



NATO: Finland and Sweden Seek Membership

June 10, 2022

On May 18, 2022, [Finland and Sweden applied](#) to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO; see [Figure 1](#)). Prompted by growing security concerns about Russia and its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, [Finland's](#) and [Sweden's decisions](#) mark a [historic shift](#) for these traditionally militarily nonaligned countries. The [Biden Administration](#) and many [Members of Congress](#) have responded positively to the prospect of Finland and Sweden joining NATO, arguing that the addition of these two [mature democracies](#) with [advanced militaries](#) will [enhance security](#) in the Baltic Sea region and the broader Euro-Atlantic area. NATO enlargement must be approved by all 30 current NATO members; U.S. approval requires Senate advice and consent.

Finland and Sweden's NATO Aspirations

Russia's 2022 war against Ukraine has [upended decades](#) of [Finnish](#) and [Swedish](#) security policy that sought to balance political, economic, and cultural ties to the West and relations with Russia. After the Cold War, Finland and Sweden joined the European Union (EU) and established close partnerships with NATO. Both [Finland](#) and [Sweden](#) have participated in numerous NATO operations and have [capable](#) military forces that are well integrated and interoperable with those of the alliance. Public support for NATO accession—and the [added security](#) of NATO's "Article 5" mutual defense clause—has skyrocketed in both countries since Russia's invasion of Ukraine; recent polls indicate support at [76% in Finland](#) and [58% in Sweden](#).

[Finnish](#) and [Swedish officials](#) assert that their countries would be "security providers," enhancing NATO capabilities and [strengthening](#) the alliance's defense posture in the [Baltic region](#) in particular. As called for by NATO, [Finland already spends around 2%](#) of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, and [Sweden has committed](#) to increasing its defense spending to meet the 2% goal "as soon as possible."

[Some analysts express concern](#) that Finland and Sweden's accession could provoke Russia and question NATO's ability to defend [Finland's 830-mile border with Russia](#) (which would double NATO's overall borders with Russia). [Finnish officials](#) contend that Finland has long defended its own borders and would continue to do so as a NATO member. [Finland](#) and [Sweden](#) also have strong traditions of societal resilience and substantial experience dealing with Russian disinformation efforts, cyberattacks, and hybrid threats.

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11949

Russia's Reaction

Russia has [long opposed](#) closer integration between NATO and Finland and Sweden. Over much of the past decade, [Russia](#) has used aggressive displays of military force (via exercises and territorial air and sea incursions) to signal its displeasure with enhanced cooperation between Finland and Sweden and NATO. Immediately prior to Finland's and Sweden's NATO applications, [Russia's Foreign Ministry stated](#), "Russia will be forced to take retaliatory steps, both of a military-technical and other nature, in order to neutralize the threats to its national security that arise from this." Subsequently, however, Russia has publicly played down the situation. [Russian President Vladimir Putin stated](#) that Finnish and Swedish accession pose "no direct threat for Russia" but emphasized that "expanding military infrastructure" could be viewed as a threat and could "provoke a response." Analysts note that Russian losses in Ukraine may [undercut the credibility](#) of a potential Russian military response to Finland's and Sweden's NATO accession.

NATO's Accession Process and Current Status

NATO allies must agree, by consensus, to accept Finland and Sweden as members. Since NATO's creation in 1949, the alliance has grown from 12 founding members to today's 30 members through eight rounds of enlargement. The [next main step](#) after application is for allied governments to sign accession protocols to the North Atlantic Treaty. NATO members then ratify the amended treaty according to national procedures, which vary by country.

