities which, more often than not, shape final foreign policy decisions. This means that our theoretical premises include material and non-material variables.

For the purposes of this research piece, we extensively work with the geopolitical factors of 'space,' 'position,' 'circulation,' and 'military structures' to understand the distribution of power in the region under study (Sections 3, 4, and 5). In addition, we have narrowed the geopolitical agents' perception to the 'perception of space' exclusively and provided evidence of both the Turkish and Russian perception of space about the Turkish Straits, with the goal of increasing the explanatory capacity concerning their political and security behaviours (Section 4), and in the general effort of testing our main argument.

By assisting in the examination of the three conflicts in the region already mentioned, all connected to the Turkish Straits [cf. Figure 1], the case studies constitute a final triple test of our main argument in light of our theoretical premises (in Section 5).

For the analysis, we used primary (Turkish and Russian foreign policy directives, official statements) and secondary sources (books, journal articles, and news) on the topic. In terms of research methods, we applied (a) content analysis to this literature, aiming for a precise understanding of texts and extracting an exact meaning, and (b) process tracing to identify links between the variables of the model of neoclassical geopolitics.

Figure 1. The Turkish Straits. Source: https://maritimecyprus.com/2021/03/28/guidelines-for-transiting-the-turkish-straits/.

Historical overview

In order to highlight the crucial geographical location of the Straits [cf. Figure 1] and to support our argument of the geopolitical continuity of a particular choke point, we compiled a brief historical overview of the Straits. By examining the different aims and interests of the states in the area throughout the centuries, we can also underline the central relevance of the geographical position.

In ancient times, the Greeks – especially Athens and Sparta – fought for control of the Straits. The Straits played a vital part in their legends, as Troy lay near the shores of the Dardanelles (Hellespont). After Troy fell and the city of Byzantium (later Constantinople) rose, piracy increased on the Sea of Marmara. As a result, huge chains were stretched across the bay to protect the Golden Horn and Byzantium (Schreiner 1924, 67–68). In 480 B.C., the Persian army was held off by Pausanias, and the army of Alexander the Great marched towards Persia, crossing the Straits using a bridge of boats.

After the Romans conquered the area, Byzantium became the capital of the (Eastern) Roman Empire and enjoyed control over the Bosphorus. However, from that capital, it was not possible to maintain authority over the Dardanelles. The status of the Dardanelles was usually determined by the strength of the influence of any foreign powers. In such a case, the Straits became 'internationalized'; if not, they remained the 'territorial' waters of the local power. The Byzantine State increasingly struggled with the Saracen and Russian raiders. Still, the final decline occurred when the Ottomans crossed the Dardanelles in 1354 and conquered much of the territory apart from the capital (Schreiner 1924, 67–69).

Shaw highlights the key strategic role of the Straits in connection with the Crusades (aimed at driving the Ottomans out of Europe and taking the Holy Land) by mentioning that, according to proponents of the former, a successful Christian blockade could prevent Ottoman reinforcements from arriving from Anatolia. When Mehmet II conquered Constantinople in 1453, the key element of the siege was overcoming the traditionally strong defence of the city – the remarkable, fortified walls and the chains stretched across the bay (Shaw 2002, 51–57). With the expansion of the empire, the Straits fell under full Ottoman control, and the Porte had the sole authority to allow passage (even merchant vessels) through them. This rule remained in effect until 1774 with the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, when Russia was granted trade privileges and freedom of navigation in the Black Sea. However, during times of war, no foreign warships were allowed to pass (Fournatzopoulou 2004, 247).

