

Sweden, Turkey, and the Concessions for NATO Membership

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Brief Analysis

Turkey's refusal to approve Sweden's NATO membership is yet another foreign policy tool being used by Erdoğan ahead of 2023 elections.

On November 22, Swedish Secretary of Foreign Affairs Tobias Billström touched on the Swedish application to join NATO—together with Finland—during an [interview \(https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/2022-11-22/ty-article/.premium/swedens-new-fm-calls-2014-palestine-recognition-premature-and-unfortunate/00000184-9f0a-d40d-a9ce-bf7f31f60000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/2022-11-22/ty-article/.premium/swedens-new-fm-calls-2014-palestine-recognition-premature-and-unfortunate/00000184-9f0a-d40d-a9ce-bf7f31f60000) with the Israeli daily Haaretz. Also noted was the Turkish parliament's ongoing refusal to endorse Sweden and Finland's entry, something that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has said can't be done until several conditions are fulfilled. As the only other NATO hold out, Hungary recently stated that its parliament would endorse the application in December or early 2023.

In response to a direct question in the interview, Billström emphasized that Sweden's aim was to join NATO as soon as possible and that Sweden had no intention to wait out Turkish parliamentary elections, set to be held in June 2023. Nevertheless, the hang-up remains centered on the Kurdish issue, and only time will tell how far Erdoğan can pressure Sweden into concessions.

Back in June, Sweden and Finland struck a deal with Turkey about joining NATO and signed an agreement that was supposed to ease the process. Featured prominently in that agreement—signed by the former Social-Democratic government, who subsequently lost the election in September—was a paragraph stating the willingness of the countries to work with Turkey concerning “anti-terrorism” activity, mainly directed at Kurdish movements.

After the deal, however, things got dicey.

Up until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Sweden never seriously considered diverting from its policy of neutrality and non-NATO status. After WWII, Sweden opted for a kind of Scandinavian defense pact, but that

failed when Norway and Denmark joined NATO and Finland was forced to appease the USSR. Things started to change at the end of the 1980's, and now the present government is led by a Center-Right party, "Moderaterna," which have argued for Swedish membership in NATO for years, pointing out that, in effect, Swedish neutrality had already ended with the decision to join the EU in 1995.

That being said, support for various independence movements and initiatives to sustain and support humanitarian efforts in several places have long played an important role in Swedish foreign policy across the political spectrum. This policy has frequently led to support for Kurdish issues. Moreover, Sweden is home to a considerable Kurdish diaspora. At least 100,000 Kurds live in Sweden—most of them with Swedish or dual citizenship—and most are from Turkey. Many of these Kurdish citizens are politically active in organizations across the board. Turkey has for years demanded that Sweden curb this diaspora political activity, since it is often directed at Turkey.

With the Swedish application to NATO, Turkey suddenly gained a **powerful tool** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/nato-membership-sweden-between-turkey-and-kurds>) to pressure Sweden on these issues, since all current NATO members must endorse a new applicant. And while the June agreement originally appeared to suggest some movement on the matter, Turkey has since upped the ante and issued a string of interpretations of the agreement. Such demands now include the extradition of individuals deemed terrorists by Ankara and, most recently, a demand that Sweden identify individuals that took part in a demonstration outside the Turkish embassy in Stockholm in November. Turkey has latched onto this latter case, as President Erdoğan was personally "insulted" by it, according to the Turkish Foreign Ministry officials who called the Swedish ambassador in protest, demanding Sweden help in identifying the demonstrators.

Sweden is obviously unwilling to identify protesters—which Ankara of course knows—but these claims go to show how far the Turkish government is prepared to pressure Sweden and gain concessions. Sweden has under the former and the newly installed government tried to appease Turkey by easing up on weapon sales and deporting some individuals who did not have their asylum applications approved. Nevertheless, these efforts have not made Turkey any more amenable to approve the Swedish application. Instead, there has been a string of new conditions.

One major sticking point—if not the major issue—remains the definition of *who* is a terrorist. The Turkish-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is a designated terrorist organization by the EU, which means it is a terrorist organization for Sweden as well. However, the Turkish assertion that most other Kurdish organizations in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq are also run by or affiliated with the PKK remains a point of contention.

One organization figuring prominently in this disagreement is the Syrian People's Defense Units (YPG), which played a key role in defeating the Islamic State (IS) and is now trying to build up a semi-independent statelet in northeast Syria. The role and future of the YPG affects Sweden as well, since many Kurds in Sweden are close to and supported the YPG during the war against IS. Even so, both previous and current Swedish governments have adhered to the Turkish demand that Sweden "distance itself from the YPG" as outlined in the agreement. What is notable is that these efforts have not induced Ankara to speed up the process. On the contrary, Ankara appears to take any attempts by Stockholm—and to a lesser extent Helsinki—to accommodate its demands as an opportunity to pile on additional concessions and demands to approve the applications.

It is also likely that the Turkish parliament will not approve the Nordic NATO applications before the general elections in Turkey in June 2023, since President Erdoğan sees election advantages in portraying Turkey as a strong and important country with foreign policy clout. So, although Billström states that Sweden is not going to wait for the Turkish election, it is unclear what more Stockholm can do to speed up the process.

Of course, this whole stalemate concerns Sweden more than Finland, and President Erdoğan has stated earlier that he's prepared to endorse the Finnish application. But this is not an option. The two Nordic neighbors, neutral

between NATO and the Warsaw-pact since WWII, have coordinated and worked together on defense-matters for decades and will join at the same time.

For Sweden, this dragged-out process is beginning to be increasingly problematic, both domestically and regionally. The large and politically active Kurdish population in Sweden is criticizing the government for being too lenient towards Turkey. And since Sweden's challenges are holding up the Finnish membership as well, the delays affect the overall strategic situation in the Baltic region. With Sweden and Finland in NATO, Russia will face significant additional naval pressure—leaving only the narrow Gulf of Finland and the sliver of land in Kaliningrad for Russian naval vessels to operate from.

As a liberal democracy and a country with a solid political and independent judicial structure, Sweden can only go so far in trying to appease Turkey. As things stand now, it would probably be better to stop trying to appease Erdoğan's demands and instead let Ankara know it is ready to engage when Turkey changes its approach. In the meantime, Sweden can take security steps outside of the NATO framework—namely expanding its military coordination with Finland and the already existing security [cooperation \(https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/uk-strikes-new-security-agreement-with-sweden-finland-2022-05-11/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/uk-strikes-new-security-agreement-with-sweden-finland-2022-05-11/) with the United Kingdom. Ultimately, if Ankara overestimates its influence to the point that it presents a real security disadvantage, Washington and Turkey's European NATO neighbors are sure to act.

On the other hand, if Sweden continues to attempt concessions past what was already agreed upon in June, Ankara under President Erdoğan will wring as much as possible out of Turkey's newly-acquired key position both in the region and through the war in Ukraine. Based on the past six months, further Swedish concessions only strengthen Erdoğan's leverage over them, without speeding up the Swedish application in the slightest. ❖

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