

## From Lausanne to Montreux: Türkiye's Diplomatic Struggle for the Reconsideration of the Straits Regime

### Lozan'dan Montrö'ye: Türkiye'nin Boğazlar Rejiminin Yeniden Gözden Geçirilmesi Konusundaki Diplomatik Mücadelesi

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#### ABSTRACT

The Turkish Straits, whose regime was determined by the Montreux Convention in 1936, have held significant importance in global geopolitics during the periods of the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, and the subsequent eras. Today, the security of the Straits is brought to the forefront by both Türkiye and the countries bordering the Black Sea due to military, commercial, and humanitarian reasons whenever East-West oriented crises and conflicts arise. The management regime of the Straits was decided by the Lausanne Treaty in 1923; however, within less than a decade, significant changes in European politics, increased armament, and the threats posed by German Nazism and Italian Fascism forced Türkiye to reconsider the control of the Straits, which were managed by an international commission. This issue became one of the main topics of Turkish diplomacy from the early 1930s, particularly in various international forums, including the League of Nations. During this period, the Turkish Foreign Ministry conducted a patient diplomacy, aiming for Türkiye to independently manage the Straits, while considering the sensitive international balances. As a result, Türkiye convinced the countries that signed the Lausanne Treaty and the major powers of the time to reevaluate the regime of the Straits. Diplomatic correspondence showing how this process progressed is concentrated between the years 1933 and 1936. This study aims to explain how Türkiye's efforts to convince the relevant parties to reevaluate the regime of the Straits took place within the historical flow. The study evaluates the correspondence of the embassies of the United States, Türkiye the United Kingdom, Switzerland, France, Italy, and Russia, which closely followed the Straits issue, and the correspondence of Turkish diplomatic missions in Europe as primary sources within the framework of the historicism methodology.

**Keywords:** Turkish Straits, Straits, Montreux Convention, Diplomacy, Diplomatic Correspondence

#### ÖZ

Montrö Boğazlar Sözleşmesi ile 1936 yılında rejimi belirlenen Türk Boğazları; I. ve II. Dünya Savaşları, Soğuk Savaş ve sonrasındaki dönemlerde küresel jeopolitika açısından önemli yer tutmuştur. Günümüzde de Doğu-Batı eksenli kriz ve çatışmalar söz konusu olduğunda, Boğazların güvenliği; askeri, ticari ve insani sebeplerle hem ülkemiz hem de Karadeniz'e kıyısı olan ülkeler tarafından gündeme getirilmektedir. Boğazların yönetim rejimi 1923'te Lozan Antlaşması ile kararlaştırılmıştı; ancak, aradan geçen 10 yıldan kısa sürede Avrupa siyasetinde

meydana gelen önemli deęişimler, silahlanmanın artışı, Alman Nazizmi ile İtalyan Faşizminin oluşturduğu tehditler Türkiye'yi uluslararası bir komisyon tarafından yönetilmekte olan Boęazlar'ın kontrolü konusunu yeniden deęerlendirmeye zorlamıştır. Bu konu, Milletler Cemiyeti başta olmak üzere çeşitli uluslararası forumlarda 1930'ların başından itibaren Türk diplomasisinin ana meselelerinden biri olmuştur. Bu dönemde Türk Dışışleri, uluslararası hassas dengeleri gözeterek Türkiye'nin Boęazların yönetimini tek başına yürütme hedefine doğru sabırlı bir diplomasi yürütmüştür. Bunun sonucunda, Lozan Antlaşması'nı imzalayan ülkeler ve dönemin büyük güçlerini Boęazların rejimini yeniden deęerlendirmeye ikna etmiştir. Bu sürecin nasıl ilerlediğini gösteren diplomatik yazışmalar 1933-1936 yılları arasında yoğunlaşmaktadır. Bu çalışma; Türkiye'nin ilgili tarafları, Boęazların rejiminin yeniden deęerlendirilmesi için ikna çabalarını tarihsel akış içerisinde nasıl gerçekleştirdiğini açıklamayı hedeflemektedir. Çalışmada, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin Boęazlar meselesini yakından takip eden Türkiye, Birleşik Krallık, İsviçre, Fransa, İtalya ve Rusya'daki büyükelçiliklerinin yazışmaları ve Avrupa'daki Türk diplomatik misyonlarının yazışmaları ana kaynakların büyük kısmını oluşturup tarihselcilik metodolojisi çerçevesinde deęerlendirilmiştir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Türk Boęazları, Boęazlar, Montrö Sözleşmesi, Diplomasi, Diplomatik Yazışma

## Introduction

The Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits have long held significant geostrategic, economic, and political importance, serving as crucial elements in Türkiye's international relations. These waterways have profoundly influenced global geopolitical dynamics, extending beyond Türkiye's bilateral relations with countries like Russia or Western nations. Issues concerning the straits invariably involve multiple major powers and impact a wide range of areas, from military to economics.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, the Turkish Straits have consistently been central to international affairs due to their implications not only for Türkiye but also for various other nations. Until the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire and its fleet dominated the Black Sea. However, during Catherine the Great's reign (1762-1796), the Ottomans lost control after consecutive defeats in the Russo-Turkish Wars of 1769-1774 and 1787-1791. By 1794, Russia had established ports in Sevastopol and Odesa<sup>2</sup>. While the Russo-Ottoman rivalry dominated the northern Black Sea, Western powers initially did not see Russia as a significant threat to their global influence, paying little attention to its actions in the region. However, by the mid-19th century, during the Crimean War (1853-1856), Russia's growing power threatened Ottoman control over Istanbul and the straits. Additionally, Russia's claim as the protector of Orthodox Christians posed a potential threat to Europe, prompting England, France, and the Ottoman Empire to ally against Russia. This alliance successfully kept Russian forces out of Wallachia and Moldova, preventing further advances. The 1856 Treaty of Paris marked a turning point in Europe-Ottoman relations, with Europe formally recognizing the Ottoman Empire within the European legal system, providing a diplomatic shield against Russia. The European Great Powers, unwilling for any single country to control Istanbul and the straits, maintained a balance of power that extended the Ottoman Empire's survival. Aware of this rivalry and the straits' strategic importance, the Ottoman Empire leveraged its position to sustain itself, as it could not have survived economically or militarily without this advantage from the 19th century to World War.