As the Ottoman Empire started to decline, it faced not only rising nationalist movements and freedom fights but also the rising Russian Empire. The Russian Empire threatened the coasts of Anatolia from 1774 onwards (Lewis 1968, 37), annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 1783, and advanced along the northern coast of the Black Sea in 1792 (Kennedy 1988, 119). During the Napoleonic wars, the issue of the Straits arose again – it was concluded that if they fell under Russian control, this would threaten the European balance of power. In 1809, after the British forces blockaded the Dardanelles and Izmir, Sultan Mahmut II accepted a peace treaty and ended the war with the UK. The British recognized the Ottoman authority to prohibit the passage of foreign warships through the Straits in times of peace. Thus, the UK became the first European power to recognize 'Turkish' authority and make it part of international law for the first time

(Shaw and Kural Shaw 2005, 12–13). During the 19th century, Russia tried to gain control of the Straits – or at least aimed to ban foreign warships (as in the 1833 Treaty of Hünkâr-İskelesi, which was overruled by the London Straits Convention in 1841). In 1878, Russian forces were already at the gates of Istanbul, while the British, supporting the Ottomans, had accessed the Sea of Marmara. With the Treaty of San Stefano (3 March 1878), the possibility of the Straits falling under Russian influence arose again, and several European powers (especially the UK and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire) protested (Kissinger 1995, 153). During the First Balkan Wars (1912–13), Russia put great emphasis on preventing other powers (Greece and Bulgaria) from seizing the Straits from the declining Sublime Porte, but potential Ottoman naval dominance in the Black Sea was not considered acceptable either (Vovchenko 2023, 886).

After the end of the First World War, with the Ottoman Empire on the losing side, the peace conferences emphasized Wilsonian points, while France and the UK negotiated their territorial claims (e.g., through the Sykes-Picot Agreement that divided the Syrian and Mesopotamian territories into mandates). The diminishing territories of the Ottoman Empire were discussed in the Treaty of Sèvres (August 1920), which proposed not only the international control and demilitarization of the Straits but also limiting the size of the Ottoman army and navy and imposing Allied control over them. Although the treaty was never implemented, it was a catalyst and has remained a huge trauma in Turkish collective memory (Kasaba 2008, 130–132). However, 'the Turks were the only one of the Central Powers able to overturn immediately the vindictive settlements imposed by the Allies following World War I' (Shaw and Kural Shaw 2005, 340). Therefore, at the end of the Turkish War of Independence, the Treaty of Sèvres was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne.

Legal framework

The Lausanne Straits Convention was signed on 24 July 1923 during the Lausanne Peace Conference. The Convention adopted a strongly internationalist approach: the Straits were to remain open to ships from any country while a demilitarized zone of 25–30 kilometres was established along the coast. It also put the administration of the Straits in the hands of the International Straits Commission under the auspices of the League of Nations. Consequently, Turkey's authority was massively restricted by the ruling of the Convention. According to the latter, if Turkey were not a belligerent party, it could not prevent the crossing of warships of belligerent states (Acer 2023, 287–288). The Convention also created international guarantees for the security of the demilitarized zones and freedom of navigation in the Straits (by the High Contracting Parties, at least the UK, France, Italy, and Japan). However, Japan's willingness to leave the League of Nations and the rising tension between these states (because of fascist Italy's campaign in Ethiopia) made such cooperation impossible (Fournatzopoulou 2004, 248–249). Also, in the 1930s, when Italy's influence in the Mediterranean grew and led to the control of several islands (Rhodes, Kos, and Leros), Turkey feared that Italy would strive to increase its influence in the Black Sea region as well (Segell 2023, 649). With the Straits under international influence, the Turks were concerned about the status of Istanbul and whether it would regain its Turkish identity (Güllü 2024, 65–66).

Although at that time Turkey's main agenda was to free the Straits – and Istanbul – from foreign occupation (thus the conditions of the Lausanne Straits Convention seemed satisfactory), the approaching new World War pushed Turkey to propose changes, especially regarding disarmament and transit-controlling regulations. As the Soviets would have preferred the Straits to be closed to all warships, they supported the Turkish initiative of revising the Convention in 1933 (Acer 2023, 290–292).

The new Regime of the Straits – the Montreux Convention – took effect on 9 November 1936; it was signed on 20 July 1936 in Montreux Palace, Switzerland, and signed by Bulgaria, France, Greece, Japan, Romania, Turkey, the Soviet Union, the UK, and Yugoslavia. The Convention consists of five sections and specifically regulates merchant vessels (Articles 2–7), vessels of war (Articles 8–22), and aircraft (Article 23) in the whole area under study (Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosphorus). Regarding merchant vessels, the Convention rules that in times of peace, they enjoy complete freedom of transit and navigation in the Straits. In times of war, if Turkey is not a belligerent, vessels under any flag enjoy freedom of transit and navigation. If Turkey is a belligerent party, all vessels except those belonging to any country at war with Turkey enjoy freedom of transit and navigation. No charges or taxes shall be levied by the Turkish authorities on merchant ships which are passing through the Straits without stopping, except for certain services (applied per tonnage) specified and categorized in the Convention (e.g., for lighthouse, sanitary, and rescue services) (The Montreux Convention 1951).

