



The Eurasia Center - European Program

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Turkey Agrees to Forward Sweden's NATO Bid Ahead of the 2023 NATO Summit



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, center, speaks with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, left, and Sweden's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson during a meeting ahead of a NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, Monday, July 10, 2023. (Yves Herman, Pool Photo via AP, File)

Hannah Ritter, Research Intern

The America-Eurasia Center

<https://www.eurasiacenter.org/>

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NATO heads of state and government pose during a group photo at a NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania. July 11th, 2023. (AP Photo/Pavel Golovkin).¹

Summary

For the past two centuries, Sweden has distanced itself from international military alliances yet still has given military aid to NATO systems. However, Sweden ended their years of international neutrality when it submitted an official letter of application to join NATO in May 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Under NATO's Accession protocols, all NATO members need to ratify Sweden's Accession Protocol. This accession period has been an ongoing issue for Sweden as Hungary and Turkey have withheld Sweden's accession bid for 2022 and early 2023.

However, a change occurred on July 10th, 2023, when Turkey approved Sweden's bid to join NATO in the final hours before the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania. Turkey's diplomacy change stems from talks with the Prime Minister of Sweden, Ulf Kristersson, over linking Sweden's membership to Turkey's application to join the European Union.² Additionally, Sweden's willingness to amend its constitution, expand its

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/nato-summit-lithuania-ukraine-sweden-08463686d0d6c613010c2ef7a9955d5b>

² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/sweden-races-to-secure-turkish-support-for-nato-bid-2452c14f>

counter-terrorism cooperation against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and export arms to Turkey.

This acceptance is only one step towards the lengthy accession process as Turkey's parliament still must ratify Sweden's bid, which Turkish President, Tayyip Erdoğan, said will not happen before October. Simultaneously, the head of the Hungarian parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Zsolt Nemeth, stated that Hungary will not forward Sweden's ratification until mid-September.³ Thus, there is a period where these countries can change their opinion, and Sweden may be back to square one with their NATO membership.

This article goes more in-depth into why Turkey withheld accession to Sweden in joining the intergovernmental military and political alliance and what changed for Turkey with finally approving Sweden's bid to NATO.

Why Turkey Withheld Sweden's Accession

Following Sweden's official letter of application to join NATO in May 2022, Turkey instantly declared that it would not accept Sweden's membership. Turkey stated that Sweden protected militants from the terrorist group, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which went against the Turkish government in 1984 and a 2016 coup attempt.⁴ The PKK is still currently designated a terrorist group in Turkey, Sweden, the United States, and in Europe. Hence, Turkey took a hard stance against Sweden's membership.

At the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid, Finland and Sweden agreed with Turkey to pass more anti-terrorism laws and work on the extradition and deportation of suspected militants. However, Sweden's courts have blocked some expulsions of suspected militants back to Turkey. Additionally, President Tayyip Erdoğan called on Sweden to take a harsher stance against what Sweden sees as terrorists after demonstrators burned a copy of the Qur'an outside a mosque and an unknown individual strung up an effigy of President Tayyip Erdoğan in front of Stockholm City Hall.⁵

There were also opinions that President Erdoğan's stance against Sweden's NATO bid was driven by his desire to foster nationalism in his country ahead of the closely contested election in May 2023. Ultimately, Erdoğan emerged victorious in the election with 52.14% of the votes.⁶ Furthermore, it has been reported that Erdoğan is actively seeking to procure F-16 fighter jets from the United States.⁷ Some speculate that he may leverage this purchase as a bargaining chip, using his accession power to influence the United States' decision on the matter.

³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungary-signals-its-likely-back-swedens-nato-bid-autumn-2023-07-13/>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/why-is-turkey-blocking-swedish-finnish-nato-membership-2023-01-25/>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkish-prosecutors-probe-erdogan-effigy-incident-sweden-state-media-2023-01-13/>

⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/28/europe/turkey-president-runoff-polls-erdogan-intl/index.html>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkish-prosecutors-probe-erdogan-effigy-incident-sweden-state-media-2023-01-13/>

What Changed?

