

# What Biden Faces with Erdogan at the NATO Summit

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Brief Analysis

**The Turkish leader has been trying to leverage Sweden and Finland's accession to weaken international support for the YPG in Syria, but he may be content with symbolic concessions that boost his reelection chances.**

**O**n May 13, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan threw a wrench into NATO's plans for expanding the alliance in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, announcing that he would object to Finland and Sweden's accession at the Madrid summit set to begin this week. Among other reasons, Erdogan noted that both countries are home to networks linked with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Turkish militant group regarded as a terrorist entity by NATO and formally designated as such by many member states.

Previously, Turkish and Swedish diplomats had held closed-door talks on finding a solution to the PKK issue before Sweden's entry to NATO, yet Erdogan decided to air out these discussions. He presumably did so in line with his longstanding political philosophy of converting "what is good for Turkey" into "what is good for Erdogan"—that is, he faces an election next June (or this November if held early) and sees great benefit in instrumentalizing NATO's Nordic expansion to bolster his chances.

Setting aside such politicization, however, at least some of Ankara's concerns about PKK networks in Sweden are driven by facts: the Nordic country has a large Kurdish diaspora population, among which are small but vocal pro-PKK elements, and certain activities reported there are indeed problematic (e.g., [fundraising](#) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/14/turkey-criticises-swedish-and-finnish-support-for-pkk>) for the group). A subsidiary concern is Stockholm's public ties with the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the People's Defense Units (YPG), including a December 2021 meeting between Foreign Minister Ann Linde and YPG official Ilham Ahmed. Yet some NATO officials may not be as sympathetic to this concern. Although certain member governments, including Washington, acknowledge the links between the PKK and YPG, they do not consider the latter a terrorist entity—in

fact, they have greatly relied on YPG forces to combat the Islamic State in Syria ever since the group formally folded itself under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2015.

As for Finland, its faltering accession bid can be seen as collateral damage from the Swedish controversy—there are almost no PKK networks in Finland, and Helsinki does not have ties to the YPG. Yet Turkey is treating the concurrent Nordic bids as a pair. Ultimately, Ankara hopes to use Sweden’s membership bid to establish a precedent among current and future accession candidates, namely, that it is not okay for NATO allies to establish or publicly celebrate deep ties with the YPG.

Meeting all of Turkey’s specific demands would be a tall order, however. Ankara wants Stockholm to lift the de facto arms embargo it implemented against Turkey following the latter’s 2019 military incursion into YPG-held territory in north Syria. Swedish officials have already stated that it is an informal embargo, implying it can be lifted. Ankara also wants Sweden to call out the YPG as a threat to Turkey, and perhaps even commit to downgrading ties with the group and eventually dissolving them altogether.

Yet the political future of the current government in Stockholm rests on the vote of one parliamentarian (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/kurds-sweden-edge-turkey-presses-government-ditch-them-exchange-nato-membership>): Amineh Kakabaveh, who is of Kurdish origin and sympathetic to the YPG. Recently, she indicated she will no longer back the government if it rescinds its support for the Syrian group. Sweden is thus in a bind, so securing a breakthrough at the Madrid summit this week will be tricky.

Erdogan is well aware of these difficulties, and he may be content with checking off just some of his demands, such as a declaration by Stockholm that “Sweden will stand with Turkey against all terrorist threats from Syria.” Because he controls around 90 percent of the media in Turkey, he can spin the smallest Swedish concession to Ankara as a major win among his nativist-populist base ahead of the next election—for example, if he opts for an early election in November, that would align well with the NATO ministerial meeting scheduled around that time. Even a largely symbolic move would be cast as Erdogan’s triumph over Europe and a metaphorical reversal of the Ottoman defeat at the gates of Vienna in 1683—a brand of nationalist sentiment that would also play well among Turks who do not normally support him. Alternatively, if Erdogan decides to hold the election next June as scheduled, then he could delay green-lighting Swedish accession until the 2023 NATO summit in Lithuania. Either way, his primary focus will be trying to cash in on the issue in domestic political terms.

Regarding U.S.-Turkish relations, Erdogan and President Biden held a phone call earlier today and mentioned meeting at the Madrid summit. Erdogan craves engagement from Washington, though not much dialogue has taken place with Biden since he took office last year. In some ways, then, Sweden’s accession troubles can be regarded as collateral damage from U.S.-Turkish tensions. Breaking the Nordic NATO impasse as early as this week’s summit may require direct discussions on the matter between Biden and Erdogan—at this point, the chances of Ankara greenlighting Sweden and Finland’s accession sooner rather than later have improved to around fifty-fifty. Whatever happens with this issue, the Biden administration is mindful of the fact that America’s partnership with Turkey is important and worthy of close attention.

*Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [A Sultan in Autumn: Erdogan Faces Turkey’s Uncontainable Forces](#)*

*(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sultan-autumn-erdogan-faces-turkeys-uncontainable-forces>). ❖*

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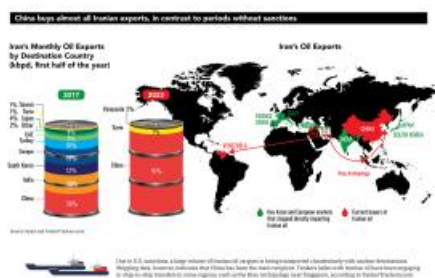
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