

NATO'S NORDIC ENLARGEMENT AND TURKEY'S RESERVATIONS

TRILATERAL MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING IN THE CONTEXT OF
TURKEY'S WIDER STRATEGIC INTERESTS

Toni Alaranta



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- With the signing of the trilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), Turkey dropped its initial objection to Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership, but has since argued that the conditions agreed in the MoU have not yet been fulfilled.
- In addition to requiring Sweden and Finland to take a more vigorous stance regarding the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its extension in Syria, Turkey has used Nordic NATO applications as a tool to raise these issues on NATO's agenda, pressuring the US in particular for a change in its Syria policy.
- Turkey's reservations need to be conceptualized within its determined search for strategic autonomy, increased room for manoeuvre, and an ideological decoupling from the West.
- Turkey's strategic interests have increasingly diverged from the rest of the alliance, likely leading to a more permanent intra-alliance opposition position in the coming years, part of which are the ongoing trilateral talks between Turkey, Finland and Sweden.



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INTRODUCTION

Despite what has otherwise been a remarkably smooth and fast accession process, Turkey threatens to delay the NATO bids of Finland and Sweden. What seems to have taken place initially in Turkey in early spring 2022 was a sudden policy formulation by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan when it became apparent that the Nordic countries would actually apply for NATO membership – a scenario that was until very recently considered highly unlikely by the vast majority of Turkey's foreign policy commentators. Until the Nordic countries initiated the application process, there were very few signs that Turkey would raise objections, although this was speculated in one or two op-eds in pro-government media.

Turkey then lifted its initial veto at NATO's Madrid Summit on 28–29 June, based on the trilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by Turkey, Finland and Sweden, in which the Nordic countries confirmed their future increased cooperation with Turkey in terms of anti-terrorism and Turkey's overall security concerns. However, immediately after the memorandum, it became apparent that the signatories had different views on what had actually been agreed, with Turkey, for instance, claiming that during the negotiations Sweden had promised the extradition of 73 persons wanted by Turkey. Thus, the Madrid agreement still left Turkey with the option of delaying the final ratification process.

This Briefing Paper identifies the motivations behind Turkey's stance. First, a long-term securitization of the Kurdish question and the related attempt at a military solution regarding the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its Syrian affiliate the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its armed wing, People's Protection Units (YPG). This has led to an attempt to use the two Nordic NATO applications as a tool to raise these issues on NATO's agenda, pressuring the US in particular for a change in its Syria policy. The Memorandum of Understanding is the public expression of this policy. Second, Turkey's interpretation of the current international system and the country's

ideal place in it, including the concomitant strategic interests that are increasingly diverging from those of other NATO members, resulting in an ambivalent stance on NATO's new enlargement.