Following the First World War, the Ottoman Empire dissolved, and a new nation was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his companions, based on a new political structure and worldview. The war officially ended for Türkiye with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, where the involved parties agreed to the principle of unrestricted passage and navigation by sea and air through the Turkish Straits — the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus — in both peacetime and

1 Kurtuluş Yücel, *The Legal Regime of the Turkish Straits: Regulation of the Montreux Convention and Its Importance on the International Relations after the Conflict of Ukraine* (PhD thesis, Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 2019), 6.

2 Tanrıverdi, Mustafa, "The Effect of Russo-Turkish Wars on The Martial Arrangement of Russia (1696-1878)", *Contemporary Turkish – Russian Relations From Past to Future* in, ed. Ilyas Topsakal and Ali Askerov (Istanbul University Press, 2021), 245.

wartime.<sup>3</sup> Given the critical geostrategic, political, and military significance of the straits, the treaty parties deemed it imperative to prevent Türkiye from exerting unilateral control over them. Accordingly, the agreement stipulated the establishment of an international commission comprising delegates tasked with implementing the agreed-upon regulations within the area. While the Turkish representative presided over this commission<sup>4</sup>, its formation and operation nevertheless represented a limitation on Turkish sovereignty within the region.

During the transitional period following the First World War the world, especially Europe, underwent significant advancements and transformations, prompting Turkish authorities to seek greater control over the straits. The years from 1918 to 1939, leading up to World War II, were marked by turbulence and notable changes in international relations. Key developments included a global economic crisis, the rise of heavy industry for military production, and the spread of Nazi and Fascist ideologies, which heightened global tensions. Despite efforts by institutions like the League of Nations, initiatives such as the Geneva Disarmament Talks (1932-1934) failed, signaling the growing likelihood of another major conflict.<sup>5</sup> As tensions escalated in Europe and the Pacific, signaling preparations for another conflict, the Lausanne Treaty initially raised hopes for global disarmament. However, by the 1930s, the situation had shifted drastically. Amid these global changes, the Turkish Republic needed to reassess its stance on the security of the Straits and its own interests in light of potential conflict. This study examines the evolution of Turkish diplomatic strategies during this period by analyzing correspondence between American embassies and Washington, as well as with countries that signed the Lausanne Treaty and their relations with Turkish diplomatic missions. It focuses on Türkiye's efforts to advocate for renewing the Straits regime from 1933 to the 1936 Montreux Conference, set against the backdrop of Europe's Pre-World War II turmoil.

## 1. Pre-WWII Prelude: Key Events and Tensions in Europe

After signing the Lausanne Peace Agreement, Türkiye aimed to adopt a European-style government and lifestyle. Turkish leaders sought to renew the country bureaucratically, politically, and economically, establishing a republic after the Ottoman Empire's collapse.<sup>6</sup> While doing so, Türkiye had to stay attentive to unfolding international issues in Europe. The Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920) ended First World War with harsh treaties like the Treaty of Sèvres and the Treaty of Versailles. Both the German and Turkish people were dissatisfied with these agreements. After over three years of war and rejecting the Treaty of Sèvres,

3 "Lausanne Peace Treaty," Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs accessed 16 May 2024, [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/lausanne-peace-treaty-part-i\\_-\\_political-clauses.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/lausanne-peace-treaty-part-i_-_political-clauses.en.mfa)

4 "II. Convention Relating to the Régime of the Straits" Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed 16 May 2024, [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/ii\\_-\\_convention-relating-to-the-regime-of-the-straits.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/ii_-_convention-relating-to-the-regime-of-the-straits.en.mfa)

5 Antony Best, Jussi M. Hanhimaki, Joseph A. Mailo, and Kirsten E. Schulze, "The path to European war, 1930-39", in *International History of the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, (London: Routledge, 2014), 156-183.

6 Zeynep Şen, "Türk Çağdaşlaşma Hareketinde (Cumhuriyet Döneminde) Gerçekleştirilen Atılımlar", *Anadolu Bil Meslek Yüksekokulu Dergisi* 45/1 (2017), 150-158.

Türkiye secured the Treaty of Lausanne on July 24, 1923, resolving most of the pressing issues with the Allied powers.<sup>7</sup> In this period, the Straits were placed under the control of an international commission<sup>8</sup>, and with the expectation of global disarmament, Türkiye accepted this arrangement. After the First World War, the great powers of Europe sought a way to prevent another major conflict. Consequently, the League of Nations was established in 1920 to promote peace and cooperation among nations.<sup>9</sup> However, Europe faced two interlinked problems: a significant arms race following the war and the rise of radical ideologies, exacerbated by the heavy burdens imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. The world was witnessing the ascent of radical ideologies.

