

Some Implications of Sweden and Finland Joining NATO

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Executive summary

Sweden and Finland's decision to abandon their longtime, famous neutrality and apply for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) indicates that Russian president Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has disastrously backfired. These two new NATO members will bring tangible geostrategic benefits to the alliance, not just a token weight. NATO has suddenly gained a new and greater strength and legitimacy. As for the Kurds, they need to understand that NATO's deal with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan to approve Sweden and Finland's NATO membership in return for their cracking down on supposed Kurdish terrorists sheltering within their borders is not as hostile to Kurdish interests as they claim. Sweden and Finland are not likely to extradite Kurds accused of political crimes to Turkey. The

Kurds should comprehend their very secondary position in the existential power struggle involving NATO and Russia and not overreact against it. As explained below, this deal with Turkey, like earlier ones, is not likely to be as inimical to Kurdish interests as first meets the eye.

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Introduction

If one of the main reasons for the Russian invasion of Ukraine was to keep NATO off Russia's borders, Sweden and Finland's decision to abandon their longtime, famous neutrality and apply for NATO membership indicates that Russian president Vladimir Putin's invasion scheme has disastrously backfired.² No longer will Finland (and for that matter Sweden too) remain "Finlandized," a cold-war term that meant Finland would never take sides in the contest between the West and the then-Soviet Union, which in return would allow Finland to remain independent. Seventy-five years of important Nordic neutrality was lost in a flash because, given Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, the two Nordic states suddenly both felt vulnerable to possible Russian aggression. Indeed, Putin's threats against their joining NATO simply added to their perceived vulnerability. Ironically, "Finlandize" may soon come to take on a new, almost opposite meaning! Even more famously neutral Switzerland has announced it will seek greater cooperation with NATO, although actual membership remains unlikely.³ NATO has suddenly gained a new and greater legitimacy.

²For background, see "Back in Business," *The Economist*, July 2, 2022, pp. 43-44; Steven Erlanger and Michael D. Shear, "NATO Formally invites Finland and Sweden to Join the Alliance," *New York Times*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/world/europe/nato-sweden-finland.html>, accessed June 30, 2022; and Ashley Parker and Emily Rauhala, "Biden and NATO Send Russia a Defiant Message," *Washington Post*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/06/29/biden-nato-defiant-russia/>, accessed June 30, 2022.

³"Switzerland Inches towards NATO as Neutrality Is Put to the Test," BNE Intellinews, May 17, 2022, <https://www.intellinews.com/switzerland-inches-towards-nato-as-neutrality-is-put-to-the-test-244573/>, accessed June 25, 2022. For an earlier study of why Switzerland remained out of the United Nations until 2002, see Michael M. Gunter, "Switzerland and the United Nations," *International Organization*, 30 (Winter 1976), pp. 129-152. This older analysis still holds many lessons applicable to Sweden and Finland joining NATO in general.

With Sweden and Finland's pending adherence to NATO, only a few other European states remain non-members: Austria, Ireland, Serbia, Cyprus, and Malta. The status of Kosovo has not yet been fully established. Russia and its virtual adjunct, Belarus, of course, have become NATO's recognized adversaries, while admitting Ukraine and Moldova would probably constitute a *casus belli* for Russia. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia still seem beyond NATO's potential writ. Although the European ministates Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco, and San Marino eventually did join the United Nations, their adherence to NATO would be irrelevant. The Vatican City, of course, is *sui generis*.



NATO Implications

These two new NATO members will bring tangible geostrategic benefits to the alliance, not just a token weight.⁴ Finland, for example, shares an 830-mile border with Russia and has a well-equipped, modern army. It maintains general conscription and possesses a well-manned, trained reserve that can be called up quickly. Finland also spends more than 2 percent of its gross domestic product on defense, and has special military capacities operating in the Arctic region, as it famously demonstrated against the Soviet Union in their Winter War of 1939. Its location on the Baltic Sea and diplomatic experience with Russia also add to its assets.

For its part, Sweden possesses a strong military and a world-class defense industry as well as military experience operating in the Arctic too. It also can help control the entrance to the Baltic Sea. This not only will make it more difficult for the Russian navy to enter the high seas but also aid NATO to more successfully defend vulnerable Eastern Europe, which would likely be on Putin's next strike list if he proves successful in Ukraine.

