

Research Briefing
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NATO enlargement: Finland and Sweden

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the benefit of NATO's collective defence agreement prompted Finland and Sweden to end decades of neutrality and non-aligned status and seek membership of the Alliance.

On 18 May 2022 Sweden and Finland simultaneously handed in their official letters of application to join NATO. Turkey's initial opposition was resolved with a trilateral memorandum agreed at the NATO summit in June 2022, paving the way for all 30 Allies to sign the required Accession Protocols.

28 of the 30 NATO members had ratified the protocols by the end of 2022.

However, Turkey¹ and Hungary delayed their domestic ratification for both countries, citing concerns about Sweden's and, to a less extent Finland's, support for Kurdish groups.

Turkey and Hungary finalised their national procedures for Finland in March 2023, enabling Finland to formally join the Alliance on 4 April 2023 as the 31st member.

NATO had hoped Turkey and Hungary would approve Sweden's accession before its summit in Vilnius in July 2023. The month before the summit, James Cleverly, then Foreign Secretary, said the UK will "continue to push for both Hungary and Türkiye to ratify the accession of Sweden to NATO."²

In early 2024 Turkey, and then Hungary, ratified Sweden's accession protocol. Sweden became the 32nd member of NATO on 7 March 2024.

1 Key dates

18 May 2022: Sweden and Finland simultaneously apply to join NATO

29 June 2022: NATO formally invites Sweden and Finland to join

4 April 2023: Finland becomes the 31st member of NATO

7 March 2024: Sweden becomes the 32nd member of NATO

¹ The Republic of Türkiye changed its official name from The Republic of Turkey in [a request submitted to the United Nations Secretary-General](#) on 26 May 2022. This briefing paper continues to use Turkey as the short form for the Republic of Türkiye, in line with the [current list of approved British English language names for countries and territories](#) issued by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) [accessed 16 June 2023]

² [HC Deb 13 June 2023 c139](#)

1 Why did Sweden and Finland apply to join NATO?

“The only country that is threatening Europe’s security and openly waging a war of aggression is Russia.”

[Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin](#)

May 2022

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted both countries to reverse decades of military non-alignment and neutrality to join the Alliance. They were already NATO’s “closest partners”, according to Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. Both countries joined NATO’s partnership for peace programme in 1994 and participated in NATO exercises.³

While the two countries have a very different history and relationship with both NATO and Russia, they followed a similar trajectory in drawing the conclusion from the conflict in Ukraine that joining the Alliance was in their best interests.

Both countries published reports reassessing the security environment in light of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.⁴ Similar in style, they set out their current policy environment, relations with key partners and NATO, and the impact membership might have:

- [Government report on changes in the security environment](#), Finnish Government (13 April 2022)
- [Deterioration of the security environment – implications for Sweden](#) (13 May 2022).

Both countries cite Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and the changed security environment, as the main driver of their decision. They both say the principal benefit of membership is NATO’s collective defence agreement, as articulated in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Sweden also argued that by joining with Finland “all Nordic and Baltic countries would be covered by collective defence guarantees.”⁵

1.1 Simultaneous applications

On 18 May 2022 Sweden and Finland simultaneously handed in their official letters of application to join NATO.⁶ Both countries argued in favour of

³ Both countries are also part of the UK-led [Joint Expeditionary Force](#), a non-NATO grouping of 10 northern European countries, meaning their armed forces have already exercised and trained with several NATO members.

⁴ Further statements can be found on the Finnish Government website: [Finland and NATO](#) and on the Swedish Government website: [Sweden’s road to NATO](#).

⁵ Swedish Government, [Deterioration of the security environment – implications for Sweden](#), 13 May 2022

⁶ [Finland and Sweden submit applications to join NATO](#), NATO, 18 May 2022

joining together, believing they would be left more exposed if they did not join but their neighbour did.

