DISCUSSION PAPER



Türkiye-NATO Relations: Time to Harmonise Perspectives on Terrorism

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Introduction

Established in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) proved the most durable security alliance that prevented the possibility of a third world war for more than seven decades. As a significant actor geopolitically, Türkiye became a member of the alliance in 1952. Contrary to expectations, NATO's importance did not dwindle after the end of the Cold War. The alliance managed to reformulate its role and strategy. Subsequently, the alliance witnessed the fourth and fifth rounds of enlargement in 1999 and 2004, in which ten new members joined the alliance. These moves aimed at integrating the previous USSR satellites into its "protective umbrella".

With the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War on February 20, 2022, two Nordic countries, Finland and Sweden, applied for a fast-track NATO membership. Finland has had significant national security concerns because of its 1340 km border with Russia. Meanwhile, Nordic countries have seen their geostrategic importance multiplied given the rising threats from Russia. Such a renewed relevance played a big role in boosting their NATO membership bid among most members. However, Hungary and Türkiye opposed these applications. Hungary's Viktor Orbán stated that the Hungarian Parliament would ratify the membership protocols soon. Ankara is supportive in principle but has long-standing legitimate demands for its national security that are yet to be met by Finland and Sweden.

The trilateral memorandum signed between Türkiye, Finland, and Sweden during the NATO Madrid Summit in June 2022 was a significant step towards reconciling views around terrorist actors, such as PKK/YPG/PYD and FETO. The memorandum indicates that the three signatories support commitments in areas such as information and intelligence sharing, removal of arms embargoes and legal constraints. However, recent developments have shown that there is still a long way to go. This paper examines Türkiye-NATO relations, focusing on the Nordic NATO membership bids.



Türkiye, Sweden, Finland sign memorandum on Nordic countries' NATO bids. (Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

A New Enlargement: Finland and Sweden at NATO's Door

The significance of NATO as a security umbrella for Europe has exponentially increased since the war in Ukraine started. The later affected drastically national security calculations of all European countries. The atmosphere of collective solidarity that has manifested itself with large-scale sanctions against Russia became a unifying factor. However, this unity is now tested with the bid of Finland and Sweden.

Discussions regarding NATO membership routinely took place since the mid-1990s. More applicants emerged following the 2008 Russia-Georgian War and the 2014 Russia's Crimea annexation. Although Nordic countries are traditionally known for their non-alignment and neutrality, the perceived Russian threat compelled them to apply to become a NATO member and benefit from Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

The latter stipulates:

"The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

When joining NATO, public opinion and popular will are especially important for Finland and Sweden. Moscow has frequently instrumentalised public opinion in the Russia-Ukraine War as justification for separatism and following intervention in Donetsk and Luhansk. Finland and Sweden made sure to obtain popular legitimacy for such a critical matter. Polls showed that the public opinion in these countries is very favourable for NATO stances on international security issues:

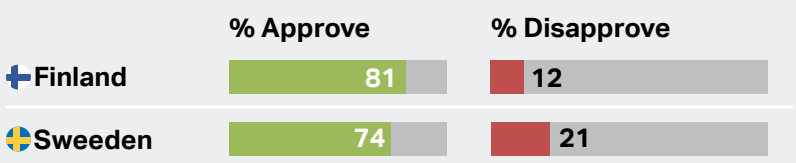
It was also thought that a prospective Northern enlargement would significantly increase the cooperation and solidarity between NATO and the European Union, of which Finland and Sweden are members (Domisse, 2016). Also, Finland and Sweden are currently part of a regional defence alliance called Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO). Nevertheless, this organisation is limited to defence and does not commit to collective security the same way NATO does.

Finland and Sweden submitted their official letters of application to join NATO in May 2022 and were invited to join the alliance at the Madrid Summit in June. After the accession talks were finished, the protocols for both countries were signed in July. The next step was for All Allies to approve as per their national regulations. Only two members, Hungary and Türkiye, did not ratify the protocols. In November, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated that parliamentary ratification for Finland and Sweden would be provided on January 2023 when Hungarian Parliament officially starts the new parliamentary session. Ankara was supportive in principle but has long-standing legitimate demands for its national security that are yet to be met by Finland and Sweden.