### 1.1. Rise of Radical Ideologies to Power

Radical ideologies gained power, preparing the world for war in both East and West. The Treaty of Versailles fueled German resentment, allowing radical groups to thrive. In this context, Hitler and the Nazis rose to power in Germany in 1933 after 13 years of struggle. Having witnessed Germany's World War I defeat, Hitler aimed to create a "Greater Germany" by uniting Austria and Germany, later achieving this goal. He sought to establish the Third Reich, with himself as Führer. Meanwhile, Italy, despite being on the winning side of World War I, felt disrespected by minimal territorial gains. Mussolini and his Fascist ideology seized power in 1922 through a brutal march on Rome.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Italy faced political problems from 1922 onwards despite being on the winning side of the First World War. Italians felt disrespected by the minimal territorial gains they received despite their victory. Eventually, Mussolini and his ideology of Fascism marched on Rome and seized power in October 1922 through brutal and threatening means, rising to prominence.<sup>11</sup> In the Far East, Japan also ignored the League of Nations and efforts to halt revisionist aggression. As an expansionist power, Japanese imperialism asserted racial superiority. While Hitler aimed to build an empire in Eastern Europe, Japan sought to establish its own in East Asia. Despite their conflicting ideologies of racial superiority, their shared opposition to British and French imperialist hegemony created common ground.<sup>12</sup>

7 "İstiklal Harbi" Türk Tarih Kurumu Başkanlığı, accessed 18 May 2024, <https://www.ttk.gov.tr/belgelerle-tarih/istiklal-harbi/>

8 "Lausanne Peace Treaty".

9 "The League of Nations" The United Nations Office at Geneva, accessed 18 May 2024, <https://www.un Geneva.org/en/about/league-of-nations/overview>

10 "The Rise of the Nazi Party History of the Battle of Britain Exhibitions & Displays Research", Royal Airforce Museum, accessed 18 May 2024, <https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/history-of-the-battle-of-britain/the-rise-of-the-nazi-party/>

11 "How Mussolini Led Italy to Fascism and Why His Legacy Looms Today", National Geography History, accessed 18 May 2024, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/benito-mussolini-rise-of-fascism-in-italy>

12 "Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Anti-Comintern Pact", The National WWII Museum, 17 November 2021, accessed 18 May 2024, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/nazi-germany-imperial-japan-anti-comintern-pact>

Later on, the world witnessed these three countries collaboration; each believing they deserved power due to perceived racial superiority, past mistreatment or injustice. On September 27, 1940, they formed a military alliance known as the Axis Powers, comprising Germany, Italy, and Japan.<sup>13</sup> As ideologies like Nazism and Fascism gained prominence in Europe, the necessity for precautionary measures became increasingly evident for both Europe and many other parts of the world including Türkiye.

## 1.2. Failure of Geneva Disarmament Conference (1932-1934) and Anglo-German Naval Agreement (1935)

The League of Nations was established to promote peace, but from 1920 until World War II, it struggled to balance the interests of the U.S. and other major powers. Although countries like Germany, Italy, the UK, and France were members, it had limited success in uniting smaller nations. Despite being a precursor to the United Nations, the League failed to prevent global conflict or achieve widespread international cooperation.<sup>14</sup> The League's main objective was to encourage member states to reduce armaments to the lowest possible level, considering national security and international obligations. However, progress was slow; the Preparatory Commission for disarmament only began in 1926, with the Geneva talks delayed until 1932.<sup>15</sup> These delays underscore the League's slow operations and the difficulty of achieving international consensus, particularly on disarmament, revising harsh treaties, and resolving issues from the war.

A major failure was seen in the Geneva Disarmament Conference, where leading powers like France, Germany, and Great Britain met with delegates from over 60 countries.<sup>16</sup> Six months prior to the conference, France made a significant announcement, declaring that its military and armaments were already at the lowest level necessary for national security. However, France indicated a willingness to pursue further reductions only if the Anglo-Saxon countries reciprocate.<sup>17</sup> Germany and Hitler sought parity with other nations, increasing French security concerns. Britain, the sole major power able to mediate, aimed to appease Germany while addressing French concerns. Dissatisfied with the progress, Germany left the negotiations in 1932 but was invited back in 1933 after Hitler became chancellor. Britain's new plan, however, did not achieve equality between Germany and France, leading Germany to exit the conference again in October 1933.<sup>18</sup>

13 "Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy Become Friends", Anne Frank House, accessed 16 May 2024, <https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/the-timeline/entire-timeline/#199>

14 John M. Merriman and John M. Winter, *Europe since 1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction*, vol 3. (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006), 1629.

15 Best, Hanhimaki, Mailo, and Schuzlze, "The path to European war, 1930-39", 156.

16 "World Disarmament Conference," Britannica, accessed 2 April 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/World-Disarmament-Conference>

17 Thomas Davies, "France and the World Disarmament Conference of 1932-34", *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 15/4 (2004): 766, accessed 17 May 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592290490886838>

18 Carolyn J. Kitching, *Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 194-205.

On the other hand Germany and United states were not able to promise France for the support they need in exchange of imposing limit to the French arms.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, its failure enabled Adolf Hitler to criticize other nations for not fulfilling their disarmament obligations and rather than fostering peace, the discussions further strained already tenuous relations.<sup>20</sup> The failure of the talk brought the conference to an end without any resolution.<sup>21</sup> The failure of the conference was strategically significant, as it altered the balance of relations in Europe and demonstrated the League of Nations' inability to address profound issues such as global disarmament and the creation of a common atmosphere of peace in Europe and beyond.

