

To be published by the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia as part of their Policy Analysis series

FPRI analysis of Turkey and NATO enlargement to Sweden and Finland

Bottom Line

- Turkey threatens to continue blocking Sweden's application to join NATO unless the Scandinavian country gets tough on terrorism (i.e., crack down on Kurdish groups operating in the country) and stop Koran burnings. Given Sweden's robust freedom of speech protections, there is little more Stockholm can do but to continue implementing the deal with Ankara negotiated last June. That can take time and is not guaranteed to convince President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to soften his position on NATO enlargement, especially in an election year.
- Finland is now preparing legislation that would allow it to join NATO on its own, essentially leaving up to Turkey and Hungary whether to treat the Swedish and Finnish applications together or not.
- While mindful of not interfering in the next Turkish elections, the United States and other allies should work with Ankara to provide incentives to ratify enlargement to Sweden and disincentives to act in ways that benefit Russia. Earthquake relief should be generous and unconditional.

Sweden and Finland grew closer to Western institutions in the post-Cold War era, and EU accession in 1995 meant that they finally abandoned their neutrality policies. They remained militarily non-aligned but cooperation with NATO increased through the Partnership for Peace program and increasing participation in NATO missions and exercises. Russian aggression in places like Georgia, Crimea, and the Donbass, along with covert operations in Europe and the United States sped up this process. On December 17, 2021, Russia proposed a [new US-Russia treaty](#) that included restrictions on "further eastward expansion" of NATO and was viewed in Stockholm and Helsinki as an unacceptable attempt to infringe on their sovereignty.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was the last straw for Sweden and Finland. The Finnish leadership indicated quite clearly that NATO accession was forthcoming and the strong historical ties between Sweden and Finland meant that this changed the equation in Sweden as well. The Swedish Social Democratic government began a process of reevaluating the policy of non-alignment.

There was concern in Sweden—but especially in Finland—about the period in between divulging to Russia the intention to join NATO and full accession and safety under its collective defense umbrella. Both states sought reassurances from the alliance that the process would be quick given the volatile security situation in Europe. The NATO secretary general assured them that the process would be speedy, and the two received security assurances from allies like the [United States](#) and the [United Kingdom](#). [According to Finnish President Sauli Niinistö](#), Recep Tayyip Erdogan told him that "if you are applying for NATO membership, we will assess it favorably." Sweden's foreign minister allegedly received

similar assurances from her Turkish counterpart during a meeting in Brussels in the spring. These assurances were crucial to the decision, especially by the Finnish leadership, to dare to antagonize Russia. Sweden and Finland formally submitted their letters of application to become NATO Allies on May 18.

However, just two days before the expected Finnish and Swedish announcements, Erdogan came out from Friday prayer and [declared](#) in response to a journalist's question that "it is not possible for us to be in favor" of Swedish and Finnish NATO accession because "Scandinavian countries are guesthouses for terrorist organizations" (i.e., Some analysts had warned that this might happen, but the political leadership in the two capitals were taken aback by Erdogan's decision to walk back his own pledges. Indeed, even his own Foreign Ministry appear to have been surprised by the Friday the 13th announcement.

Why Is Erdogan Blocking NATO Enlargement Now?

There are at least four possible reasons why Erdogan decided to block Finland and Sweden's effort to join NATO. The straightforward explanation is that Ankara means what it says. Turkey raised objections about the way that especially Sweden handles groups like the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), classified as terrorists by the European Union and United States, as well as groups and individuals that only Turkey considers terrorists, like followers of the preacher Fetullah Gülen. There is a sizeable and influential Kurdish diaspora in Sweden, and there are regular demonstrations where PKK flags are displayed openly. Swedish anti-terrorist laws have until recently been rather toothless, whereas freedom of speech laws are particularly expansive, so flag-waiving is generally not prohibited. Ankara views this as Sweden allowing PKK propaganda and [claims](#), with some justification, that the PKK conducts fundraising and recruitment among the Swedish diaspora.

Second, the veto benefits Erdogan politically. He is facing a tough [reelection campaign](#) in the run-up to this summer's elections. The PKK issue has deep resonance with large segments of the Turkish population that Erdogan and his allied ultranationalist party—the Nationalist Action Party (MHP)—need to woo. Taking a stand against European countries perceived to be too lax on terror, therefore, resonates with a domestic audience.

Third, Ankara wants F-16 fighter jets and associated modernization kits from the United States after having been [kicked out](#) of the consortium producing the more modern F-35 joint strike fighter due to Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system. Holding up NATO enlargement could also be an attempt to secure that deal or, more ambitiously, to persuade the United States to rethink its policy towards the Syrian Kurdish militias that Turkey views as branches of the PKK.

