



**LUND**  
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**The PKK impasse: Traversing the complex nature of  
Turkish-Swedish relations.**

**Evaluating validity in the Turkish NATO veto: A  
process-tracing analysis on Sweden's PKK connection**

# Abstract

This thesis delves into the complex nature of Swedish-Turkish relations in the context of Sweden's NATO-application, focusing primarily on the presence of the PKK in the bilateral relations. The dynamics of this framework, highlighted by Turkey's veto to the Swedish NATO-application, signifies a trajectory where security is increasingly a prioritized domain in political agendas globally. This research employs the theoretical frameworks of constructivism and rational choice theory to help understand how aspects of identity and rational behavior explains the actions of the involved actors. The thesis takes the form of a case study utilizing a process-tracing method to establish a causal sufficient explanation to the Turkish veto. The thesis asks to what extent the PKK has been present in the relations between Turkey and Sweden and finds that there has been an impactful presence of the PKK in Swedish politics in recent years, lending validity to the Turkish veto. The causal processes of (1) *The Swedish Social Democrats pledges to deepen its collaboration with the PYD*, (2) *The Swedish Inspectorate of Strategic Products revoke license for military exports to Turkey* offer a descriptive explanation to the Turkish veto.

*Key words:* PKK, Turkey, Constructivism, Sweden, Rational Choice, NATO  
Words: 9667

## **Abbreviations and Glossary**

ARGK - Artêşa Rizgariya Gelê Kurdistan (People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan)

CJTF-OIR - Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve

ERNK - Eniye Rizgariye Kurdistan (National Liberation Front of Kurdistan)

EUROPOL - European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation

ISP - Inspektionen För Strategiska Produkter (Inspectorate for Strategic Products)

PKK - Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)

SDF - Syrian Democratic Forces

YPG - Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Defense Unit)

YPJ - Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's protection Unit)

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# 1 Introduction

In the complex realm of international relations, the dynamics at play between nations are shaped by a variety of different factors, ranging from historical legacies to present-day geopolitical shifts. This thesis undertakes an examination of Turkish-Swedish bilateral relations within the context of Sweden's pursuit of becoming a member of the defense alliance NATO. A particular focus will be on a decisive element that ostensibly appears to have impeded the Swedish endeavor to join the defense alliance - the presence of the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK), an organization that is designated as a terrorist organization by numerous countries, including Turkey and The European Union. The PKK has a conflictual history with Turkey and an unequivocal presence on the European continent, not least within the Swedish collective consciousness, where the organization has at times garnered considerable media and political attention. The admission of a country in NATO mandates a unanimous ratification by all its members. Every NATO-member therefore has the power to veto a candidate country, thus blocking its accession. In connection with Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership in May 2022, Turkey decided to veto Sweden's membership referring to its deficient handling of PKK-activity in the country. Turkey's veto has sparked diplomatic tensions in the bilateral relations between Turkey and Sweden, and the disagreement has posed challenges to Sweden in their endeavor as they've been forced to make political concessions. Moreover, the deadlock has demonstrated a divide in views on security and has led to a reevaluation of diplomatic strategies within NATO and its closest allies. In relation to the Swedish membership application, Turkish president Erdogan has repeatedly called out Sweden's weak handling of the PKK. In May 2022, days after the Swedish official application for membership, Turkey issued a statement accusing Sweden of supporting terrorist organizations while urging them to take concrete steps to counteract PKK activities in the country. Given this background, the PKK seems to have emerged as a significant actor in the geopolitical arena, exerting influence over the diplomatic interactions and security policy direction of nation states and intergovernmental organizations.

