

# Turkey's Options for Finland and Sweden's NATO Membership Applications

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**Abstract:** *Russia's aggressive attitude and attempt to invade Ukraine aroused concern in Russia and neighboring countries. Sweden and Finland applied for NATO membership because NATO member states are more protected against aggressive behavior. However, while Turkey used to be particularly positive towards Finland, Turkish President Erdogan's change of attitude created a problematic situation. How can Turkey, or Erdogan, use this difficult situation to benefit himself as the 2023 elections are approaching? Erdogan has several options. In addition to alternatives such as re-involving in the F35 project, giving urgent permission to purchase Patriot air defense systems, preventing support to the PKK/YPG terrorist organization, deportation of PKK terrorist organization members in Sweden, it may also request sizeable financial support. It is also crucial whether Sweden, Finland, and other NATO countries accept Turkey's demands. Can Erdogan risk his favorable decision to jeopardize his relations with Russia? Turkey is more likely to decide in the personal interests of Erdogan, who runs the country autocratically. The importance of the final decision in terms of international relations and Turkey's domestic politics is discussed. It should be noted that the Istanbul Gezi defendants, whom the United States wants to be released from prison, are also in Turkey's hands as a trump card.*

**Keywords:** NATO, Turkey, Finland and Sweden, NATO Membership, Russia, Diplomacy, International relations

## 1. Introduction

Democracies need peace, while autocratic regimes need turmoil to maintain their power (Mintz 1993). Although Russia's foreign policy priorities seem to be shaped and prioritized for the country's benefit, one of the critical issues is Putin's effort to maintain his power in domestic politics. Partition or complete occupation of Ukraine will increase Russia's ambitions in the peripheral countries (Glaser 2021).

US foreign policy is to thwart Russia's invading ambitions by blocking its borders with NATO forces. Of course, this is not expected to be entirely in good faith. The economic dimension of this is essential. Russia has proved that the fears of Russia and neighboring countries are not unjustified in the Crimea and Georgia events. However, if Russia had defended democracy through peaceful initiatives, NATO's self-encirclement would not have been legitimate. But then, Putin would have to give up his political interests and bring an air of democracy to his country, which is something that Putin cannot do with other autocratic leaders (Tuncer 2022 DOI: 10.21275/SR22302165252, Frantz 2018).

NATO's door remains open to any European country in a position to undertake the commitments and obligations of membership and contribute to security in the Euro-Atlantic area. Since 1949, NATO's membership has increased from 12 to 30 countries through eight enlargement rounds. Five partner countries have declared their aspirations for NATO membership: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Georgia, Sweden, and Ukraine. The Republic of North Macedonia became the latest country to join the Alliance on 27 March 2020 ([www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49212.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm))

The legitimacy of Sweden and Finland's desire to join NATO has now been realized. NATO, criticized for being late on the Ukraine issue, now wants to act faster on this issue. However, Turkey, a NATO member, should not veto the entry of Sweden and Finland. The same problem was

experienced during Greece's second entry into NATO, and Turkey was somehow convinced ([www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/declassified\\_181434.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/declassified_181434.htm)). Greece withdrew from the military wing of NATO after Turkey's Cyprus Peace Operation in 1974; Greece returned in 1980. Greece's membership in NATO was a security guarantee that the country welcomed to support national efforts in providing a viable defense. On 18 February, Greece was formally accepted as one of NATO's first new members since the creation of the Alliance in 1949, along with Turkey.

After Turkey intervened in Cyprus in July 1974, Greece left the military wing of NATO, claiming that NATO did not prevent Turkey's intervention in Cyprus. This event undoubtedly affected Turkey-Greece relations deeply; moreover, it worried the Western imperial powers sensitive to the control of the Aegean-Mediterranean. Western powers intensified their attempts to bring together their two allies, whose presence and cooperation they needed in the Aegean-Mediterranean, once again, under the umbrella of NATO. They advised Greece to return to NATO and Turkey not to take a negative stance.

Shortly after the intervention, Turkey declared NOTAM 714 in July 1974 and made flights in a 50-mile area over the Aegean subject to its permission. Greece, which was in a difficult situation and lost its command and control authority in the Aegean, announced in 1976, two years later, that it wanted to return to the military wing of NATO. Still, Turkey stipulated the redefinition of the command-control areas in the Aegean for this. NATO European Commander-in-Chief Alexander Haig and then Gen. Rogers attempted with Bülent Ecevit and Süleyman Demirel, but they could not get results.

The disagreement between the parties continued. In the second half of the 70s, as the Soviet Union's influence in the Mediterranean increased, especially after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the collapse of the pro-US Shah regime in Iran, Western powers increased the pressure

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on Greece to return to the military wing of NATO.