Fourth and finally, the person who stands to gain most from Ankara's veto on NATO enlargement is Vladimir Putin. While the Turkish-Russian relationship is complex and involves a great deal of tension, the Russian leader has leverage over Ankara. Turkey has [advertised another military incursion](#) into Kurdish-led areas in northern Syria, but since the areas in question are patrolled by Russian or Russia-allied Syrian troops, this *de facto* requires [Russian approval](#). Russia also provides Turkey with energy and is building a nuclear reactor in Akkuyu, for which it recently provided Turkey with much-needed [new financing](#),

and the two countries are in [discussion over a possible deferral of Turkish loan payments](#). Erdogan has been pursuing an increasingly transactional foreign policy in recent years, and by halting NATO enlargement he is giving Putin what he wants, by design or coincidence.

Current Negotiations

In June 2022, Finland, Sweden, and Turkey negotiated a [Trilateral Memorandum](#) that set a roadmap for the process and allowed Sweden and Finland to gain status as invitees to NATO. With that, the ratification process could start. So far, twenty-eight of the alliance's thirty members have ratified Finland and Sweden's application—by historic standards, the process has been remarkably speedy. Only Hungary and Turkey have not yet ratified. The Hungarian parliament is set to consider ratification, perhaps in March, although Victor Orban has repeatedly kicked that can down the road.

The Trilateral Memorandum set up seven concrete steps for Sweden and Finland (as well as Turkey) to implement. The focus of Turkey's ire, however, is Sweden. There is a gap between the description by Swedish policymakers and the NATO secretary general, who [argue](#) that Sweden and Finland have now lived up to their obligations, and Turkish officials, who [assert](#) that Sweden is not even halfway there.

Sweden has taken action on all seven points, and has fully implemented several of them. The remaining steps are such that they will require a lengthy and perhaps continuous process, making it difficult to say exactly what would be required for them to be fulfilled. The commitment to fight terrorism with resolve and tighten legislation to that end is a good example. Sweden has enacted a new comprehensive anti-terrorism law as well as amended its constitution to make it possible to outlaw support for terrorist organizations. Previously, legal liability was only possible for violent terrorist acts, not support for an organization on the terror watch list. This process is ongoing, as [the addition to the new law](#) making such support illegal could only be drafted after the constitution had been amended. If approved, the law is expected to enter into effect on [June 1 of this year](#).

Summary of the 7 steps:

Commitments in the Memorandum per §8	Actions taken
1. Establish a joint dialogue and cooperation mechanism to enhance cooperation on counter-terrorism, organized crime, and other common challenges.	Ongoing contacts. 1 st meeting in Königstedt Manor in Vantaa, Finland on August 26. 2 nd in Stockholm on November 25. 3 rd planned for Brussels.
2. Finland and Sweden will conduct the fight against terrorism with resolve and will tighten legislation.	Sweden has enacted a new anti-terror law & amended its constitution . A second legal package is in process as is an additional law on terror

	financing . Swedish Police & Security Services (Säpo) have made PKK a priority.
3. Finland and Sweden will address Turkey’s pending deportation or extradition requests, in accordance with the European Convention on Extradition.	A dozen individuals have been denied entry to Sweden & two have been deported from Sweden due to suspected PKK ties. Supreme Court has heard but denied extraditions.
4. Finland and Sweden will investigate and interdict financing and recruitment for PKK and all other terrorist organizations and their extensions, as well as affiliates or inspired groups or networks.	The new anti-terror laws include tougher restrictions on financing of terrorist groups. A first arrest on grounds of PKK financing & extortion was made on February 3.
5. All commit to fight disinformation, and prevent their domestic laws from being abused for the benefit of terrorist organizations and activities that incite violence against Turkey.	Sweden has among the world’s most robust free speech protections. There is little room to stop pro-PKK demonstrations & flag waving, but such actions could be used as evidence of support for terrorist organization.
6. Finland and Sweden will ensure that national regulatory frameworks for arms exports enable new commitments to Allies. (Also § 7: Turkey, Finland and Sweden confirm that there are no national arms embargoes between them. Sweden is changing its regulatory framework for arms exports.)	Sweden has not changed its regulatory framework, but there is no arms embargo & Swedish authorities have approved follow-on sales to Turkey for the first time since 2019.
7. Finland and Sweden commit to support the fullest possible involvement of Turkey in EU Common Security and Defence Policy, including PESCO.	In the EU, Sweden has argued in favor of Turkey’s inclusion into PESCO.

Ultimately, it will be a Turkish decision to determine when they feel like these steps are fulfilled to their satisfaction. The political climate surrounding the decision has been poisoned by a series of protests in Sweden aimed to provoke the Turkish president and thereby damage the accession process. Left-wing groups who are critical of NATO have demonstrated with supporters of the PKK, waving PKK flags, stomping on Erdogan portraits, and hoisting an [effigy of Erdogan](#) up on a rope along with a video of the body of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, with the text “Erdogan – take this opportunity to resign, so that

you don't end up upside down at Taksim Square." A left-wing magazine has hosted a competition for the best Erdogan caricature.