The ambition with this thesis is to employ a process-tracing methodology to trace, and meticulously analyze two concrete underlying factors that constitute a probable cause for the Turkish decision to veto Sweden's NATO- membership application. These factors are events that will be treated in the analysis section of this thesis. The focus of the analysis will be to scrutinize these instances, where Swedish decision makers, from Turkey's perspective, have indeed expressed support for the PKK. The consequent research puzzle is to examine the validity of the claim and investigate how cases of Swedish support for the PKK has contributed to the Turkish decision to veto Sweden's NATO-application. This thesis shall argue that Swedish decision-makers have occasionally adopted policies and made official statements that could be interpreted as a degree of endorsement of the PKK and its affiliated organizations. These events validate the Turkish decision to block Sweden's NATO-membership referring to its support for the PKK. The analysis of these instances aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complexities of Sweden's foreign policy-involvement in issues surrounding the PKK, thus shedding light on its implications for the bilateral relations with Turkey.

## 1.1 Research context: Relevance and research question(s)

### 1.1.1 Relevance

The significance of this thesis is highlighted by the dynamic nature of contemporary diplomacy, where non-state actors such as the PKK, wield increasingly more influence over international relations. Against the background of PKK's presence in the bilateral relations between Turkey and Sweden, this thesis aims to shed light on the intricacies that are characterizing the relationship during the process of Sweden's pursuit to join NATO.

Furthermore, it is imperative to investigate this inquiry considering the security policy paradigm shift that the Swedish NATO membership application signifies. The Swedish departure from its longstanding tradition of official military non-alignment carries substantial implications for Sweden's geopolitical role and the direction of its security policy. Adding to the relevancy of the investigation is that the Swedish application, and Turkey's veto symbolizes a more extensive global shift, where security is situated at the forefront of the political agenda in an ever-growing international uncertainty.

### 1.1.2 Time frame and demarcations

The analysis will focus on the time frame that started in the mid-2010s, specifically 2014 when the campaign designated to defeat the Islamic State commenced. This event plays a crucial role in how several of the actors involved in the research puzzle have shaped their relationship with each other and cemented their roles in the geopolitical dilemma that is currently unfolding. By delving into events that have influenced the Swedish, as well as Turkish stand on the PKK since. This time frame will provide a broad and impactful context to trace the progress and development of the PKK's presence in Sweden. Here it is argued that the trajectory of the organizations and actors within this time frame will establish a better understanding for the contextual dynamics that have led to the present-day situation, which is crucial for understanding the outcome, ergo Turkey's veto against Swedish membership in NATO. Moreover, this time frame will encapsulate important aspects such as the evolution of PKK activities, shifts in international relation dynamics, and cyclical patterns. These aspects will serve as a foundation to establish a comprehensive understanding of perceptions and responses between Turkey and Sweden with regards to the PKK. In a process tracing analysis, a nuanced understanding is crucial to the historical and contextual factors influencing the outcome.

### 1.1.3 Research question

The aim of this thesis is to answer the following question:

1. *To what extent has the presence of the PKK affected Turkish-Swedish bilateral relations within the context of Sweden's endeavor to join NATO?*

## 1.2 PKK Unveiled: Tensions with Turkey and diasporic connections.

### 1.2.1 Unpacking the PKK: A contextual scrutiny of the PKK in Turkey

The dissatisfaction over inequality, regional underdevelopment and discrimination against Kurds gave rise to a political and intellectual uprising amongst the Kurdish population in Turkey during the 1960s and 70s. The rise of Kurdish national movements during these decades contributed to the politicization and discussion of Kurdish issues in Turkey that included demands for political and economic equality. The 'Kurdish question' in Turkey has constituted a significant element in the Turkish social and political awareness. Jülide Karakoç's article *The Impact of the Kurdish Identity on Turkey's Foreign Policy from the 1980s to 2008* (2010) provides a rigorous account of several episodes where the Kurdish identity has influenced Turkish politics and its foreign policy actions during the eighties and nineties, up until 2008. Karakoç's article offers an insight into how PKK and the Kurdish identity specifically have impacted Turkish political life, providing an identification of potential mechanisms that guide Turkish foreign policy in instances where the PKK is present. The military coup of 1971 and subsequent military rule resulted in suppression of Kurdish activism and political engagement in Turkey. This period led to the inception of several Kurdish left-wing groups, including the PKK. Inspired by other contemporary liberation movements, the PKK was founded upon the ideologies of revolutionary socialism



and Marxist-Leninism, with the ambition to unite the Kurdish population within an independent socialist republic. The organization quickly gained support for its cause and attracted sympathy from large parts of Kurdish regions along with the Kurdish diaspora across Europe (Gunes, 2021).