At the same time, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has reinvigorated the NATO alliance, giving it renewed purpose and unity, the exact opposite of Putin's original intentions. More specifically, NATO has just announced a new, more powerful Strategic Mission statement—its first since 2010—against further Russian inroads by identifying it as the alliance's primary adversary. Gone are the earlier post-Cold-War days when Russia was supposedly NATO's "partner for peace."

At the NATO summit in Madrid that extended membership invitations to Sweden and Finland, NATO leaders agreed to boost the number of alliance troops at high readiness from 40,000 to

⁴"DOD [U.S. Department of Defense] Official Touts Sweden, Finland Joining NATO," June 22, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3071022/dod-official-touts-sweden-finland-joining-nato/>, accessed June 26, 2022. For further background, see Carl Bildt, "NATO's Nordic Expansion: Adding Finland and Sweden Will Transform European Security," *Foreign Affairs*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2022-04-26/natos-nordic-expansion>, accessed May 1, 2022.

300,000, a very significant increase.⁵ However, most of these rapid reaction forces will be based in NATO home states. Members have not announced exactly which of their forces will be committed to NATO command. Nevertheless, for the first time the United States will permanently station forces on NATO's eastern borders with headquarters for the U.S. 5th Army Corps in Poland and additional rotational combat brigades in Romania, beefed up rotational deployments to the Baltic region, an increase in the number of destroyers positioned at Rota, Spain, and two additional F-35 jet squadrons in the United Kingdom.⁶ Moreover, for the first time, NATO has also termed China, Russia's announced partner, a strategic "challenge."

Finally, the NATO Madrid summit that invited Sweden and Finland to join the resurgent alliance, for the first time also invited leaders of four Asian countries—Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea—to attend the meeting, signaling NATO's growing focus on Asia at the same time Russia pursued its aggression against Ukraine. Many Asian states fear that if Russia succeeds in conquering Ukraine, it will encourage more cautious China to show similar aggression toward its neighbors, particularly Taiwan. However, India, soon to surpass China as the largest nation on earth, remained noticeably absent from these doings. The Philippines and Vietnam, among other Asian powers, also remained uncommitted. Lost in the shuffle was North Korea, a pariah, nuclear-armed state that has often elicited negative attention from the United States.

On the other hand, NATO's requirement that all 30 members unanimously approve Sweden and Finland's membership application gave Turkey an unwanted influence in the entire process of defending Europe from aggressive Russian irredentism and expansion. This is particularly so since in recent years Turkey at times

⁵ Emily Rauhala and Annabelle Timsit, "NATO to Boost High-Readiness Forces in 'Biggest Overhaul since Cold War,'" June 27, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/27/nato-rapid-reaction-force-expansion/>, accessed June 30, 2022.

⁶ Ashley Parker and Emily Rauhala, "Biden and NATO Send Russia a Defiant Message," *Washington Post*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/06/29/biden-nato-defiant-russia/>, accessed June 30, 2022.



has acted more like a member of a renewed Warsaw Pact than NATO. Maybe this situation should give NATO cause for thinking about its future membership and expulsion policies.

Kurdish Implications

Finally, what are the implications for the Kurds, seemingly the continuing victim in international power politics?⁷ At first glance they seem rather ominous since Sweden and Finland have had to assure Turkey that they will stand up against supposed Kurdish PKK terrorism, extradite Kurdish and other exiles back to Turkey, and in so doing betray their long-standing commitment to human rights. Point 8 of their 10-point deal seemed the most sensitive because it contained a commitment by Sweden and Finland “to address Turkiye’s [Turkey’s new official name] pending deportation or extradition requests of terror suspects expeditiously and thoroughly.”⁸ “Our government will be working closely with our Finnish and Swedish counterparts to implement this agreement,” announced Turkish Communications Director Fahrettin Altun, adding that the meeting between Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Jens Stoltenberg (NATO’s Secretary-General), and the leaders of Finland and Sweden “achieved concrete, specific and significant results regarding our concerns over terrorism.”⁹

Significantly, added Altun, all parties, “agreed to full cooperation against the terror organization PKK and all its extensions.” This meant that Turkey viewed as terrorists such other groups as the Syrian Kurds. “Sweden and Finland committed to stand with Turkiye against all forms of terrorism and promised not to provide support

⁷ For background, see Steven Erlanger and Michael D. Shear, “Finland and Sweden Make Security Pledges to Win Turkey’s Acceptance of Their NATO Membership Bids,” *New York Times*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/28/world/europe/finland-sweden-nato-membership.html>, accessed June 30, 2022.