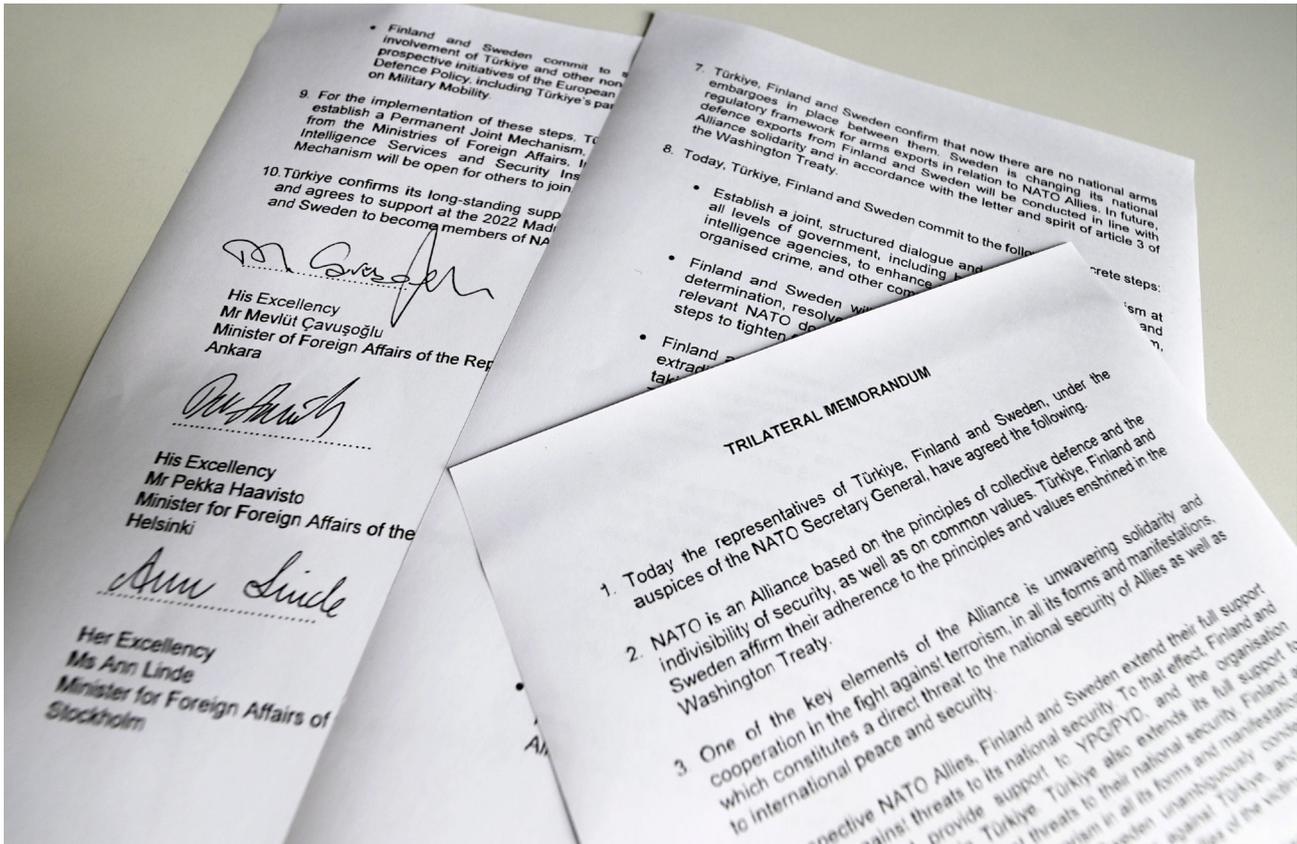
NATO as an organization is very unlikely to start a more fundamental debate on Turkey's role in the alliance, or the country's undemocratic development and Kurdish policy, even though this would be beneficial in terms of the security alliance's future cohesion and effective decision-making. The paper thus concludes that a process of more or less permanent management of intra-alliance opposition within NATO is to be expected, part of which are the ongoing trilateral talks preparing the NATO membership of Sweden and Finland. The presumably laborious negotiation process with Turkey in the coming months should be used by the two Nordic countries as an opportunity to define their basic parameters as NATO members, including what sort of Turkey policy they should practise once becoming treaty allies.

TURKEY'S RESERVATIONS AND THE TRILATERAL MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

After it became highly likely that Russia was going to invade Ukraine, the Joe Biden administration in the US put together a determined plan to unite its European allies to deter Russia, and by December 2021 this also included the preliminary preparations for Finland and Sweden potentially initiating their NATO applications.¹ It was confirmed both by NATO as well as by Finland and Sweden that Turkey had been thoroughly consulted in these preparations, and that it had not raised any objections. However, once the applications were sent, Turkey immediately decided to object, threatening to derail the smooth accession process planned by all other members.

Turkey's objections have several elements. Officially, it demands Sweden and Finland to take much

¹ David Ignatius, 'The secret planning that kept the White House a step ahead of Russia', *Washington Post*, 26 May 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/05/26/biden-white-house-secret-planning-helped-ukraine-counter-russia/>.