Vessels of war must weigh no more than 15,000 tons, except for those of the Black Sea powers, which can send heavier single capital ships through the Straits. However, the maximum aggregate tonnage of vessels that non-Black Sea littoral countries may have in that sea in times of peace is 30,000 tons (or a maximum of 45,000 tons in exceptional cases). They shall not remain in the Black Sea for more than 21 days. Submarines of the Black Sea powers constructed or purchased outside the Black Sea may also pass if adequate notification is given to Turkey. Also, light surface vessels and minor military vessels can transit without any charges or taxes. In times of war, warships enjoy the freedom of transit through the Straits if Turkey is not a belligerent; however, vessels of belligerent states may not pass, except when they are returning to their bases. If Turkey is a belligerent party, this decision is completely in the hands of the Turkish authorities (The Montreux Convention 1951).

The new regulations were generally in favour of Turkey, yet did not ignore the littoral countries' security concerns. The rule that in peacetime, passing warships shall not use the aircraft they may be carrying, the restrictions on the number and tonnage of warships transiting the Straits address Turkey's concerns, and regulations on the number and weight of ships in the Black Sea address the littoral states' concerns (Acer 2023, 294–295).

Supervising the implementation of the Convention was Turkey's responsibility, as, according to the Convention, it controlled the passage through the Straits. However, this led to several disputes with other countries, especially in times of war. During the Second World War (Turkey was neutral at the time), the Allied powers protested against the passage of the ships of the Axis powers, which claimed to be merchant ships or vessels under 100 tons. Turkey was required to manoeuvre and maintain the Convention regulations as strictly as possible without risking becoming involved in the war (Seydi and Morewood 2005, 79–88). After the war ended, both the Soviet Union and the United

States (and the UK) would have liked to revise the Convention: Stalin would have preferred joint administration and defence of the Straits (Kelkitli 2017, 65). Due to the Soviet demands for revision, the Turkish Straits crisis between Turkey and the Soviet Union broke out in 1946 (Erşen and Köstem 2019, 50). Turkey managed to convince the Western powers of the threat of renewed Russian interest in the Straits. Thus, the Convention remained unchanged. The Cold War imposed new challenges in the implementation of the regulations: defining 'times of war' and 'times of peace' was problematic as international armed conflicts may not be 'wars' in the traditional sense (this question came up when U.S warships crossed the Straits during the Vietnam war, but the U.S. declared not being belligerent, only supporting South Vietnam in a civil war) (Fournatzopoulou 2004, 250–255). While Turkey tried to cooperate with both the U.S. and Great Britain in the early years of the Cold War, the traditional British influence in the area diminished slowly as the regional transition from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana took place (Barlas et al. 2020).

In the 1990s, Turkey felt that ensuring the safe transit of vessels through the Straits (regarding traffic, accidents, and environmental concerns, among other issues) demanded an update to the regulation. Thus, the International Maritime Organization accepted the Rules and Recommendations on Navigation through the Straits and Sea of Marmara, although the Convention remained the main set of regulations governing navigation in the Straits (Fournatzopoulou 2004, 250–255) There have been several calls to upgrade the Montreux Convention (Weaver 2016, 76), although Turkey has repeatedly expressed its willingness to comply with it (Republic of Türkiye – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Position, power, and perception

The Montreux Convention (1936) ended centuries of war for Black Sea supremacy, as Turkey gained autonomy over the Straits and control over transit through them. Coastal countries also received privileges due to the restrictions on the tonnage of war vessels and their maximum duration of stay. Due to the regulations on manoeuvring capability, the conditions were also acceptable to the Soviet Union, as they reduced its vulnerability to foreign aggression (primarily from the USA). After the Cold War ended, a new form of cooperation was established in the Black Sea area: the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC), with the participation of Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Greece, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine. Although the BSEC is still operating and has many project-like working areas (Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization, 2024), its effectiveness is hindered by conflicts between its members and other reasons (e.g., financial crises). Nevertheless, it paved the way for a multilateral security cooperation, the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), established on 2 April 2001. Its members are Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Romania. On 1 March 2004, Turkey initiated Operation Black Sea Harmony, aimed at detecting illegal activities in the area. Russia, the first littoral state, participated in 2006 (Kelkitli 2017, 66–70).

