

NATO's Enlargement Policy and Türkiye's Position: A Key NATO Ally

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ABSTRACT *NATO's enlargement policy indicates the admission of new members with full membership status within the framework of mutual mandates and responsibilities and the expansion of NATO's borders and geographical areas of responsibility. The accession of fifteen members to the Alliance in the post-Cold War period has brought along some controversies. Türkiye supports NATO enlargement in principle. This study discusses Ankara's stance and cautious attitude towards Finland and Sweden's applications for NATO membership by evaluating how NATO's post-Cold War enlargement policy has affected Türkiye's position within NATO. The main claim of the study is that NATO's decision-making procedure has had a positive impact on Türkiye's relations with candidate countries.*

Keywords: NATO's Enlargement Policy, Türkiye, Finland and Sweden Membership, NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, Trilateral Memorandum

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Introduction

According to Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which established NATO, any European state capable of assisting the development of the principles of the Treaty and the security of the North Atlantic region may be invited to join. Accordingly, during the Cold War, Türkiye and Greece became NATO members on February 18, 1952, Germany on May 9, 1955, and Spain on May 30, 1982, bringing the total number of NATO members to 16. On July 1, 1966, after France withdrew from the Alliance's integrated military command, the headquarters of the Alliance moved from Paris to Brussels. At the NATO Summit held in Strasbourg and Kehl on April 3-4, 2009, France officially rejoined NATO's integrated military command structure. Similarly, Greece, which decided to withdraw from the Alliance's integrated military command structure on August 14, 1974, returned on October 20, 1980.

Within the framework of the Alliance's transformation, which can be considered a product of NATO's ability to adapt to changes in the international security environment after the Cold War, there has been a significant expansion to 31 members: the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined on March 12, 1999; Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia on March 29, 2004; Albania and Croatia on April 1, 2009; Montenegro on June 5, 2017; North Macedonia on March 27, 2020; and Finland on April

4, 2023. In the post-Cold War period, NATO's enlargement was officially initiated at the end of 1993. Although it is claimed that the assurances given to the Soviet Union during the reunification of Germany in 1990 played a role in the delay in the official agenda of enlargement,¹ the biggest factor was the divergent views on this issue within the Alliance. The enlargement of NATO in the post-Cold War era was considered a puzzle and a big mistake by international relations theories, especially from the Neo-realist perspective. NATO enlargement has been strongly criticized by many academics and foreign policy experts, such as George Kennan, Paul Kennedy, Richard Haass, and Thomas Friedman.² The decision to expand NATO has been discussed from diverse perspectives within the international community. In NATO's official documents, the commitment to the enlargement first appeared in the Final Declaration of the Brussels Summit in 1994. The Declaration reaffirmed NATO's open door policy to other European states that could contribute to security in the North Atlantic Area and stated that NATO enlargement was an expected development. Prior to the first enlargement of NATO, serious differences emerged between the Allies on policy towards the Russian Federation. These disagreements were particularly intense between the U.S. and Germany. At a conference in Berlin in September 1994, German Defense Minister Volker Rühle stated, "If Russia were to become a member of NATO it would blow NATO apart." At the same conference, U.S. Secretary of Defense

William Perry stated that although he thought that the membership of the Russian Federation would not take place shortly, this country should not be left out.³ In fact, after this date, the NATO-Russian Federation relationship has been exactly as William Perry described it. In both 1997 and 2002, prior to NATO's 1999 and 2004 enlargements, steps were taken to improve bilateral relations with Russia. In 1997, the Founding Act was signed with Russia while the NATO-Russia Council was established in 2002. Having identified Russia as a partner and established necessary channels of dialogue and cooperation, NATO then implemented its enlargement policy by accepting new members. The Russian Federation was linked to NATO's enlargement process through the Founding Act, institutional arrangements such as the NATO-Russia Council, and its membership in the Partnership for Peace (PfP), but Russia was not made a member of the Alliance. This was because the U.S. did not want to see the Russian Federation either in NATO or against it in the post-Cold War era.

