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**SWEDEN, TÜRKIYE, AND NATO:  
RATIONAL CHOICES LEADING  
TO A BREAKDOWN IN  
NEGOTIATIONS?**

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## Negotiations re-derailing

Sweden's NATO application looks as if it is on the cusp of derailing once more after 21 August comments from Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In the context of Sweden's NATO application, Erdoğan asserted that "Sweden must first of all take care of the streets of Stockholm. If they don't take care of their streets, if these attacks on the things we hold sacred continue, then they shouldn't blame us" (Hacaoglu, 2023, para. 2). This statement follows a summer of Qur'an burnings that have soured Sweden's relations with most of the Muslim world, Türkiye included (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation [OIC], 2023), severely increased the risk of terror attacks on Sweden and motivated direct threats by militant Islamist groups (Swedish Security Service, 2023; Johnson & Ahlander, 2023).

These developments have led Sweden's prime minister to describe the current security environment as "the most serious security-political setting since the second world war[1]" (Alström, 2023, para. 1). The rise of anti-Swedish sentiment is also suspected to be magnified by malign actors, especially those with an interest in derailing Sweden's NATO process (Nyberg, 2023). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the rise in this sentiment has been specifically tied to actors supported by Russia, whose purported aim is to disturb Swedish foreign relations, its NATO application process, and stoke religion-based tensions within Sweden (Nyberg, 2023).

Said anti-Swedish sentiment may also induce Türkiye to renege on a deal to ratify Sweden's NATO accession. While no decisive action has been taken, Erdoğan's implication of non-ratification should Sweden not "control its streets" indicates that Türkiye is seeking a return to entry negotiations. The Turkish side altering the deal is neither unusual nor wholly unexpected, as it has already reneged on the earlier Trilateral Memorandum (NATO, 2022), where it committed to admit Sweden to NATO.

## Rational interest and Türkiye's non-ratification

The possible return of a Turkish blockage is also unsurprising, as its refusal to ratify results from a rational interest calculation rather than a political tactic. In short, the benefits of a status quo where Sweden teeters on the edge of NATO admission appear to outweigh the costs for Türkiye considerably and are politically useful for the Turkish government.

[1] "Vi befinner oss i det allvarligaste säkerhetspolitiska läget sedan andra världskriget"

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Firstly, Türkiye's bargaining power is not decreasing as pressure from its allies builds up but rather appears to be increasing with the concessions it wins from Sweden and NATO allies seeking to break the deadlock. Further, Sweden has no clear options for maintaining its security (Ds 2022:7) and has shown a willingness to compromise through two separate agreements, both littered with concessions (NATO, 2022; 2023). Meanwhile, Türkiye appears fully aware of how worries over Russo-Turkish relations are shielding it from harsh rebukes from NATO allies (Childs, 2023, p. 26), all as the situation is a political goldmine domestically and in the wider Muslim world. This appears compelling to Erdoğan, whose Neo-Ottoman tendencies feed ambitions for some form of Muslim political leadership and an assertive foreign policy that is critical of the West (Genç, 2018; Yavuz, 2020).

The first reason relates entirely to bargaining power, and the case is simple: Sweden does not have any. The Swedish NATO application is a crisis response brought on by the deteriorated security setting caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which gained momentum after Finland joined the alliance (Ds 2022:7). In this line, Sweden has grown increasingly reliant on defence integration with Finland (Ds 2022:7; Edström & Thorburn, 2023, p. 5). Accordingly, should the status quo of Finland inside the alliance and Sweden outside hold for a considerable amount of time, military integration and interoperability may suffer (Chasan, 2023; Öbrink, 2023).

Simultaneously, Sweden has set NATO membership as its highest priority (Government Offices of Sweden, 2023). The Trilateral Memorandum showed that it is willing and able to make sweeping concessions to speed its application. However, Sweden's constitutional changes criminalising membership or funding of terror organisations were not a result of the Trilateral Memorandum Turkish demands or Sweden's NATO aspirations, as the constitutional changes were submitted to parliament in 2021 (Prop. 2021/22:42). The Swedish government did however publicly tie the law to Sweden fulfilling its obligations under the Trilateral Memorandum, most notably via an op-ed in Financial Times by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson (2023). As such, Sweden is locked in with no clearly viable alternatives to NATO membership for its security and mounting costs as long as it is not a member.

In crossing an earlier red line of refusing to go further than the Trilateral Memorandum by agreeing to new terms with the Vilnius agreement (NATO, 2023), it has also signalled that there is more for Türkiye to gain, all as it plays up a change to its constitution as a concession. The Swedish room for manoeuvre and the strength of its position is also weakening over time, partly due to the costs incurred and partly as Türkiye's focus on Qur'an burnings in Sweden increases international attention to said events. These burnings have not only raised Sweden's terrorist threat level (Swedish Security Service, 2023) but also continuously worsens its international standing and relations with Muslim-majority states (Swedish Institute, 2023; OIC, 2023).