In June, Sweden's then Foreign Minister, Anna Linde, presented an updated statement of foreign policy to the Riksdag, saying "Russia's war has created a new and more dangerous reality for Europe and Sweden". She argued "the best way for Sweden to protect its security is for Sweden to join NATO."⁷

Further statements can be found on the Finnish Government website: [Finland and NATO](#) and on the Swedish Government website: [Sweden's road to NATO](#).

1.2 Formal invitations to join

Sweden and Finland were [formally invited to join the Alliance](#) at the Madrid Summit on 29 June 2022.⁸ The summit declaration said the accession of Finland and Sweden will "make them safer, NATO stronger, and the Euro-Atlantic area more secure."⁹

1.3 Security assurances during the accession process

A core tenet of the Alliance is [Article 5 of the Washington Treaty](#). This states that an armed attack against one shall be considered an attack against them all. However, this only applies to those who belong to the Alliance.

11 May 2022

UK offers support to each country if attacked during transition period.

Both countries expressed concern Russia could take provocative or retaliatory measures towards them in the period before they join the Alliance. In its report on the benefits of membership, Sweden said "Russian provocation and retaliatory measures" could not be ruled out during the transition period.¹⁰ Prior to its application to join, Finland also suggested the potential for increasing tensions on its border with Russia.¹¹

⁷ Swedish Foreign Ministry, [Statement of Foreign Policy](#), 10 June 2022

⁸ NATO, [Madrid Summit Declaration](#), NATO, 29 June 2022

⁹ NATO, [Madrid Summit Declaration](#), NATO, 29 June 2022

¹⁰ Swedish Government, [Deterioration of the security environment – implications for Sweden](#), 13 May 2022

¹¹ Finnish Government, [Government report on changes in the security environment](#), 13 April 2022

The Madrid summit declaration explicitly stated: “the security of Finland and Sweden is of direct importance to the Alliance, including during the accession process.”¹²

The UK Government signed non-binding political declarations with Finland and Sweden to support each country should either be attacked. These pledges were made by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 11 May 2022 during visits to both countries.

The wording is the same in the two agreements, except for the name of the country. This is from the Declaration of Solidarity with Sweden:

We confirmed that, should either country suffer a disaster or an attack, the United Kingdom and Sweden will, upon request from the affected country, assist each other in a variety of ways, which may include military means.¹³

Jens Stoltenberg suggested many allies are providing “substantial security assurances”.¹⁴ Speaking in February 2023 he said it is “inconceivable that there will be any military threat against Finland or Sweden without NATO reacting.”¹⁵

2

What is the accession process?

Joining the Alliance requires a country to accede to the North Atlantic Treaty (also known as the Washington Treaty).

This involves every member signing and ratifying an Accession Protocol.¹⁶ The ratification process will vary according to each members national requirements and procedures.

Once all member countries have notified the US Government, which is the depositary of the North Atlantic Treaty, of their acceptance of the Protocol, the Secretary General then invites the potential new member to accede to the North Atlantic Treaty.

More detail of the process can be found in Commons Library paper [How do countries join NATO?](#), CBP9813.

¹² NATO, [Madrid Summit Declaration](#), NATO, 29 June 2022

¹³ [UK-Sweden Political Declaration of Solidarity: 11 May 2022](#), Prime Minister’s Office, 11 May 2022; see also [UK-Finland Statement](#), 11 May 2022

¹⁴ NATO, [press conference](#), 13 June 2022

¹⁵ [Opening remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Munich Security Conference session "Beyond the Alliance: Partnering up for European Security"](#), NATO, 18 February 2023

¹⁶ More formally known as the Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty on the accession of the invited country.

2.1

NATO members sign the Accession Protocols

Sweden and Finland completed accession talks on 4 July 2022.¹⁷ The following day, on 5 July 2022, NATO Ambassadors for all 30 Allies signed the Accession Protocols for Finland and Sweden.¹⁸

By the end of September, all but Turkey and Hungary had ratified the accession protocols for both countries.

Hungary and Turkey deposited the instruments of ratification for Finland with the US State Department on 31 March and 4 April 2023 respectively.

As a new member, Finland then ratified and deposited the instrument for Sweden on 4 April 2023.