The Trilateral Memorandum of Understanding between Finland, Sweden and Turkey, photographed in Helsinki on 29 June 2022.
Source: Lehtikuva / Vesa Moilanen

more rigorous action against the PKK, designated a terrorist organization by Turkey, the EU, and the US, and its Syrian affiliate the PYD and its armed wing the YPG, which, being the main ground forces in the US-led alliance's fight against the Islamic State, is armed by the US and politically supported by the US and the EU alike.

In the beginning, Turkey's negotiation strategy with Finland and Sweden seemed to be based on the concept of non-talks, namely the list of demands was so implausible that one can argue that the Nordic countries were not even meant to be able to address them. The Turkish media repeatedly published new lists of demands with sometimes five and at other times ten requirements, including the extradition of a list of persons allegedly affiliated either with the PKK or the Gülen movement (designated by Turkey as a 'FETO' terrorist organization and accused of organizing the 2016 coup attempt), banning all public manifestations of the PKK in the Nordic capitals, making no distinction between the PKK and its extensions, and curtailing any financial assistance to the PKK and the Gülen movement, allegedly organized by persons living in Sweden and Finland.

Most noteworthy, Turkey's conditions include a preposterous demand for the two Nordic countries to change their own legislation related to terrorism, freedom of expression and the extradition of individuals accused by Turkey of terrorism. These demands, in a more sophisticated form and wrapped up in more generalized phrases about common anti-terrorism cooperation, are still to be found in the Memorandum of Understanding signed in Madrid. It is thus obvious that the MoU includes controversial passages, such as explicitly naming not only the PKK but also the Syrian affiliate PYD/YPG, and even FETO.

The trilateral negotiations between Turkey, Sweden and Finland included some elements that would have allowed a compromise in the first place. That is, the ending of an arms embargo on Turkey was clearly a possibility and there were already signs at the end of May that both countries were preparing for this, at least after becoming treaty allies with Turkey. However, as Turkey's authorities argued that this would not suffice to remove Turkey's objections, it seemed that the negotiations were doomed to fail. This initial stalemate was then dissolved with the MoU signed at the Madrid NATO Summit of 28–29 June.

The key passages in the MoU mention not only the PKK but also the PYD/YPG and FETO as Turkey's crucial security threats. The fourth paragraph states that 'Finland and Sweden will not provide support to YPG/PYD, and the organisation described as FETO in Türkiye'. This is followed, in paragraph five, by a clause according to which 'Finland and Sweden commit to prevent activities of the PKK and all other terrorist organisations and their extensions, as well as activities by individuals in affiliated and inspired groups or networks linked to these terrorist organisations'.²

Taken together, paragraphs 4 and 5 can legitimately be said to be logically connected, in the way that Finland and Sweden regard the PYD/YPG as well as the Gülen movement (FETO) as terrorist organizations, since the MoU mentions that Finland and Sweden have pledged to prevent the activities of the PKK and all other terrorist organizations and their extensions, and that 'Finland and Sweden reject the goals of these terrorist organisations'. Thus, Turkey has very good grounds for arguing that Sweden and Finland define the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organization similar to the PKK. Indeed, this is the way that the MoU document has been interpreted by the Turkish leadership. President Erdoğan in particular emphasized that the MoU document is the first international agreement that equates the PYD/YPG with the PKK and can thus be used as a model to follow in the wider NATO context. Further, President Erdoğan has emphasized that the MoU is only the first stage of the process and that Finland's and Sweden's membership is conditional upon their demonstrable implementation of the issues agreed in Madrid.³

Another potentially controversial clause included in the MoU deals with the future procedures regarding anti-terrorism practices in Finland and Sweden. According to the MoU document, Finland and Sweden 'will take all required steps to tighten further domestic legislation to this end'. Whereas Sweden and Finland have emphasized that this only means faster and smoother processes in accordance with the existing legislation and, for instance, in line with the European Convention of Extradition – also explicitly mentioned in the MoU document – the Turkish leadership seems to argue that with this clause, Sweden and Finland have agreed to extradite persons that Turkey has requested even before the signing of the memorandum.

