The Straits After the Montreux Conference

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CONFERENCE

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When on April 10, 1936, the Turkish Government requested a revision of the Lausanne Straits Convention, it focused attention on a problem almost as old as history itself. The issue involved the narrow body of water between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, about 235 miles long, made up of the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmora and the Bosphorus. The modern question dates essentially from 1774 when Russia won commercial access to the Straits, a right later extended to other Powers. But the waterway remained closed to warships according to the “ancient rule” of the Ottoman Empire, of which England became a guarantor in 1809. During the nineteenth century the struggle for control of the Straits was waged primarily between Russia and England: Russia wanted them open to its warships alone, while England wished them closed to all warships and open only to commerce. If, however, they must be opened to warships, the English desired that their vessels be permitted to enter the Black Sea. Russia, for a brief period, obtained access to the Straits by the Treaty of Unkiar Eskelessi in 1853. But the conventions of 1840 and 1841 closed them again to non-Turkish war vessels. This rule of closure remained the law until 1923. The treaties of 1856, 1871 and 1878 made no essential changes in the legal status of the Straits, though Germany’s penetration of the Ottoman Empire in the years before the World War altered fundamentally the political situation.

The war brought the Straits an entirely new status. The Armistice of Mudros (October 31, 1918) gave Great Britain a controlling influence over the Ottoman territories, while the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) was to have sealed British dominance. Though Constantinople remained technically Turkish, a rigid “international” control was set up over the Straits, which were to “be open, both in peace and war, to every vessel of commerce or of war and to military and commercial aircraft, without distinction as to flag.” But the revolt of the Turks under Mustafa Kamâl Atatürk and his subsequent victory over the Greeks in 1922 ended the Sèvres settlement.

The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) terminated the Greco-Turkish struggle, recognized the complete independence of Turkey, and provided a new Convention for the Straits. It guaranteed their commercial freedom with certain restrictions in time of war. The warships which any one Power in time of peace might send through the Straits were not to exceed the strength of the most powerful Black Sea fleet, i.e., the Russian. The Powers reserved the right “at all times and under all circumstances” to send not more than three warships into the Black Sea, none to exceed 10,000 tons each. The zone of the Straits was demilitarized, though Constantinople was allowed a garrison of 12,000, a naval base and an arsenal. To enforce these provisions an International Commission under the League of Nations was organized. Turkey’s desire for an individual and collective guarantee was refused; instead the Powers offered to act together under the League in case the security of the zone were menaced. Nevertheless
both Russia and Turkey considered the Straits provisions as inadequate for the security of the region. Fundamentally Lausanne did not solve the problem.

Turkey's continued protests against the Lausanne Convention did not become especially audible until the breakdown of the League system in the years following 1931. It was at the Geneva Disarmament Conference in 1933 that the Turkish Government requested the removal of the Lausanne clauses on the grounds that they were "incompatible with the right of legitimate defense," and she insisted that "if the military clauses in the various peace treaties [were to be eliminated] the military clauses in the Lausanne Treaty [should be] treated in the same way."

Meanwhile, Turkey had become a stabilizing factor in the Near East. Her friendship with Russia dates from 1921. In 1932 she became a member of the League of Nations. In 1933 she signed a close alliance with Greece. She took a leading part in the Balkan Conferences and with Greece, Yugoslavia and Rumania became a member of the Balkan Entente of 1934. She therefore was in a good position to work for the revision of the Straits Convention.

The diplomatic preparation for revision was thorough. During the Ethiopian crisis, Turkey, in return for assuming her full obligations under Article XVI of the League Covenant, received "reciprocal assurances" from Great Britain and France, possibly concerning the Straits. But it was not until the spring of 1936 that a formal request for revision of the régime was made. On March 7 Germany remilitarized the Rhineland in violation of both the Versailles and Locarno treaties. On April 10 the Turkish Government requested the Lausanne signatories and the Secretary-General of the League to call a conference to revise the Straits Convention. The note declared that at the time the Lausanne Convention was signed the European situation presented "a totally different aspect from that of today." Then the League seemed strong and its guarantees effective, the future looked peaceful, and there was a prospect of arms reduction. This was no longer true. International guarantees had failed elsewhere — Turkey must rely on her own strength. Both the British and the Russian Governments replied on April 16 accepting the convocation of a conference "without delay," and the latter thoroughly supported the Turkish desire for remilitarization of the Straits. At the end of April France fell into line. The Balkan Entente was likewise favorably disposed. The Bulgarian Government, not a member of the Balkan Entente, did not feel that it could oppose the conference and announced that it would not oppose remilitarization. Japan was sympathetic; only Italy disapproved.