Turkey deposited the instrument of accession for Sweden on 26 January 2024, with Hungary following on 7 March 2024, allowing Sweden to become the Alliance's 32nd ally on the same day.

A list of ratification and deposits by NATO member is maintained on the US State Department website:

- [Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty on the Accession of the Republic of Finland](#)
- [Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty on the Accession of the Kingdom of Sweden](#)

2 When did the UK ratify the protocols?

The Government laid the Accession Protocols for Finland and Sweden on 6 July 2022. They were laid as Command Papers: [CP 730 \(Finland\)](#) and [CP 731 \(Sweden\)](#).

Liz Truss, the then Foreign Secretary, said the UK wished to quickly ratify the protocols to encourage other Allies to do the same. For that reason, the Government opted to ratify the Protocols without the 21 sitting days' scrutiny usually required by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.¹⁹ The Shadow Foreign Secretary supported this approach.²⁰

¹⁷ [Finland and Sweden complete NATO accession talks](#), NATO, 4 July 2022

¹⁸ [NATO Allies sign Accession Protocols for Finland and Sweden](#), NATO, 5 July 2022

¹⁹ [HC Deb 6 July 2022 c878](#); [HCWS188 \[Sweden and Finland NATO Accession\]](#), 6 July 2022

²⁰ [HC Deb 6 July 2022 c880](#)

3

Why did Turkey oppose Finland and Sweden's membership?

Turkey initially objected to Finland and Sweden's application to join NATO. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said both countries must abandon support for Kurdish groups that he said threatened Turkey's national security. He also called for the lifting of restrictions on arms exports to Turkey and for the extradition of individuals Turkey considers terrorists. The President said Turkey would not change its stance "until Sweden and Finland show clear, concrete and decisive steps."²¹

3.1

The Trilateral memorandum

The agreement of a [trilateral memorandum](#) (PDF) on 28 June 2022 between Turkey, Sweden and Finland appeared to resolve the issue.²² The agreement enabled NATO to formally invite the Nordic countries to join the Alliance at its Madrid summit in June 2022.

The Summit declaration acknowledged Turkish concerns:

In any accession to the Alliance, it is of vital importance that the legitimate security concerns of all Allies are properly addressed. We welcome the conclusion of the trilateral memorandum between Türkiye, Finland, and Sweden to that effect.²³

The memorandum addressed Turkey's concerns about its national security and terrorist groups.

Finland and Sweden agreed to not provide support to YPG/PYD (Kurdish groups in Syria, the People's Defense Units and Democratic Union Party) and confirm that the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' party) is a proscribed terrorist organisation.

The memorandum also referred to recent counter-terrorism legislation in both countries, and arms exports.

Finland and Sweden agreed to address "Türkiye's pending deportation or extradition requests of terror suspects expeditiously and thoroughly."²⁴

²¹ ["Turkey sets conditions for backing Swedish, Finnish NATO membership"](#), RFE/RL, 21 May 2022; ["Turkey rejects NATO offer of trilateral talks with Sweden and Finland"](#), Financial Times, 15 June 2022

²² NATO, ["Trilateral memorandum between Türkiye, Finland and Sweden"](#), 28 June 2022

²³ NATO, [Madrid Summit Declaration](#), 29 June 2022

²⁴ NATO, ["Trilateral memorandum between Türkiye, Finland and Sweden"](#), 28 June 2022

A Permanent Joint Mechanism was set up to implement the steps each country committed to, with the participation of all three countries.