After the 1980 coup d'état in Turkey that saw even further political suppression, the PKK initiated a more confrontational approach. In 1984, amidst the political turmoil that followed the 1980 coup, the PKK embarked on a guerilla warfare strategy in South-Eastern Turkey where their armed wing ARGK conducted operations targeting Turkish security forces and military targets near the border to Iraq. This marked the commencement of a prolonged and tumultuous conflict that lasted until a ceasefire was declared in 1999 (Gunes, 2021). The extended conflict between the PKK and the Turkish army resulted in tens of thousands of casualties and the displacement of Kurdish populations, fueling additional hostility between Turkish authorities and the PKK. During its armed conflict with Turkey, The PKK increased its popularity and influence and became an influential challenger to Turkish authority in the Kurdish-populated regions. In conjunction with the 1980 coup, the Kurdish matter found its way to the Turkish foreign policy agenda as many Kurds took refuge in neighboring Syria (Karacok, 2010). The situation led to diplomatic tensions between the countries as Turkey demanded extradition of Kurds who they labeled as terrorists, which Syria refused. The PKK has since constituted a determinant agent in Turkish-Syrian bilateral relations (ibid.). After years of conflict between the Turkish army and security forces and the PKK, the leader of the PKK Abdullah Öcalan was captured in 1999. Following Öcalans imprisonment, for a few years, the PKK underwent both organizational and ideological restructuring which saw a decrease in military conflict and the PKK sought to address the Kurdish issue through more democratic and peaceful means (Ibid.). After a ceasefire that lasted until 2004, throughout the 2000s the PKK-Turkey relationship has been plagued by endeavors to find common ground, as well as confrontations between Turkey and the PKK and its associated group (White, 2015). Despite ambitious attempts to secure peace and foster peaceful relations, the conflictual relations between Turkey and the PKK have marked the geopolitical landscape in the region and beyond, and the adversaries have persisted until this day. Kurds have yet to gain political and cultural recognition in Turkey, and their efforts to secure such rights still constitute a conflictual relation between Kurds and the Turkish government.

## 1.2.2 The PKK nexus: A network of affiliation

As previous sections of PKK's background highlights, the organization of PKK has changed throughout its history. What started as an organization with a focus on social reform, based on Marxist ideology in Turkey, is now a network of affiliated organizations with a global reach. PKK's affiliated organizations share similar ideologies, usually concerning Kurdish autonomy and self-governance. Turkey's antagonistic attitude towards the PKK also extends to these organizations, due to methods and motives that Turkey considers illegitimate and threatening to its territorial integrity (Balanche, 2018).

This paragraph will focus on two prominent organizations, that underscores a larger dimension to the question of Kurdish movements both regionally and internationally, whose presence have historically led to tensions and conflicts with Turkey (ibid.). The two organizations that will be presented in this section, and that will serve as a foundation for the analysis later in this study are the *People's Defense Units* (YPG), and the *Democratic Union Party* (PYD). The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) is a left-wing political party, uniting Kurdish people in political opposition in Syria. Established in 2003, as a Syrian branch of the PKK "on the heritage and struggle of Kurdistan national liberation movement" (The democratic Union Party, n.d.), PYD has played an important role as a political force in Kurdish regions of Syria. As an influential regional actor in northern Syria, the PYD has established administrations and security forces in Northern Syria, including the YPG. Throughout the 2010's the groups managed to gain control over large regions in northern Syria, close to the border to Turkey. As a result, an autonomous region has been created, Rojava, a self-governing region that was proclaimed during the civil war in Syria in the early 2010s (International Crisis Group, 2017). In the mid-2010s, the northeastern regions of Syria (including Rojava) became a central battleground for the ravaging of the Islamic State (IS). YPG, as well as their female equivalent YPJ, as an armed force of the PYD became pivotal actors, and played a critical role when they cooperated with the US-led Combined Task Force in its operation (CJTF-OIR) to combat IS. YPG actively engaged in numerous battles against IS in Northern Syria and was renowned for its contributions in fighting the Islamic State in the region (Balanche, 2018). Despite praise and support from US and its allies for its contribution in fighting the Islamic State, Turkey has maintained its stance on YPG and still perceive the organization as a security threat referring to its alleged connections to the PKK. Since YPG and a global coalition fought the Islamic state, Turkey has conducted numerous