Another treaty failed, affecting countries' strategies once again. After World War I, the U.S. and Great Britain sought to limit naval armaments with the Five Power Treaty of 1922. This treaty, involving the U.S., Great Britain, Italy, Japan, and France, imposed limitations that eased the naval arms race while the U.S. and Britain maintained significant sea control. Germany faced severe restrictions under the Versailles Treaty. By the 1930s, Japan, seeking imperial power in East Asia, aimed for parity with Britain and the U.S. In December 1934, Japan announced it would no longer adhere to the treaty, which likely provoked Germany, already seeking equal status and opposing the Versailles Treaty. In response, Britain aimed to maintain relations with Germany and secure a naval agreement, even at the cost of straining its relationship with France.<sup>22</sup> This could ease tensions for the UK and Europe. In pursuing this agreement, Britain aimed to ensure it did not compromise French security, as the German proposal aligned with British interests. On June 7, 1935, Washington received a message from its Embassy in London stating that Germany proposed limiting its naval power to 35 percent of the British fleet and adhering to this limit under all circumstances. Britain discreetly informed France, Japan, and Italy about the proposal through a secret aide-memoire, seeking their views. The U.S. responded on June 11, approving the initiative.<sup>23</sup> According to the United States Embassy in France, the French government was uncertain whether Germany would uphold its commitment to maintain a fleet strength ratio of 35 percent if the Soviet government increased its naval armaments. Consequently, France informed its allies that, for its own security, it would be increasing its naval power.<sup>24</sup> Although British politicians believed excluding France from the agreement would benefit both nations, it reminded everyone that alliances can be disregarded when a country's own interests and security are at stake. As a

19 "Geneva Disarmament Conference Collapses", Politico, accessed 18 May 2024, <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/06/this-day-in-politics-092520>

20 Pippa Catterall ve Carolyn J. Kitching, *Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference: A Study in International History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2003), 154–55.

21 Walter A, McDougall, "World Disarmament Conference". Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/World-Disarmament-Conference> accessed 12 April 2024.

22 Best Richard A Jr. "The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935 and Aspect of Appeasement", *Naval War College Review* 34/2 (1981), 68–69.

23 "Foreign Relations of The United States Diplomatic Papers 1935; Volume I General The Near East And Africa" Wics Library, accessed 14 April 2024 <https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/G5OAT7XT7HRHX84>

24 "Foreign Relations of The United States Diplomatic Papers 1935; Volume I General The Near East And Africa."

result, France, unwilling to accept this, began acting more independently and formed ties with Italy and others, regardless of British approval.

## 2. On Diplomatic Correspondence: Turkish Response to the Changing Atmosphere in Europe

Turkish authorities closely monitored the response and repercussions of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. Following the agreement, the Germans were elated, attributing this outcome to Hitler's speech on May 21, 1935<sup>25</sup>, which addressed Europe's evolving policies and Germany's triumph over the restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. With the naval issue resolved, Germany hoped that both England and the rest of Europe would subsequently agree to air and ground military limitations revoke based on German expectations. However, later on, German public opinion and politicians began to criticize the agreement as being against their own interests. They argued that Germany was committing itself too much and that giving such concessions to foster friendship with Great Britain was unnecessary. In fact, the German government had second thoughts. Eventually, the Foreign Minister of Nazi Germany at the time, Konstantin Baron von Neurath, explained to Türkiye's Berlin Ambassador, "Our only reservation in agreeing to maintain a naval force equivalent to 35% of the British navy is this: the given ratio is based on the current strength of naval forces, but if Russia increases the power and number of its Baltic fleet, undoubtedly our 35% ratio will change."<sup>26</sup> This situation demonstrates that the Germans had the option to disregard the agreement when they deemed it necessary. Conversely, British authorities were aware that Germany aimed to create political opportunities to establish ties with Great Britain. Germany intended to leverage these ties to gain the support of the British government for its future colonial ambitions. According to reports from Türkiye's London Embassy, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin visited German Ambassador Joachim von Ribbentrop and expressed satisfaction with reaching the agreement. However, Baldwin also made it clear that despite the agreement, Great Britain would not support Germany's colonial aspirations.<sup>27</sup> In fact, a report from Türkiye's French Embassy in Paris states that "The French regarded this agreement as a major blow to themselves." Mr. Bastid of the French Senate Foreign Relations Committee stated that this situation had pushed France closer to Italy. The report also noted that, although it was thought to have caused a deep wound, Pierre Laval showed an unprecedented level of composure.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, although the Italians expressed disturbance, Türkiye's Budapest Embassy claimed that Mussolini was not happy with some fraction of French politics and was not expected

25 H. L., "Herr Hitler's Speech of May 21<sup>st</sup>", *Bulletin of International News* 11/24 (1935): 3-7.

26 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of State Archives Ottoman Archives ) (BOA), Hariciye Vekaleti Umumi Katıblık (HVUKK), 534/ 37176 - 149204 - 59 (7 Nisan 1935).