It was imperative for the Turks, as well as the Russians, to prevent the militarization of the Straits. The US, although not part of the Convention, confirmed that it would respect the regulations. Thus, when NATO proposed initiating the anti-terrorist operation

Active Endeavour in the Black Sea area after it was launched in the Mediterranean in 2001 following the terrorist attack of 9/11 (Çelikpala and Erşen 2018, 75), both Turkey and Russia were against this. They argued that the littoral states were already engaged in cooperation with similar aims (i.e., BLACKSEAFOR) (Delanoe 2014, 369). Thus, the Turkish-Russian relation could influence the security of the European neighbourhood and the southern flank of NATO (Özerdem and Whiting 2019, 420). During the Cold War, the majority of the littoral countries belonged to the Soviet bloc, which opposed Turkey. Once the Cold War ended, many littoral states wished to become members of NATO and the EU; Russia thus experienced the majority of the littoral countries becoming part of an opposing bloc.

During the first decade of the 2000s, the post-Soviet area experienced several pro-democracy protests, which unsettled the Russian leadership. At the Bucharest Summit of NATO in 2008, Ukraine's and Georgia's membership aspirations were acknowledged, and NATO welcomed their wish to become members of the organization in the future. The official statement issued by NATO proposed that Georgia and Ukraine submit their applications to the Membership Action Plan (MAP), the first step in the membership application process (NATO, 2008). In parallel with this, the European Union launched a program designed to help the economies of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine: The Eastern Partnership Initiative. In witnessing this process (NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democratization), Russia felt the need to increase and update its military power, which contributed to the crisis in Georgia, a process which will be described below (Balta 2019, 77).

From the early 2000s onwards, a good personal relationship developed between the two leaders, Erdoğan and Putin. Putin travelled to Turkey in December 2004 to sign intergovernmental agreements within the framework of the Joint Declaration on the Intensification of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership (M 2018, 356). This was the first time in 32 years that a Russian leader had visited Turkey (Flanagan et al. 2020, 119). Due to similarities in the political approaches of the two countries, many have argued that they are both pursuing neo-imperialistic goals and expansionist foreign policy approaches, as well as centralizing power in domestic politics (Balta 2019, 78–79).

The Turkish geopolitical agents' perception of space

After the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; AKP) came to power in early 2003, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009–2014) and later Prime Minister (2014–2016), had a significant influence on Turkish foreign policy decision-making. In line with Erdogan's own vision, Davutoğlu's fundamental work of 2001, *Stratejik Derinlik. Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position), summarizes the key objectives and approaches of Turkish foreign policy. According to Davutoğlu, Turkey has to reach back to its cultural and historical origins and rediscover the former Ottoman space (Erşen and Köstem 2019, 4). Davutoğlu describes the Turkish Straits as one of the world's most significant straits, being of unique geo-economic and geopolitical importance: they connect the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea especially opens the way towards Central Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, too. According to his analysis, the Straits are one of Turkey's key strategic assets and should be handled using rational

and flexible diplomacy in order to minimize risks while maximizing profits. One must take Istanbul into account, Turkey's largest city, located alongside a vital naval trade route and international waterway, and also take into consideration the Sea of Marmara and the surrounding region, as it is the most important industrial and trade hub in Turkey (Davutoğlu 2001, 158–162).