military offensives into northern Syria with the aim to push back the YPG and its allies from the border region (Aljazeera, 2019).

### 1.2.3 PKK's European presence: The Swedish chronicle

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, large flows of Kurds migrated from Turkey to Europe. The Kurdish migration to Europe can be explained by various motives, including education and work. However, a more significant reason for the mass migration of Turkish Kurds is the political repression they faced in Turkey. The political turmoil that plagued Turkey during the 1960-1990s led to large migratory flows of Kurds to neighboring countries as well as Western Europe, leading to an establishment of large Kurdish diasporas in countries such as Sweden, Germany, France, and the Netherlands (Baser 2013, p.7). Kurds who migrated to Europe from Turkey had often faced suppression of political, cultural, and ideological expression in Turkey. In liberal states throughout Europe however, the Kurds were able to express their identities freely in the public domain. The removal of these barriers led to the European diasporas becoming more engaged in political organizations, particularly in the aftermath of the 1980 coup in Turkey that saw a deepening of Kurdish identity and political awareness amongst Turkish Kurds in Europe (Soguk, 2008, p.178). After the emergence of the PKK, and the subsequent armed conflict between PKK and Turkey, the divide between Kurds grew larger. These divisions extended to the Turkish and Kurdish populations in Europe. In combination with a sense of societal disenfranchisement and segregation, this led to a breeding ground for extremism in European diasporas, which created opportunities for the PKK to establish a firm presence among the European diasporas (White, 2015).

Scholars have argued that the characteristics of the Kurdish groups who migrated to Europe differed. Both Baser (2013, p.14-16), and Ayata (2008, p.21) contend that the Kurds who migrated to Sweden were more homogenous, intellectual Kurdish activists who to a larger extent than elsewhere in Europe contributed to Kurdish literature and academia. The profile of the Kurdish migrants in Sweden, in combination with the opportunities provided by Sweden, as well as the Swedish political, and cultural accommodation towards the Kurds led to a politically involved and engaged diaspora in Sweden. As they were granted opportunities,

both to engage in public opinion and preserve their cultural identity, Sweden became a favorable environment for establishing a Kurdish identity and Kurdish associations. The Kurdish diaspora in Sweden has become both considerable and impactful. As stated previously, Kurds in Sweden have been particularly active in driving the Kurdish question in academia and literature, as well as politically. Members of the diaspora regularly participate in public political demonstrations where it is evident that PKK flags and symbols are showcased visibly. Due to the constitutionally protected and far-reaching freedoms of expression in Sweden, Turkey has repeatedly claimed that the PKK are allowed to conduct propaganda in the country (Aljazeera, 2022), (Levin, 2023). Moreover, in addition to the Turkish claims that the PKK are allowed to spread propaganda in Sweden, several claims have been made that the PKK is also using the Swedish diaspora to fund their cause (Aljazeera, 2022). Several investigations into the PKK have concluded that the PKK is in fact conducting fundraising in Europe. A 2011 report from Europol, mapping the terrorist situation and trends in the EU stated that “Separatist terrorist groups such as the PKK/KONGRA-GEL and LTTE are involved in the trafficking of drugs and human beings [In the EU] to raise funds for their terrorism activities” (Europol, 2011, p.6), and “[EU] Member States with Kurdish diasporas are witnessing - and actively combating - fundraising activities of adherents of the PKK/KONGRA-GEL in their jurisdictions.” (ibid, p.11). Given this background, Turkey has consistently accused countries in Europe of being too passive against the PKK, or even supporting the organization (Uslu & Aytac, 2007)