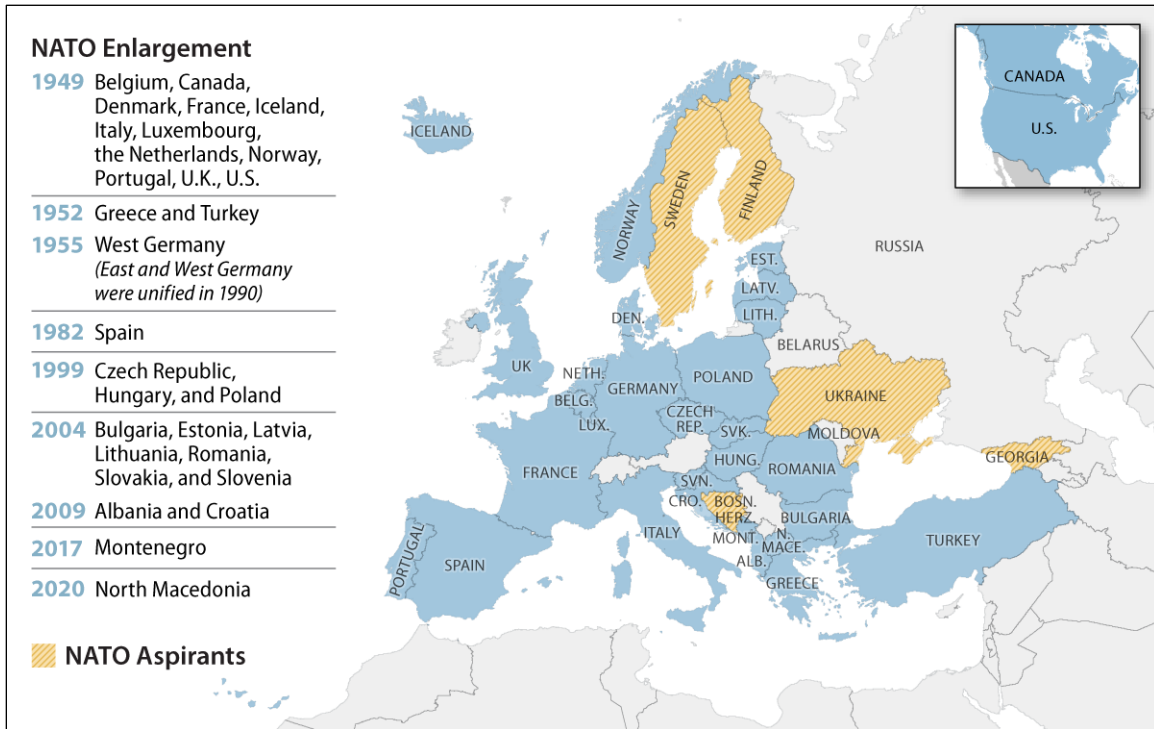
[NATO's Secretary General](#) and nearly all allies have [welcomed](#) Finland's and Sweden's applications, and many expect the ratification processes could be relatively quick (there is no set time frame, but for [recent enlargements](#) the process has taken about [13 months](#)). [Turkey](#), however, has [voiced reservations](#). Turkey views Sweden, and to a lesser extent Finland, as [sympathetic](#) to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (or PKK, a U.S.- and EU-designated terrorist organization). Turkey also objects to both countries' [participation in an EU-coordinated suspension of arms sales to Turkey](#) since 2019 in response to Turkey's military operations in Syria against [the YPG](#) (or People's Protection Units), a PKK-linked group and partner in the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL). Observers underscore [broader Turkish concerns](#) about U.S. support for the YPG and U.S. sanctions on Turkey in response to its 2019 acquisition of a Russian S-400 surface-to-air defense system. [U.S. and NATO officials](#) express confidence that they will be able to resolve Turkey's concerns, but Turkey's objections [could slow](#) the accession process. (Also see CRS Report R44000, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief*.)

Role of Congress and U.S. Policy

In the United States, once accession protocols are signed, the Administration sends them to the Senate for its advice and consent. The treaty would be referred first to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, which then would report it to the Senate, where it requires a vote of two-thirds of Senators present for passage. If the Senate were to pass a resolution of ratification, the resolution would be transmitted to the President, who would decide whether to enter the treaty on behalf of the United States. (Also see CRS Report 98-384, *Senate Consideration of Treaties*.)

[President Biden](#) robustly supports Finland's and Sweden's NATO bids and has committed to help "deter and confront any aggression" during the [period before](#) accession. U.S. officials have not provided specifics on U.S. security assurances, but they may include an [increased U.S. military presence](#) and [more joint training exercises](#). Resolutions of support for Finland's and Sweden's NATO accession have been introduced in both the House (H.Res. 1130) and the Senate (S.Res. 646).

Figure I. NATO Countries and Aspirants



Source: CRS Graphics. Map updated June 2022.

Notes: In addition to Finland and Sweden, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine aspire to NATO membership. In 2008, NATO allies agreed that Georgia and Ukraine would one day become NATO members; Bosnia was granted a Membership Action Plan in 2010.

Author Information

Kristin Archick
Specialist in European Affairs

Andrew S. Bowen
Analyst in Russian and European Affairs

Paul Belkin
Analyst in European Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.