Since then, there have been back and forth negotiations between Ankara and Nordic countries, but the latter's efforts remained insufficient to satisfy Türkiye's requests in the fight against terrorism.

Finns' and Swedes' Views of NATO Leadership

Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the leadership of NATO?



Data collected in 2022

Source: GALLUP

Sharing security concerns as a prerequisite for becoming allies

Ankara's position regarding Nordic bids for NATO membership can be seen as a two-fold strategy: complementary and conditional. On the one hand, as the post-Cold War enlargement quests show, Türkiye has always been a staunch proponent of NATO's open-door policy to promote security and peace. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that Türkiye would be an unconditional supporter of any applicant. At this point, Ankara emphasises the necessity for all members of the alliance to display a supportive attitude towards a member fighting terrorism. "Giving all kinds of support to the PKK/YPG terrorist organisation and also asking us for support for NATO membership is, to say the least, inconsistent," Erdoğan said.

In other words, Türkiye's stance on Sweden and Finland's membership negotiations is a form of conditionality that puts counterterrorism first while still not completely disregarding the idea of an open-door policy. Since their application, Finnish and Swedish delegations have come to Ankara for periodic meetings. The NATO summit in Madrid in June 2022 was a positive step forward, underlining the need for concrete steps to be taken in meeting Türkiye's demands.

The ensuing articles tackling this issue are as follows:

Article 4: *"As prospective NATO Allies, Finland and Sweden extend their* ***full support*** *to Türkiye against threats to its national security. To that effect, Finland and Sweden* ***will not provide support to YPG/PYD, and the organisation described as FETO*** *in Türkiye."*

Article 5: *"Finland and Sweden confirm that the* ***PKK is a proscribed terrorist organisation.*** *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.****"*

Article 6: *"Further to this, Finland refers to several recent amendments of its Criminal Code by which new acts have been enacted as punishable terrorist crimes. The latest amendments entered into force on January 1, 2022, by which* ***the scope of participation in the activity of a terrorist group has been widened.*** *At the same time, public incitement related to terrorist offenses was criminalised as a separate offense. Sweden confirms that* ***a new, tougher, Terrorist Offenses Act*** *enters into force on July 1, and that the government is preparing further tightening of counter-terrorism legislation."*

The Trilateral Memorandum signed during the 2022 NATO Summit was an important step. It signalled clearly to the European public opinion that Ankara takes issues related to its national security very seriously. However, the fact that the candidate countries have not taken concrete steps despite more than six months has taken Türkiye's decisive attitude towards NATO membership in a negative direction. The point is whether the candidates seeking to be in a security alliance are truly committed or indifferent to this goal rather than engaged in a series of political negotiations over a matter central to another country's national security.

Counterterrorism: An indivisible unit

The issue of the fight against terrorism did not just come out of the blue with Finland and Sweden's bids. The necessity of taking a common stance against terrorist groups should not be understood as a demand specific to Türkiye. Although Ankara voiced its national security interests, there are two important points when the issue is examined from a broader perspective.

First, Türkiye's stance is vital in shaping global public opinion in the fight against terrorism. The Turkish foreign policy aims to maintain a proactive pattern that points to the duplicities linked to the fight against terrorism globally. Undoubtedly, tensions stemming from the American support for the YPG/PYD is one of the key reasons that made US-Turkish relations go through a roller coaster. Ankara went ahead and cleared its borders from terror threats, carrying out military operations against terrorist groups in Northern Syria in recent years (Kasapoğlu & Ülgen, 2018). These operations include Operation Euphrates Shield (2016-17), Operation Olive Branch (2018), and Operation Peace Spring (2019). Such a proactive stance drew Washington's ire because of its backing for the YPG/PYD.

The Turkish leadership aims to send a message to all, namely that using terrorist groups as proxies, is neither legal nor ethical. Thus, Ankara's stance on the Nordic membership application is a call to all international actors that the key to achieving constructive diplomatic relations with Türkiye is to cut support to terrorist groups that threaten Ankara.

Secondly, the issue of counterterrorism should be prioritised within the framework of NATO. Despite Russia being cited as the greatest threat in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept, the document still characterised terrorism as the "most direct asymmetric threat," which indicates that the fight against terror is still significant for the North Atlantic alliance (Keyman, 2022).