27 BOA, HVUKK, 501/31438 - 124378 - 3 (7 Temmuz 1935).

28 BOA, HVUKK 534/37176-149204-59.



to maintain French – Italian friendship.<sup>29</sup> The public outrage, at the time only pushed Great Britain to consider its ally, compelling Eden to be sent to Paris and Rome to soften relations and maintain their alliance.<sup>30</sup> The French response to this agreement was visibly evident through another direct incident. When the British sought assistance from France during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, requesting Laval to pressure the Italians to cease their attack, Laval disregarded this plea. A Turkish report from the French embassy corroborated this information firsthand. Subsequently, the Turkish ambassador in Paris approached Laval to inquire about any proposals from the British government regarding the Ethiopian situation. In response, Laval acknowledged the inquiry but dismissed it as belated, remarking, “They had not found it necessary to solicit our input during their negotiations with the Germans.” Furthermore, he iterated, “We are disinclined to align ourselves with the British in their conflict with the Italians. “The same report indicated that the thawing of relations between the British and the French was facilitated by a speech delivered by the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare<sup>31</sup> on July 11th, 1934. In this speech, Hoare stated that the British were striving for peace efforts, highlighting that the French had actually benefited from this agreement. He explained that prior to the Great War (World War I), the French naval power lagged 30% behind that of Germany, whereas with this agreement, the French navy gained a superior position over the Germans by a margin of 43%. This speech served to reassure the parties involved and normalize their relations once again.<sup>32</sup> However, while regaining France sympathy it was late for utilizing French diplomatic power for reducing the Italian treat over Ethiopia. The invasion of Ethiopia took place between 1934 and 1936, during which the Italians eventually took control of the country. Turbulent and constant guerrilla wars ensued, and in 1947, Italy accepted Ethiopia’s independence.<sup>33</sup> The intensification of Italian aggression found a political and diplomatic vacuum, as the United Kingdom and France were at odds due to the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. This discord allowed Italy to feel emboldened and unchallenged in its invasion of Ethiopia. The Italian aggression served as a wake-up call for Türkiye, prompting a proactive response not only to counter the Italian invasion of Ethiopia but also to prepare for potential aggression against Türkiye and Balkan countries.

29 Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Cumhuriyet Arşivi (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of State Archives Republican Archives) (BCA) Muamelat Genel Müdürlüğü, 30-10-0-0 / 221 - 491 - 33 (24 Haziran 1935).

30 Best Richard A. Jr. “The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935 and Aspect of Appeasement”,77.

31 BOA, HVUKK 541/ 44144 - 209528 - 13 (12 Temmuz 1935).

32 “Foreign Office,” Hansard UK Parliament, 11 July 1935, accessed 22 May 2024, [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1935/jul/11/foreign-office#S5CV0304P0\\_19350711\\_HOC\\_302](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1935/jul/11/foreign-office#S5CV0304P0_19350711_HOC_302)

33 “Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1936),” Britannica, accessed 19 April 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Italo-Ethiopian-War-1935-1936>

## 2.1. Türkiye's Pursuit of Alliances and Security Agreements

While Italians were attacking Ethiopia and creating fear of Italian invasion in Mediterranean area and Balkans, Türkiye and regions countries such as Greece and Romania were looking for safety from expansionist attitude of Italy and possible foreign invasions. In this era there were a group of agreement that countries looking for to ensure their safety. Türkiye was trying to keep its ties with Greek and Balkan countries as well as Russia. As its one of the previous rival Russia was a new ally of Türkiye after first world war, initially Türkiye was excluded from the League of Nations due to being on the losing side of the war, and Russia was not it the league as well. Türkiye was skeptical about joining the league because of perceived British and French influence. This skepticism was shared by the Russians, leading to closer Turkish-Soviet relations and the signing of a friendship treaty in 1925, which was extended in 1929.<sup>34</sup>

The treaty stipulated mutual consent for any third-party commitments. In the 1930s, Türkiye aimed to engage in international affairs and was invited to join the League in 1932, with assurances that its relations with Russia would remain unaffected. When Russia joined the League two years later, the issue of 'not offending Russia' was resolved. Türkiye then became a strong defender of the League's values. In 1935, Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüştü Aras emphasized to British Ambassador Sir Percy Loraine that upholding the League's charter was central to Turkish foreign policy. It was obvious that Türkiye was expecting League to exert its power on international issues which could create a safer environment for Türkiye and other countries who were looking for safety and international collaboration. After Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, Türkiye supported sanctions against Italy. However, United States was never part of the league and with Germany and Japan withdrawing from the League in 1933 and Italy in 1935, the League lost its sanctioning power in reality. Türkiye, like other nations, had to seek alternative security measures to maintain peace in his region. In 1933, Greece and Türkiye signed an agreement pledging the inviolability of the Thracian border and cooperation on matters of common interest. Subsequently, Türkiye signed a Non-Aggression Pact with Romania and Yugoslavia. In 1934, the Balkan Pact or Balkan Entente was established with the participation of Greece, Romania, Türkiye, and Yugoslavia. The Entente committed the states to protecting their borders in the event of inter-state attacks and to cooperating in situations that threatened peace.<sup>35</sup> Apart from that most importantly Türkiye got support of the Balkan Pact signatories for rearmament of the Turkish straits in case of a revision.<sup>36</sup> While all the diplomatic work around the Europe was very hectic and countries were trying to appease Germany and Italy for the sake of maintaining peace and avoiding another world war, Türkiye was still not sure about its of the most strategic asset's safety. Türkiye was not able to have

34 "Türk-Rus Ortak Deklarasyonu (24 Mart 1941)," Atatürk Ansiklopedisi, accessed 13 October 2023, <https://aturkansiklopedisi.gov.tr/bilgi/turk-rus-ortak-deklarasyonu-24-mart-1941/>

35 William Hale, *Türk Dış Politikası 1774-2000*, (İstanbul: Mozaik, 2003), 52–55.

36 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 14 June 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1935v01/d891>

military equipment in and around the straits and ‘Mare Nostrum’<sup>37</sup> (our Sea)’ policy of Fascist Italy as a treat was alive and Türkiye had to take precautions.

