



## Finland should prepare to join NATO on its own

by Helmi Pillai, 16 February 2023

**Last month, Turkey threatened to block Sweden’s NATO membership, while indicating its support for Finland’s accession to the alliance. If Turkey continues to block Swedish membership, Finland should join NATO alone.**

Finland and Sweden [announced](#) their joint bids for NATO membership last May, in response to Russia’s February invasion of Ukraine. The decision to join the alliance was a major shift for both countries due to their long-standing policies of military non-alignment.

For Finland, non-alignment was only ever a pragmatic choice. With its 1340-kilometre-long shared border with Russia, Finland’s independence during the Cold War depended on remaining neutral and not provoking the Soviet Union, which made NATO membership impossible. After the Cold War, Russia posed less of a threat to Finland, so although Helsinki had more freedom of manoeuvre in its foreign policy, there did not seem to be any pressing need to join the alliance. After February 2022, however, the threat from Russia once again felt real enough for Helsinki to turn to NATO for protection.

For Sweden, by contrast, non-alignment was less motivated by pragmatism. With its 200-year-long history of neutrality, the policy was seen “[as morally and ideologically superior to an allied stance](#)”. For this reason, NATO accession was a more complex decision for Sweden. It has been widely [reported](#) that Helsinki had to push Stockholm to take the leap.

Turkey and Hungary are the only NATO allies yet to ratify Finland and Sweden’s membership. Hungary has not made any particular demands on the two countries but has continuously [delayed](#) the ratification process. Turkey is clearly the more significant barrier for Finland and Sweden’s accession into the alliance. After Helsinki and Stockholm announced their NATO bids, Ankara [stated](#) that it would block their applications unless the two Nordic states stopped supporting alleged terrorists and lifted their export bans on weapons sales to Turkey. The Turkish leadership [claims](#) that Sweden, in particular, harbours and assists extreme pro-Kurdish groups affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) – which is on the EU’s list of terrorist organisations – and supporters of the exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen, whom it views as a threat to its national security.

In June, Finland, Sweden and Turkey [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding, in which the two applicants agreed to support Turkey in its fight against national security threats, and to crack down on the activities of the PKK and the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish armed group in Syria that Turkey sees as a branch of the PKK. In the memorandum, Finland and Sweden also agreed to address Turkey's pending requests to deport and extradite alleged pro-Kurdish activists living on their territory; end arms embargoes against Turkey; and cease support for any movements affiliated with Gülen.

The signing of the memorandum allowed NATO to formally invite Finland and Sweden to join the alliance, but the problems with Turkey have continued throughout the ratification process, despite the two countries taking several steps to meet Ankara's demands. Both lifted their export bans, and Sweden amended its constitution to strengthen domestic anti-terror laws, but the question of extraditions remains a problem. Turkey claims that Sweden [specifically](#) has failed to extradite or deport pro-Kurdish activists, and that it has not done enough to crack down on supporters of the PKK. But there is not much more the Swedish government can do: decisions about extradition are made solely by courts and, as such, are not subject to politicians' control. In January, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson expressed his frustration at the situation, [stating](#) that "Turkey both confirms that we have done what we said we would do, but they also say that they want things that we cannot or do not want to give them."

In late January, the ratification process reached a breaking point following protests in Stockholm. These [included](#) the burning of a Koran by a far-right politician, and the display by pro-YPG activists of an effigy depicting Erdoğan hanging by his feet. These episodes sparked outrage in Turkey. In response, Erdoğan [stated](#) that Sweden could no longer expect Turkey's support for its NATO bid but [suggested](#) that Turkey could still ratify Finland's membership. The prospect of processing Finland and Sweden's applications separately was reiterated in recent [reporting](#) from Bloomberg, which claimed that Turkish leadership is considering approving Finland's membership by March.

This has put Helsinki in a difficult position. The official stance of Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin is that the two countries will join NATO together. In a joint press conference with Kristersson on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, Marin [stated](#) that "It's important that we today send a clear message – Finland and Sweden applied together, it is in everyone's interest that we join together". This was also emphasised by Kristersson who [said](#) "We embarked on this journey together and we do the journey towards membership together".

But, despite Marin's comments, there are signs that Finland may be considering joining NATO before Sweden. Most notably, on January 24<sup>th</sup> Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto [stated](#) that while joining together remains the preferred option, Finland may need to consider acceding alone if Sweden's NATO bid is further delayed. This caused a stir in both Finland and Sweden. Haavisto quickly corrected himself, [insisting](#) that Finland was still committed to pursuing its membership with Sweden and was not considering other options. While it is possible that Haavisto's comments were just a case of unclear communication, this seems unlikely. Haavisto is a very experienced politician who is not prone to gaffes of this kind. It seems very probable that he would have predicted the reaction to his statement. His words may therefore be an indication that Helsinki is indeed preparing for the possibility of joining before Sweden.