Turkey spent the second half of the 1970s struggling against the US embargo abroad and trying to suppress the right-left conflict at home.

The Military Administration, which seized power on September 12, 1980, to establish "stability and security," began new searches in foreign relations. It was the Military Administration's search for a foothold. It soon became clear that the military intervention took place with the knowledge of the USA.

In a statement released just after September 12, the US State Department stated that "the purpose of the (soldiers') seizure of power is to ensure the functioning of a democratic system" and said that "the USA will continue to help Turkey to achieve economic stability."

About a week after the intervention, the letter sent from the US Department of State to the US embassy in Ankara reiterates the US perspective on the Military Administration. It points out that the economic aid will continue, along with general demands such as the release of political leaders, NATO Commander-in-Chief, General Rogers, in Greece's NATO. It was explicitly stated that he would make attempts to return.

While the USA made large loans to the September 12 Administration, it put forward its impositions. The continuation of inter-communal talks on the Cyprus issue and the return of Greece to NATO were among the top demands of the USA. Kenan Evren (Turkey's President then), the military coup leader in 1980, bowed to pressure due to his loyalty to America and Turkey's difficult situation under the American embargo. He did not use his right of veto to accept Greece into NATO for the second time. Turgut Özal, who would later become the President, and Brzezinsky played an essential role in this event. From the point of view of the American embargo, there are important factors, such as the F35 project and American sanctions, which are similar to the current situation.

### **The trump cards and problems in the hands of Turkey and NATO**

Turkey and NATO have issues that can be negotiated mutually.

- 1) Turkey's most crucial trump card is the veto vote that Sweden and Finland can use against NATO membership. If Turkey vetoes, Sweden and Finland cannot become members of NATO.
- 2) Although Turkey is a NATO country, it purchased the S-400 air defense system from Russia, and as a result, it was excluded from the F35 fighter jet project. It may come to the plan with the request of reintroducing the positive vote against the membership of Sweden and Finland to this project. This could be similar to how Greece was prevented from re-membership in NATO in 1980.
- 3) Turkey conducts cross-border operations, especially in Syria, to defend against the PKK/YPG terrorist organization. Still, it supports the American PKK/YPG organization to use it against the Islamic Terrorist

Organization ISIS. Turkey's warnings against the United States on this issue have remained unanswered until now. Turkey can bring this issue to the plan in return for the support it will give to Finland and Sweden in NATO.

- 4) Even though Turkey has wanted to purchase Patriot air defense systems since the Obama era, the United States has abstained from this issue. This issue can also be brought up.
- 5) Turkey, or President Erdogan, has decisions on several matters, unclear how they are understood. One of them is the American citizen priest Brunson. The Andrew Brunson crisis, which caused the tensest days in the history of US-Turkey relations and brought the two countries to the point of imposing mutual sanctions, was resolved with the release of the US evangelical priest. US cleric Andrew Craig Brunson, sentenced to 35 years in prison for "committing crimes and spying on behalf of terrorist organizations" in Izmir and was under house arrest, was sentenced to 3 years, one month, and 15 days in prison. However, considering the time the priest had been in jail, it was ruled that he would not be imprisoned again.

In addition, Brunson's house arrest and travel ban were lifted. Trump thanked the release, explaining that Erdogan did not break his request. However, it is not known how the bargain was made (tr. euronews. com/2018/10/12/adim-adim-brunson-krizi-and-Turkiye-iliskilerinde-yaptirimlar-noktasina-nasil-gelindi).

Another incident is the case of German citizen Deniz Yücel. Die Welt Turkey correspondent Deniz Yücel was detained in Istanbul to testify to the investigation teams about the news he wrote about the hacking of the private e-mail address of the Minister of Energy then by RedHack. He was arrested on February 27, 2017, to whom he was referred on charges of "propagandizing for a terrorist organization and inciting the people to hatred and enmity."

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan spoke on the subject: "It turns out that this terrorist was the cause of all these events. Unfortunately, this man is a terrorist, not a journalist, and the German administration puts my ministers on the same scale as such a terrorist". German Chancellor Angela Merkel talked with President Erdoğan to let him go. '

Merkel stepped in for Yücel, and the journalist was released after being detained in Turkey between 14 February 2017 and 16 February 2018. German Chancellor Merkel did not explain the negotiations for Yücel's release (tr. euronews. com/2022/01/25/aihm-gazeteci-deniz-yucel-in-act-g-davada-turkiye-yi-mahkum-etti).

In another incident, two Israeli tourists were declared spies and arrested for taking pictures of Erdogan's palace. The meeting between Erdogan and Israeli President Herzog was instrumental in releasing these two people. However, it is unknown how bargains were made.

