

Erdogan Still Firmly in NATO Bloc Despite Blackmailing EU

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan urged the European Union on July 9 to open the doors for his country to join the bloc if they want to secure support for Sweden's accession to NATO. His blackmailing of the EU, which ultimately produced results, comes only days after he controversially broke an agreement with Moscow by releasing neo-Nazi Azov Battalion members under Turkey's custody to Ukraine.

"Turkey has been waiting at the door of the European Union for over 50 years now, and almost all of the NATO member countries are now members of the European Union. I am making this call to these countries that have kept Turkey waiting at the gates of the European Union for more than 50 years," Erdogan said. "First, open the way to Turkey's membership of the European Union, and then we will open it for Sweden, just as we had opened it for Finland."

Turkey has been an EU member candidate since 1999. Since 2016, negotiations on a visa-free regime between Turkey and the EU have been on hold. The country's bid for EU membership has been stalled due to democratic backsliding and an unrelenting occupation of the northern portion of EU-member Cyprus since 1974.

Ultimately, Erdogan backflipped just mere hours after issuing his blackmail.

"I'm glad to announce ... that President Erdogan has agreed to forward the accession protocol for Sweden to the grand national assembly as soon as possible, and work closely with the assembly to ensure ratification," said NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg on the eve of the alliance summit in Vilnius, which will be held on July 11-12.

Finland and Sweden applied to join the bloc in May 2022. Finland gained its membership on

April 4, 2023, while the Swedes await approval from Hungary and Turkey. As Turkey will never surrender its occupation of northern Cyprus, its EU membership will be forever stalled, making Erdogan's ultimatum either a desperate action or a calculated manoeuvre to advance other interests.

Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billström told public broadcaster SVT that he expects Turkey will eventually signal that it will let Sweden join the alliance, though he could not say whether that would happen at the NATO summit in the Lithuanian capital. Sweden's top diplomat said he expects Hungary, which also has not ratified Sweden's accession, to do so before Turkey.

Turkey and Hungary remain the only NATO members still standing in the way of Sweden becoming the 32nd member of the US-led bloc, with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban strongly signalling he will follow Erdogan's lead and approve Sweden's membership only if Turkey does the same.

Now that Erdogan has reportedly unblocked Sweden's path, the question is what was offered to appease the Turkish leader. Presumably, Erdogan would have only unblocked the accession process with the promise of receiving F-16 fighter jets, advancing EU membership talks without altering domestic oppression and ethnic cleansing abroad, or securing Western funding as the Turkish economy continues to tank with Gulf money all dried up.

The NATO summit will be dominated by how the alliance will see its future relationship with Kiev amid endless efforts by President Volodymyr Zelensky for Ukraine to become a member and a signatory to the mutual defence pact. Evidently, though, Sweden's situation will also be discussed since Turkey is the main hindrance to their accession.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, for his part, joined a chorus of other European leaders and officials who said Sweden's NATO membership should not be tied to Ankara's stalled EU membership bid.

"Sweden meets all the requirements for NATO membership. The other question is one that is not connected with it. And that is why I do not think it should be seen as a connected issue," the German chancellor said.

Stoltenberg also expressed before announcing Erdogan's unblocking that the two issues have nothing to do with one another, reminding that while he supports Ankara's bid for EU membership, it was not one of the conditions in the agreement signed by Turkey, Sweden, and Finland in 2022 at the NATO summit in Madrid.

Despite Erdogan initially adding another condition to Sweden's accession, it is not a sign that Turkey has gone rogue within NATO, but rather it is the Turkish president blackmailing the alliance and EU to gain advantages for his country - what they are specifically since EU membership is not realistic, remains to be seen.

Erdogan broke a deal he had with Moscow by releasing on July 8, only days before the NATO summit, five Ukrainian Azov Battalion officers, who returned to Ukraine on a presidential plane. The Azov Battalion militants had been prisoners since the battle of Azovstal following the Russian liberation of the port city of Mariupol. Erdogan had no obvious reason for breaking the deal, meaning that he will now want something at the NATO summit for doing this.

Although it may appear that Erdogan has gone rogue by attaching an impossible condition for Sweden to become a NATO member, he is just leveraging to gain some advantage for Turkey. The release of the Azov Battalion members for seemingly no good reason demonstrates that Turkey is still firmly within the NATO bloc.

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