



Sweden Focuses on Security Cooperation as It Works Through NATO Accession

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Despite intensified diplomatic efforts, Türkiye has still not agreed to start the ratification procedure for Sweden's—nor Finland's—NATO membership. The accession process may drag on until after Türkiye's presidential and parliamentary elections in June 2023. During this time, Sweden, which is the target of increased hybrid attacks, should enhance the cooperation with NATO countries to strengthen resilience.

Since the formal invitation to Sweden and Finland to join NATO in July this year, 28 out of the 30 member states have ratified the accession treaties, which is essential for the enlargement of the Alliance. If Hungary, which is clearly pro-Turkish and pro-Russian in the EU, ratifies it as planned in mid-December, the last state on which Sweden's admission to NATO will depend will be Türkiye, which is still against it. In November, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited Türkiye to try to persuade the Turkish president to agree to NATO enlargement. A few days later, the new prime minister of Sweden, Ulf Kristersson, also went to Ankara for talks.

Change and Continuation in Swedish Security Policy. The Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 caused a radical change in the perception of threats in Swedish society and among its political elites. Sweden, which was a neutral country during the Cold War and non-aligned (except for military blocs) since joining the EU in 1995, in May this year applied for admission to NATO together with Finland. Since the political elites had for many years announced that they would make a possible decision on membership together with Finland, they came under pressure when Finns' support for NATO membership increased sharply and the authorities in Helsinki began to seriously consider such a possibility.

An important factor in the Swedish government's thinking about NATO membership was the change in the Swedish public's attitude to NATO membership. In January this year, so before the start of the war in Ukraine, 37% of respondents

supported accession and 35% were against it. After the Russian full-scale invasion, support increased and slightly exceeded 50%. Seeing that, the ruling Social Democrats began to seek cross-party support for accession. The climax of the political debate was a report by a special working group that was published in May this year that pointed to a deteriorating security environment for Sweden and the clearly growing threat from Russia. Although building political consensus may have been complicated by the September elections, the government of Magdalena Andersson managed to avoid including the issue of membership in the campaign.

The parliamentary elections led to the Social Democrats losing power despite winning the elections with more than 30% support. Then, a minority government was formed of a bloc of conservative-liberal parties with the Moderates at the top (18% of votes), and supported by the extreme Sweden Democrats (SD, 20% of the votes). Prime Minister Kristersson announced that his cabinet will bring Sweden into NATO and prepare it for the most serious challenges in the security environment since World War II.

The new government also promises to further increase defence funding and declares it will strengthen security policy. Sweden intends to increase spending to the NATO level of at least 2% of GDP by 2026. However, the implementation of these promises may be hindered by the deteriorating economic situation. In 2021, the Swedish economy had recovered from the pandemic, expanding by

more than 5.1%, but in the first quarter of 2022 real GDP contracted by 0.8%.

For several years, Sweden's priority has been to strengthen Gotland's defence capabilities. This island is the easternmost Swedish territory. Sweden's military potential (especially its navy and air force) and the ability to defend Gotland will significantly strengthen the Alliance's ability to support the Baltic States by sea and air. Sweden's location and its military potential also will strengthen NATO in the Arctic.

Turkish Veto Threat. Even before formally applying for NATO membership, in mid-May Türkiye made demands on Sweden (and to a lesser extent on Finland) that could extend its process of accession to NATO. The authorities in Ankara demanded the extradition of more than 30 Turkish citizens accused of plotting against the government, the termination of the activities of organisations it said are associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Fethullah Gülen movement in Sweden, both of which Ankara considers terrorist groups, and a prohibition on activities of pro-Kurdish organisations in that country. Türkiye's reservations also concerned an arms embargo against it.

Türkiye's stance forced Sweden and Finland to cooperate with it more than usual in the pre-accession stage. In June, these countries signed a tripartite memorandum on cooperation. The Swedish authorities implemented most of the elements included in the demands, including lifting the arms embargo and blocking financial support to Kurdish groups in Syria. In early October, they informed Türkiye of the 14 measures they had taken since the signing of the memorandum.

However, the extradition of persons accused by Türkiye of terrorism remains a contentious point. Although the memorandum obliges Sweden and Finland to consider the Turkish requests and to strengthen cooperation in this area, Türkiye seems to fully expect all suspects to be handed over to it. During a visit to Ankara in early November, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg tried to convince the Turkish authorities to agree to Sweden's membership, stressing that it is fulfilling its obligations. However, the Turkish authorities stated that they expected Sweden to fully implement the earlier arrangements, and assessed the actions taken so far as insufficient.

Threats to Sweden and a NATO in Transition. After submitting an application for NATO membership, Sweden obtained political security guarantees from several Alliance countries, including the U.S., the UK, Germany, and Poland. This was intended to weaken Russia's ability to influence Sweden's perception of threats and the political situation. At the same time, the armed forces of Sweden and the member states of the Alliance increased their activity in the Baltic Sea region, indicating readiness to take defensive actions.

Russia, which initially threatened retaliation over NATO enlargement, has toned down its rhetoric in recent months, but the accession process has been accompanied by increased cyberattacks against the candidates.

Sweden and other countries must reckon with the growing threat of hybrid attacks (below the threshold of open military aggression). This was shown by the attacks on the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines in September this year, part of which are in Sweden's exclusive economic zone. However, these attacks have not led to a decline in Swedes' support for membership, nor have they diminished Sweden's determination to support Ukraine. In mid-November this year, the Swedish authorities handed over another defence package of military aid worth SEK 720 million (€65.5 million). The military, financial, and other assistance (e.g., to Ukrainian refugees) provided so far by Sweden is greater than that offered by some NATO members.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The imposition of additional political requirements by some member states that are not a formal condition of membership is a new and negative trend in NATO enlargement policy. It sets a precedent and may complicate future accessions. Similar political conditions outside the negotiating framework have been present for more than a decade in EU enlargement and are a factor in that policy crisis.

Türkiye's approach to NATO enlargement to include Sweden and Finland is primarily influenced by the internal situation, including next year's presidential and parliamentary elections. The November bomb attack in Istanbul, for which the authorities in Ankara accuse Kurdish separatists of the PKK, may further stiffen the Turkish position. Therefore, it should be considered that the Turkish side will prolong the accession procedure and NATO enlargement will be possible only in the second half of next year. This will not change Sweden's security policy, and the new government will be even more determined in it.

In the transitional period, it will be crucial to strengthen the cooperation between Sweden and NATO in the area of resilience, which through the exchange of experience is to reduce the allies' vulnerability to hybrid attacks. Sweden, which will take over the presidency of the EU Council in January 2023, will be able to generate new proposals to strengthen the cooperation between NATO and the EU in this area.

Cooperation with Poland could concern strengthening resistance to hybrid activities, which fall below the threshold of open aggression, including disinformation and protection of critical infrastructure. Sweden's presence in NATO also will create a stronger basis for closer cooperation with Poland in strengthening the capabilities of the navy, air force, and air and missile defence.