On the right, Danish provocateur Rasmus Paludan burned a Koran outside the Turkish ambassador's residence. This caused [outrage](#) in Turkey and in many Muslim-majority countries. The Swedish government's statements decried the actions as "despicable" and "horrible" events that the government does not agree with but that nevertheless are protected speech under Swedish law. This has failed to satisfy Ankara. Although Koran burning is not mentioned in the Trilateral Memorandum, [Erdogan has stated](#) emphatically that Sweden cannot join NATO as long as it is allowed.

These events led to a deep crisis in the talks, and the Turkish government [paused all negotiations on January 24, 2023](#). After almost a month-long pause, on February 20, the Turkish minister of foreign affairs, [announced](#) that talks can resume. The next meeting of the permanent mechanism/standing committee is to take place in Brussels under NATO auspices, but there is no date at the time of writing.

Will Finland Go It Alone?

From a NATO perspective, joint accession of both Finland and Sweden makes [strategic sense](#). Having a contiguous territory from Norway to the Russian border would make it easier for NATO to support the defense of the Baltic states. With Sweden and Finland in NATO together, the Baltic Sea becomes a *de facto* NATO lake, and the Swedish island of Gotland is key to the defense of the sea. The two Nordic countries [bring first-rate military forces](#). Finland's strength lies in artillery forces and its large army when fully mobilized, while Sweden brings an array of advanced capabilities in the air and at sea and a prominent arms industry. Having Sweden in limbo waiting to become a full member would also complicate NATO defense planning.

Nevertheless, Turkish officials have [stated](#) that they could ratify Finland quickly if it separated its application from Sweden's . Finnish and Swedish policymakers maintain that they would prefer to join NATO together, but the tone has shifted recently. Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO secretary general, now [says](#) that the most important thing is that both join, not that they do so at the same time. On February 28, the [Finnish parliament will vote](#) on legislation that would enable it to quickly join as soon as all NATO members have ratified Finland's application, effectively now placing the decision on whether to break up the Nordic duo in Ankara's hands.

When Can We Expect Turkish Ratification?

Ratification is carried out by the Turkish parliament, but Erdogan has control over parliament thanks to his alliance with the ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party. Finnish ratification could be done rather quickly, but it does not appear likely that Erdogan will allow ratification of Swedish accession before the Turkish elections in a few months. Hence, a key question is what the outcome of those elections could mean.

The terrible earthquakes in southeast Turkey and Syria have introduced uncertainty over the timing of elections. They are mandated to be held in June, but Erdogan had announced that they would instead be held on May 14, with a possible (likely) second round fourteen days later. As of the moment of writing, it is still somewhat unclear whether the elections can be held then, in June, or whether they will be postponed to a later date.

An opposition victory in the elections may seem unlikely given Erdogan's grip on power, but the Turkish economy is ailing, there is widespread anger over the presence of 6.7 million Syrians with refugee-like status, and the new presidential system directs not only power but also responsibility to the top. The government [did not perform well](#) in response to the earthquakes, and there is anger over the initially slow response. Erdogan needs to win an outright majority of votes in order to avoid a runoff in which the opposition can unite behind a single candidate. [Polls](#) have been showing his alliance with the Nationalist Action Party reaching between 40 and 50 percent, even after [a recent popularity boost](#) from increased spending. The earthquake response is not likely to have improved his numbers.

If the opposition wins a parliamentary majority as well as the presidency, it will likely still want to ensure that Sweden addresses PKK fundraising and recruitment. However, opposition figures have signaled that they intend to return to Turkey's Western orientation. Ratifying NATO enlargement in time for the alliance summit in July in Vilnius would be a strong signal to Turkey's allies, but time is short.

If Erdogan remains in power, ratification of the Swedish accession by July seems unlikely, albeit perhaps not impossible. Judging by incidents like the Erdogan-Mark Rutte spat in 2017 (in which harsh words were exchanged over Dutch refusal to allow Turkish ministers to campaign in the Netherlands), things may calm down after elections.

However, Swedish-Turkish relations are arguably experiencing a deeper rift that may take longer to heal. We may yet see more protests intended to provoke Erdogan. Due to the very strong freedom of speech protections in Sweden, there will be little the government or police can do to curtail them. Judging from a variety of [statements](#) by Turkish leaders, they seem intent on holding out until they see ["change in Swedish policy on the ground."](#) That could include police investigations of PKK activities and further arrests, but the judicial process in Sweden can take time and there is no guarantee of convictions. We are also likely to see further deportations of Turkish citizens suspected of PKK ties, but likely no extraditions of the high-profile Gülenists that Turkey has publicly demanded.

