

EUROPE NEWS

Turkey plans its own Panama Canal

BY MARC CHAMPION

ISTANBUL—Turkey will build a new canal connecting the Black Sea with the Marmara Sea to reduce traffic in the Bosphorus, one of the world's busiest and most dangerous shipping lanes, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said.

The prime minister announced his plan Wednesday in the midst of a re-election campaign, comparing the project's importance with the Panama and Suez canals.

Kanal Istanbul would cut through mostly undeveloped, state-owned land and forest just west of Istanbul, creating a second channel that ultimately connects the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. The project also would include construction of a new 60 million passenger per year airport for Istanbul and two new mini-cities, Mr. Erdogan said.

Mr. Erdogan gave no estimate of the new canal's cost or how it would be financed, but said that he was confident the project would attract private investors and that financing wouldn't be an obstacle. He also said a study of the terrain will take two years and will determine the precise route of the canal, which is expected to be 25 meters (27 yards) deep, 150 meters (165 yards) wide, and 45 to 50 kilometers (28 to 31 miles) long.

"We are today starting to work on one of the biggest projects of the century, which leaves behind the Panama, the Suez and—in Greece—the Corinth canals," Mr. Erdogan said. The Panama canal is 77 kilometers long, the Suez canal 80 kilometers, and the Corinth canal six kilometers. Kanal Istanbul would be shorter and not as challenging to build as the Panama or Suez canals, but even if it took just half the Bosphorus traffic, the new canal would be busier than either.

The prime minister wasn't clear about who would build the canal, although he commented the project

would be "open to the world." Turkish construction companies, however, are fiercely competitive and could prove difficult to outbid.

Mr. Erdogan unveiled the project at a campaign rally in Istanbul, ahead of parliamentary elections on June 12. Opinion polls suggest the

prime minister's ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, will win a third term in office. The AKP is fighting a campaign based on its strong record of delivering economic growth, with ambitious pledges for the future that include a high-speed train network, a third bridge over the Bosphorus and development of a Turkish aircraft industry. The new airport has been discussed for some time. The canal project itself, Mr. Erdogan said, would create thousands of jobs.

Given the timing of the announcement as a campaign promise, it isn't certain the canal will get built. However, Mr. Erdogan, a former Istanbul mayor, has never hidden his ambition to leave an indelible mark on Turkey. He has also said he would like to turn Turkey into a presidential republic, and if elected president could be ending his second term in 2023, the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic.

"We said Turkey deserves to enter 2023 with such a major, crazy and wonderful project, and we took the step for this," Mr. Erdogan said in his speech.

Describing the plan as a "dream" that Turkish and Ottoman leaders have nurtured for centuries, Mr. Erdogan said the canal would enhance the city, moving the dangers of shipping accidents away from Istanbul's densely populated center. The canal would be able to accommodate some of the world's largest ships, up to 300,000 deadweight tons, he added.

The straight is just 700 meters across at its narrowest point and has strong currents and several blind turns that have contributed to

catastrophic accidents over the years.

"Any such project should be good news for the international shipping industry" because it would increase safety and cut the density of two-way shipping traffic in the Bosphorus, said Bill Box, spokesman for Intertanko, the international association of tanker owners.

But Mr. Box also said the project raised a lot of questions. One such question is whether the canal would fall under the 1936 Montreux Convention, which governs the Bosphorus and guarantees passage to

all civilian shipping in peacetime: Under that convention, Turkey can't charge a fee for ships to use the Bosphorus,

