



VULNERABLE WORLD OIL CIRCULATION

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The Bosphorus is one of the 6 global chokepoints in maritime oil circulation, passing through a city of 12 million people. Oil is mainly produced far from where it is consumed. The transportation of petroleum represents one of the most strategically important circulations of resources in the global economy.(1) Since about two thirds of the global petroleum production is transported by sea, distribution constraints are inevitable and involve the use of a number of straits and passages, chokepoints of maritime circulation. As world consumption rises and the capacity to handle additional traffic appears to be limited, the importance of strategic passages will increase and future disruptions of oil flow are more likely to be related to circulation rather than depletion.

Chokepoints are a common concept in transport geography as they refer to locations that limit the capacity of circulation and cannot be easily bypassed, if at all. Any alternative to the chokepoint involves some detour or the use of an alternative that amounts to substantial financial costs as well as delays. In the trade, the chokepoints themselves are perceived as a resource whose usefulness varies with the ebb and flow of the geography of circulation. Their value is proportional to how frequently they are used and to the availability of alternatives. The limit to circulation imposes a threshold on its use and the closer the traffic is to this threshold, the more the resource is considered to be exhausted. As a valuable resource, a level of control must be established to ensure access to the chokepoint. For even in the worst of crises, petroleum must continue to flow.

The Bosphorus is one of the six chokepoints in the global geography of maritime oil supply, the others being Hormuz, Suez, Malacca, Bab el Mandeb, and Panama. And since roughly 62% of all the petroleum produced worldwide is shipped by sea, we understand why these straits are of great strategic importance, they truly are the geographical Achilles heels of global economy. Passage through the Bosphorus, which links the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, has been regulated by the Montreux Convention of 1936 which recognized Turkey's control of the straits but granted free passage to any commercial vessel in times of peace. The Black Sea remains the largest outlet for Russian oil exports. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the importance of the Bosphorus has been growing since the vast oil reserves in the Caspian region must, at least partially, be transported through the Black Sea to reach external markets. Pipelines do offer an alternative, but the cost of moving oil along the

BTC pipeline ranges between \$1 and \$2 per barrel while shipping oil with tankers through the Black Sea costs 20 cents per barrel.

The Turkish Straits are one of the world's busiest passages with 50,000 vessels annually, including 5,500 crude-oil carriers. Twisting and turning for 30 km with a width of only 1 km at its narrowest point, the Bosphorus is one of the most difficult-to-navigate waterways. The future growth of petroleum circulation through the narrow sea passage is highly problematic, above all the risk of collisions and oil spills in the midst of the country's largest city. The Bosphorus is unique in that it cuts through a city of twelve million people. For them, it is not only a seaway, it is the main boulevard of Istanbul lined with ancient mosques and Ottoman palaces.

In response to the hazards, the Turkish government recently prohibited nocturnal passage for large carriers, slowing down the traffic and causing up to twenty days of delay for tankers waiting to pass the Turkish straits. A new multi-million vessel traffic system monitors the cluster of nearly one hundred ships, idling at the straits' mouth waiting their turn while the radio in the control tower fields calls from anxious oil-company executives, eager to know when their tanker can resume its voyage through the Straits. Delays can cost oil supertankers 36,000 euros per day, bringing the final expenditures closer to pipeline transportation costs. Some observers view the Bosphorus logjam as leverage to promote the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline route.

Simultaneous to being valued as a political valve and a great economic asset moving Istanbul into a prime geostrategic position, the passage might well be the most sensitive spot in the country. With the rise of global oil consumption, the vulnerability of strategic passages such as the Bosphorus will further increase and the disruption of oil flows moves into the picture as one of the obvious potential targets that could paralyze the West.

Two big truck bombs outside the British consulate and the Britain-based HSBC banking group killed more than twenty-seven people in Istanbul in November of 2003, just five days after the bombing of two synagogues. After these attacks, commonly understood as a response to British military involvement in Iraq, some analysts warned that the Bosphorus could be a tempting target for Al-Qaeda. Even if the destructive acts are not directly aimed at the Straits as a strategic point, they certainly bring to light the risky card Turkey plays as a transit country for oil between Muslim producers and Western consumers.

Security forces blocked off access to the destruction site. After a number of attempts, I found a way through to a less symbolically loaded adjacent building accommodating textile sweatshops, which was equally in ruins. Throughout my investigations in the field, this seemed to be a recurring theme. Hardly ever was I permitted to visit the main stage of events, I was continuously diverted to secondary scenes (Nebenschauplätze), wandering around the lesser debris of history. Instead of experiencing those as

insignificant sidetracks, I began to pay attention to the things happening in that place at the particular moment of my presence. Assertive master discourses on political relations continuously push lateral events taking place in minor sites into the isolation of silence and pictorial absence, writing them out of history. By drawing connections between the side events and the major narrative strands relating the geography, as fragile and ephemeral as these connections may be, this project rewrites them, nevertheless, into a historical continuity.

1. (1) Jean-Paul Rodrigue: "Straits, Passages and Chokepoints: A Maritime Geostrategy of Petroleum Distribution," in: *Les Cahiers de Géographie du Québec*, vol. 48, No. 135, 2004, pp. 357-377. URL: http://people.hofstra.edu/faculty/Jean-paul_Rodrigue/downloads/CGQ_strategicoil.pdf
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Cluster: Black Sea Files

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