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**TÜRKIYE'S OBJECTION TO
SWEDEN'S NATO BID:
CONCESSIONS AND ITS FINAL
PATH INTO THE ALLIANCE**

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Introduction

More than a year has passed since Finland and Sweden jointly submitted their applications to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) on 18 May 2022. Since then, neither of the countries has achieved their desired outcome of swiftly becoming a member of NATO. Unlike Sweden, Finland initially faced a veto from Türkiye. However, this block was eventually lifted following multiple rounds of negotiations, after which Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recognised that the issue of 'Kurdish terrorist activity in Finland had been addressed' (Wintour, 2023).

In the case of Sweden, Türkiye waited until the eve of the NATO Summit in Vilnius to lend its support, likely to exert maximum pressure on Stockholm. This gesture comes after months of lengthy negotiations between the two countries. The matter holds importance for Ankara due to national security concerns, particularly regarding the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). More precisely, the negotiations were focused on Türkiye's accusations of Sweden harbouring PKK's former members, along with the lift of arms sales restrictions imposed by Finland and Sweden. Although Sweden made several gestures to appease Ankara, these efforts appeared to be insufficient to convince Türkiye to provide its support. Nevertheless, Sweden unexpectedly attained its objective on 10 July 2023: Erdoğan agreed to pass Sweden's bid for Alliance membership to the Turkish parliament. Considering this negotiating scuffle over Sweden's NATO bid, this Info Flash aims to overview the events surrounding Türkiye's opposition and analyse the concessions that have changed Türkiye's view of Sweden's membership.

1. Turkish Objections regarding Sweden's Bid

The negotiations between Sweden and Türkiye demonstrate that the latter was not in a hurry to facilitate Sweden's immediate accession to NATO without securing concessions in return (Michaelson, 2023). This observation remained valid, even in light of the upcoming Vilnius 2023 NATO Summit. In a complicated domestic context marked by 80 per cent inflation in July 2023 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2023), President Erdoğan intended to protect Ankara's interests. Facing the polls, which showed a marginal victory against opposition candidate [Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu](#) in the 2023 presidential election, Erdoğan used his chances to show Türkiye's strength and protect its national interests by threatening to veto the ratification of Sweden's and Finland's accession (Turak, 2023). Consequently, Türkiye made various demands to these countries, which have escalated over the months and put increased pressure not only on Sweden but also on the European Union and NATO.

2. The Trilateral Memorandum of Understanding

During the Madrid 2022 NATO Summit, foreign ministers of Türkiye, Sweden, and Finland signed a Trilateral Memorandum of Understanding (NATO, 2022). Through this Memorandum, Türkiye confirmed its 'support for Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership and [enabled] progress in both countries' NATO membership process' (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2022).

Sweden and Finland subsequently conceded to some of Türkiye's requests. First Stockholm and Helsinki vowed to step up cooperation to prevent the activities of the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the associated Democratic Union Party (PYD) group (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2022). Likewise, it included followers of Fethullah Gulen, an influential Islamic cleric and former close ally of the Turkish President (Surk, 2016), whom Ankara accuses of orchestrating the 2016 coup attempt (Lukov & Murphy, 2022). Given the tense relationship between Türkiye and the Kurdish supporters, President Erdoğan has been forceful in criticising Sweden for harbouring PKK members, which it sees as a terrorist organisation (Lukov & Murphy, 2022). Sweden accepted Ankara's demands by toughening its anti-terrorism laws despite criticism from former allies of the Social Democratic government and opponents of Sweden's NATO application (Hivert, 2023). This reform outlaws organising gatherings to provide financial or any other form of support to banned groups, focusing on targeting Kurds suspected of having connections to PKK militants (Kirby, 2023).

Second, both countries had to assure Türkiye that they would lift the embargo on the sale of military equipment. Several European governments, including Italy, France, Germany, Finland and Sweden, suspended arms sales to the country in response to its northern Syria offensive against the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia in 2019 (Çetiner, 2022). However, the Swedish Inspectorate of Strategic Products lifted these restrictions after three years, although they did not specify which products could be supplied (Çetiner, 2022).

Lastly, both countries were required to facilitate the extradition of militants to Ankara, as exemplified by the case of a Kurdish resident in Sweden who was accused of a drug-related offence. However, the suspect has claimed the extradition request is merely a consequence of his support for pro-Kurdish groups (Kirby, 2023).