Since its establishment, NATO has worked to implement policies that redefine and counter security threats and risks within the framework of changes in the international conjuncture. NATO's ability to adapt to these changes over 74 years has enabled it to transform itself from the original 12-member regional collective defense organization into a global security organization with 31 members and partnerships with another 40 countries. NATO has retained an

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important position on Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy agenda for 71 years. Within the literature, this has been described in various ways: on the one hand, as "an initiative that ended a century and a half-long search for belonging to the (Western) system;"⁴ on the other hand, as "an initiative that narrowed the room for maneuver to produce multifaceted foreign policy."⁵ In fact, Türkiye's position in NATO has been the subject of many debates in a manner that supports both of these opposing interpretations.

As the NATO member that has arguably suffered the most from terrorism, Türkiye places great significance on NATO's statement in the "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept"⁶ that terrorism in all its forms and manifestations represents "the most direct asymmetric threat to the security of the citizens of NATO member countries and international peace and prosperity." It is also highly significant that Türkiye, Sweden, and Finland signed a trilateral memorandum at the Madrid Summit, held on June 28-30, 2022. In addition to addressing Türkiye's

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legitimate security concerns, this memorandum also envisaged that both countries would end the military embargoes imposed on Türkiye. In this respect, the memorandum is an important reference text that will help address Türkiye's fight against terrorism. In this context, both countries were expected to cease all forms of economic, military, and political support to structures that Türkiye defines as 'terrorist organizations' and to respect Türkiye's national interests and security sensitivities in a manner befitting an ally. In the process, Finland fulfilled its responsibilities in the memorandum and became a NATO member in April 2023. The talks between Türkiye and Sweden are based on the principles of the Alliance and Türkiye's approach to the fight against terrorism. Accordingly, the main purpose of this study is to discuss Ankara's cautious attitude towards Finland and Sweden's applications for NATO membership by evaluating how NATO's post-Cold War enlargement policy has affected Türkiye's position within NATO. Before focusing on Ankara's cautious attitude towards Finland and Sweden's

applications for NATO membership, the study touches on Türkiye's stance and gains regarding previous NATO enlargements and what Türkiye has gained from these enlargements.

Post-Cold War NATO Enlargement and Türkiye's Position

Today, it is clear that Türkiye supports NATO enlargement. However, it is important to remember that this was accompanied by some controversy. The first post-Cold War NATO enlargement invitation was extended to the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary at the Madrid Summit in July 1997. Prior to the NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting in February 1997, Türkiye's then Foreign Minister, Tansu Çiller, said in a speech: "In principle, we are not opposed to the enlargement of the Alliance, but it should not be forgotten that NATO documents also include the issue of the linked enlargement processes of NATO, the Western European Union, and the EU. Türkiye would like to see a principled approach."⁷ For the EU member states of NATO, this statement created the perception that Türkiye could use its veto on NATO enlargement to get more concessions from the EU.⁸

The reason for not choosing a more precise term than "perception" here is that the idea of a parallel enlargement of NATO and the EU, from Türkiye's point of view, remained only discourse and was not supported by serious policies by the Foreign Ministry. Indeed, Türkiye soon abandoned Çiller's rhetoric. However, given

Türkiye's unconditional support for NATO enlargement, there was an expectation in Turkish public opinion that those EU member states that were also NATO members and new NATO members would support Türkiye's EU accession process if they became EU members before Türkiye.⁹ However, this expectation was not met since Türkiye did not become an EU member despite never vetoing NATO's enlargement process during the post-Cold War period.

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that NATO's enlargement policy has brought some gains to Türkiye, for example, in resolving problems and establishing good relations with those Balkan countries aiming for NATO membership. In the early 1990s, the main topics of relations between Türkiye and the Balkan countries were defense, security, and Türkiye's support for the integration efforts of the countries in the region with the West. In this respect, Türkiye has taken care to carry out all its military activities in the region as part of NATO and UN activities. Türkiye actively participated in NATO's activities in the Balkans. Ankara was involved in efforts to end the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and called for multilateral intervention.¹⁰ Supporting NATO's interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, Türkiye closely followed the events taking place in Kosovo due to its historical and cultural ties with the region, as it did in Bosnia, and made efforts to solve the problem.