The conversation between Sweden's Prime Minister, Ulf Kristersson, and Turkey's President, Tayyip Erdoğan, surprised everyone before the 2023 NATO Summit. A statement by Kristersson following the meeting discussed the agreement between the two countries, in which President Erdoğan committed to moving forward with the ratification of Sweden to NATO.⁸ Sweden reaffirmed their commitments with the trilateral memorandum agreement made at the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid. Additionally, Sweden agreed to establish a new security dialogue, deepen its cooperation on trade and investments, and strengthen the talks of Turkey's accession to the European Union. There also were talks about improving customs arrangements and taking steps to implement visa-free European travel for Turkish citizens to Sweden.



Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, left, and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson shake hands next to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg prior to their meeting, on the eve of the NATO summit, in Vilnius, Monday, July 10th, 2023. (Henrik Montgomery/TT News Agency via AP, File)⁹

Regarding the F-16 Fighter Jets, both U.S. and Turkish officials have emphasized that any potential deal would not be contingent upon Sweden's NATO membership. Despite these assurances, shortly after the news broke, President Joe Biden of the United States

⁸ <https://www.government.se/statements/2023/07/statement-nato/>

⁹ <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-sweden-nato-f16-biden-erdogan-0fada88fbc141ff0c1143a497624b6d8>

indicated that the U.S. intends to move forward with the sale of F-16 jets, pending consultation with Congress.¹⁰ It remains uncertain how the idea will fare in Congress, but Turkey's approach towards Sweden's accession seems to be making some progress in negotiations with the United States regarding the F-16 jets' purchase.

Conclusion

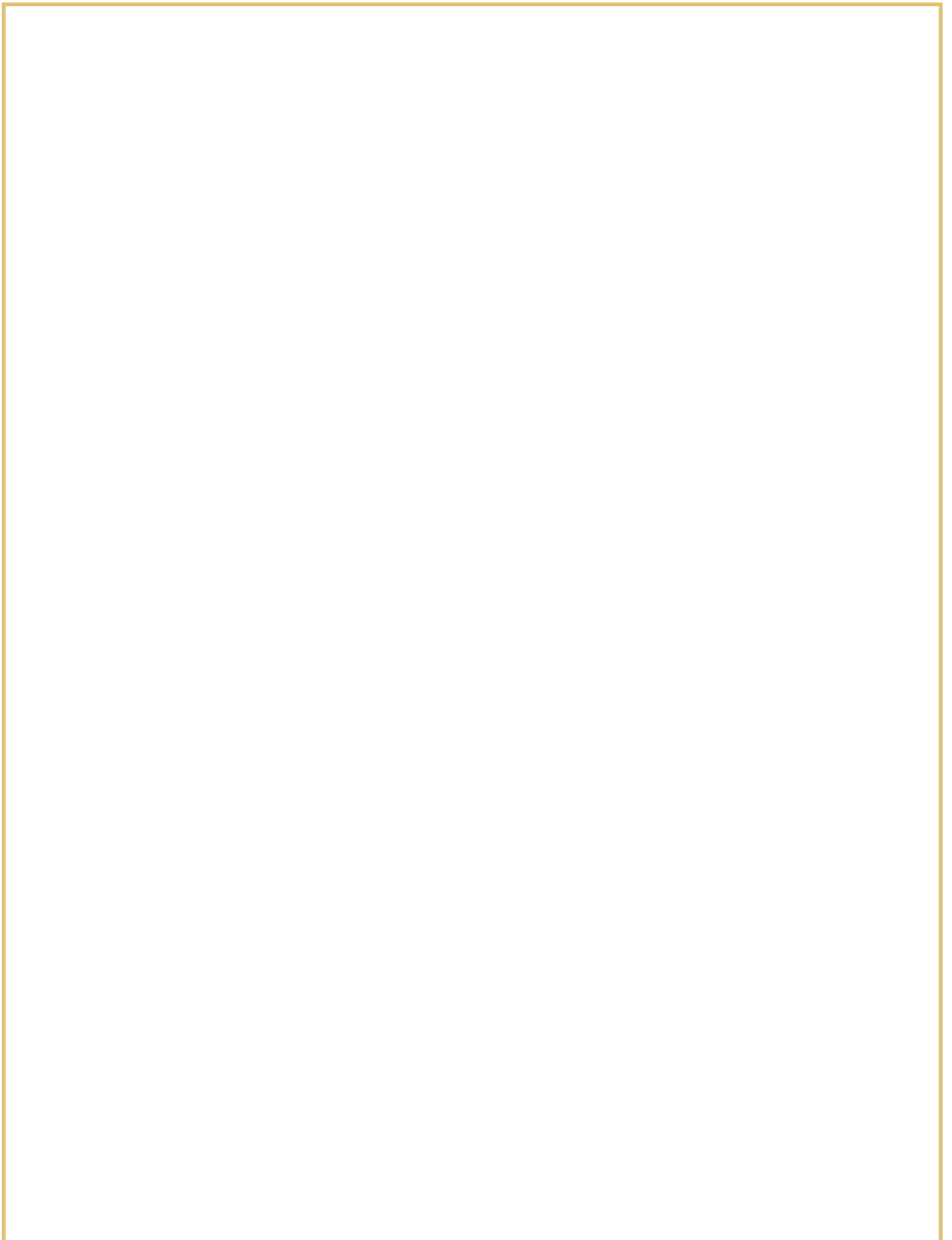
In a surprising turn of events, discussions surrounding Sweden's NATO membership have gained momentum, and Turkey has signaled its willingness to accept Sweden as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The move comes amid shifting geopolitical dynamics and a desire from both countries to strengthen defense cooperation, regional security, and counter-terrorism ties.

