Almost a year ago Turkey started a large-scale construction project - Istanbul Canal with all the adjacent infrastructure. The project is planned to be completed in 6 years. According to the preliminary estimates, the budget of the project will be USD 15 billion. The Canal will be 45 km long, and its depth will be 25 m; it will pass through the European part of the city, parallel to the Bosphorus whose maximum depth is 27 m. If these plans of the Turkish government come true, the European part of Istanbul will actually turn into an island.

For several centuries many of Turkey’s rulers were raising the issue of building a canal linking the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara, yet, due to various reasons, their plans never came to fruition. Among the factors which postponed the launch of this project were wars, economic recessions, and the fact that in the 18-19th centuries Turkey was lagging behind many other countries in terms of technical and scientific progress. Besides, many environmentalists warned about the inexpediency of building this Canal.

The construction of the Istanbul Canal is the greatest infrastructure initiative in the history of Turkey, and the implementation of this project is supported both from Turkey’s national budget, and by investments from Middle East. The length of the Istanbul Canal will exceed the length of the Bosphorus by 15 km.

The official reason for starting this construction was the need to lower the sea traffic passing through the Bosphorus and reduce the number of accidents that often occur when ships pass through the strait.

According to Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who initiated the project, the Bosphorus is the most congested waterway in the world. The Turkish leader is convinced that any failure to complete this project will result
in heavy overloading of the Strait with approximately 80 thousand ships a year passing through by 2050. Safety can be guaranteed only if the traffic does not exceed 25 thousand ships per year. If one were to take into account the fact that today the traffic is over 40 thousand ships a year passing through the Bosphorus, then safety standards have already been violated.

According to many experts, the Bosphorus is indeed very overloaded. It takes on average 8 hours for a ship to wait for the permission to pass through the Strait. This situation results in high costs for shippers. The throughput of the Bosphorus is about 120 ships per day. The expected throughput capacity of the Istanbul Canal will be 185 ships per day.

The ships passing through the Bosphorus actually move across Istanbul. The Turkish government believes that this is no good at all, as there is a risk of accidents that can lead to significant damage to urban infrastructure.

Due to the peculiarities of water currents and natural relief, the Bosphorus is particularly difficult to navigate. In order to avoid emergencies, many foreign companies often hire Turkish pilots who assist the ship crews in overcoming the most difficult legs of the strait.

According to the Montreux Convention adopted in 1936, Turkey has no right to levy duties and fees from passing ships. As noted earlier, the traffic through the Bosphorus is truly heavy. The construction of the Istanbul Canal that will not be regulated by the Convention, will be an opportunity for Turkey to have a good source of proceeds for the country’s budget due to a large number of ships passing through. According to the forecast of the Turkish government, the payback period of the Istanbul Canal project is 15 years, and the Canal will be bringing to the budget USD 1 billion every year.

Despite the obvious economic advantages a part of the Turkish population is against the Canal construction. According to recent opinion polls, only 49% of respondents supported the implementation of the project. The mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu is also among the opponents of the project. He believes that the real cost of this ambitious project will be at least USD 80 billion. Also, the mayor’s greatest concern is that the Canal may cause interruptions in the supply of fresh potable water to the city.

It is important to note that many Turkish environmentalists also oppose the construction of the Istanbul Canal. In their opinion, the implementation of the project may disrupt the delicate balance between the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. The water level in the Black Sea is 0.5 meters higher than that of the Sea of Marmara. The Black Sea has a lower salinity level.

Scientists confidently state that after launching the Canal, more water from the Black Sea will flow into the Sea of Marmara. This water flow will contain bacteria, which will eventually disrupt the environmental balance in the Sea of Marmara and will even cause possible shallowing of the Black Sea. Of course, such unpleasant consequences will badly affect the ecology of the entire region.

Russian environmentalists are of the same opinion as their colleagues from Turkey. They also note that today the salinity level in the Black Sea is much lower than in the Sea of Marmara, and intensive mixing of water can lead to irreparable consequences. But this is not the only reason for environmental concerns.

At a depth of about 200 m, there is almost no oxygen left in the water mass of the Black Sea, and the bottom layers of the sea, the average depth of which is about 1100 m, is a lifeless hydrogen sulfide environment in which there is nothing alive. At the same time, the Black Sea is the largest storage of hydrogen sulfide among all the seas of our planet. The situation is complicated because the surface water layer is getting thinner every year. If there is a breach in this layer, there will be a leakage of hydrogen sulfide into the atmosphere which will lead to an environmental disaster.

The Istanbul Canal raises not only environmental issues, but also issues that affect international relations. The Montreux Convention of 1936 regulates the status of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. In accordance with this convention, the countries adjacent to the Black Sea may use the Canal in the peacetime as a passage for their warships of any class upon Turkey’s prior notification. In turn, there are some restrictions related to the tonnage and class of warships belonging to non-Black Sea states. The total tonnage of military vessels of non-Black Sea countries in the Black Sea cannot exceed 45 thousand tons, and the period of staying in the Black Sea waters for the ships belonging to the non-Black Sea countries cannot exceed 21 days.

The Montreux Convention empowers Turkey, in the event of a situation threatening its state security or in the event
of participation in a war, to regulate the traffic regime of the straits at its discretion, including prohibiting passage through the strait or allowing warships of non-Black Sea powers to stay in the Black Sea waters for an indefinite period of time.

After completion of the Istanbul Canal construction, it is assumed that the Montreux Convention will not be applied, and there will be other agreements to stipulate the passage regulations for ships in that area.

Besides the economic benefits, the construction of the Istanbul Canal may cause severe environmental consequences and difficulties in international relations. An immense amount of resources will be required for the implementation of this ambitious construction project, and Turkey may not have enough resources for that. The high level of inflation in the country, observed recently, and the tense geopolitical situation in the region have a negative impact on the implementation of the plans of the Turkish president. Only time will tell whether Turkey will be able to complete this ambitious project, and which consequences it may have.

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