President Erdoğan was clear that Turkish ratification was dependent on Sweden and Finland fulfilling the commitments made in the memorandum:

Sweden and Finland should carry out their duties and those are in the text ... But if they don't, of course it is out of the question for the ratification to be sent to our parliament.²⁵

Erdoğan also said Sweden had promised to extradite 73 individuals as part of the agreement, although the memorandum does not name any individuals nor commit to an explicit number.²⁶

3.2 Progress made... then halted

The three countries had been making progress in negotiations. Two meetings of the Permanent Joint Mechanism were held in August and November 2022.²⁷

In September, Sweden lifted a ban against exporting military equipment to Turkey imposed in 2019.²⁸

In November, after talks in Ankara, NATO's Secretary General said "Finland and Sweden have delivered on their commitment to Turkey. It's time to welcome Finland and Sweden as full members of NATO".²⁹

However, Turkey suspended talks with both countries in January 2023 after a series of protests in Stockholm, involving the burning of a copy of the Quran.³⁰

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February 2023, Stoltenberg again said Finland and Sweden "have met their obligations."³¹

²⁵ ["Erdoğan says Sweden, Finland must fulfil NATO agreement promises"](#), Al Jazeera, 30 June 2022

²⁶ ["Erdoğan says Sweden, Finland must fulfil NATO agreement promises"](#), Al Jazeera, 30 June 2022

²⁷ [First Meeting of the Permanent Joint Mechanism Established within the Framework of the Trilateral Memorandum Which Turkey, Finland and Sweden Signed during the NATO Madrid Summit](#), Turkish Government, 26 August 2022; [Meeting of the Permanent Joint Mechanism – Türkiye, Finland and Sweden](#), Swedish Government, 25 November 2022

²⁸ [Sweden resumes arms exports to Turkey after NATO membership bid](#), Reuters, 30 September 2022

²⁹ [NATO chief urges Turkey to endorse Finland, Sweden accession](#), AP, 3 November 2022

³⁰ [Turkey condemns burning of Qur'an during far-right protest in Sweden](#), the Guardian, 21 January 2023

³¹ [Opening remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Munich Security Conference session "Beyond the Alliance: Partnering up for European Security"](#), NATO, 18 February 2023

3.3 No longer together... Finland joins NATO

In early 2023 Turkey suggested it could support Finland's bid before Sweden's. Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said "I think it would be fair to distinguish between a problematic country and a less problematic country".³²

While Finland and Sweden had previously expressed a preference to join together, Jens Stoltenberg suggested at the Munich Security Conference in February 2023 that they could join separately: "what matters is that both become members as soon as possible, not whether one becomes a member before the other."³³

Turkey's parliament ratified Finland's accession protocol on 30 March, enabling Finland to become the 31st member of NATO on 4 April 2023.³⁴

3.4 Approval of Sweden takes longer

In early 2023 Turkey indicated its parliament was unlikely to vote on ratification before presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023.³⁵ President Erdoğan was re-elected on 28 May 2023.

NATO was keen for Sweden to accede before the Vilnius summit in July. Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, speaking at the time of Finland's accession, said "we are clear that Turkey should provide a clear path for Sweden's swift accession."³⁶

Following President Erdoğan's re-election, the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, urged Turkey to immediately finalise Sweden's accession: "We believe the time is now and there's no reason for not moving forward. Turkey has raised important and legitimate concerns. Sweden and Finland both addressed those concerns."³⁷ French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna has also said France wants Sweden "to be in Vilnius as a full

³² Swedish and Finnish NATO bids may be treated 'separately', Turkey warns, Financial Times, 30 January 2023; [Erdoğan says Turkey may accept Finland into Nato without Sweden](#), The Guardian, 30 January 2023

³³ [Opening remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Munich Security Conference session "Beyond the Alliance: Partnering up for European Security"](#), NATO, 18 February 2023

³⁴ [Turkish parliament ratifies Finland's NATO accession as Sweden kept waiting](#), Reuters, 31 March 2023

³⁵ [Turkey pushes back vote on Sweden and Finland's NATO accession](#), the Guardian, 14 January 2023; [Erdogan leaning towards holding Turkish elections in June – sources](#), Reuters, 22 February 2023

³⁶ FCDO, [Finland's accession to NATO: Foreign Secretary's statement on Turkey's ratification decision](#), 17 March 2023

³⁷ [Blinken urges Turkey to immediately approve Sweden's NATO accession](#), Reuters, 30 May 2023

member.”³⁸ However, President Erdoğan then dampened expectations of an early resolution, saying “Sweden has expectations. It doesn’t mean that we will comply with them.”³⁹