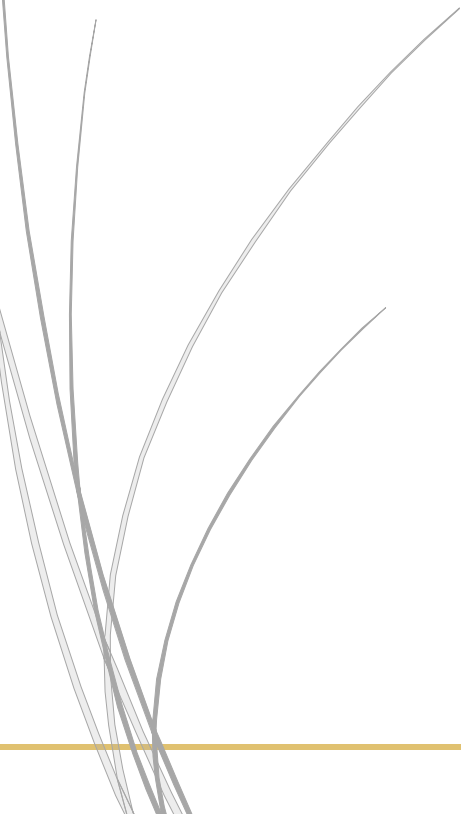
The next steps needed for Sweden are for Turkey's Parliament to approve Sweden's membership bid. As stated before, this will not be a quick process and will take months for Parliament to vote. Sweden also must wait for Hungary to move forward with Sweden's acceptance, but Hungary's Foreign Minister, Peter Szijjarto, stated that completing the ratification process is now just a "technical matter" in which Hungary's parliament will vote this fall on the matter.¹¹

As for now, Sweden must wait a few months and hope that the promises and agreements made before the 2023 NATO Summit remain in place as both Hungary and Turkey agreed to move forward with Sweden's accession. As for the other NATO allies, all are delighted to welcome, with hope, the 32nd member country by the end of 2023.

¹⁰ <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-sweden-nato-f16-biden-erdogan-0fada88fbc141ff0c1143a497624b6d8>

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungary-signals-its-likely-back-swedens-nato-bid-autumn-2023-07-13/>





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