⁸ Cited in Charlie Duxbury, “Swedish and Finnish NATO Deal with Turkey Triggers Fears over Kurdish Deportations,” *Politico*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/sweden-finland-nato-deal-turkey-trigger-fears-kurdish-deportations/>, accessed July 2, 2022.

⁹ These and the following citations were taken from Merve Gul Aydogan Aglarci, “Turkiye ‘Satisfied with Constructive Approach’ by Sweden, Finland,” Anadolu Agency, June 29, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-satisfied-with-constructive-approach-by-sweden-finland/2626355>, accessed July 2, 2022.

to the PYD/YPG [Syrian Kurds].” The Turkish spokesman also cited the agreement on the two new NATO applicants lifting “restriction or sanctions on our defense industry” Further, Turkey claimed that Sweden and Finland “agreed to create an intelligence sharing and cooperation mechanism” to further these aims against Kurdish dissidents as well as “to ban any fundraising and recruitment activities by the PKK and its extensions.” Finally, a “Permanent Shared Mechanism” consisting of justice, intelligence, and security elements would oversee and verify the implementation of these steps.

Despite its denial, this deal in effect meant that the United States was also agreeing to support Turkey on these issues involving the Kurds. Indeed, a senior administration official told reporters that “Biden deserves credit for lengthy behind-the-scenes diplomacy.”¹⁰ Specifically, the United States agreed to help Turkey upgrade its air force with new F-16s fighter jets, a deal that had long been held up by Turkey purchasing a Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system.¹¹

The embattled PKK reacted caustically: “NATO has agreed in Madrid to support and adopt the policy of massacres and genocide carried out by the Turkish state against the Kurdish people for a hundred years,”¹² and concluded, “The Kurdish people are being turned into a bargaining chip for NATO enlargement.” The NATO agreement “is a declaration of enmity against the Kurdish people” and “shows the hypocrisy of a system that calls itself a ‘Western democracy.’”

Although the Kurds have clearly been treated unjustly over the years, they also were failing to appreciate their very secondary position in

¹⁰ “No Concessions Made to Turkey to Support Finland, Sweden: US,” *Turkish Minute*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2022/06/29/concessions-made-to-turkey-to-support-finland-sweden-us/>, accessed July 2, 2022.

¹¹ “Biden Thanks Erdogan, US Signals Support for Turkish F-16s,” *Turkish Minute*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2022/06/29/den-thanks-erdogan-us-signals-support-for-turkish-f-16s/amp/>, accessed July 2, 2022.

¹² This and the following citations were taken from “PKK: NATO gives Green Light to Turkey’s Genocide against the Kurds,” ANF News, June 29, 2022, <https://anfenglish.com/news/pkk-nato-gives-green-light-to-turkey-s-genocide-against-the-kurds-60880>, accessed July 2, 2022.



the existential power struggle involving NATO and Russia as well as exaggerating how hostile the NATO agreement really was to their interests. Thus, in the first place, it was unreasonable to expect NATO to refuse to bargain with Erdogan over admitting Sweden and Finland simply to support the Kurds. Unfortunately, in the scheme of existential world politics, the future of Europe regarding the Russian threat as manifested by its totally unwarranted invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the resulting need to strengthen NATO surely trumped blatant, total support for the Kurds. Moreover, the Kurds have been seemingly sacrificed on the altar of world politics many times before—as it once again appeared in this case—only to find that the situation was not as hopeless as it initially appeared. However, first let us turn to the current situation involving the concession made to Turkey regarding its support for Sweden and Finland’s membership in NATO.

In the first place, despite the European Union, United States, Germany, France, United Kingdom, and others all listing the PKK as a terrorist organization, this has not led to any mass extradition of its members sheltering in Europe, among other actions against the Kurdish organization.¹³ As the Finnish government emphasized, the agreement is merely a political commitment. It does not provide a binding obligation in international law. If Finland receives any requests for extradition, they “will be addressed in accordance with the European Convention on Extradition, according to which extradition shall not be granted if the concerned offense is regarded by the requested party as a political offense.” Furthermore, declared Finland, extradition would fail even for an ordinary criminal offense if it had reason to believe it had “been made for the purpose of prosecuting or punishing a person on account of his race, religion, nationality or political opinion.”

¹³ The following citations were gathered from Ali Yildiz, “[Opinion] NATO Deal Unlikely to Make Extradition of Turkish Political Dissidents Possible,” *Turkish Minute*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2022/06/30/n-nato-deal-unlikely-to-make-extradition-of-turkish-political-dissidents-possible/>, accessed July 2, 2022.