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The rationale for Türkiye ratifying Sweden's accession under current circumstances remains unclear as, put bluntly, the longer they wait, the more they get. Thus far, the concessions gained include, among other things, Sweden promising to reinvigorate the Turkish EU accession process, withdraw all support for Kurdish groups, remove all export controls on defence materiel, work for greater Turkish inclusion in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects, and institute a bilateral security compact (NATO, 2023; NATO, 2022). Further, the two main costs they are enduring by doing so appear manageable. Firstly, the rest of NATO, who heavily favour Sweden joining the alliance, bar a largely indifferent Hungary, have tied some deals and cooperation to Sweden's admission (Wilks, 2023) but have refrained from overt coercion.

This lack of coercion dramatically lowers Türkiye's stakes and is unlikely to change, as NATO allies appear worried that more assertive action would drive Türkiye toward Russia (Childs, 2023). Secondly, the reputational effects Türkiye is faced with are not omnidirectional. Westward relations are already marked by an absence of trust and relations with other parts of the world are being strengthened due to non-ratification. That leaves minor drawbacks and significant gains, covering everything from the policy furthering an existing Neo-Ottoman agenda of protecting the Islamic faith (Yavuz, 2020) and expected concessions promised by Sweden and other Western states once it ratifies.

As for Türkiye's domestic politics, public opinion remains steadily against NATO in general (Fagan & Poushter, 2020), and presumably also against Swedish accession. Combined with a post-election reversal only half-materialising, this points to alternate, non-electoral, explanations for Erdoğan's refusal to ratify. As such, the status quo makes non-ratification rational. The question then arises of how to break the deadlock.

### **Fears of bargaining failure as a driver for ratification**

To begin with, it is entirely possible that Türkiye ratifies Swedish membership within short. This is a possibility mainly because there is a risk of the two states' domestic politics making their positions irreconcilable, regardless of how comfortable as the status quo is for Türkiye. In other words, Türkiye and Sweden are beholden to a classic two-level game between each other and their respective domestic politics (Moravcsik, 1993, p. 4), which could lock in the status quo. For Türkiye, a possible issue is that their current position is resonating overly well: denouncing Sweden for Qur'an burnings in particular strikes a chord, as exemplified by the international outcry (OIC, 2023), as would strongarming Sweden into banning it.

Should Türkiye make a clear demand that Sweden must disallow Qur'an burnings or protests by Sweden's Kurdish minority, attempting to do so may collapse the Swedish government. This scenario is realistic given that, though polls find a majority of Swedes are now in favour of prohibiting Qur'an burnings (Rosén, 2023), the largest party supporting the governing coalition is decidedly against it, with voters polling in favour of allowing burnings and party leader Jimmy Åkesson rejecting legal changes outright (Holm & Rydhagen, 2023; Rosén, 2023). Regardless of parliamentary feasibility, Swedish law requires two votes in favour separated by an election and at least nine months for changes to be made to its constitution (SFS 2010:1408).

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These legal and political requirements mean that Sweden cannot do anything until parliament reconvenes after a new election, which is expected in late 2026. Even more problematic for Türkiye is the increasing possibility of an Islamic terror attack in Sweden (Swedish Security Service, 2023), the effects of which would be unpredictable for the negotiations. Possible terror attacks notwithstanding, Türkiye does appear to, at some point, want Sweden in the alliance to gain the concessions it has been promised. It therefore has no particular interest in talks breaking down, which is a risk present in holding up the process.

The main problem here is that the situation may be heading for a bargaining failure where Sweden has given Türkiye the impression that constitutional changes blocking everything from Qur'an burnings to certain protests are forthcoming. Arguing for this is that there are some indications that the Turkish side has interpreted the Madrid and Vilnius agreements as Sweden agreeing to take such action. The most notable example after Vilnius is Erdoğan's insistence that Sweden restores order, implying that allowing Qur'an burnings means the blame for Türkiye's non-ratification lies on Sweden (Hacaoglu, 2023).

In conclusion, if Türkiye considers Sweden not to be living up to its agreements, a bargaining failure may well arise. It is unclear whether Sweden has any desire or ability to make the changes Türkiye considers Sweden to have promised. and Türkiye appears to view said changes as a way out of backing down from a widely popular position. Should Türkiye remain convinced that Sweden can stop Qur'an burnings and other demonstrations, the rational choice for Türkiye is to wait for Sweden to do so. The problem arises in that the longer Türkiye holds out, the less predictable the costs and benefits are. Eventually, those costs, particularly those related to public opinion, may outweigh the benefits. Sweden's government, on its part, may not be able to get the changes through without collapsing. In short, if ratification does not happen soon, it may well be long until Sweden goes through.

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