This controversy was further emphasized by President Erdoğan in his speech at the NATO Summit on 29 June, where he claimed that during the trilateral negotiations, the Swedish Foreign Minister had 'promised' to extradite 73 persons. Sweden and Finland have rightly stated that no such clause mentioning a specific number of persons to be extradited is included in the MoU. This being the case, the issue of extraditions will be one of the most problematic aspects of the trilateral negotiations.

The most recent step after the Madrid Summit has been the first trilateral Turkey–Sweden–Finland negotiations in Helsinki on 26 August,⁴ approached by Turkey as a mechanism to review to what extent the two Nordic countries have started to implement the MoU agreement. This negotiation format was established by the MoU as a Permanent Joint Mechanism, with the participation of experts from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Justice, as well as intelligence services and security institutions. Although all parties are likely to emphasize that the joint mechanism works strictly according to its internal logics, it is not difficult to predict that its outcome will also be dependent on wider political calculations, particularly in Turkey where presidential and parliamentary elections are to take place in June 2023.

NORDIC NATO APPLICATIONS AND TURKEY'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS

It is possible to interpret Turkey's obstruction tactics from two distinct yet partly related perspectives. A more defensive view is based on an array of grievances accumulated during the last ten years or so, expressing a list of security-related issues, in particular regarding the PKK and its Syrian affiliate the PYD, and its armed wing the YPG, which forms the core fighting force of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In addition, one could argue that the veto tactic has also manifested an offensive aspect, namely, it has been used as an instrument to secure room for power projection in the Middle East, especially by putting pressure on the US Syria policy, which has made the PYD a legitimate international actor. In more theoretical terms, Turkey's actions can be defined as intra-alliance opposition through which it engages in strategic non-cooperation as boundary challenging

2 Trilateral memorandum between Türkiye, Finland and Sweden, 28 June 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_197342.htm?selectedLocale=en.

3 'Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan Madrid dönüşü açıkladı! İsvec 3-4 tane terörist gönderdi', Milliyet, 1 July 2022, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/cumhurbaşkanı-erdogan-madrid-donusu-acikladi-isvec-3-4-tane-terorist-gonderdi-6782431>.

4 The short press release after the meeting simply notes that the work of the joint mechanism will continue during the autumn, https://um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/turkin-suomen-ja-ruotsin-valin-en-pysyva-yhteinen-mekanismi-kokoontui-suomessa.

behaviour (testing the limits in terms of what an alliance member can do while still remaining an ally) in order to advance its own priorities within the alliance, and even approaching a boundary-breaking posture in seeking independence from the alliance and increasingly cooperating with the alliance's adversaries, Russia in particular.⁵

There are thus three distinct levels on which Turkey's blocking policy has been operating. First are the security concerns regarding Sweden and Finland's practice of tolerating PKK and Gülen movement sympathizers, a policy shared by Western states more generally as part of freedom of expression, and in particular Sweden's diplomatic relations and political support for the PYD in Syria. The second is the aforementioned array of grievances especially towards the US that have been accumulating throughout the last ten years, from the US arming the Syrian YPG to its refusal to extradite Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen, accused by Turkey of being the leader of the 'FETO terrorist organization' and the mastermind behind the 2016 coup attempt.

The third layer is the more offensive one, an instrumentalization of Turkey's veto right in order to create room for its power projection in the Middle East – the insistence upon equating the Syrian PYD with the PKK inherent in the MoU signed with Sweden and Finland is clearly an attempt to legitimize the existing and planned military interventions in Syria that are specifically targeting these Kurdish forces and their de facto self-rule in North-Eastern Syria, officially known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The reason why Turkey invests so much political capital in this issue, with high costs in terms of its reputation in the eyes of its treaty allies, is that the AANES administration is based on PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's vision of 'democratic confederalism', a unique de-centralized governing model, conceptualized by Turkey as a direct challenge to its own centralized nation-state model.