If Erdogan has been personally offended by the various deliberate provocations from small groups on the fringes of Swedish politics, then even strenuous efforts by the Swedish government to fully implement the Trilateral Memorandum may not suffice. His [mention](#) of the case of North Macedonia does not bode well in that regard, since that process took over a decade.

What Should be Done?

The disastrous earthquakes spurred a great need for international assistance, to which allies—including Sweden—have promptly responded. Aid should continue to be generous

and unconditional in response to the widespread suffering. Greek aid after the 1999 Izmit earthquake (in what became known as [“earthquake diplomacy”](#)) helped ease tensions between the two for some time. [Early indications](#) suggested no such effect when it comes to Ankara’s position on the Swedish application, but the very recent decision to reopen talks show that it may be too soon to tell.

It can be useful to look at precedents for possible clues as to how this impasse could be resolved. Turkey has previously blocked NATO action to try to get allies to abandon the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and get tougher on the PKK. The YPG, a Syrian Kurdish militia that Turkey with some justification views as the PKK’s Syrian offshoot, is the leading force within the SDF. In 2009, Turkey [blocked the candidacy](#) of the Danish former Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, to the post of NATO secretary general. The rationale at that time was that Ankara was angry over his management of the Muhammed cartoon scandal in 2006, but [part of the solution, brokered by President Barack Obama in 2009](#) , [was that Denmark kicked out a pro-PKK television station, ROJ TV.](#)

Ten years later, [Turkey blocked Eagle Defender](#), the NATO graduated response plan to shore up the defense of Poland and the Baltics, unless NATO allies recognized the YPG as a terrorist group. Ankara eventually dropped its veto after [pressure](#) from allies and a [compromise](#) whose details have not been publicized, but may have involved some concessions on the definition of terrorism in NATO documents relating to Turkey. Ultimately, Ankara has not been successful in forcing allies to change position on the Syrian Kurds. However, with Finland and Sweden’s application to join NATO, Ankara has significant leverage in the form of the veto and has clearly chosen to make a stand.

American leadership is key to resolving crises within NATO. Bilateral security assurances from the United States and other allies have been important during the ratification period. However, apart from strong public support and record-fast ratification, so far Sweden and Finland have been left to negotiate with Turkey on their own. There were good reasons for this, as US policymakers were afraid that they would become the target of Turkish bargaining if they interjected themselves into the negotiations, and that the poor relations between Washington and Ankara might even mean that US involvement could hurt more than it helped. The United States does not have the leverage over Turkey it once did.

The situation has changed, and it’s now time for American intervention . The negotiations are in crisis and there is not much that the Swedish government can do that it is not already doing. If there is to be any chance of a Turkish ratification before the NATO summit in July, or even this year, a firm contribution by the United States, as well as other key NATO members, is needed. Countries like the United Kingdom ([partly due to arms trade](#)) and Spain ([due in part to deep economic ties and strong Spanish support for Turkey’s EU accession](#)) maintain good relations with Turkey and could use that political capital to nudge Ankara in the right direction. Germany is a key trading partner with Turkey, something which could give Berlin leverage should they choose to use it.

The United States and other NATO allies should work with Turkey to provide incentives to live up to its pledge to support NATO’s open-door policy, as well as disincentives to behavior that is in conflict with the common interest of the alliance. The old fear that pushing Ankara

too hard will lead it to abandon the alliance is understandable but likely overblown. [Turkey needs its NATO membership](#) and would not easily discard what has been a cornerstone of Turkish foreign and security policy since 1952. The current government pursues a multidimensional foreign policy and demands respect for its interests. This has *de facto* meant a downgrading of NATO membership to being but one leg of several on which Turkish foreign and security policy now stands, but it still needs that leg.

Moreover, [Turkish cooperation with Russia](#) is a fact even in the absence of a tougher stance by its treaty allies, as the purchase of the Russian S-400 Surface-to-Air missile system showed. By delaying Finland and Sweden's application to join NATO, Turkey is already advancing Russia's interests at the expense of the interests of the alliance. This muddled posture somewhere between its Western allies and Russia is likely where Turkey would remain even in the face of tougher pressure from allies, since Turkey's interests do not fully align with Russia.

There is little time before NATO summit in July, so allies cannot afford to wait until after the Turkish elections to increase the intensity of conversations with Ankara. However, they should avoid acting in ways that could sway the next elections. A tougher public posture in the months before the elections could be used to further inflame tensions for political reasons, and any carrots announced before the elections would be campaign gifts to the incumbent. NATO should focus instead on silent diplomacy coupled with a preparedness to act swiftly and more decisively after the elections, either with an opposition government likely to be more favorably inclined to NATO enlargement or with an Erdogan-led government that will need help to get there.