It is important to note that a lot of information of PKK activity in Sweden is veiled in obscurity, both from Swedish authorities as well as PKK themselves. An unequivocal fact, however, is that there is a large Kurdish diaspora in Sweden, that frequently participates in public discourse and various political settings. Since the Turkish decision to veto Sweden however, PKK has assumed a more prominent role in both media coverage and political discourse, given its implication for Sweden’s security policy direction.

## 2 Methodology and Theory

In light of the aforementioned research dilemma, this section of the thesis will elaborate on the theoretical framework that will be utilized in the ensuing analysis. Subsequently, an examination and discussion of the chosen methodological approach will follow, encompassing an evaluation of its appropriateness and rationale for the selection of the method.

### 2.1 Theoretical framework

This thesis will extend existing theoretical frameworks that will deepen the understanding of the motives guiding the behavior of the actors involved in the research puzzle. The theories aim to provide an understanding of aspects such as national identity and rational behavior and their impact on international politics, and specifically in the context of Turkish-Swedish relations regarding security policy. The chosen theoretical frameworks of rational choice and constructivism provide a comprehensive and complementary theoretical basis that will steer the analysis and seek to provide an explanatory framework for the actions of the involved actors in the case. Although other theories have been considered for this study, and ought to have produced interesting analyses, this section will argue for the utility of the chosen frameworks. The theories presented here will serve as a theoretical framework, offering a perspective in the comprehension of the analyzed situation. In the summary, and discussion section of this thesis, the theoretical framework will be employed as an interpretation of the analysis. Hence, the theories will not be applied in the analysis section, other than to serve as a guiding lens through which the actions of the involved actors will be examined, providing a nuanced comprehension.

### 2.1.1 Constructivism

The constructivist theory of international relations (IR) presents a framework that challenges the traditional perceptions of IR scholarship, where material capabilities are the primary elements of importance in international dynamics (Kapitonenko, 2022). Instead, adherents to the constructivist school of thought argue that non-material factors are the decisive aspects of international relations. Aspects such as perceptions, norms and identities are what is constituting and shaping the behavior of states and other actors in the international system. Disputes and conflicts among actors occur when their identity is at threat or there is a clash in the normative perceptions of actors (ibid.). International relations according to the constructivist theory can be described as a reciprocal process of constituting identities between the international system and the actors that inhabit it, the actors shape the system and the system shape the actors. Therefore, the identity and perception of actors will influence their behavior towards others in international relations (Karacok, 2019). The constructivist emphasis on identity and norms offers a useful perspective that can examine how the presence of the PKK may influence the construction of identity, and how national identity has shaped the way that Turkey conducts its foreign policy, and subsequently why they chose to veto the Swedish NATO-application, referring to its leniency towards the Kurdistan Workers Party.

In relation to Turkey, much constructivist literature has examined national identity as a determinant in the way it conducts its foreign policy. Karakoç (2010) argues that national identity in relation to the Kurdish minority has repeatedly influenced Turkish foreign policy, stating that “it leads to the construction of a collective identity. And from time to time, this identity constitutes the reason for cooperation or dispute between Turkey and other states.” (p.919). The article thus contributes to theoretical foundations that will benefit this analysis. By analyzing how Turkish foreign policy decisions have been influenced by the PKK, based on aspects of identity, the article reflects insightful aspects that will benefit the analysis in this research. By studying previous constructivist literature, one can gain knowledge that will add comprehension to how Turkey now chooses to act as it does towards Sweden. Moreover, the article shows that the Kurdish identity, and the existence of the PKK has had a significant presence in how Turkey has conducted its foreign policy especially with its direct neighbors.