However, whether the issue is supported by concrete commitments or would remain a statement on paper is open to debate. Although the nature of the concept of terrorism has remained constant over time, namely by harming state institutions and civilian populations, its forms have evolved. The generally accepted definition of terrorism revolves around the use of violence to provoke a state of terror or fear, mostly to achieve political or non-political targets. Therefore, the nature of terrorism is simply about violence. On the other hand, features of terrorism have changed extensively. Hijacks, suicide bombings, attacks on public transportation, cyber-attacks targeting private or official datasets and information systems, and the use of biochemical weapons can be considered different forms of terrorism. A genuine perspective that should be developed and implemented by NATO is, therefore, expected to take these "ever-changing" features into account. NATO as a steadfast security alliance should be more explicit on this subject (Gorka & Lindley-French, 2010).

The evolution in thought that occurred after 9/11 makes it possible to distinguish between old terrorism and new terrorism in terms of form and structure. Compared to the old terrorism, which consists primarily of conventional hierarchical structures, the new terrorism has enabled individual actions that can be shaped through various ideological motivations (Sabir, 2014). Conceptions of old terrorism were primarily about the hierarchical structures and planned, systematic attacks mainly on state actors. However, the new face of terrorist threats expanded its scope and methods without necessarily being characterised by strict hierarchical entities. Also, terrorist groups do not operate as isolated structures but communicate with each other. Phillips (2014) argues that cooperation among terrorist groups can also increase their longevity and survival.

Thus, the rise of new terrorism has amplified the security threat and has ultimately resulted in the proliferation of terrorist organisations, terrorist attacks, and deaths resulting from terrorism on a global scale. According to data from the Global Terrorism Database, the number of terrorist attacks worldwide has fluctuated over the past two decades, with a general upward trend until 2014. Hence, terrorism must remain a priority on the global agenda.

When analysing PKK/YPG within the context of "old" and "new" terrorism, several key observations can be made. Firstly, this terrorist group has been able to blend over time a Marxist-Leninist ideology with ethnic separatism and adapt these ideological elements to new realities and ideological debates. They have also spread violence and fear by creating regional structures and expanding their geographical influence. Additionally, as reported in the Europol 2022 report, they have been found to generate financial support through numerous NGOs in Europe, showing the ability of new terrorism to generate resources for funding. Therefore, PKK/YPG differs from the "old" terrorism concept in their ability to use ideological propaganda via social media and proxy civic society initiatives to engender more sophisticated forms of financial support instead



70th anniversary of Türkiye's membership in NATO. (Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

of the conventional methods, such as direct extortion of the civilian population.

Another important point to be underlined in the context of counterterrorism and NATO is that the North Atlantic alliance should strengthen the element of trust among its members against such volatile and "fugitive" acts of terrorism in the 21st century (Sjursen, 2004). It is vital that a security bloc, which can keep up with the new dynamism and multipolarity of the post-Cold War international system, shows the same success in the fight against terrorism for the sake of its stability. Otherwise, there is no point of being part of a security alliance if one's security concerns are not shared by the rest.

NATO's policies need to be comprehensive and proactive in the fight against terrorism. It is essential to critically consider each step of the NATO anti-terrorism strategy, which consists primarily of three points: awareness, capabilities, and engagement. For the first part, as a staunch security alliance, NATO should empower its ability to share intelligence among its members. To make all members perfectly informed about one terrorist organisation and its affiliates that pose serious threats, it is vital to strengthen mutual trust among the allies and report acts of terrorism harming civilians. Therefore, the trust factor is a prerequisite for promoting awareness.

The second aspect of NATO's counter-terrorism strategy, capabilities, is related to the degree to which all allies can cooperate for training and military exercises. In that regard, it should be underlined that NATO's strategic approach should prioritise intra-alliance cooperation in counterterrorism instead of a local-level strategy of assisting regional powers outside the alliance. Capabilities can be best empowered when joint training and military operations are carried out mainly by the allies. At that point, for example, NATO has recently provided training to the Jordan Armed Forces to enhance their ability to implement a comprehensive strategy for countering terrorism across various government agencies.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, it becomes more complicated if allies have divergent regional priorities or if they fall into the problem of short-termism. In the short term, allies may attach secondary importance to a matter specific to another ally's national priority. At that point, it is necessary to recall the "spillover effect" terrorism can create for different geographies. Unless terrorism, regardless of its origins, is taken as one of the primary items of the agenda, its disastrous effects will ultimately exceed the boundaries of a certain region.