Türkiye’s effort to convince Europe of a new strait regime and to stop Italy in its attacks on Ethiopia was visible, particularly in the diplomatic correspondence of the United States. In a telegram dated October 14, 1935, to Washington, the US ambassador reported that he had met with Italian officials to convince them not to bomb cities like Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa in Ethiopia. He noted that as he was leaving the meeting with this aim, the Turkish ambassador was entering with the same purpose.<sup>38</sup> The effort should not be seen solely as a humanitarian act but also as a strategic move to exert pressure on Italy. The success of Fascism in Ethiopia could easily encourage Italians to attack places included in “Mare Nostrum,” such as Greek and Turkish territories. Türkiye’s efforts were focused on curbing Italy’s aggressive militarist actions and reducing the threat from Italy. For Türkiye’s quest to renew the conditions of the Turkish Straits, the Anglo-German agreement was particularly important, as its remote results affected Türkiye’s security plans. The agreement disturbed France, which eventually rejected the British approach to stopping the Italians’ attack on Ethiopia. This concern for its safety against Italy and Germany pushed Türkiye to seek a renewal of the Straits’ status after the Treaty of Lausanne. Unstable relations made Türkiye wary of trusting Europe in the event of an attack on its straits, especially since the Treaty of Lausanne had already rendered the area without military powers. With Italy being an active military revisionist country and Europe unable to create a stable political environment to ensure security against an Italian or even German attack, Türkiye felt necessity to ensure its own military safety<sup>39</sup> at its best capacity with an agreement that would not disturb European power.

### 3. Turkish Diplomatic Efforts for the Renewal of the Straits Regime in United States Diplomatic Correspondence

America has closely monitored Türkiye’s stance and other countries’ reactions to the issue of the Turkish Straits through their embassies around the world. The main figure in Turkish diplomacy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was Dr. Tevfik Rüştü Aras, who was an influential representative for Türkiye in the League of Nations as well as in all international affairs during his tenure from 1925 to 1938 as Foreign Minister of Türkiye.<sup>40</sup>

Türkiye’s decision and Dr. Aras’s efforts to change the straits regime first appeared in United States diplomatic correspondence as early as June 29, 1934. At that time The United States Secretary of State was asking their ambassador in Great Britain about allegations regarding the

37 Yücel Güçlü, “Fascist Italy’s “Mare Nostrum” Policy and Turkey”, *Belleten* 63/238 (1999): 813, accessed 15 June 2024 <https://doi.org/10.37879/belleten.1999.813>.

38 “Historical Documents,” Office of the Historian, accessed 23 May 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1935v01/d780>

39 William Hale, *Türk Dış Politikası 1774-2000*, 56.

40 Matthew Frank, *Making Minorities History: Population Transfer in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2017), 369, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199639441.001.0001>

Turkish government's intention to renew the convention related to the regime of the Turkish Straits, which was signed on July 24, 1923, at Lausanne. Washington was inquiring if Türkiye had taken any action on this matter and, if so, what the British approach was. The embassy was asked if they had any formal or informal information on the issue.<sup>41</sup> The embassy responded with the answer from Sir John Simon, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to a similar question in the British House of Commons. Simon was asked, "What representations have been received from the Turkish Government regarding the demilitarized zone adjoining the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, and what attitude has he adopted in this matter?" He confirmed that in 1933, a Turkish delegate at the General Commission of the Disarmament Conference in Geneva raised the topic of renewing certain provisions from the Lausanne peace settlement, which outlined the situation of the straits, and claimed that it needed revision for the security and safety of the straits. However, "It has not formed the subject of specific representations to His Majesty's Government." said Simon. When the question arose multiple times in Geneva, Simon spoke with Dr. Aras, who assured him that the Turkish government, under the current circumstances, would not pursue the matter further.<sup>42</sup>

Another correspondence from the United States' French Ambassador claimed that the Turkish Foreign Minister tried to gain support from the French Government but was unsuccessful, as the French government was openly against any changes to the straits regime established by the Lausanne Agreement of 1923.<sup>43</sup> Italy's Ambassador reported the results of its "discreet inquiries" and claimed that the Italians believed the Turks had already accumulated military material very near the demilitarized zone. While the Italian government had not received any official statement from the Turkish side, the Italians were also looking forward to a revision. They believed this revision would merely formalize the situation that already practically existed.<sup>44</sup> However, this message proved to be incompatible with the reality on the ground, as when the matter came to the Montreux Convention, the Italians did not sign it until 1938.

The United States Ambassador in Türkiye informed Washington that Turkish Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüşü Aras claimed they did not raise the issue of the straits at the Geneva Disarmament talks officially because they believed they were capable of defending the straits even in presence of some restrictions. He added that they did not need anyone's permission to defend their country. The same report from the Ambassador included a significant analysis that the people in Türkiye were not concerned about the demilitarized areas because they were confident in their ability to defend them if needed. However, the people were unhappy

41 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 11 June 2024, [https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v02/pg\\_979](https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v02/pg_979)

42 "Turkey (Straits Convention)" Hansard UK Parliament, accessed 11 June 2024, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1934-06-11/debates/b4fe2860-eae2-4ffc-b2f2-906edc6016d4/Turkey>

43 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 11 June 2024, [https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v02/pg\\_975](https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v02/pg_975)

44 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 11 June 2024, [https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v02/pg\\_976](https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v02/pg_976)

with the presence of the Straits Commission.<sup>45</sup> These initial correspondences indicate that the United States of America was consistently attempting to comprehend Türkiye's intentions and commitments regarding the issue of the straits, as well as the responses from related countries such as Great Britain, France, and Italy.

These communications reveal that Türkiye's assertion about changing the straits regime began as early as the 1933 Geneva Convention and garnered political attention in both Europe and the United States. While the United Kingdom proceeded cautiously and sought to persuade Türkiye calmly not to raise the issue, France was clearly opposed to any change. Italy, on the other hand, was believed to be open to discussing the issue. Türkiye, while exercising caution, also attempted to present a confident image through speeches by Dr Tevfik Rüştü Aras in international forums, demonstrating its ability to defend itself even if Europe did not change its stance on the straits regime. In the Geneva conference of the disarmament, Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs Litvinov, was the only representative ready to accept Türkiye's claim to be discussed and support its cause for the straits at the moment.<sup>46</sup> This initial stage of diplomatic discussions was a precursor to Türkiye's more assertive diplomatic efforts to convince the world of the need for a revision of the straits regime.