3. Not an Easy Path for Sweden: New Demands to Lift the Veto

For Türkiye, Sweden's compliance with the points above was necessary for ultimately passing the request (Al Jazeera, 2022). Nevertheless, Ankara's demands escalated over the last months, even though Sweden made significant progress in the contested areas, which NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg recognised (NATO, 2023). Furthermore, events in Sweden did not do any favours to the country's NATO bid.

President Erdoğan considered the limited pro-Kurdish demonstrations that took place in Stockholm in mid-June 2023, as prejudicial to Sweden's accession bid (Toksabay & Hayatsever, 2023). Indeed, he accused those demonstrations, which also opposed Sweden's NATO bid as well as the recently approved anti-terror legislation, attended by some members of the Swedish Left Party and by groups close to the PKK, to have an "anti-Turkish" character. (Agence France-Presse, 2023). Likewise, the projection of the PKK flag onto the Swedish Parliament did not assist in fostering mutual understanding between the partners (Reuters, 2023). Considering these developments, President Erdoğan announced that 'Turkey cannot approach Sweden's NATO bid positively while "terrorists" were protesting in Stockholm' (Reuters, 2023). The consecutive burning of a copy of the Qur'an at the start of the three-day Eid al-Adha holiday further inflamed relations between Ankara and Stockholm (Henley, 2023). Türkiye's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan condemned the action, stating it was 'unacceptable to allow anti-Islam protests in the name of freedom of expression' (Henley, 2023). He demonstrated his unwillingness to expedite Sweden's accession to the Alliance.

4. The End of the Road: How Türkiye was Convinced to Ratify Sweden's Membership in NATO.

In the end, support from third parties rather than the concessions to Türkiye seemed to have played a decisive role in saving Sweden's bid. While previous national developments did not favour Sweden's swift accession to NATO, allies, including the United States (US), saw Sweden's membership as necessary for NATO (Atwood et al., 2023). The urgency surrounding the 2023 Vilnius Summit was likely generated to convey a strong message of unity in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Although not explicitly part of the negotiations, it was stated that the sale of American-made F-16 fighter aircraft was an implicit demand by Ankara (Atwood et al., 2023). The purchase of forty F-16 fighter jets and eighty so-called 'modernisation kits' for its current military aircraft fleet has been on Ankara's wish list for a long time (Kokkinidis, 2022). It aims to improve its armed forces and its stronger global position as a rising power (Müftüler-Baç, 2014). However, Washington, as well as other NATO allies, considered the purchase an operational risk, insofar that it could allow data collected by American F-35s to be shared with Moscow (Bensaid, 2020). Likewise, in the run-up to the eve of the NATO Summit in Vilnius, Erdoğan made a surprise move by preconditioning the lifting of its veto on Sweden's NATO application to the reopening of Türkiye's EU accession negotiations. He declared that Türkiye 'has been waiting at the door of the European Union for over 50 years now' (Carter, 2023).

In the present scenario, where Türkiye has considerable influence and the potential to gain leverage from these negotiations, the sale of these fighter jets could have been an explicit factor in persuading Türkiye to lift its veto (Wintour, 2023). The acquisition of the fighter jets may have provided the incentive for Türkiye to reconsider its stance. On the same day that Türkiye dropped its opposition to Sweden's accession, the Pentagon reported a call between US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Turkish counterpart Yasar Guler on modernising the Turkish armed forces (DW, 2023). Even though Sweden had no control over this matter, it appeared to become a decisive factor for Türkiye (Wintour, 2023). On the other hand, regarding Turkey's membership into the EU, the European Commission swiftly disputed this move by indicating that the two processes are 'separate and happening in parallel' (Brzozowski, 2023).

Conclusion

Despite many experts' and diplomats' belief that Ankara's extensive demands would drag on for months or even years, Türkiye surprised the Alliance by paving the way for Sweden's entry into NATO. Türkiye's initial objection to ratifying Sweden's bid did not only result in a headache for members but was seen as a master stroke by President Erdoğan. By refusing to ratify Sweden's NATO bid, he unblocked several pending issues, such as the extradition of PKK supporters in these countries and reopened talks over the sale of the American F-16 fighter jets. Likewise, he reminded Western countries that they should take Turkish interests into account if they want Ankara's support in future issues.

Sweden's entry into the Alliance is now a matter of time. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether Türkiye's strategy will be copied in multilateral contexts in the future. With regard to how Türkiye benefited from these events, more countries may consider vetoing – or threatening to veto – new alliance or organisation memberships hoping to obtain political concessions more quickly than through conventional channels.

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