### 2.1.2 Rational Choice

Rational Choice is a multifaceted approach of studying international relations and political science. It has prominently been described as a method in the literature, rather than a theory. It seeks to explain individual and collective outcomes in terms of *individual goal-seeking under constraints* (Snidal, 2002). This description refers to the idea that actors in international relations are assumed to have objectives which they seek to pursue. The actions that actors are able to pursue however, are limited to certain constraints. The Rationalist approach further assumes that actors are rational and will act accordingly in their aim to achieve their objectives. While there is different rational choice ‘traditions’ they share the idea that actors will act according to their preferences and objectives, based on rational calculations of *costs and benefits* (Snidal, 2002).

Rational choice theory further includes what the literature describes as *utility maximization* which could be described as a way of rationalizing decision-making. Similar to the idea of cost and benefits, according to adherents of rational choice, an actor will act in a way that will produce a desired outcome based on their objectives. The model therefore presupposes that there are a variety of different options that one can make, and a rational actor will choose the option that maximizes the utility (Rakner, 1996) The decision to include the rational choice framework stems from its applicability to the analysis of the decision-making processes of relevant actors, highlighting how rational calculations and national preferences contribute to the dynamics of Turkey-Sweden relations in the context of PKK presence. It provides tools that can explain how both Turkey and Sweden have behaved in the chain of events that this analysis seeks to decipher.

## 2.2 Methodological framework

Process tracing is a method used to identify causal links between postulated causes that have resulted in a given outcome. It involves an examination of explanatory, sequentially organized evidence over time with the aim to make causal conclusions. In other words, process tracing

is a method used for discerning a causal relationship between a hypothesized cause and the outcome to understand the causal mechanisms at play within a given case or chain of events. By examining specific pieces of “diagnostic” evidence, the researcher aims to diagnose or understand the causality within the selected process. The ambition with process-tracing analysis is to study an event that constitutes a decisive moment in a given case and trace the occurrence of this event to critical incidents that preceded this outcome in order to discern any causal connections (Halperin & Heath, 2017). The research takes its starting point in a decisive moment in the bilateral relations between Turkey and Sweden, this moment further symbolizes a transformative shift in Sweden’s and NATO’s geopolitical function on the European continent. The aim of this research is to identify the *causal mechanisms* and *events* that could serve as explanations for the diplomatic strains between the two countries that are currently unfolding. Given this background, it is argued that process-tracing is the most appropriate methodological approach for this study. The following section will, in accordance with the argument that process-tracing is the most suitable method for this analysis, account for the strengths of the method as well as the chosen approach of process tracing that will be used to conduct a cohesive analysis.

### 2.2.1 Variables and hypothesis

This thesis posits that the outcome, which is the Turkish veto on Sweden’s NATO-membership application, and strained diplomatic relations within this context - used in this research as the dependent variable - has been caused by the presence of the PKK in the bilateral relations between the two countries. The presence of the PKK will be treated as the independent variable in this thesis. The presence of the PKK as an independent variable will be analyzed through cases in which the organization has been present in domestic Swedish politics, as well as the bilateral relations between Turkey and Sweden. The dependent variable is the strained diplomatic relations between Turkey and Sweden in the context of Sweden’s pursuit of joining NATO. The strained relations have manifested itself through diplomatic disagreements and condemnations, and the Turkish veto against Sweden’s membership application. As a demonstration of the variables, two significant political episodes that have



played out in the recent years will be presented below, these serve as the analytical foundation for this research and are as follows:

Independent variable 1: *The Swedish Social Democrats pledges to deepen its collaboration with the PYD.*

Independent variable 2: *The Swedish Inspectorate of Strategic Products revoke license for military export to Turkey*

Dependent variable: *Turkey vetoes Sweden's application for NATO-membership and diplomatic tension ensues.*

The independent variables presented signifies a clash between the Turkish and Swedish perspectives. The Swedish stance on groups that are considered to be affiliated with the PKK stand in contrast to what Turkey views as a combat of terrorist organizations that are posing a threat to their national security and territorial integrity. The divergence in the Swedish and Turkish perspectives regarding the PKK and its affiliated organizations is recognized in this research as a crucial element that has resulted in the dependent variable and outcome. Given this delineation, this thesis argues that the independent variables presented have constituted causal mechanisms that have led to Turkey vetoing the Swedish NATO-bid.