In 1997, opponents of NATO enlargement in Türkiye argued that it would

impose a financial burden on Türkiye, that Türkiye would not be as powerful in the NATO decision-making process as before, that Türkiye would lose its strategic importance, and that Türkiye would have difficulty using the advantages it had gained in the European Conventional Forces Treaty due to the opportunities provided to the Russian Federation.¹¹ Instead of considering which of these concerns have been realized, we focus rather on how NATO's admission of new members has benefited Türkiye. Indeed, the enlargement of NATO has brought relative stability to the Balkans, while Türkiye has been able to negotiate on a wider range of issues. Especially through its responsibilities within the framework of the PfP program and as a NATO member, Türkiye has improved its relations with PfP countries by signing military cooperation and training agreements. Türkiye supported the Balkan states to join NATO for regional security and stability. Türkiye's high-level and mutually beneficial relations with the Balkan countries continue. NATO's acceptance of new members has benefited Türkiye, particularly through the relative stabilization of the Balkans and Türkiye's increased ability to negotiate on a wider range of issues.

Finland and Sweden's Membership Applications and Türkiye's Position

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and the subsequent war have had repercussions not only for NATO's unstable relationship



A tripartite memorandum was signed between Türkiye, Sweden, and Finland on the NATO membership processes of Sweden and Finland in the presence of the leaders of the three countries, in Madrid on June 30, 2022.

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with the Russian Federation but also on relations between Alliance member states and the alliance's solidarity discourse. Two concrete reflections of the war on the Alliance are the adoption of NATO's fourth post-Cold War strategic concept at the Madrid Summit on June 28-29, 2022, and NATO's offer of membership to Finland and Sweden.¹²

The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept represents a significant change in the Alliance's official discourse compared to the three previous post-Cold War strategic concepts by stating that the Euro-Atlantic region is not at peace

and identifying the Russian Federation as the most significant and direct threat to NATO members. The document makes it a fundamental priority to increase the Alliance's capabilities regarding defense and deterrence. More specifically, the document accuses Russia of being the greatest threat to the rules-based international order, describing the Russian-Ukrainian war as a "brutal and unlawful invasion" that has caused "unspeakable suffering and destruction."¹³ The document also declares that alliance membership is decided by NATO allies without the involvement of third parties. The addressee

of these statements is clearly Russia's leadership, which considers NATO's enlargement unacceptable.

The war has also strengthened the discourse of state threats to the alliance, which was first emphasized within NATO following Russia's annexation of Crimea. NATO is trying to develop an approach that focuses on Russia's armed forces and its conventional and nuclear presence. Given Sweden and Finland's locations, especially Finland's 1,340 km border with Russia, the invitation to join NATO sends a military and political message to Russia. Finland's accession on April 4, 2023, doubled the length of NATO's land border with Russia, allowed the Alliance to deploy multinational brigades, battle tanks, naval forces, and air defenses on Russia's borders, and also favored Western actors in the Arctic region.

For Sweden to become a NATO member, the Turkish and Hungarian parliaments must approve the accession protocols. As discussed below, Ankara notes that Sweden has recently taken steps to combat terrorist organizations, such as the PKK/YPG and the Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ), but still considers these to be insufficient, while Budapest has expressed discontent with statements of Swedish officials regarding the rule of law and democracy in Hungary.¹⁴

If Sweden joins NATO, Russia will be further isolated as the only non-NATO Arctic state, while Northern Europe will become a NATO flank. Considering that 60 percent of Rus-

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sia's territory is located in the Arctic region, it is clear that the Arctic region is turning into an area of long-term geostrategic competition. In NATO's official discourse, Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO is based on NATO's identity, which guarantees the territorial integrity of member states. That is, NATO's enlargement policy will continue to be used as a tool to ensure the alliance's deterrence effect.

Finland and Sweden's NATO Applications: How Did the Process Unfold?