For her part, Swedish prime minister Magdalena Andersson explained, “We never extradite anyone who is a Swedish citizen,”¹⁴ as were some individuals seemingly in danger. “So they don’t need to worry.” In addition, added the prime minister, “we will of course . . . follow Swedish and international law. . . . This means that if one is not conducting terrorism activity, one doesn’t need to be worried.” As did her Finnish counterpart, Andersson also pointed out that the agreement with Turkey “does not produce a binding commitment in terms of international law. It is no more than an expression of political intent.” In addition, as parties to the European Convention on Human Rights, the UN Convention against Torture, and the Refugee Convention of 1951, both Sweden and Finland were bound by the internationally legal principle of non-refoulement, “which guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” Moreover, Turkey’s loose definition of terrorism that went well beyond mere criminalizing participation in violent acts and punished basic freedom of speech also made questionable how willingly the prospective new NATO members would satisfy Turkey’s demands. For his part, therefore, Erdogan replied that he could still block Sweden and Finland’s NATO membership applications if they failed to implement their deal with him.¹⁵

The partial U.S. withdrawal of protection for its de facto Syrian Kurdish allies against ISIS and acceptance of the Turkish incursion into northern (Kurdish) Syria in October 2019 constitutes a further example of this not-so-bad-as-it-seems syndrome.¹⁶ At first a seeming disaster for the Syrian Kurds, the Kurdish political and military presence in northern Syria nevertheless survived as did a smaller, protective U.S. detachment. This situation certainly was not what the Kurds wanted, but also less than what the Turks sought. In

¹⁴ The following citations were taken from Ibid.

¹⁵ “Erdogan Warns Turkey May Still Block Nordic NATO Drive,” *Turkish Minute*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2022/06/30/erdogan-warns-turkey-may-still-block-nordic-nato-drive/>, accessed July 2, 2022.

¹⁶ For background, see Michael M. Gunter and M. Hakan Yavuz, “The October 2019 Turkish Incursion into Kurdish Syria: Its Background and Broader Implications,” *Middle East Policy*, 27 (Spring 2020), pp. 86-101.



addition, of course, in the end the Turkish alliance was more important to the United States than total support of the Kurds. Still, some support for the Kurds remained, and so a closer examination of the present situation with NATO, Turkey, Sweden, and Finland also reveals, as already argued above.

Earlier in August 2014, the United States actually worked indirectly with the PKK by giving it air support in its battle to protect the heterodox Yezidis in Sinjar (Shingal) from the genocidal assault by ISIS. The United States was so impressed by the PKK's military ability and that of its Syrian associates the SDF/PYD/YPG that a tacit alliance against ISIS soon developed, much to the chagrin of Turkey.¹⁷ Furthermore, in the past U.S. pronouncements about supporting Turkey by criminalizing PKK leaders as supposed drug kingpins also proved largely illusory¹⁸

Conclusion

Led by the United States, NATO has correctly reacted to Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine by facilitating Sweden and Finland's NATO membership applications. Such steps to beef up NATO are the best way to deter further Russian aggression, keep the larger peace, and thus help prevent possible nuclear catastrophe. As in nature, international politics abhors a vacuum. Thus, those who instead see NATO aggression fail to remember the lessons of Munich in 1938, and at best are witless apologists for Moscow, which in attacking Ukraine has broken arguably the basic rule of modern international law: Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter specifically proclaims: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State."

¹⁷ For a lengthy analysis, see Michael Knights and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies: The U.S.—Syrian Democratic Forces Partnership against the Islamic State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022). In particular, see *Ibid.*, pp. 36, as well as 39, 82; and Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds: A Divided Nation in Search of a State*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2019), pp. 180-181.

¹⁸ Merve Aydogan, "US Renews Bounty on Wanted PKK Terrorists Up to \$5M," Anadolu Agency, April 14, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-renews-bounty-on-wanted-pkk-terrorists-up-to-5m/2209123>, accessed July 2, 2022.

As for the Kurds, they need to understand the not-so-new situation regarding NATO's deal with Turkey and respond appropriately to achieve the best results for themselves. This means comprehending the rationale behind the NATO deal with Turkey and not overreact against it. Otherwise the Kurds risk needlessly burning bridges that would only have to be rebuilt later. As explained above, this deal with Turkey, like earlier ones, is not likely to be as inimical to Kurdish interests as first meets the eye.

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