Although the official argument behind Turkey's reservations is solely based on conditions that Turkey insists Sweden and Finland must fulfill before Turkey's parliament will approve their memberships, one should also pay attention to more implicit factors. This brings to the surface a more ambiguous element of Turkey's stance, namely that it maintains a somewhat ambivalent view on the new NATO expansion. In this situation, the veto policy has been a tool to pressurize the US, and through that the whole NATO alliance, to significantly

transform its policy in several issues. In addition to the question of the US politically supporting and arming the YPG militia in Syria, these include the CAATSA sanctions,⁶ the dropping of Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet programme, and the US administration's refusal to sell F-16 fighter jets.

It can thus be argued that Turkey's leadership has conceptualized Finland's and Sweden's NATO applications as an instrument to bring to the fore all major issues that it has strongly disapproved of during the last ten years. As a matter of fact, this has even been publicly acknowledged by President Erdoğan's influential spokesperson İbrahim Kalin.⁷ One could thus argue that Turkey has had a maximalist position, namely, an attempt to force the Biden administration to the negotiating table in order to achieve a kind of grand bargain about Syria, Northern Cyprus, the arms embargo and so forth, and a minimalist position, namely to ensure that Sweden and Finland could not join NATO unless they thoroughly changed their policy of making a distinction between the PKK and its Syrian offshoot, the PYD.

In addition, it is important to analyze Turkey's stance in a wider context of the country's long-term foreign policy approach. Ever since the end of the Cold War and in particular during the last ten years, Turkey has vigorously aimed at strategic autonomy, increased room for manoeuvre, and an ideological decoupling from the West, inherent not only in President Erdoğan's Islamic-Conservative outlook but also shared by many actors in the secular-nationalist constituency, perceived as an attempt to end Turkey's two-century long subjugation to Western interests and the country's dependency on the West both materially and ideologically. Whereas other Western countries, including the Finnish and Swedish political establishment, perceive the relative decline of the so-called – and ultimately US-led – liberal international order as an explicitly negative development, many in Turkey's foreign policy elite interpret it as a potentially positive phenomenon, increasing Turkey's options, and as an instrument to diversify its foreign policy. In this frame of interpretation, the rise of China, the Russian revisionism towards the West, and the rise of the so-called BRICS are all perceived as a welcome development heading to a new, post-Western world order where Turkey becomes a strong autonomous pole in itself, at least in European and Middle Eastern regional contexts, if not even globally.

5 Oya Dursun-Özkanca, *Turkey-West Relations: the Politics of Intra-alliance Opposition*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 35–36.

6 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, sanctions legislation also used against Turkey.

7 'Cumhurbaşkanlığı Sözcüsü İbrahim Kalın'dan Habertürk TV'ye açıklamalar', Habertürk, 26 June 2022, <https://www.haberturk.com/cumhurbaskanligi-sozcusu-ibrahim-kalin-dan-haberturk-tv-ye-aciklamalar-3472768>.

One must also note that although Turkey's official statements regarding the NATO expansion underscore that Turkey is not in principle against the alliance's open door policy, and only wants the two Nordic countries to take a much more rigorous stance against PKK-related terrorism, the wider discourse produced within the pro-government circles in the media and think tanks also reveals a more fundamental questioning of NATO expansion. To give some prominent examples, as early as 18 April, Hasan Basri Yalçın, a regular columnist for the staunchly pro-Erdoğan daily Sabah newspaper, argued that as new members, Sweden and Finland would bring very little added value in terms of NATO's deterrence capacity and that the new expansion round was only a tool to advance a liberal missionary agenda, a development not useful for Turkey.⁸

In addition to this view questioning the rationale for NATO expansion, analysts in government-affiliated think tanks have also recently published policy papers that reveal a highly critical stance towards NATO expansion. For instance, Murat Yeşiltaş, an analyst in SETA Türkiye think tank, has recently published a policy brief on NATO expansion where he writes about how NATO's 'aggressive expansion policy', which now included even Sweden and Finland, was increasingly emphasizing the alliance's attempt to encircle Russia, instead of the previous combination of dialogue and deterrence.⁹

