



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on March 27, 2023

Swedish Parliament Pushes Ahead for NATO Membership

On March 22, Sweden's parliament voted in support of going ahead with NATO membership plans, an outcome that would hinge on the ultimate decisions of NATO members Hungary and Turkey.

Swedish lawmakers voted for NATO membership with 269 in favor, 37 against, and 43 absent. During the seven-hour debate in the parliament, or Riksdag, the Left and the Green parties requested that NATO membership only be accepted if no nuclear weapons were put in Sweden. In line with that stance, a group of Social Democrats put forth a proposal but did not garner the necessary votes to pass the motion.



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Swedish Riksdag building in Stockholm

Green party MP Jakob Risberg remarked that "Sweden is about to plunge into a nuclear alliance with a Turkish despot as a doorman."

Previously, both the Social Democrats and the Sweden Democrats (SD) party joined the Green and Left Parties in opposing NATO membership. Nonetheless, after the Russo-Ukraine conflict broke out in February 2022, the SD is now strongly for Sweden's NATO ascendancy.

"When reality changes, we must also rethink old truths," said Sweden Democrat Aron Emilsson, the chairman of the Riksdag's Foreign Affairs Committee. "This is a historic but still necessary decision to make," he stated, "we are leaving 200 years of nonalignment behind us."

However, with the Fidesz Party of Hungarian President Orbán stating that Hungary will ratify Finland's NATO application on March 27, but "will decide on the case of Sweden later," the Nordic country's path to NATO has since met with a key obstacle.

Hungary hitherto opposed Sweden's NATO membership as the latter has been more embroiled than Finland in the European Union (EU)'s rule-of-law debate against Budapest.

Nevertheless, Stockholm still anticipated that Hungary would ratify both countries' applications. After the news that Hungary would only approve Finland's application for the time being, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson expressed his disappointment with public broadcaster Sveriges Radio:

"I'm going to ask why they are now separating Sweden from Finland. These are signals we have not received before, so I'm absolutely going to raise this with Orbán today."

Complicating matters further has been Sweden's choppy relationship with NATO member Turkey. Although Sweden initially applied for membership along with Finland in the spring of 2022, Turkish insistence for Sweden to clamp down on Kurdish activists and Quran-burning demonstrations have emerged as major roadblocks in Sweden's NATO application.

In light of an impending domestic election in May, observers have contended that Turkish President



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Erdoğan may want to appear tough in the realm of foreign policy toward Sweden to gain conservative Islamic votes back home. On the other hand, Sweden has resisted Turkey's conditions, especially those that would breach Sweden's law on free speech.

Yet Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billström remained optimistic that Sweden would join the military bloc in time for the next NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania.

On March 24, Sweden joined its Nordic neighbors in combining their fighter jet fleets under one operational command, establishing Europe's most battle-ready fighter fleet after Russia's.

Based on statements published by the respective authorities, the air chiefs of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland signed a declaration of intent for greater collaboration last week, an agreement which was characterized as "the foundation for a single Nordic air defense."

Consequently, the combined fleet of the four Nordic countries will have approximately 250 fighter jets at its disposal, which — exceeding the number of the 226-jet French fleet — will be the largest fleet among the Western allies in Europe, after Russia's 773 aircraft, the [Global Fire Power](#) index stated.

While Finland and Sweden are not officially NATO members yet, the declaration was signed in the presence of NATO Air Command at the U.S. Ramstein Air Base in southwest Germany. Also, this declaration was a clear signal that the four Nordic countries created a new joint fighter fleet to be functionally included in the larger NATO operational command.

"The ultimate goal is to be able to operate seamlessly together as one force by developing a Nordic concept for joint air operations based on already known NATO methodology," a [statement](#) published by the Danish defense ministry read.

This declaration of intent singled out four areas of action to pursue deeper collaboration in, including integrated command and control with combined planning and execution, flexible placement of air forces, common airspace monitoring, as well as combined training and exercises.

"The sum of these efforts will enable a holistic approach to air forces in the Nordic countries," the Danish ministerial statement continued, adding that "the Nordic Response and Arctic Challenge Exercise will be used as milestones for the joint efforts."

Notably, this Nordic joint fighter fleet would enjoy operational, strategic, security as well as deterrence advantages. Such a partnership would imply that even if Sweden and Finland would not be admitted to NATO for another few months, all four Nordic participants would be obliged to take up arms in the field of air defense should any one of them face any threat or assault.

"This is an important step towards strengthening our common security," Finland's air force commander Brigadier General Pasi Jokinen said.

In another move to reinforce its security, Sweden also recently urged for stricter EU visa restrictions, citing a rise in asylum fraud.

On March 22, the Swedish presidency of the EU Council made the assertion on asylum fraud in a leaked internal memo, a move that analysts claim reflected the rising clout of the SD party on the Swedish government, which holds the rotating EU Council presidency role until June 2023.

Alluding to a rise in fraudulent asylum claims from countries such as Venezuela, with which the EU has visa arrangements, Sweden requested for the potential suspension of EU-Venezuelan visa arrangements. Under present EU-Venezuelan visa arrangements, Venezuelan citizens may visit the EU



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Schengen Area for 90 days without a visa.

In 2021, the EU received 51,000 asylum applications from Venezuela, Colombia, and Georgia, with an average rejection rate of more than 90 percent. This figure is a considerable rise from previous years, and part of a wider trend of asylum seekers arriving from nations with EU visa agreements.

Besides, the memo suggested enhancing screening on Venezuelan arrivals to the EU and mounting more pressure on Venezuelan authorities to monitor individuals at risk of committing asylum fraud. More than seven million Venezuelans have fled the country since 2015, due to dire economic conditions under the country's dictatorial socialist government.

Also, under Swedish leadership, the EU Council broached capitalizing on EU trade deals with the developing world to curtail migration numbers. Called the General Scheme of Preferences (GSP), the EU trade agreement gives preferential tariffs to developing countries on exports into Europe, provided that those countries adhere to human-rights statutes and deport their citizens who are illegally in Europe.

This new approach towards migrants can be juxtaposed with the country's previous policy on asylum and has markedly changed since the Swedish Democrats agreed to back the new Swedish government in October 2022 after pledges to tighten border security.

Similarly, another memo disclosed by the transparency group [Statewatch](#) indicated the Swedish presidency's wish to calibrate wider visa deals to tackle the increase in bogus asylum applicants.

At the moment, Sweden is not the only one heightening border security. Other European nations are also exploring using visa arrangements with third-party countries to regulate illegal migration flows, such as Italy's recent negotiations with regional governments in North Africa.



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