

When Will Turkey Ratify Sweden and Finland's NATO Accession?

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Jan 25, 2023

Also published in Delphi Economic Forum

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Articles & Testimony

The key to an “F-16s for NATO expansion” agreement lies in the sequencing, with President Biden facing congressional opposition and President Erdogan dealing with economic and election challenges.

Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 led Sweden and Finland to seek NATO membership last May. Turkey opposed this process, citing Sweden's stance towards the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—designated as a terror entity by NATO members—and the Party of Democratic Unity (PYD)—the PKK's Syrian offshoot, among others. Top Turkish, Swedish, and Finnish diplomats signed a trilateral memorandum in June 2022 during the Madrid NATO summit to mitigate Turkish concerns, in which Stockholm and Helsinki committed themselves to not “provide support to PKK and PYD,” while also recognizing the PKK as a terrorist entity. Will Ankara greenlight NATO's next expansion wave, and if so, when is the Turkish parliament likely to ratify this historic Nordic enlargement?

Background: What Ankara Wants from Sweden

Ankara's bigger goal regarding NATO's Nordic enlargement is for Alliance members, starting with incoming Sweden and Finland, to crack down more harshly on the PKK, while also disengaging from its affiliates. In this regard, Ankara pays special attention to the People's Protection Forces (YPG), the PYD's military wing in Syria. Some NATO members have collaborated with the YPG, which has folded itself under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) since 2015, to combat the Islamic State. Ankara wants this cooperation to end now that the Islamic State has been defeated.

Sweden and Finland have announced their commitment to honoring Turkish demands outlined in the Madrid memorandum. While Finland does not have a large Kurdish diaspora population and faces little opposition from

Ankara regarding the PKK/YPG issue, Sweden, whose population is one percent Kurdish, has taken concrete steps since last year to satisfy Ankara's expectations. Lately, however, signs have emerged that Ankara may not be in a rush to ratify NATO's Nordic expansion.

...and from President Biden

The immediate issue in the U.S.-Turkish dialogue currently is Ankara's request to purchase a new fleet of F-16s from Washington, as well as upgrade its existing fleet. Turkey's elites and population alike attach great importance to Ankara's request, fearing that the country will find itself with a severely weakened air force by the end of the decade. This sale is currently stalled in the U.S. Congress due to objections from some key Senate members.

To this end, the White House may offer Erdogan a (tacit) quid pro quo—securing a foreign policy win regarding NATO's expansion for President Joe Biden while also strengthening Erdogan's hands in the polls. Biden could promise Erdogan that he will “provide” F-16s to Ankara before the 2023 Turkish elections. This deal would include a trade-off, namely selling Greece F-35s, a technologically more advanced fighter jet, in order to soften objections in Congress to the F-16 sale to Turkey. If Senate members refusing the F-16 sale still remain unconvinced, the White House could send the F-16 sale request to the U.S. Congress by “forcing a vote,” in which case Congress could only block the sale if both chambers voted against it.

A major weapons acquisition would strengthen Erdogan's hand in the polls. He would, in return, promise to have the Ankara parliament ratify NATO's Nordic enlargement before the Turkish legislature dissolves itself (likely to happen in March) in preparation for elections (likely to be held in April-May)—and ahead of the Alliance summit in Vilnius, Lithuania in July. However, Erdogan may delay ratification until after the Turkish elections.

The key to an “F-16s for NATO expansion” deal lies in the sequencing. Ankara will insist on F-16s first and the Biden administration on the Ankara legislature ratifying NATO enlargement. The White House will be unwilling to “force a vote” in the Congress if Ankara has not taken the first step, with Biden subsequently yielding to continuing Senate objections.

In this case, Erdogan may decide that it is more convenient to delay ratification until after the Turkish polls. This would also be his way of signaling to Biden and leaders of Ankara's key European and NATO allies that “they should not turn their back on Turkey's leader because they will still need him on a plethora of key security issues, from managing refugee flows to NATO expansion.” To put it bluntly, Erdogan may leverage Ankara's veto over NATO enlargement to secure U.S. and European acquiescence to his policies during the Turkish elections season.

Russian President Vladimir Putin could inject himself in this scenario, delaying NATO's new members from coming in. Putin could help Erdogan at the polls by providing generous loans and large financial flows to Turkey ahead of the elections. Currently, the country's economy is suffering from high inflation, at over 80 percent in 2022. In fact, Turkey's macroeconomic stability has been at risk since 2018, when its economy entered into a recession for the first time under Erdogan.

While analysts expected that the economy would collapse before summer 2022, that did not happen thanks in large part to financial inflows from Russia, including a \$5 billion wire transfer for the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power station in southern Turkey by Russia's Rosatom. Russian cash, including large inflows thanks to increased trade and tourism in 2022, has trickled down, providing relief and allowing Turkish banks to roll over foreign debt, subsequently preventing an economic meltdown. Similar injections of cash in the coming months, including a fresh lump-sum transfer by Putin, could provide a new economic lifeline and convince Erdogan to use the Turkish veto inside NATO against the Alliance's Nordic enlargement, especially if the F-16 sale is blocked in Congress.

The “good news” under this scenario, however, is that whatever the outcome of the spring 2023 elections, the Ankara parliament is likely to ratify NATO's Nordic expansion after the polls. This is because if the opposition wins,

Turkey's new rulers will be eager to be embraced by the EU and United States in order to start global financial inflows to the country and jumpstart its economy. Accordingly, an opposition-led legislature would quickly ratify NATO's Nordic enlargement.

If Erdogan wins, the outcome may not be too different. The Turkish leader will be eager for a reset with Biden and the EU for the same reasons as the opposition and he will likely approve Sweden and Finland's NATO membership in return for U.S. and European public support to his administration after the elections.

Barring a meltdown in U.S.-Turkish or Turkish-Swedish ties, Ankara is likely to ratify the Alliance's next enlargement. The question is whether this will happen before the Turkish parliament dissolves itself or after the elections are held and a new legislature convenes in late 2023.

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