

Opinion – NATO’s Expansion in Northern Europe Rests on Türkiye

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, JAN 19 2023

NATO’s enlargement in Northern Europe to encompass the entire Baltic Sea region with the likely accession of Finland and Sweden is one of the most remarkable, and most unexpected effects of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Both nations bring incredible military resources to the alliance as well as unique perspectives in dealing with Russia, particularly in the case of Finland. Sweden and Finland, as well as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are also some of the strongest advocates for Ukraine joining NATO at an unspecified time, knowing the power of security guarantees to help protect against future attacks.

Finland and Sweden may have a clear-cut case in seeking membership of a revitalised defensive alliance, but their accession process has also revealed some of the fissures long present within NATO. On NATO’s southern flank, Türkiye (Turkey) is the member state seeking to extract the greatest concessions from Finland and Sweden while holding tremendous leverage over future peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.

Ankara’s primary grievances are with Stockholm rather than Helsinki, but their joint bid means their fates are wedded together. Turkey has accused Sweden of harbouring terrorists and supporting the Kurdistan Worker’s Party or the PKK, designated a terror group by NATO as well as by Sweden. In order for the Turkish parliament to approve both nations’ accession bids, they need to deport up to 130 ‘terrorists’, says President Erdoğan. Sweden denies supporting the PKK and has pledged to distance itself from Kurdish groups in both Turkey and Syria, including the Syrian People’s Protective Units or YPG, which Ankara views as an offshoot of the PKK. However, much to Ankara’s dismay, Sweden is unlikely to cease advocating for democratic reforms and political pluralism in Turkey, just as it will continue to host a sizable Kurdish minority and exiles fleeing persecution.

Given its strategic location between East and West and its historic ties stretching from the Balkans to the Levant and the Caucasus, Turkey often savours its moment in the geopolitical spotlight. As Finland and Sweden still wait to gain Turkey’s approval to join NATO, President Biden is reportedly seeking Congressional approval for the sale of 40 F-16 fighter jets to Turkey. Turkey first requested the jets from Washington in October 2021, but Turkey’s decision to acquire the Russian S-400 air defence system stalled negotiations over the sale. Now, in a bid to push Ankara towards greenlighting Sweden and Finland’s NATO bids, weapons systems from Washington are back on the table.

In the US Congress, Sen. Robert Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is willing to block the sale of F-16 fighter jets until Turkey’s human rights record improves. However, Western leaders may find themselves waiting for a considerable amount of time if military aid to Turkey is contingent on sudden human rights reforms and political freedoms. The great paradox is that the accession of two of the most peaceful and socially liberal states in Europe rests on the whims of an illiberal autocrat. Turkey is increasingly a NATO member state that shares little of the alliance’s values and at times has interests that clash sharply with Washington and other Western powers in the Middle East. Despite this, Finland and Sweden must work with the Turkey that exists today and not hope for an idealised post-Erdoğan utopia that will become a haven for Turkey’s Kurdish minority.

Next month marks one year since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the seismic changes that have swept Europe and the global order since then. The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, as well as the cohesion of NATO

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despite all the odds, is one of the lasting legacies of Vladimir Putin’s strategic blunder. For Ankara, time in the spotlight in order to maximise concessions and geostrategic aims is clearly one of Erdogan’s main drivers. Ultimately, he is likely to approve Sweden and Finland’s bid, leveraging his hard-line security posture to bolster his own domestic political position ahead of the Turkish general election called for 14 May.

While Turkey may not share the liberal values of many NATO member states and its two current aspirants, it still has a role to play within the alliance. In facing Russian aggression and maintaining the existing security order in Europe and Eurasia, imagining Sweden, Finland, as well as Turkey outside of NATO is a dangerous prospect.

Like any intergovernmental alliance, NATO has its shortcomings and weak spots, but it is ultimately a big tent, capable of responding nimbly to crises in its neighbourhood and amongst its members while gaining new adherents in the process. This is by far its greatest benefit, and an interest that Sweden, Finland, and Turkey all share despite having different value sets and imperial legacies which shape their approaches to foreign policy.

In a similar vein as NATO, Turkey under Erdogan craves relevance and abhors isolation on the global stage. This will ultimately be what continues to bind NATO and Turkey together, particularly if Ukraine emerges as the victor, and Ankara proves to be a constructive architect for transatlantic security in contrast to Moscow’s destructive and irredentist tendencies that have made it a pariah.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for Global Risk Insights and Foreign Brief, two political risk publications, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

He writes in a personal capacity and not with any professional affiliation.