Other high-profile politicians have also made similar comments. Jussi Halla-aho, the chair of the foreign affairs committee in the Finnish Parliament, recently [said](#) that "It hardly matters whether Finland and Sweden join NATO on the same day or on consecutive days. It is probably more important that membership is realised as soon as possible."

While Finland should be open to joining NATO before Sweden, the best option for all parties, for several reasons, would be for Finland and Sweden to join NATO together. First, Erdoğan has been unreliable throughout the ratification process. It is therefore important to consider the possibility that Ankara is not serious about ratifying Finland's membership either, at least without introducing another list of demands. Second, there is a risk that Finland's decision to leave Sweden behind could undermine their extremely close and geostrategically important relationship, which would not be in the interest of either country. Third, allowing Turkey to divide and rule Finland and Sweden in this manner would undermine the authority of the two countries and the alliance. NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has [emphasised](#) repeatedly that both countries meet the membership criteria and should be welcomed into NATO quickly. This week, however, Stoltenberg signalled that the two countries could also join the alliance separately, [stating](#) that "the main question is not whether Finland and Sweden are ratified together" but that "they are both ratified as full members as soon as possible".

Finally, from a defence perspective, it would clearly be preferable for Finland, Sweden and NATO itself if both countries joined the alliance simultaneously. From a [defence planning](#) viewpoint, the Baltic Sea region would be most effectively defended as one strategic area. Access to Swedish territory [is vital](#) for the security of supply and military mobility of other NATO allies in Northern Europe. This includes Finland, whose critical supply lines would [run](#) mostly through Sweden or its territorial waters in the event of a conflict with Russia.

If Turkey continues to block Sweden's membership, however, there are also several reasons why it would be better for Finland to join alone than for both countries to remain outside the alliance. First, considering Turkey's reaction to the protests in Stockholm, it is highly improbable that Erdoğan will ratify Sweden's membership, at least before Turkey's elections – which may even be postponed from May following the recent earthquake. Finland and Sweden hope that the situation will change after the elections, and this may well be the case if the opposition wins. But if Erdoğan wins, there is little reason to believe he would be in a rush to ratify Sweden's membership – blocking Sweden's accession provides useful leverage for Turkey's [attempt](#) to purchase F-16 fighter jets from the US. Furthermore, the burning of the Koran [caused](#) significant outrage among the Turkish population.

Second, although Russia's aggression poses a threat to both Sweden and Finland, the two countries are in different geopolitical positions. Finland has a long border with Russia; it was occupied by the Russian empire; fought two wars with the Soviet Union in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and was subjected to intense Soviet pressure throughout the Cold War. Sweden has no land border with Russia, has never been occupied by Russia and was not subjected to the kinds of pressure that Finland experienced during the Cold War. While Russia does not pose an immediate threat to Finland as long as its troops are tied up in Ukraine, aggression remains a possibility, which is the reason why Helsinki applied for NATO membership in the first place.

Third, it would be better for NATO to have Finland in the alliance as soon as possible. With Finland's membership, NATO will be able to [defend](#) its territory in the North more effectively and to improve its security in the whole Baltic Sea region. Sweden, too, would be more secure with all of its neighbours in the alliance.

Fourth, since Helsinki has pressured NATO allies to ratify its membership quickly, it would be difficult for Finland to delay its own accession to wait for Sweden. This would probably also be unpopular politically; more than [half](#) of the Finnish population is in favour of joining the alliance before Sweden.

Finally, even if Finland joining NATO before Sweden would cause some friction between the two countries, it would be unlikely to damage their relations in a significant way. When asked about the prospect of separate accession, Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billström [said](#) that “even if it is a very strong interest to keep the Swedish and Finnish processes together, one also [has] to respect that NATO membership is a national interest for the respective countries” and, as such, “it is not up to me as foreign minister of Sweden to have views on how [Finland] handles its application process.” This suggests that Sweden understands Finland’s urgency in the matter. In any case, Helsinki would be unlikely to pursue separate accession without reaching an agreement with Stockholm first.

In reality, it is improbable that Finland will actively seek to join without Sweden before Turkey’s elections. Joining simultaneously remains the preferred option for Finland, Sweden and NATO. For the moment, Helsinki is still optimistic that a deal with Turkey can be reached, either after the election or with the help of the US. However, Finland must prepare for the possibility that Turkey may continue to block Sweden’s NATO bid, even after the election. If Turkey were willing to ratify Finland’s membership, there would be little reason at that point for Finland to decline the offer. Despite their close relations, Finland and Sweden are separate countries. Finland must prioritise its own security interests.

**Helmi Pillai is the Clara Marina O’Donnell fellow (2022-2023) at the Centre for European Reform.**