Further, a wide array of Turkish foreign policy commentators repeatedly argue that, ultimately, the Russian war on Ukraine has been caused by NATO expansion and its provocative policies, and the US push for global hegemony since the end of the Cold War. Elements of this line of argumentation can even be found in the highest ranks of Turkey's current regime. For example, İbrahim Kalın, President Erdoğan's spokesman, who also actively participates in policy formulation, has recently argued that although they do not as such justify the Russian attack on Ukraine, the current conflict is deeply influenced by the events and mechanisms created since 1997, after which America sought a global governance based on a pyramid model where the US was the only superpower and the rest were expected to follow its rule as secondary powers at best. In Kalın's thinking, Russia has come to challenge this order, calling for the establishment of a new

one. Kalın emphasized that the repeated Western talk about Russian President Vladimir Putin becoming 'crazy' completely failed to detect this causality. In Kalın's view, Turkey is also calling for a new order that replaces the current, dysfunctional one, in an era when the conjunctural changes have greatly increased Turkey's status.¹⁰

Based on these views, which are repeatedly circulating in Turkey, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the country's foreign policy elites are extremely doubtful whether it is ultimately in Turkey's interest to support NATO expansion at a time when Turkey is determinedly trying to continue its balancing policy between the West and Russia. Indeed, especially when read against Turkey's above-mentioned long-term foreign policy approach and its ideal positioning in the international system, it can be argued that Turkey sees Sweden's and Finland's NATO membership as a potentially disruptive element, further straining the West-Russia relationship by strengthening the alliance and making it more difficult for Turkey to maintain its delicate balancing act between the West and Russia.

However, at the end of the day, Turkey will approve Finland's and Sweden's membership and thus confirm its official stance about supporting NATO's open door policy. During this process, however, it will do whatever it can to legitimize its military solution policy regarding the PKK and its Syrian offshoot, as well as have counter-terrorism and the importance of the alliance's southern flank duly incorporated into any future planning by NATO – a goal at least partly achieved at the Madrid Summit.

CONCLUSIONS

NATO as an organization is highly unlikely to engage in any sort of fundamental debate over Turkey's role as a member, especially in the current international context. On the other hand, Turkey is very likely to continue its balancing act between the West and Russia, while simultaneously trying to have its own unique interests better accommodated by the alliance. That being the case, a process of a more permanent management of intra-alliance opposition within NATO is to be expected in the coming years, based on the increasingly divergent interests between Turkey and the rest of the alliance.

8 Hasan Basri Yalçın, 'Nato'nun içini boşaltmak', *Sabah*, 18 April 2022, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/hasan-basri-yalcin/2022/04/18/natonun-icini-bosaltmak>.

9 Murat Yeşiltaş, 'NATO'nun Genişlemesi ve Türkiye', SETA Türkiye, 25 May 2022, <https://www.setav.org/natonun-genislemesi-ve-turkiye/>.

10 'Cumhurbaşkanlığı Sözcüsü İbrahim Kalın'dan Habertürk TV'ye açıklamalar', Habertürk, 26 June 2022, <https://www.haberturk.com/cumhurbaskanligi-sozcusu-ibrahim-kalin-dan-haberturk-tv-ye-aciklamalar-3472768>.

Part of this intra-alliance problem-solving agenda entails the ongoing trilateral talks preparing Sweden's and Finland's NATO membership. A somewhat laborious negotiation process with Turkey can be expected in the coming months. This should be used by the Nordic countries as an opportunity to define their basic parameters as NATO members, including what sort of Turkey policy they should practise once becoming

treaty allies. It is very difficult to evaluate any time frame for these negotiations, as it is unclear what the endgame ultimately is on Turkey's side. This is further complicated due to Turkey's forthcoming elections, scheduled for June 2023, the preparations for which will undoubtedly play a role in constructing Turkey's bargaining strategy. /