Davutoğlu resigned in 2016, and due to increasing security threats (terrorism, the rise of ISIS, civil war in Syria) in the second half of the 2010s, Turkish foreign policy had to abandon the soft power approach based on 'zero problems with neighbours' and adopt a more *realpolitik* approach. Therefore, the country increased its investment in the defence industry (unmanned aerial vehicles) and military technology research in order to gain comparative advantages. In the meantime, Turkey tried to balance the great power politics of the U.S. and Russia, usually by compartmentalizing issues or using a 'policy of balancing' (Gümüş 2022, 177–180).

Erdoğan is very interested in the maritime routes of the region – he personally proposed in 2011 the construction of a new route to run parallel to the Bosphorus, the Istanbul Canal. The proposed canal would be 45 km long and 275 m wide and labelled both artificial and national, thus giving Turkish authorities full authority over its military and civil traffic (Moskalenko et al. 2023, 651). The proposal, referred to as a 'crazy project' by Erdoğan, raises numerous questions, including its relation to the Montreux Convention, whether it would undermine the supremacy of the latter by creating an alternate route, financial challenges in a vulnerable economy, as well as representing a possible threat to marine and freshwater ecosystems (Wilks 2021). The publication of a letter signed by 104 retired Turkish admirals opposing the project (Moskalenko et al. 2023, 651) signals the national and international importance of the Straits and the role they play in Turkish policymaking. '[. . .] the problems related to the Black Sea, although there are no maritime disputes, are a good example of maritime issues as a continuous ongoing element in Turkish foreign policy due to its important geopolitical situation' (Özkan and Kırval 2023, 130).

The Russian geopolitical agents' perception of space

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had to adjust to its new role in the international order. In June 2000, under Vladimir Putin's presidency, Russia adopted a new Foreign Policy Concept, which highlighted its interest in the post-Soviet area. In 2013, an adjusted, new foreign policy concept was also introduced in Russia. It emphasized that Russia is a global military and economic centre, and its values and unique civilization should be made transparent. Due to this new approach, a more assertive role has been taken by Russia in many international crises, such as the annexation of Crimea and its active role in the war in Syria. This has not only led to further hostilities with the West but also involved increasing the naval presence of Russia in the Black Sea and Mediterranean (Balta 2019, 76–79).

Due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Black Sea Fleet declined, and the Turkish navy tried to fill the vacuum, aiming for naval superiority. However, by 2016, the Russian Navy had re-taken the lead. The Russians announced they would spend an additional $2.4 billion by 2020 to modernize their fleet (Flanagan et al. 2020, 125). The annexation of Crimea enabled the deployment of missile systems such as the S-300 PMU

anti-aircraft missile (near Sevastopol) and the Bastion-P coastal battery (Delanoe 2014, 372). Also, in order to deter NATO from intervening, Russia deployed the hypersonic missile *Kinzhal* (Kh-42 M2) on MiG-31 fighters in the Southern District (Erşen and Köstem 2019, 55).

When the Russo-Ukrainian war broke out, Russia accepted the Turkish implementation of the Montreux Convention involving restricting the passage of warships through the Straits. Moreover, Russia's Ambassador to Turkey, Alexei Yerkhov, even appreciated the Turkish stance (Hürriyet Daily News 2022). It can be argued that the Turkish move to block all warships helped prevent a possible escalation of the conflict between Russia and NATO (Moskalenko et al. 2023). The Turkish Straits and the Black Sea are important from an economic point of view: the region is cross-cut by energy transportation corridors between Europe and Asia and economic and trade markets (Celikpala and Tatlioglu 2023, 751).

The strategic relevance of the Turkish Straits: case studies

To understand the three main crises of the past two decades in the Black Sea region, one has to consider the Russian perspective on the post-Soviet area. For Russia, it is crucial to maintain a dominant role in any conflict in the region. Russia can achieve this by, for example, preventing post-Soviet countries from developing and forming a mature security community, often by supplying weapons to the disputing sides. Added to this fact is that the region itself suffers from the burden of many frozen conflicts (e.g., Armenia-Azerbaijan), and the states have yet to develop better relations and common goals. As stated in its foreign policy concepts, one of Russia's priorities is the post-Soviet area. Thus, Russia will willingly interfere if the status quo is challenged or Russian interests are threatened. Moreover, the Russian leadership perceives that it is their right to intervene using diplomatic or military tools (Hajizada 2018, 535).