According to correspondence on April 30, 1935, Turkish Foreign Minister Dr. Tevfik Rüştü Aras met with the French Ambassador and conveyed that despite Türkiye and Germany were allies during the First World War, Türkiye had supported France's position and claims against Germany in the current issues. He expressed hope that France would reciprocate by supporting Türkiye's claim for a revision of the straits regime, which did not happen in Türkiye's previous effort. In this correspondence, the analysis of the USA's Ambassador Robert P. Skinner is particularly significant. Considering Turkish aversion to the Straits Commission, he predicts that Türkiye will persistently press its case before the relevant countries until the proposals are definitively accepted.<sup>47</sup>

While the world was seeking permanent solutions against the rising threat of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in Europe, the Turkish delegate secured the support of the Balkan Entente during the May 10-13, 1935 of Balkan Conference. As Türkiye's diplomatic pressure intensified, the Great Powers began to consider Türkiye's position in the Geneva Conference, recalling Türkiye's cooperative stance during the Lausanne Conference of 1923. In 1923 Turkish officials were observing an atmosphere more focused on disarmament in Lausanne; however, by 1935, the world was decidedly moving towards rearmament. For Türkiye, the straits represented the most vulnerable point. The United States Ambassador in Türkiye pointed out that Türkiye

45 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 11 June 2024, [https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v02/pg\\_972](https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v02/pg_972)

46 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 11 June 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1935v01/d887#fnref:1.7.4.10.32.8.8.16.2>

47 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 11 June 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1935v01/d888>

was already prepared to defend the straits, suggesting that any revision would primarily serve Türkiye's pride and prestige. He emphasized that Turkish military readiness around the straits meant that the actual situation would not change significantly even with revisions.<sup>48</sup> So for the Ambassador Skinner the change would be solely on paper and would approve ground reality and help Turkish prestige.

A significant letter from the American Ambassador in Türkiye reached Washington on June 21, 1935. The ambassador reported that he had visited İzmir and Çanakkale for an inspection. During his visit, he witnessed the Turks increasing their military presence very close to the straits. He was informed that the bridges were down, forcing him to take a newly renovated road, intended for military purposes, which led to the train tracks. While it is unclear whether this route was shown to him deliberately, Skinner stated it would be unfair to claim that the Turks were creating a 'fait accompli' to pressure the world into accepting existing conditions that could not be changed. However, it was evident that Turkish military personnel were working diligently to support their cause. In the same letter, Ambassador Skinner claimed that both he and his British counterpart, Sir Percy Loraine, believed the Turks viewed the current conditions as a blot on Turkish independence, with the Russians supporting them in their efforts. The ambassador pointed out Russia's historic desire to control the straits and suggested that Stalin, the new 'Tsar' of Russia, was trying to influence Türkiye in a different way. Rather than fighting for their historic ambitions, the Russians were seeking to form a military alliance and industrial partnerships that would make them indispensable for Turks. Skinner expressed concerns about the depth of Türkiye-Russia relations and what might happen if Türkiye's strong and capable leadership were to disappear one day, potentially allowing a weaker group to take power and letting Russia gain control over the matter. The letter also highlighted concerns about the risks of regressing the country's institutions by 25 years, referencing conditions from 1910.<sup>49</sup> In the letter, it is evident that the ambassador is concerned about potentially losing Türkiye to Russia. The Turks are already fortifying their positions, and if the West does not acknowledge this reality, it could drive Türkiye into deeper ties with Russia. This would risk Türkiye reverting from its current Western-influenced governance to the turbulent times of the 1910s. During this period, Western countries may lose their ability to influence Türkiye in various beneficial ways.

On June 25, 1935, Ambassador Skinner visited Foreign Minister Aras and reported to Washington that Aras informed him they had not yet initiated any official process, but now was the time to do so because the major powers were aware of Türkiye's intentions. In addition, the Balkan Entente countries—Greece, Romania, and Yugoslavia—promised their support to Türkiye regarding the rearmament of the straits. During the meeting, Aras outlined Türkiye's

48 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 11 June 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1935v01/d889>

49 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 12 June 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1935v01/d890>

five requests for military rearmament of the straits: the right to install mobile coastal batteries, to militarize its European territory with mobile artillery, to deploy submarine mine carriers, to maintain two submarine bases at Çanakkale, and to establish bases for hydroplanes and airplanes. In the same meeting, Skinner inquired about Türkiye's views on the Soviets, to which Aras openly stated that Türkiye perceived them in the same way as they viewed Germany or Britain, and that the Soviet principles of government would never be applied in Türkiye.<sup>50</sup>

On July 3, 1935, Ambassador Skinner wrote in his letter to Washington that the reason Türkiye sought rearmament stemmed from the impression left on Ankara by Europe's looming war, compounded by Italian aggression. For many months, Türkiye's Foreign Ministry had been convinced that once Germany completed its war preparations, a major conflict would erupt in Europe. When Türkiye signed the Lausanne Treaty and the Straits Convention on July 24, 1923, they expected strict disarmament measures across Europe. However, this did not materialize, leaving Türkiye vulnerable in the straits due to the lack of disarmament. At this juncture, Americans aimed to ensure two things: first, that Türkiye would not align itself with Soviet government principles, and second, that American commercial vessels would enjoy freedom of navigation through the straits. They believed the best way to safeguard American interests would be through a special agreement between the United States and Türkiye, contingent upon American commitments to defend the straits.<sup>51</sup> On November 1, 1935, after Skinner's meeting with Dr. Aras, he learned that the time for Türkiye to formally apply for changes to the straits regime was approaching.<sup>52</sup> After the preparations by the Turkish Foreign Ministry were completed, on April 11, 1936, parties to the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 and the United States were invited to discuss Türkiye's fortification of the straits. The document distributed to all parties by April 10, 1936, stated that the conditions in Europe and the world in 1923 were much different in terms of optimism for disarmament compared to today. Rearmament had resurged, and military capabilities had increased among nations. Furthermore, the ineffectiveness of collective guarantees had left Türkiye vulnerable. Now, Türkiye sought to renegotiate the Strait Convention to ensure its territorial integrity and security while maintaining commercial navigation.<sup>53</sup> This was Skinner's final message. Later, on April 14, 1936, when the US Ambassador to Türkiye sent a message to Washington signed by J.V.A. MacMurray.

