

Turkish President Erdogan gives go-ahead for Sweden's NATO membership

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan agreed late Monday evening to support Sweden's NATO membership bid, clearing the way for Stockholm to become the US-led aggressive military alliance's 32nd member. The announcement came on the eve of NATO's Vilnius summit, where a major escalation of the war on Russia will be discussed.

In a tweet announcing Erdoğan's agreement, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg wrote, "This is an historic step which makes all NATO allies stronger & safer."

Contrary to this absurd claim, the accession of both Finland and Sweden to NATO will further expand a northern front in the US/NATO war aimed at subjugating Russia to the status of a semi-colony and plundering its natural resources. The finalisation of Finland's membership in April more than doubled NATO's land border with Russia, while Sweden's integration means that Russia will be surrounded by NATO members in the Baltic Sea. Plans are already well advanced within the Nordic countries' militaries to transform the region into a common area of operations, including through the creation of a joint air force and the granting of unhindered access for US troops in the region.

Erdoğan's approval of Sweden's NATO membership followed several days of intensive discussions as US imperialism pushed for the issue to be settled prior to the beginning of the Vilnius summit. Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson visited US President Joseph Biden at the White House last Wednesday. Biden told Kristersson he was "anxiously looking forward" to Sweden's NATO membership.

On a phone call with President Biden on Sunday, Erdoğan told Biden that he still did not approve of Sweden's membership. A Turkish press release said, "Erdoğan stated that Sweden has taken some steps in the right direction by making changes in the antiterrorism

legislation," but Sweden allowing Kurdish groups to "hold demonstrations freely praising terrorism nullify those steps."

Earlier Monday, Erdoğan gave a press conference in which he called for his government's approval of Sweden's NATO membership to be conditional on the restarting of talks for Turkish admission into the European Union. After this proposal was roundly rejected by leading European politicians, including German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and Erdoğan held a one-on-one meeting with Kristersson, an agreement was finally brokered at a final meeting chaired by Stoltenberg.

The decisive role in forcing an agreement was undoubtedly played by Washington. The US reportedly threatened to withhold its prized F-16 fighter jets from Turkey if Ankara did not let Sweden into NATO.

Erdoğan's announcement followed a meeting in Istanbul over the weekend with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Erdoğan declared at a joint press conference that Ukraine "deserves" NATO membership. Together with his acceptance of Sweden's NATO membership, this statement by Erdoğan underscores that the Turkish bourgeoisie's attempt to pursue a policy of balancing between the imperialist powers on the one hand and Russia on the other due to strong economic ties with both sides is proving ever-more untenable.

To placate Ankara, Sweden has lifted its arms embargo on Turkey, which it imposed after Turkey began its military campaign against the Kurdish nationalist People's Protection Units (YPG) in 2019. Sweden has also passed a new sweeping antiterrorism law which will allow for the quick extradition of terror suspects to Turkey and other countries. In April, a series of antiterrorism raids were conducted in Sweden against Islamist extremists. However, multiple Quran burnings in Sweden aggravated frictions between the two countries.

The determination on the part of Washington and its

European imperialist allies to bring Sweden into NATO is bound up with the country's strategic location and military capabilities, as well as the significance of the broader Nordic and Arctic regions in the war on Russia. Stockholm sits on the Baltic Sea, home to water traffic and pipelines on Russia's doorstep. The island of Gotland was a major military base during the Cold War due to its strategic location in the Baltic just over 300 kilometers northwest of the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. Sweden also extends far into the Arctic Circle, an area of increasing tension, especially as new natural resources are discovered there.

The US has already concluded a defence cooperation agreement with Norway that gives military forces far-reaching latitude to operate without restriction in "agreed areas" and places troops operating in the country under US jurisdiction, including when they are off-duty. Similar agreements are being negotiated with Finland and Sweden. The Nordic defence chiefs have also drawn up a major plan for the rapid transportation of NATO troops and their supply through several ports on the west coast of the Nordic countries, from Esbjerg in Denmark, to Gothenburg in Sweden, and Trondheim and Tromsø in Norway.

The possibility that the NATO powers could seize on any number of pretexts to undertake a major military escalation in the Nordic region is made all the more likely given the deepening crisis facing the far-right regime in Kiev. The war in Ukraine has killed hundreds of thousands of soldiers, including an estimated 200,000 Ukrainians alone. Ukraine is scouring the country for recruits, imprisoning those who do not comply. The counteroffensive launched this summer has largely failed, and the war is only made possible due to the seemingly limitless flow of billions of dollars of advanced weaponry into the country from the imperialist powers.

Sweden's emergence as a frontline state in NATO's war on Russia revives the old lines of conflict that once divided northern Europe. Sweden fought a series of wars with the Russian Empire during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, culminating in the 1808-09 Finnish War as part of the Napoleonic Wars. This conflict saw Sweden lose control of Finland, which became a grand duchy within the Tsarist Empire.

Sweden subsequently pursued a policy of neutrality until its participation in NATO's neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan. But the country has been deeply integrated with US imperialism for the entire postwar era. Sweden worked closely during the Cold War with the

United States intelligence agencies, specifically for its spying operations on Moscow.

Historically, Swedish companies are major arms producers, having invented things like dynamite and the hand-held rocket launcher. Sweden, despite being a small country of 10 million people, has sent billions of dollars in military equipment to Ukraine already, including its advanced Archer mobile artillery system. It plans to increase its military budget by 64 percent between 2022 and 2028 as well as double the number of people in its yearly military draft from the current level of 10,000.

Swedish Gotland-class submarines are considered some of the most advanced non-nuclear submarines in the world, having the ability to stay submerged for longer. The Swedish Navy also has extensive experience in the Baltic Sea, a notoriously tricky body of water, filled with shallow archipelagos along the coastal regions. This region would become an area of intense conflict if open war breaks out with Russia.

In the exchange between Biden and Kristersson at the White House last week, Kristersson indicated this contribution the country would bring to NATO. He stated, "We do seek common protection [under NATO], but we also do think that we have things to contribute, to be a security provider for the whole of NATO."

The cost of Sweden's massive military build-up and the transformation of the region into a front in the war with Russia will be borne by working people. Sweden confronts a massive inflation crisis driven, in part, by the war. Inequality in the country is at its highest levels since records began in the 1970s. Sweden is currently the only country in Europe in recession, albeit a light one. A procession of right-wing governments both from Sweden's nominally left Social Democratic Party, as well as its traditional right-wing parties, have overseen decades of cuts to education and health care that have decimated the country's once much-vaunted public services and social programmes.



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