The 2008 Russo-Georgian war

The Russo-Georgian war broke out on 8 August 2008 and lasted for five days. Turkey expressed its support for Georgian sovereignty, while it tried to call for restraint and avoid targeting Russia. The Straits played a vital role in the conflict, as the U.S. was determined to provide humanitarian assistance to Georgia through them. Therefore, the U.S. was seeking access to the Black Sea in contravention of the regulation of the Straits (exceeding maximum weight and bypassing the maximum duration of stay by exiting and entering the Straits) (Alim 2022).

During the war, despite being a NATO member and an ally of the U.S., Turkey referred to the Montreux Convention in relation to American warships requesting passage through the Straits towards the Black Sea to provide humanitarian aid to Georgia. At first, the U.S. wanted to send two navy hospitals (the USNS *Comfort* and USNS *Mercy*), but their aggregate weight exceeded the maximum tonnage. Thus, the U.S. sent three smaller ships instead. Due to a warning from Russia regarding the maximum duration of stay and the threat that, if exceeded by the American vessels, Turkey would be held responsible, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a note on the basic principles of the Convention concerning non-littoral countries (Kelkitli

2017, 69). To solve the Russo-Georgian conflict without including external powers, Turkey put great effort into mediating between Russia and Georgia, albeit to no avail, as Russia recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Çelikpala and Erşen 2018, 76). This also signalled the Turkish interest in becoming a more active player in the region and implementing an active regional diplomacy (Antonenko 2009).

The 2014 annexation of Crimea

The Crimean crisis began in late 2013 when the pro-Moscow Ukrainian government decided against signing the Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union. Protests broke out in reaction, eventually causing the collapse of the Ukrainian government and Russia to intervene (Manoli 2015, 121–122). In 2014, a referendum was held on whether Crimea should join Russia: based on the (contested) affirmative result, Russia annexed Crimea.

In 2010, the Kharkiv Pact between Russia and Ukraine extended Russia's lease (which was due to expire in 2017) over Crimean naval facilities for another 25 years until 2042. According to the Pact, Russian military forces were already legally in the region. After Russia annexed Crimea, the pact was unilaterally annulled in 2014 (Unver 2018, 331).

After the Russian annexation of Crimea, many Western states-imposed sanctions on Russia. However, Turkey decided not to join the sanctions regime, although the Russian re-militarization of the area changed the balance of power (Baev 2019a, 417). Although Turkey did not recognize the former referendum and supported Ukrainian territorial integrity, it was equally important not to alienate Russia. Thus, when Russia expressed its concern regarding the joint naval exercise of NATO members Romania and Bulgaria together with a U.S. ship on the Black Sea, the Turkish leadership was eager to confirm that everything had been arranged according to the Convention (Çelikpala and Erşen 2018, 76). Turkey wishes to prevent the escalation of any conflict in the region into a conflict between NATO and Russia. Consequently, Turkey struggles to keep the NATO presence in the area as small as possible. Therefore, only a small multinational brigade has been deployed in Romania, and NATO's naval vessels have to comply with the regulations of the Convention. Although Erdoğan expressed concern about the Black Sea turning into a 'Russian lake,' he has had to accept the new geostrategic reality (Baev 2019b, 54–55).

The 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war

The Russian invasion of Ukraine started on 24 February 2022. According to the official Russian statement, it was a 'special military operation' (Al 2024). In the Montreux Convention, 'times of war' begin with a declaration of war. Therefore, the Russian statement might have influenced the naval movement through the Straits. Nevertheless, it was clear from the beginning that it was indeed a full-scale war against Ukraine's territory. Therefore, Turkey, as a non-belligerent state, applied Article 19 of the Convention and acted accordingly: it denied passage of the warships of the warring countries, except for those returning to their home bases. This was confirmed on 27 February, shortly after the war started, by the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. Commercial vessels were free to transit the Straits; however, due to

the historical experience of warships disguised as merchant ships, Turkey has the right to search the vessels of the warring countries. Ships carrying grain or other food from the warring countries were also searched in accordance with the Food Corridor Treaty signed by Turkey, Russia, and Ukraine in July 2022 (Acer 2023, 302–306). Turkey tried to use its intermediate position between Russia and Ukraine to broker peace. However, negotiations in Istanbul in March, hosted by the Turks, remained unsuccessful (Hale 2023, 55).