MacMurray in his latter mentioned that it was difficult for France and Great Britain to focus on Türkiye's demands while the question of Germany's remilitarization of the Rhineland

50 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 11 June 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1935v01/d889>

51 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 14 June 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1935v01/d893>

52 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 14 June 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1935v01/d894>

53 "Historical Documents," Office of the Historian, accessed 14 June 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1936v03/d564>

still awaited resolution. However, according to a report from the CIA prepared in 1947 and declassified in 2012, Germany's rearmament and withdrawal from treaties resulted in a more favorable reception of Türkiye's demands.<sup>54</sup> After sending invitations to the involved parties, responses were awaited from countries such as Great Britain, France, Soviet Russia, Yugoslavia, and Japan. The United States' ambassador in London reported to Washington that the British government would respond positively. They appreciated Türkiye's straightforward approach and found it suitable; however, they would preferred the matter to be addressed in the League of Nations rather than solely among the signatories of the Lausanne Treaty. Türkiye's call for discussion was accepted by all powers except Italy, who declined official representation in the conference that would be part of the treaty, agreeing to sign it only two years after an agreement was reached in Montreux.<sup>55</sup> Turkish demands discussed between June 22 to July 20 of 1936 and new agreement entered into force on November 9, 1936.<sup>56</sup> Türkiye's efforts in international diplomacy eventually bore fruit for its security, convincing all parties to the Lausanne Agreement and additionally the United States of America. The result of Türkiye's Foreign Ministry's steadfast policy of persistent pressure within international legal frameworks and maintaining diplomatic courtesy was instrumental in persuading the world to discuss the matter.

#### 4. Conclusion

Considering periods of high tension such as the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, it is evident that the Turkish Straits hold significant strategic importance for both Türkiye and the global community. These straits serve as crucial passageways for humanitarian aid, trade vessels, and warships. Türkiye's control over the straits, as governed by the Montreux Convention, affords the nation considerable autonomy in shaping its policies and diplomatic relations, particularly with Russia and Europe. Absent the Montreux Convention, Türkiye's ability to navigate its policy-making and ensure national security during global crises would likely be more constrained.

The conditions at the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne were markedly different from those of the 1930s, a period characterized by an arms race. Initially, Türkiye believed the world was moving toward disarmament. However, as the threat of another global conflict loomed, with Italy and Germany in Europe and Japan in Far East posing significant dangers to world peace, Turkish authorities astutely recognized the need for enhanced national security measures. Consequently, Türkiye sought to alter the regime governing the straits, which, under the 1923 Lausanne Agreement, was controlled by an international commission.

54 "The Problem of the Turkish Straits," CIA Foia (Foia.Cia.Gov), accessed 14 June 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp08c01297r000500030004-2>

55 "Montrö Boğazlar Sözleşmesi", TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, accessed 15 June 2024, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/montro-bogazlar-sozlesmesi>

56 "The Problem of the Turkish Straits". CIA Foia (Foia.Cia.Gov), accessed 14 June 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp08c01297r000500030004-2>



The diplomatic efforts of Türkiye, as revealed through various correspondences, highlight three key strategies: timeliness in addressing requirements, anticipation of potential international conflicts, and maintaining pressure without alienating counterparts. Turkish diplomats, notably Foreign Minister Dr. Tevfik Rüştü Aras, identified the opportune moment to request changes to the straits' regime. They refrained from initiating formal inquiries until they had prepared the international community, including organizations like the Balkan Entente, and secured alliances with nations concerned about similar threats.

U.S. diplomatic correspondence from the 1930s indicates that Turkish officials anticipated war once Hitler felt sufficiently prepared. While American ambassadors attributed Türkiye's stance to European conditions, it is clear that Turkish leaders closely monitored global developments to foresee potential threats. Despite active participation in the League of Nations, particularly during disarmament talks, Türkiye did not rush formal proceedings for the renewal of the straits regime. However, in the disarmament conference of Geneva 1933 onwards, Turkish representatives voiced their concerns over existing threats in informal ways, making it clear that they would defend the straits if necessary, while respecting international law and avoiding unilateral actions.

By subtly showcasing their military preparations to British and American ambassadors during visits to strategic locations like Çanakkale and İzmir, Türkiye effectively demonstrated its defensive capabilities without creating a sense of a '*fait accompli*.' This approach garnered support from Balkan countries and Russia, ensuring that Western powers would not oppose Türkiye's position, thereby preventing Russia from gaining undue influence over Türkiye.

When all conditions aligned favorably for Türkiye, their steadfast and decisive diplomatic efforts resulted in the major powers agreeing not only to discuss the issue of the Turkish Straits regime but also to acknowledge Türkiye's *de facto* control and turn it into a direct legal position. This recognition granted Türkiye the rightful authority over the straits, reflecting the pragmatic and strategic foresight of Turkish diplomacy.

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