

# **Maritime Chokepoints and the New Eco-Warfare**

## **Looking Past the Strait of Hormuz to the Bosphorus**

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By: Alexander L.W. Snyder  
The Crimson Fulcrum Strategic Institute

The events transpiring in the Strait of Hormuz have radically changed the conversations about the Iran conflict. When the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran last month, headlines and newscasts focused on enriched uranium, nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Now the words that dominate the conversation are oil, tankers, mines, and the global economy.

The path to victory (however defined) will not be based on the number of casualties to soldiers or the destruction of cities. Instead, the outcome will be based on which nation is willing to continue to suffer through the disruption to the global economy and accept the pain to their own citizens caused by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

Welcome to the new Eco-Warfare. This term, initially coined during the Cold War to describe military forces intentionally unleashing environmental catastrophes, now is better used to describe a purposeful military strategy designed to disrupt economies.

The strategic importance of controlling waterways to achieve military victories and enduring hegemony has been known for thousands of years. In classical times the strength of its navy allowed Athens to control the Aegean Sea and dominate the Delian League. Spain's fleet established a dominant position on the oceans in the 1400s and this continued until 1588 when the Spanish Armada was defeated by Great Britain's Royal Navy. England's domination continued until preeminence passed peacefully to the U.S. Navy in the twentieth century.

As we are currently witnessing, it is extremely difficult to remedy manmade disruption to a maritime chokepoint. The current circumstances in the Strait of Hormuz, which is 38 kilometers across at its narrowest point, demonstrate the need for the Pentagon to devote increased time and resources toward scenario planning in the event of future disruptions to maritime chokepoints.

There are several other chokepoints around the world including:

- the Strait of Malacca, sixty-five kilometers wide
- the Babel-Mandeb Strait, twenty-six kilometers across
- the Strait of Gibraltar, thirteen kilometers wide
- the Bosphorus Strait, only 750 meters across at its narrowest point

In addition to its width, each chokepoint has unique characteristics. These include:

- intensity (size and density) of surrounding population
- types and quantum of goods passing through
- alternative routes

- identity of countries most directly impacted by disruption
- availability of alternative sources of goods

From a military perspective the two most important factors are the width of the chokepoint and the population intensity at the chokepoint. The narrower the waterway, the easier it is to interfere with the flow of goods and the more intense the population the greater the limits on using military force to reopen the waterway.

Of the maritime chokepoints, a blockade of the Bosphorus Strait would be the easiest to implement due to its extreme narrowness and the most difficult to overcome militarily due to the intensity of the population around it. The Bosphorus is the narrowest naturally occurring international straight in the world. At only 750 meters across at its narrowest point, it is 2.5% of the width of the Strait of Hormuz. This makes it much more susceptible to disruption, even by an attacker with limited resources. For those who are from the New York metropolitan area but have not been to Istanbul, to help you visualize it, the Bosphorus is narrower than the width of the Hudson River where it passes beneath the George Washington Bridge.

The Bosphorus not only divides Istanbul, a city of over 16 million people, it also separates the continents of Europe and Asia. Having recently returned from a ten-day visit to Istanbul where I daily walked along the Bosphorus and having visited there on a regular basis over the last 30 years, I can tell you that it is surreal watching the size and number of tankers and cargo ships passing through such a narrow strait. On a typical day over 100 ships pass through it and over the course of a year more than 40,000 ships. This is similar to the number that passed through the Strait of Hormuz before the war with Iran. The Bosphorus also has additional commerce that the Strait of Hormuz does not have. Over two million people traverse it every day using three bridges, one auto tunnel and one rail tunnel. It is difficult to imagine a battle to break a blockade which does not result in an enormous number of civilian casualties and collateral damage to infrastructure.

Although any attempt to limit shipping through the Bosphorus would draw an immediate response from the U.S., the country most affected by its closure would be Russia. The Bosphorus provides Russia with access out of the Black Sea, ultimately into the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic and Indian Oceans beyond that. Russia has fully understood the Bosphorus' strategic importance since World War I when the Ottoman Empire closed it to all shipping. The ability to pass through the Bosphorus is also vital for Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, and Bulgaria, as it provides their only maritime outlet.

The primary cargo going through the Bosphorus is grain, foodstuffs, sunflower oil, fertilizer, crude oil, LNG and various petroleum products. Prior to their own war, Russian and Ukrainian nitrogenous fertilizer exports accounted for 28% of the global market and Ukraine produced 50% of the world's sunflower oil. These are all essential products and the percentages of supply are sufficient to create ripples through the global economy.

Currently the Bosphorus is controlled by Turkey subject to the terms of the Treaty of Lausanne signed at the Montreux Convention of 1936 which provides among other things that merchant ships have the right of open passage. The Treaty permits Turkey to close the straits to warships in time of war. Currently, in accordance with the Convention Russian warships are not permitted to pass through the Bosphorus other than to return to their home bases in the Black Sea. Commerce flows freely.

With commerce currently flowing freely should we be concerned by the prospect of a disruption to shipping through the Bosphorus? The answer is yes based on the characteristics of the Bosphorus and the commerce that runs through it as well as the demonstrated inability to quickly reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

Perhaps, most important is the fact that based on what has transpired in the Strait of Hormuz, terrorist organizations such as the Houthis, Hezbollah and others are witnessing the limited resources needed to inflict disproportionate damage to the world economy at a maritime chokepoint. It would be foolish and naïve to disregard the likelihood that organizations such as these are studying the feasibility of disrupting the Bosphorus using resources that they already have at their disposal including mines, mosquito boats, drones, and even highly mobile weapons such as automatic grenade launchers fired from the shores.

The fact that the U.S. Navy could not quickly reopen the Strait of Hormuz and protect the free passage of ships even though the Pentagon had planned this military conflict with Iran indicates that significant pre-planning to address the disruption to commerce was not conducted. Based on this, it is more likely than not that the Pentagon has not prepared a response for any attempt by a terrorist organization to block shipping through the Bosphorus; particularly given the fact that no international conflict is currently contemplated in that area. At this time the Pentagon must undertake rigorous pre-planning to prepare for future eco-warfare that takes advantage of the commerce vulnerabilities at maritime chokepoints and it would behoove them to particularly focus on the Bosphorus given the needlelike area through which ships can pass and the potential battle taking place in the middle of a city of 16 million people.

Turkey has closely monitored Iran's ability to leverage its control over the Strait of Hormuz and it is also conceivable that President Erdogan may seek to take advantage of its control of the Bosphorus to gain greater influence on the world stage. Any such action would be consistent with his Neo-Ottomanism political ideology, centered on reviving the Ottoman Empire's legacy and restoring Turkey's cultural, political, and economic dominance across the former Ottoman territories.

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