At the end of December, the Turkish parliament’s foreign affairs commission approved Sweden’s bid, paving the way for a vote to be held in Parliament.⁴⁰ The move came after Sweden introduced measures to explicitly prohibit participation in a terrorist organisation.⁴¹ On 23 January 2024, Turkey’s parliament ratified Sweden’s accession protocol.⁴² Turkey deposited the protocol with the US State Department on 26 January 2024.⁴³

3 Turkey’s request for US F-16 aircraft

At the time of the 2022 Summit, there was speculation that Turkey is seeking to leverage its position for other purposes. In particular, Turkey’s request for new F-16 aircraft and upgrades to its existing fleet.⁴⁴ While the Biden administration supports the sale of F-16 aircraft to Turkey, any sale needs Congressional approval. In February 2023, a bipartisan group of Senators explicitly linked Congressional approval for the F-16 deal with Turkey’s approval of Sweden and Finland’s membership to NATO.⁴⁵ Following Turkey’s ratification of Sweden’s accession protocol, the Biden administration notified Congress of its plans to sell Turkey new F-16 fighter aircraft in a deal valued at up to \$23 billion. The deal reportedly involves 40 new F-16s and modernising 79 existing F-16s.⁴⁶

³⁸ [France says Turkey and Hungary must ratify Sweden’s NATO membership before July summit](#), Reuters, 16 June 2023

³⁹ [Turkey’s Erdoğan plays down Sweden’s NATO hopes](#), Politico, 14 June 2023; [NATO, Senior officials meet in Ankara to address Trilateral Memorandum implementation, Sweden’s path to NATO membership](#), 14 June 2023

⁴⁰ [Turkish parliament’s foreign affairs commission approves Sweden’s NATO bid](#), Al Jazeera, 26 December 2023

⁴¹ [New anti-terror law should convince Turkey to back NATO bid, Swedish minister says](#), Reuters, 31 May 2023

⁴² [Turkey’s parliament approves Sweden’s NATO bid](#), Al Jazeera, 23 January 2024

⁴³ US State Department, [NATO Sweden accession protocol notification of deposit of instrument](#), 26 January 2024

⁴⁴ [Biden administration throws support behind potential F-16 sale to Turkey](#), Reuters, 29 June 2022; Congressional Research Paper [Turkey \(Türkiye\): Possible U.S. Sale of F-16 Aircraft](#) (PDF), R47493.

⁴⁵ [US Congress says F-16 sale to Turkey depends on NATO approval](#), Reuters, 2 February 2023; [Turkey F-16 sale in congressional limbo amid Lockheed backlog](#), Defense News, 18 January 2023

⁴⁶ [Lawmakers greenlight F-16s for Turkey after Erdogan approved Sweden’s NATO bid](#), Politico, 26 January 2024

4

Why did Hungary delay ratification of Sweden's protocol?

Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, indicated in November 2022 that Hungary would support both country's accession but was awaiting ratification by Parliament. However, he also said Turkey's concerns need to be heard.⁴⁷

Mr Orbán also indicated reluctance among some MPs about the prospect of enlargement. According to Mr Orbán, some are concerned about the lengthy border between Finland and Russia. He also cited concerns about Sweden and Finland's relations with his country, suggesting they were "shamelessly spreading lies" about the rule of law and democracy in Hungary. Speaking in February, he said while Hungary "supports Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO in principle, we first need to have some serious discussions."⁴⁸

The Hungarian parliament ratified Finland's protocol on 27 March 2023.⁴⁹

According to Politico, European diplomats are not clear why Hungary opposes Sweden's membership, with one official saying there is "zero understanding". Politico suggests it is because of its close ties with Ankara, with a Hungarian official suggesting that Hungary's position "is fundamentally shaped by the preferences of Turkey".⁵⁰

In May, Mr Orbán said relations between his country and Sweden must improve: "the political relations between Hungary and Sweden are awfully wrong. We don't want to import conflicts into NATO."⁵¹

