



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 26, 2023

## Finland Indicates It May Consider NATO Entry Without Sweden

SINGAPORE — For the first time, Finland floated the possibility of distancing its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) application from that of Sweden, after its neighbor faced fresh opposition from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The notion broached by Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto, if it materializes, would signal a major shift in Finnish policy since the Nordic nations jointly applied to join NATO in May 2022.

Bombarded with persistent protests from Turkey — mainly to what the Muslim country regards as an insufficient suppression of Kurds in Sweden — the two Nordic countries had up to this week maintained that their applications be together.

Analysts remain uncertain as to how Finland will modify its approach following Haavisto's remarks. The status still remains for both countries to enter NATO concurrently, Haavisto told reporters in Helsinki on Tuesday (Jan. 24), downplaying his tone from prior comments, when he had hinted that Finland may need to prepare entering NATO solo.

"A joint path to NATO is still possible," he said, elaborating that "somewhere in the back of our minds we are considering options in case a country were to face permanent resistance."

Turkey and Hungary are the only two of NATO's 30 members who have not ratified the applications from the two Nordic countries.

Erdogan on Monday rejected Sweden's bid after a far-right activist burned the Koran in Stockholm. U.S. officials responded by reinforcing their backing for NATO's expansion.

Erdogan's stance increased doubt regarding the idea of Sweden joining NATO, since the Turkish leader has not indicated any possible shift in position thus far. With an election poised to be held in May, the Turkish leader is hoping to boost support from religious conservatives.

In light of this, Finland's President Sauli Niinisto tried to mitigate tensions. Speaking to reporters in Kyiv, he said to take things "calmly" and added that "undoubtedly it seems to be the case that we have to wait for the elections in Turkey to take place."

Although Turkey had suggested ratifying Finland's application separately at the start of the process, both Nordic countries as well as NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg rejected the idea, according to two Turkish officials who refused to be named.

Turkey is mostly pleased with Helsinki's cooperation with Ankara, which will be shown in Turkey's decision, they said, without indicating whether the Turkish government would support ratifying



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Finland's bid for membership when requested to do so.

If Finland were to join NATO without Sweden, a huge territory in its rear would fall outside of the alliance. This situation could potentially risk supply routes and NATO's ability to ensure Article 5 security guarantees, Haavisto said. Also, some military cooperation between the two countries that has developed over the years would have to be scaled down.

"There is no 'plan B' to get it together," Haavisto said. "That path hasn't been considered possible, and that's in part to do with how to plan our defenses. These Nordic defenses are very difficult to organize, looking at our long eastern border and considering the worst-case scenarios, and Sweden has a key role to play in how we organize these defenses."

Hungary has announced that it plans to process the applications at the opening of parliament next month, though its timelines have changed in the past. A green light by Budapest would leave Turkey as the sole country to ratify the expansion, which NATO diplomats had hoped to settle prior to the group's summit in Vilnius in July.

Although Turkey agreed in principle last summer to NATO allies, including the U.S., inviting Sweden and Finland to join the alliance, it insisted that Sweden give concessions, such as a wider clampdown on Kurdish groups that the country deems as terrorist groups and the extradition of suspects.

Finland and Sweden both fulfill all NATO prerequisites and should be permitted to join, Haavisto said, stating that the delay "benefits the bloc's opponents."

That being said, Erdogan's nationalist ally, Devlet Bahçeli, said Turkey is not content even following the Swedish government's denouncing the burning of the Koran, which he said was a "grave attack against our religious and spiritual sensitivities." "Condemning it is not enough," Bahçeli said.

Sweden has insisted that it had adhered to an agreement formed at NATO's June summit in Madrid last year, which permitted the progress of the group's expansion.

"Protesters are toying with the security of Finland and Sweden in the current situation with actions that are clearly intended to provoke Turkey," Finland's Haavisto said. "This has become an obvious hindrance to the process."

Finland guards a border with Russia that is around 1,300 kilometers (800 miles) long, and has a track record of wars with its eastern neighbor. The country hopes to join NATO on the pretext of preventing any future wars, and maintains a strong military to defend itself.

Haavisto stated that a pause of a few weeks was necessary in Finland and Sweden's talks with Turkey on their NATO application.

"A time-out is needed before we return to the three-way talks and see where we are when the dust has settled after the current situation, so no conclusions should be drawn yet," Haavisto told Reuters. "I think there will be a break for a couple of weeks."

"No other national security question is more important than that we, together with Finland, quickly become members of NATO," Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson told reporters, urging calm and restraint after the weekend's protests. He said he hopes to restart talks with Turkey as soon as possible, and added that there was no contradiction between maintaining the right to freedom of speech in Sweden and proceeding with the process of joining NATO.

Sweden and Finland require the backing of all incumbent NATO states to move forward in their



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application, which was submitted following the Ukraine-Russia crisis that broke out in February last year.



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