Also, terrorism has a considerable potential to act as a multiplier. Its disastrous impacts can easily spill over to other areas, such as trade and tourism. Take, for example, NATO's Counter-piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off the Horn of Africa started in 2009. Piracy activities in this region were not taken only as a matter specific to Somalia, but it was also perceived as a serious threat to the maritime trade activities of many countries. So, enhancing capabilities can be best achieved if the allies are gathered if the relationship between terrorism and other areas is underlined.

The last point on which NATO's strategy focuses is engagement. For this, NATO aims to develop constructive dialogue channels with the allies and empower partnerships with international actors. Local concerns and national priorities should be given more attention to promoting engagement. In other words, NATO's focus should be based on a "cautious optimism" that does not disregard the fact that local partners may have some complicated relationships with terror groups or their affiliates.



Violent clashes in Paris with supporters of PKK. (Ameer Alhalbi - Anadolu Agency)

From Kandil to Europe: PKK as a Trojan Horse

At the centre of Ankara's concerns about national security is Finland and Sweden's indifference and even support for the persons and organisations with close links to the terrorist organisation PKK and its affiliates, as well as the FETO terrorist organisation. PKK and its offshoots, the YPG/PYD, have existed in various European countries for some time. After the 1980 Military Coup, the PKK ordered its terror operative to settle in Europe to find financing and disseminate ideological propaganda (Özcan, 1999; Yurt & Süleymanoğlu, 2022). PKK senior figures travelled to various European countries in the 1980s as per the terrorist leader Abdullah Öcalan's orders, establishing various associations there. These people, who claimed political asylum by presenting themselves as victims, engineered complex pro-terror networks in Europe. These structures often took the shape of civil society organisations. In the case of Nordic countries, they became the "Trojan horses" that benefited extensively from their lax new environment.

Sweden and Finland also serve as hubs for the terrorist organisation PKK. As the two countries started considering Ankara's demands, the PKK supporters' discomfort grew in intensity. A few weeks ago, several acts of violence were carried out by supporters of the terrorist organisation PKK in response to a racist attack in Paris, France, which resulted in the deaths of 3 individuals. As a result of these incidents, dozens of police officers were injured, and 11 individuals were arrested. The person responsible was previously charged for racist attacks and the case remains open. However, somehow the PKK supporters pretend it is the work of Ankara, claiming to be the victims.

Recently, supporters of the PKK/YPG terrorist group in Sweden gathered in provocation of Türkiye. They congregated in front of Stockholm's historic City Hall, hung a puppet resembling Erdogan by its feet on a pole in front of the building and shared a video of this on social media.

These examples, and many more, are a thorn in the sides of constructive relations between allies. They represent a case in point for countries that fail to acknowledge Ankara's perspective in the fight against terrorist organisations.



PKK/YPG supporters in Sweden. (Atila Altuntaş - Anadolu Agency)

Conclusion

Discussions on terrorism and the North Atlantic security alliance have resurfaced after the Nordic bids for NATO. While the Trilateral Memorandum in June 2022 has become a cornerstone in achieving a broader consensus on the destructive face of terrorism, there is still a long way to go. The functioning and forms of action of terrorist groups have undergone serious changes in the 21st century, and new forms of terrorism have emerged. Therefore, predicting the future of terrorism has become increasingly complex, revealing the need for collective action. This action requires that both NATO allies and other countries revise their counter-terrorism strategies. The 9/11-centric strategy of counterterrorism is significantly losing its lustre. The international community should prioritise terrorism as the primary threat to global peace and security and understand its far-reaching consequences that go well beyond the borders of nation-states. At that point, Ankara's demands are precise and clear. The process of NATO membership should take the idea that security alliances must be based on mutual trust and a determined course of action against terrorism at the centre. Depending on the demonstrated ability to show concrete cooperation in the fight against terrorism, both Finland and Sweden will possibly become a part of NATO's security umbrella, and NATO's door will remain open for other candidates that are committed to pursuing the same will in the future.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. (Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

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