Following Turkey's parliamentary approval of Sweden's bid in January 2024, Mr Orbán said Hungary supports NATO membership of Sweden.⁵² However, in early February, Hungary's ruling party boycotted an extraordinary session of parliament called by opposition groups to approve Sweden's membership.⁵³ The leader of the ruling party in Hungary's Parliament said a vote could take place when parliament meets for its regular session in late February, but added "for this a meeting of the two prime ministers in

⁴⁷ [Hungary PM says more talks needed on Finland, Sweden NATO bids](#), Reuters, 24 February 2023; [Hungary signals fresh delay in Finland, Sweden NATO approval](#), Reuters, 25 February 2023

⁴⁸ [Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the kossuth radio programme "Good Morning Hungary"](#), Prime Minister's office, 24 February 2023. Commons Library paper Hungary: Viktor Orbán's Government and European reaction (CBP 9516) discusses rule of law and other matters.

⁴⁹ [Finland on course for NATO membership after Hungarian vote](#), Politico, 27 March 2023

⁵⁰ ["Annoying sideshow": Hungary frustrates NATO allies](#), Politico, 12 April 2023

⁵¹ [Hungary's Orban: better relations with Sweden needed before NATO membership](#), Reuters, 23 May 2023

⁵² [Hungary supports Sweden's NATO membership, PM Orban tells Stoltenberg](#), Reuters, 24 January 2024

⁵³ [Hungary's ruling party balks at Swedish NATO vote](#), Politico, 5 February 2024

Budapest is necessary.”⁵⁴ That meeting took place on 23 February, with a visit by the Swedish Prime Minister to the Hungarian capital where they finalised a new defence agreement, which includes the sale of Saab Gripen aircraft to Hungary.⁵⁵

Hungary’s parliament approved Sweden’s accession on 26 February 2024, with the President signing the bill on 5 March.⁵⁶ Sweden formally joined the Alliance the 7 March 2024.⁵⁷

5 What is Russia’s response?

Russia has long opposed the expansion of NATO. However, President Putin has indicated he sees no threat to Russia if Sweden and Finland join the Alliance. He has, however, said Russia will respond if NATO begins to establish military infrastructure in either of the two nations. These comments were made following the formal invitation to join in June 2022:

With Sweden and Finland, we don’t have the problems that we have with Ukraine. They want to join NATO, go ahead.

But they must understand there was no threat before, while now, if military contingents and infrastructure are deployed there, we will have to respond in kind and create the same threats for the territories from which threats towards us are created.⁵⁸

Putin has since told the Russian Board of the Defence Ministry if Sweden and Finland join NATO, Russia needs to respond “by creating a corresponding group of forces in Russia’s northwest.”⁵⁹ Russia has an 830-mile border with Finland.

Remarking on Finland and Sweden’s accession in March 2024, Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s Foreign Minister, pressed at the speed with which “Finland and Sweden exchanged their neutrality” for membership of NATO at a time when, he said, “the alliance took an openly aggressive, hostile attitude towards the Russian Federation”. Lavrov suggested Russia could deploy additional weapons to the new Moscow and Leningrad military districts.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ [Orbán boycotts parliament session called to ratify Swedish NATO bid](#), The Guardian, 5 February 2024

⁵⁵ Politico, [Stroking the ego: Hungary’s Orbán gives his nod to Sweden’s NATO bid](#), 23 February 2024

⁵⁶ [Hungary President signs Sweden’s NATO membership ratification](#), Reuters, 5 March 2024

⁵⁷ NATO, [Sweden officially joins NATO](#), 7 March 2024

⁵⁸ [“Putin: Russia will respond if NATO sets up infrastructure in Finland, Sweden”](#), Reuters, 29 June 2022

⁵⁹ [Meeting of the Russian Defence Board](#), President of Russia website, 21 December 2022

⁶⁰ Russian Foreign Ministry, [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions following the Antalya Diplomacy Forum](#), 2 March 2024

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