After Finland and Sweden formally applied for NATO membership on May 18, 2022, Türkiye's position as a NATO member evolved in several stages, although it should be emphasized that Türkiye supports NATO's enlargement policy in principle. Türkiye's position was first set out by President Erdoğan on May 13, 2022, in his statement claiming that

Türkiye is one of the strongest members of NATO in Eurasia because of its military capabilities

Sweden and Finland were harboring terrorist organizations, including the PKK, and that Türkiye would not look favorably on their accession until they took steps in this regard.¹⁵

It was known that Sweden and Finland had policies and practices that tolerated and even provided serious legal and financial support to terrorist organizations such as the PKK and DH-KP-C, which pose the greatest national security threat to Türkiye. In addition to PKK members, both countries also provided asylum to some convicted or wanted FETÖ members. Türkiye, as a member of NATO, which is based on the operation of the collective self-defense mechanism when there is an attack against the territorial integrity or political independence of the member states, has brought forward the long-standing policies and practices of Sweden and Finland, which disregard Türkiye's security, under the umbrella of NATO.

Accordingly, at the Madrid Summit, a tripartite memorandum was signed by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto, and Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde after a four-way meeting.¹⁶ In the memorandum, Finland and Sweden declared that they

strongly reject terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and that they will not support the Democratic Union Party (PYD), People's Protection Units (YPG), or FETÖ, while Türkiye conditionally agreed not to block either country's membership application. The memorandum had two fundamental implications. First, Northern Europe has become a wing of NATO, giving it the opportunity to surround Moscow from both the West and the Baltic over the Northern Europe-Russia border. Second, Türkiye has gained support in its fight against terrorism, in line with NATO's counter-terrorism rhetoric, by making it clear that Ankara does not fundamentally oppose NATO expansion. The text signed at the NATO Summit of Heads of Government and States clearly defines the PKK as a "terrorist organization," and Finland and Sweden are obliged to prevent the activities of the PKK and its extensions or affiliated groups and individuals. Therefore, the agreement is compatible with the strong inclusion of the fight against terrorism in the latest Strategic Concept.¹⁷ Being in NATO, which is an alliance structure against security threats and possible attacks, requires first of all considering the security concerns of other member countries. In this context, a tripartite agreement that responds positively to Türkiye's expectations from Sweden and Finland on the fight against terrorism and the extradition of terrorists is not a surprising development.

After the memorandum was signed, the accession protocols of Finland and Sweden were signed in Brussels

on July 5, 2022, and the accession process officially started. The Türkiye-Sweden-Finland Permanent Joint Mechanism established under the agreement held two meetings in August and October 2022. However, in January 2023, Ankara decided to suspend these meetings indefinitely because it claimed, based on two events, that the Swedish administration was not acting in accordance with the spirit of the memorandum. The first event was a protest by PKK-affiliated elements in Sweden at the Turkish embassy in Stockholm on November 21, 2022, which included terrorist propaganda and insults against President Erdoğan. The second was in January, when Danish politician Rasmus Paludan burned a Koran in front of the Turkish embassy in Stockholm and protested against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. At this point, it should be noted that it was a very risky endeavor to draw Sweden's NATO membership application into a cultural and religious context in the aftermath of these events. Even though there are those who support these unacceptable events in Western countries, Muslim-majority states and international Islamic organizations have been very critical of Sweden's irresponsible steps.¹⁸

Considering Türkiye's concerns, some changes were made in the legal legislation in Sweden. The constitutional amendment that came into force on January 1, 2023, in Sweden allows for the adoption of more comprehensive laws in the fight against terrorism. In this context, according to the new terror laws adopted on

June 1, 2023, joining a terrorist organization, financing it, or otherwise supporting such participation constitutes a criminal offense. However, Sweden also needs to be successful in transforming the legal regulations on the fight against terrorism into concrete actions. Given Sweden's aspiration for NATO membership, it is really difficult to understand how Sweden could have allowed or ignored such planned and provocative actions. Ankara then developed the discourse that Finland's and Sweden's applications should be handled separately since Finland had acted in accordance with the memorandum by imposing restrictions on the PKK and FETÖ as well as lifting restrictions on military equipment sales to Türkiye. In doing so, Ankara clearly demonstrated that it is not against NATO enlargement in principle. Instead, it emphasized that any country wishing to become a member of NATO, a collective defense organization, has to respect Türkiye's security needs.

Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has continued as an organization to respond to the new international context. A number of cynical expressions were coined to emphasize NATO's passivity during the Cold War, such as 'No Action Talk Only' or 'Not After Two O'clock'. However, these are no longer applicable in the post-Cold War era as NATO's perception of security has gradually expanded from purely military elements to include political, economic,

and social factors. This, in turn, has gradually widened the Alliance's field of struggle and intervention. During this transformation process, NATO has expanded its appreciation of the threats and risks against itself, and established relations with the countries of Central Asia, North East Africa, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific Region. In this context, the Alliance has developed policies in many different areas, such as ensuring energy, maritime, human, and cyber security.

For Türkiye, these developments have paved the way for the Alliance to remain a significant element in Türkiye's foreign and security policies. It is clear that Türkiye has strategic importance within NATO which is fed by its geographical location. However, Türkiye's importance for NATO is not limited to its geographical location. The 21st century security risks require deployable and expeditionary military capabilities, and the Turkish Armed Forces have the capability to develop these capabilities. Türkiye is counted among the top five allied countries contributing the most to NATO operations in a wide geography, from the Balkans to Afghanistan, from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Türkiye hosts NATO Land Command (LANDCOM) Headquarters in İzmir, and the radar within the NATO Ballistic Missile Defense architecture is located in Kürecik, Malatya. NATO AWACS aircraft can use Konya Air Base, while Türkiye provides aerial refueling support to NATO AWACS aircraft in its airspace as part of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS. Türkiye also hosts training centers

that are important for the realization of the objectives of NATO's post-Cold War strategic concepts. The Turkish Partnership for Peace Training Center and the NATO Centre of Excellence Defense against Terrorism (COE DAT), both based in Ankara, are examples of this context. Türkiye is one of the strongest members of NATO in Eurasia because of its military capabilities. All these characteristics of Türkiye are very important for the future of NATO and the security of its member states. While promoting all NATO initiatives, including enlargement, partnerships, and efforts to build a missile defense system, Türkiye has placed a special emphasis on growing its ties with new members, both before and after enlargement. Unfortunately, despite years of combating terrorism, Türkiye has not gotten any concrete contributions from a number of other NATO members. Given that this struggle has depleted Türkiye in many respects, it was both normal and necessary for Ankara to prioritize Türkiye's national security concerns. Unfortunately, it is a fact that Türkiye has not received the support it deserves in the international arena against terrorist organizations, which is the biggest security problem. At NATO's Madrid Summit on June 29, 2022, the heads of state adopted a resolution formally inviting Finland and Sweden to join the Alliance. The accession, which requires the approval of all member states, has brought forward the policies and practices of Sweden and Finland, which have been continuing for a long time and disregard Türkiye's security. Ankara has tried to overcome its le-

gitimate reservations against Sweden and Finland's NATO membership through both written commitments and binding and result-oriented actions. Finland has complied with the commitments expressed in the memorandum and has taken actions showing that it respects Türkiye's security needs. The actions of Finland since its membership application demonstrate its ability to cooperate with Türkiye within NATO.

Sweden, which used to be known in Türkiye as one of the countries where the Nordic democratic culture is alive and well, has unfortunately become known in recent years as a country that does not give Türkiye the support it deserves in the fight against terrorism and as a country where provocative actions are carried out against Türkiye. Considering Türkiye's concerns, although some changes were made in the legal legislation in Sweden, it is not possible to say that Sweden has been successful in transforming the legal regulations regarding the fight against terrorism into concrete actions. It is clear that until now Sweden has not taken adequate measures to prevent the PKK's activities in its own country. Naturally, this situation does not meet Türkiye's expectations. If Sweden adopts a stance that respects Türkiye's security needs in accordance with the text of the memorandum of understanding and demonstrates this attitude through concrete actions, then Türkiye will permit Sweden to join NATO. Türkiye's expectations within NATO, which was established to collectively respond to attacks on the territorial integrity and political

Türkiye's expectations within NATO, which was established to collectively respond to attacks on the territorial integrity and political independence of all member states, are compatible with NATO's collective defense approach

independence of all member states, are compatible with NATO's collective defense approach. Türkiye's presence in NATO, which can establish concrete relations based on trust with all regions of the world through its hard and soft power elements, is also very valuable in terms of achieving NATO's global goals. ■

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