The hypothesis of this research is consequently as follows:

*There has been a notable presence of the PKK in Swedish politics in recent years. This presence is demonstrated by Sweden's leading party's ambition to deepen its collaboration with organizations connected to the PKK, and the Swedish reluctance to export military materiel to Turkey as a direct result of their operation targeting PKK-affiliated organizations. These events constitute a chain of causal mechanisms that lends validity to the Turkish veto against Sweden's membership application to NATO.*

## 2.2.2 Explaining-outcome process-tracing

In the analysis, the *Explaining-Outcome* approach of Process-Tracing will be utilized. Contrary to other variants of process tracing, explaining-outcome process-tracing is a type of process tracing method that seeks to establish a concise yet comprehensive explanation for a specific outcome in a single case. Explaining-outcome process tracing is thus more of a case-centric method rather than a theory centric (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). Beach and Pedersen (2013) describe the ambition of explaining-outcome process trading as a method to “establish a minimally sufficient explanation for why an outcome has been produced in a specific case” (p.156). To find a minimally sufficient explanation means that the essential elements of interest for the outcome should be scrutinized, leaving out irrelevant or extraneous details. It is therefore a method that entails a refinement of the analyzed process to its core components. Moreover, in explaining-outcome process-tracing, a particular focus lies at looking at events that occurred in the specific case to understand the outcome. These specific details, however, might not apply on a broader scale, in other situations. It is therefore common to look at unique aspects of the given situation to understand the outcome of the course of events of interest (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). Explaining-outcome process-tracing therefore uses an eclectic approach, combining systematic mechanisms with unique case-specific, nonsystematic mechanisms, to establish the simplest sufficient account for a particular outcome (ibid.). The rationale behind the selection of explaining-outcome process tracing in this thesis can be found in the case selection strategies described by Beach and Pedersen (2013). The authors describe that the selection of cases within explaining-outcome process tracing are motivated by a strong intrigue in how a particular outcome occurred in each case, rather than to create generalizability or theorization on a broader scale. Thus, the aim of this research is not to establish a general explanation that could be applied on a larger scale, but rather to search for empirical evidence that will produce a *minimally sufficient explanation* in this specific case. Although the explanation for the specific case in this research may exhibit aspects that can be generalizable in a broader context, on cases that have unfolded similarly, that is not the primary aim of this method. By utilizing the methodological framework of process-tracing, the analysis will analyze two specific instances where Sweden has reportedly, politically acted in a way that could be considered as supportive of the PKK and its affiliates. By conducting a process-tracing analysis, the aim is to create a minimally sufficient explanation to why Turkey chose to veto the Swedish NATO-bid (outcome). The potential causal mechanisms will be presented in the analysis, these are the mechanisms that this thesis analyzes in order to establish a minimally sufficient explanation.

Counterfactuals as an additional method in process tracing ought to be addressed in this methodological section. In process-tracing, counterfactuals refer to alternative scenarios that didn't occur in a given case. The idea is that similar analyses are being conducted, with different events and independent variables. By evaluating different scenarios, counterfactuals improve the capacity to study causality between variables as well as the interactive nature between these to establish a constitutive relationship. The combination of process-tracing and an analysis of counterfactuals produce a more rigorous account of causality and therefore increase validity of the research (Lupovici, 2009). However, due to the constrained capacity of this thesis, counterfactuals will not be accounted for in this thesis.

