

# DOES TÜRKIYE PLAY WELL-CALCULATED CHESS MOVES ON THE WESTERN BOARD?

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August 2023



## About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.

The world was closely watching the NATO Vilnius Summit in 2023 to observe how Türkiye's role in determining Sweden's NATO membership would unfold, considering the mounting pressure on Türkiye from Western countries, especially the United States. President Erdogan's administration engaged in diplomatic negotiations with Western leaders to secure advantageous positions considering Türkiye's strategic importance in NATO, with its military presence and veto power. However, Türkiye's stance on Sweden's NATO membership differs due to concerns about terrorism and anti-Islamist movements, causing negative public sentiment in Türkiye towards Sweden's accession. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan clearly expressed that Sweden's approval of NATO membership application depends on the Swedish government's cooperation in the fight against terrorism and he expects the promises and guarantees given in this regard to be fulfilled.

After a long-lasting neutrality policy, Finland and Sweden decided to pursue NATO membership in the wake of the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. While most of the NATO members support the integration of both Finland and Sweden into the Alliance, Türkiye has alleged that these Nordic states have affiliations with terrorist organizations, specifically the Kurdish terrorist group PKK and the Gülen movement, which Türkiye prosecutes for their involvement in the 2016 Coup attempt. The 2016 coup attempt in Türkiye spiked the distrust toward the West due to its ties with Gülenists and perceived support for Kurdish terrorist groups. Although this negative attitude affected the NATO integration of both countries, Sweden and Finland, Türkiye firmly believes that Sweden presents a more significant threat to its security between the two Nordic states due to terrorist groups using the country as a hub and offensive acts against freedom of religion. Conversely, Finland has demonstrated more effective progress in implementing the June 28 2022 Trilateral memorandum

involving Türkiye and Sweden. As a result, Türkiye is backing Finland's NATO bid while maintaining reservations about Sweden's membership.

The Swedish NATO bid opened a new channel for Türkiye-Sweden dialogue and in response Sweden regulated its anti-terror legislation and attempted to prosecute against terrorism funding structures. Regardless of the steps taken, the Turkish position did not seem to change until the Vilnius Summit. There were statements by the Turkish government hinting that nobody should expect a green light to Sweden's NATO aspiration any time soon. That is why the announcement that Türkiye would approve Sweden's membership in the statement made the day before came as a surprise to many.

Türkiye's negotiations using its veto power helped the country to get compromises from the West. Türkiye understood that it could not immediately approve the Swedish application due to the unresolved disputes, but it also knew that there had to be a compromise made sooner rather than later since the Russian invasion of Ukraine demanded immediate action. Following that logic, Turkish foreign policy chose to keep negotiating channels open and demanded certain assurances to proceed. For instance, just after the statement that involved Türkiye's approval of Sweden's membership, the Swedish government expressed its support to the revitalization of Türkiye-EU relations in line with Türkiye's demands for progress in the dragging EU accession process, the modernization of customs union and visa liberalization for Turkish citizens. Both Stoltenberg and Biden showed their support for progress on Türkiye's EU accession as an incentive to encourage Türkiye to ratify Sweden's NATO integration which paid off as Türkiye finally settled with Western counterparts. Türkiye's F-16s request to the US, after being excluded from the F-35 program, was brought up by Turkish officials during negotiations. After the positive setting created by Türkiye's sudden change of position, the Biden administration announced moving forward on F-16s transfer to Türkiye.



These foreign policy achievements increased Erdoğan's reputation both domestically and internationally. Although some label him as an opportunist, he made the most out of his country's position and displayed diplomatic skills that brought success to Türkiye on relations with the EU. Additionally, it could be interpreted as that Türkiye is leaning more on the EU-US side, possibly believing that Russia's international credibility has been damaged too much for Türkiye to preserve absolute neutrality. The release of Azov commanders, support for Ukraine's NATO aspiration, approving Sweden's NATO bid after ratifying Finland's membership and increasing military cooperation with Ukraine amidst war, all reflect how Türkiye views this war and the winners and losers in it, despite the fact that the balancing act has served them well so far. However, the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) interpreted Erdoğan's way as blackmail-like behavior resulting from the one-man regime and a policy damaging Türkiye's credibility in front of its allies. According to the political party, not taking a similar approach towards other NATO member countries that support YPG/PKK elements, like the USA, and putting all the responsibility on Finland and Sweden caused a loss to Türkiye's reputation.

In addition, even if Finland and Sweden support the strengthening of Türkiye-EU relations, Türkiye's EU trajectory is still a long and challenging one as the country must first go through the harmonization process with the EU's *acquis*. Verbal support of EU countries has no real impact or lasting effect on this relationship. Additionally, CHP does not find it appropriate to place Türkiye's bilateral relations with other countries on the NATO agenda. CHP argues that they will ratify the membership in the parliament, but that Turkish foreign policy should be carried out within the institutional framework, away from the ideological consideration of one man. The main opposition underlines that verbal support from EU partners is only temporary and when the agenda of countries changes, this

support can become easily discarded or forgotten. In this case, we should credit Erdoğan's negotiation and gains but also avoid exaggerating them.

## Did Türkiye finally let go of the double-edged sword that it has been playing for a while now?

Türkiye took a slight turn in foreign policy and now plays a closer game with NATO allies. There could be two reasons behind why Türkiye chose to shift towards the West with the Vilnius summit and the build-up to it: First, Türkiye failed to produce useful concessions out of Russia in the areas of rivalry, for instance Syria. Russia was cornered due to sanctions and international isolation and Türkiye aimed to take advantage of Russia's situation. Türkiye appears dissatisfied with Russia which might have triggered the shift to a more anti-Russian stance than a somewhat neutral position. Secondly, it seems Turkish decision-making has assessed that siding with the West rather than staying neutral will eventually prove more rewarding. This shows Türkiye also does not see Russia emerging with a good position from the war and does not want to bet on the wrong horse. Time will tell what kind of complications will arise if Turkish-Russian rivalry continues, especially in the context of the Syrian conflict. On the other hand, the crucial grain deal is at stake as Russia does not rely on Türkiye's mediation anymore and is currently bombing grain silos in Ukraine. The Türkiye-Russia relations are still delicate and invaluable for both sides. Not to mention, Erdoğan is always capable of surprising everyone at any time.