The conference for revision met at Montreux, Switzerland, on June 22. All the Lausanne signatories were represented except Italy, who refused to send a delegation as long as sanctions prevailed and Great Britain kept her mutual assistance agreements in the eastern Mediterranean. It was understood from the beginning that there would be a new convention, that commercial freedom would be guaranteed, and that Turkey would have the right to remilitarize the Straits; but there was fundamental disagreement, particularly between Great Britain and the continental Powers, concerning the Turkish right to close the Straits. When the conference began, Tevfik Rushdi Aras, the Turkish Foreign Minister, presented a draft which abolished the Commission of the Straits and placed the zone definitely under complete Turkish sovereignty,
with the right of closure. The project guaranteed freedom of commerce, but remilitarized the Straits. Non-riverain Powers were limited to 14,000 tons of warships in the Straits and 28,000 tons in the Black Sea. Submarines and civil and military aircraft were completely excluded from the Straits.

The other Powers challenged the Turkish project though they agreed in principle that a change was necessary. Even Turkey's ally, Soviet Russia, attacked those features which would have limited the right of Soviet warships to pass to and from the Mediterranean. Moscow's aim was to make the Black Sea a *mare clausum* to all except Soviet men-of-war. The British counter-project, presented on July 6, raised the tonnage limitations in the Straits and in the Black Sea (the latter to 45,000 tons of warships for non-riverain states), and provided that in case of war belligerents could pursue their enemies through the Straits into the Black Sea — an obvious threat both to Turkey and to Russia. Moreover, the Turkish right to close the Straits was to be decided by a two-thirds vote of the League Council. The British proposal further provided for a Commission of the Straits.

Naturally the British draft aroused the opposition of the Turkish and Russian delegations, not to mention the states of the Balkan Entente. Some observers thought that London had been instigated into taking its position by Berlin, who for obvious reasons desired to handicap Russia. So incensed were the Russians that they were prepared to leave the conference. Rumania, now in close alliance with Turkey through the Balkan Entente, had revised her own Straits policy and came out strongly against England. M. Titulescu, the Rumanian Foreign Minister, accused the British of duplicity — of supporting collective security and regional pacts at Geneva and then sabotaging them at Montreux. By July 15 Great Britain changed her position. The announcement of the Austro-German accord entered into July 11 under Italian auspices may have had something to do with the shift. Throughout this phase M. Paul-Boncour of France acted as the mediator between the British and the Russo-Turkish positions. The result was the conclusion of the new convention on July 20, which on the whole recognized the thesis upheld by Soviet Russia, France and the Balkan Entente.

The new Convention reestablishes Turkish sovereignity over the Straits, with full right to remilitarize the zone. The Commission of the Straits ceases to exist after October 1, 1936. The Convention guarantees freedom of commerce, both in peace and war, even if Turkey is a belligerent, provided the commercial vessels do not commit acts of war. Warships are subject to very strict regulations both in peace and war. In war, belligerents are forbidden to use the Straits, except when acting under the authority of the League, or when acting in accordance with a regional pact to which Turkey is a party and which is registered at Geneva under Article XVIII of the Covenant. Turkey has the right to close the Straits in case of threat of war or aggression, subject to a two-thirds vote of the League Council. The Convention is to last for twenty years, unless denounced, and may be revised every five years.

While Japan and Bulgaria accepted the Convention, they made reservations, the former as to the participation of the League and the latter as to the regional pacts. Italy neither signed nor approved.

The Montreux Convention is the first formal revision of a postwar treaty
by peaceful means. It is also a clear victory for Turkey, for her friends in the Balkan Entente, and for the policy of regional pacts. But there are gains also for Soviet Russia, closely associated with Turkey, and now allied to both France and Czechoslovakia. In many respects the Convention is a reversion to Russia's position under the Treaty of Unkiar Eskiessi. The Soviets may now send their fleet into the Mediterranean in peacetime without restriction, while non-riverain Powers are limited to 45,000 tons in the Black Sea. Should Turkey adhere to the Franco-Russian pact, the French and Russian fleets might utilize the Black Sea as a base for naval operations in the Mediterranean. The League, too, has won a theoretical victory, since its members are assured access to the Straits when acting against an aggressor, and Article XVIII of the Covenant is specifically applied for the first time. Germany, and particularly Italy, are losers, since the anti-Italian group in the Mediterranean seems definitely strengthened. Great Britain, having lost her real control over the Straits and having been weakened at Suez by Italy, may discover that the fate of her influence in the Near East is sealed unless she assists the formation of a Near Eastern Entente in much the same way that France and Soviet Russia have fostered the Balkan Entente.

It may be suggested that the Montreux Convention is a reversion to the prewar status of the Straits, and is not in a fundamental sense a genuine solution of the problem. A few days after the close of the conference, Turkish troops once more took their stations along the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. The Montreux Convention, it is true, means the end of an experiment in the internationalization of waterways. But there would seem to be no real international solution of the problem without general naval and military disarmament and without a strong international organization that can guarantee security. Further, an attempt to reach a genuine international solution would seem to imply that such waterways as the Suez Canal, the Panama Canal and the Straits of Gibraltar should also be placed in the same category with the passage to the Black Sea.