Between February and July 2022, Russia imposed a full blockade on the Ukrainian Black Sea ports, thus crippling the Ukrainian economy and foreign trade and threatening world food security, which the G7 called the 'weaponization of food'. Russia was able to achieve this result due to the special nature of the Straits. As mentioned, they constitute maritime choke points, which means they enjoy control over sea lines of communication – in this case, the only naval route from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea (Segell 2023, 645) – and, therefore, the only way to open oceans. Once again, Turkey assumed the role of the mediator in this conflict (Gümüş 2022, 180). On the one hand, it deemed the Russian actions 'aggression' and supported Ukraine's territorial integrity, and on the other hand, it refused to join in with Western (EU and U.S.) sanctions imposed on Russia. Also, Turkey was eager to assist UN officials in negotiating the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2022, which allowed the transport of grain and other crops from Ukraine via international trade routes; however, due to Russia, the deal was not extended after July 2023 (United Nations 2023).

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that the Russian interest in accessing warm waters constitutes a geopolitical continuity, in which Russia has exerted pressure on the Turkish Straits for centuries. In this way, the conventional argument of the permanence of geography, and therefore the continuity of geostrategic objectives connected to that permanence of geography, is validated through this methodologically innovative examination. For this reason, Russian geopolitical agents tend to perceive the Straits from the perspective of encirclement. As explained, the Straits have been a traditional area of confrontation between Western-supported powers (the Byzantine Empire and the Ottoman Empire) and Russian interests. To the Russians, there are advantages in being granted trade privileges and freedom of navigation in the Straits, whereas the prevention of the militariation of the waterway and restrictions on the passage of foreign ships tend to be considered ideal, as the Russian navy thrives in the Black Sea and competition is not desired.

In spite of this, it is also a fact that Turkey and Russia are able to combine their wills to keep the Americans out of the straits. This has already happened in the past as demonstrated in our case studies, and both Russia and Turkey have been continuously opposed to the militarization of the Straits.

To a certain degree, the security of Europe has depended on guaranteeing that the Straits do not fall under full Russian control. The three case studies confirm not only the relevance of the Straits in times of political conflict and full-scale war but also the balance of powers between two regional hegemons (Turkey and Russia). In this way, the paper confirms the central geographical relevance of a particular choke

point and considers its strategic relevance to the two mentioned key powers in the region.

We have tested that the central position of the maritime route through the Turkish Straits has played an important role since ancient history and continues to do so in the 21st century, as it is supported by the analytical results from our three case studies. Moreover, most international trade commodities still circulate via maritime transportation, and the Turkish Straits are, in addition, an energy transport corridor between Asia and Europe.

While we can confirm the recognition of (i) the Turkish objective of keeping the status quo and (ii) Russia's increasing military power in the region (Çelikpala and Erşen 2018; Segell 2023) in the literature, the uniqueness of the central geographical position of the Straits and the connection between physical geography and the behaviour of the state on the international arena via the perceptions of the geopolitical agents was not assessed until now.

From a neoclassical geopolitics' perspective, it is unsurprising that both Turkey and Russia are interested in exerting and expanding their influence over the Straits as much as possible. The research validated this assumption and reached the objective stated in the introduction. The hypothesis was also confirmed. Due to the increasing Russian military presence described in the case studies, Turkey's aim is to preserve the status quo and prevent other foreign powers (e.g., the U.S. and NATO) from gaining a significant foothold in the area. As for the status of the Straits, Turkey is adamant about maintaining the prominent position of the Montreux Convention, as this gives Turkey significant authority over the naval route. Russia, on the other hand, has been seeking access to the open oceans and crucial trade routes for centuries, as Russia is encircled by the Straits, which are the only passage out of the Black Sea and, therefore, of vital interest. The research results sustain the prediction that the current Russian geopolitical agents will, therefore, tend to continue to take steps to gain more leverage over the Turkish Straits.

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Author contributions

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