The Turkish public knows about Erdogan's negotiation, which is not transparent. Whether such non-transparent bargains may exist in NATO's Finland and Sweden decision

is a question mark.

The European Court of Human Rights severely criticizes Erdogan for human rights violations in Syria and Turkey. If the power changes hands in the elections in 2023, it is clear that serious trial processes will come to the agenda for Erdoğan (Tuncer 2022 DOI: 10.55559/sjahss.v1i05.29). Can Erdogan ask for an international assurance against this possibility in 2023 in return for not using a veto vote?

- 6) Turkey's economy is in a challenging situation. A Central Bank was on the verge of bankruptcy and severe foreign debt payment, and the Turkish Lira traded at the lowest value in history. Increasing unemployment and poverty are a heavy burden for Turkey. Erdogan, who wants to get out of this situation as soon as possible, alleviate the problem, and go to the 2023 elections, can ask for crucial economic aid. However, since NATO, a military unit, cannot do anything about it, America may step in. This would be a very corrupt bargain.
- 7) In particular, Sweden does not openly accept Turkey's PKK/YPG terrorist organization as a terrorist organization and does not speak out against some organization members residing in Sweden. This issue affects Turkey's game.
- 8) The burning of the Holy Quran in Sweden brought the peoples of the two countries against each other and made it difficult for Turkey to vote positively for Sweden ([www. bbc. com/turkce/haberler-dunya-61134914](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-61134914)).
- 9) Another situation is the Eastern Mediterranean Energy issue. Especially France and Greece, which are trying to leave Turkey alone, may have to take a step back from this attitude.
- 10) Another substantial stalemate of Turkey is that when Finland and Sweden say yes to NATO, their relations with Russia will deteriorate, which is not clear yet.
- 11) The internal opposition in Turkey will also bring criticism if Turkey's vote in NATO is both positive and negative. That's why it hasn't taken a specific stand so far.
- 12) Turkey's trade target with Finland is 2 billion Euros. The trade target with Sweden is 3 billion USD. This trade will affect the Turkish economy, which is in bad shape (<https://ticaret.gov.tr/>).
- 13) Stopping the pressures of the European Court of Human Rights and the United States in line with the release of the detainees of the Istanbul Gezi case can also be used as a trump card for the veto issue in Turkey's hands. However, world public opinion will not welcome the open discussion of human rights.
- 14) It should not be surprising if it is among Turkey's wishes that Turkey's European Union membership process, which has been dragged on for years, should be accelerated and completed in the NATO membership process.

## 2. Conclusion

If NATO refrains from fighting Russia's invading attempts, its establishment and necessity are also debatable. Another critical question is; If NATO did not want to face Russia, why was it organized in Eastern Europe and encouraged

Ukraine to join NATO? (Tuncer 2022, DOI: 10.21275/SR22302165252). This time, NATO does not want to be exposed to negative criticism.

An important topic of discussion is that NATO and the Warsaw Pact create a mutual balance. There is no need for NATO as there is no Warsaw Pact at the moment, and NATO policies have a toxic and aggravating effect on Russia. However, it is known in history that although NATO does not invade the country, the Warsaw Pact and Russia's ongoing invasion and border violations are numerous. The most important reason is Russia's former occupying ideology and the current autocratic oppressive Putinism policy (Robinson 2020). The intervention in Chechnya, the Georgian war, the Crimea, and the Ukraine occupation revealed the legitimacy of the NATO security umbrella against Russia's aggressive policies. Negative feelings after NATO's open-door policy failed in Ukraine now put NATO to a difficult test for Finland and Sweden's memberships. For Turkey to use its veto right in this exam, NATO needs to analyze the past problems well, examine the issue from a broad perspective, and reduce the chance of a failure again.

Turkey has previously wanted to use its veto right to appoint the NATO Secretary-General. In 2009, Turkey objected to setting Anders Fogh Rasmussen as NATO's top official, only relenting after high-level talks. De Hoop Scheffer, the outgoing secretary-general at the time, recalled overnight negotiations involving U. S. President Barack Obama ([https://www. politico. eu/article/turkey-nato-sweden-and-finland-membership-tayyip-erdogan/](https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-nato-sweden-and-finland-membership-tayyip-erdogan/)).

Russia's openly aggressive attitude, the occupation of Georgia, Chechnya, Crimea, and then Ukraine, and the same threatening attitude towards Finland and Sweden have justified the NATO memberships of Sweden and Finland (Applebaum 2012). It has also become obligatory to make these memberships a little while ago. It doesn't seem very easy for Turkey to vote negatively when all these cards are on the table. However, Turkey will not want to leave the table without gaining some advantages in its decision on membership. The diplomatic power of the parties will determine the outcome.

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