### 2.2.3 Alternative explanations in Process-tracing

A key component in Process tracing methods is the consideration of alternative explanations that might have influenced or resulted in the specific outcome. If these plausible factors are not taken into consideration, or at a minimum addressed or controlled for, the analysis, as well as the method risk being unpersuasive (Bennett & Checkel, 2014). The procedure of investigating alternative explanations typically involves identifying alternative factors that could explain the observed outcome, thereafter the alternative explanations should be evaluated whether they could have had a significant effect on the outcome. Bennett and Checkel (2014) argue that the strength in a causal explanation can be found in its capacity to show the consistency and stringency with the observed outcome. Neglecting these risks undermining the overall analysis as well as damaging its credibility, therefore it is important to account for alternative potential explanations in order to ensure an appropriate academic analysis.

A consideration of alternative explanations serves as a fundamental part of conducting a systematic investigation as it enhances both validity and reliability of the causality presented in the analysis. Taking into account alternative explanations also contribute to producing a broader understanding of the intricate dynamics at play within a specific case. In the context of this thesis, alternative explanations will be presented at the end of the analysis and will include explanatory perspectives on Turkish actions that have been circulating in the media

coverage, and diplomatic discussion surrounding the case. These explanations will be addressed further at the end of this research, in the concluding section.

## 2.3 Data and material

This thesis will utilize a wide array of material, ranging from official statements and government documents to media coverage and scholarly work. The material will serve as evidence for the events that are analyzed and how the actors have responded within these contexts. These shall demonstrate how the events that are played out and are being analyzed constitute a chain of events that lay the foundation for this analysis. Based on this, the research is qualitative and employs textual- and content analysis. Important to note is that several media outlets have been used in this research, these function primarily as a description of how and when events and statements have unfolded. These sources have been handled with caution and in such a way that biases and skewed reporting have been largely avoided.

## 3 Analysis

### 3.1 The Swedish Social Democrats enhance collaborative partnership with Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD)

In November of 2021, several news outlets in both Turkey and Sweden reported that the Swedish Social Democrats, the governing party in Sweden, had reached an agreement with the independent member of parliament Amineh Kakabaveh. The deal was signed in connection with the election of a new Swedish Prime minister, a vote that the Social Democrat candidate Magdalena Andersson won by a margin of one vote (Prot. 2021/22:33). In her address to parliament prior to the votation, Kakabaveh explained her motives for voting yes to Andersson as prime minister. Among other issues Kakabaveh proclaimed during her speech that constructive discussions between herself and the Social democratic Party have led to an agreement that included a condemnation of the classification of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) as a terrorist organization “by some state actors” (Socialdemokraterna, 2021). Kakabaveh’s address further included praise for the Kurdish groups that have fought hard to defeat the Islamic State in Northern Syria, emphasizing the Kurdish women who had contributed to the battles against IS. Moreover, Kakabaveh expressed the importance of manifesting support for the autonomous zone Rojava in Northern Syria, highlighting development work, as well as the release of a Kurdish politician in Turkey (Prot. 2021/22:33). The deal that was signed by the Social Democrats party secretary as well as Kakabaveh included a reiteration of the points presented by Kakabaveh in her parliament address. The deal emphasized the Social democratic party’s ambition to deepen its relationship with PYD, with Kakabaveh playing a central role in the cooperative effort. It further reiterated the support for autonomous Rojava, where PYD has a leading governing role, thus constituting a legitimate cooperation partner. The agreement further underscored the importance of the YPG

in the defeat of the IS, highlighting the Swedish support of their efforts within the international coalition against the terror organization (Socialdemokraterna 2021).

While the agreement between Kakabaveh and the Social Democratic party was conspicuous, and garnered media coverage at the time, Sweden had not yet applied for NATO-membership, resulting in few consequences for Swedish foreign policy. The agreement, however, was re-actualized in June 2022, amid the Swedish process of joining NATO. In early June, several parties on the right decided to raise a vote of no confidence against the Social Democratic minister of justice, once again causing predicaments for the ruling Social Democrats as they were to face another uncertain vote (Jönsson & Persson, 2022). Going into the vote it was clear that it would likely be a margin of one vote that would decide the outcome. As had been the case only half a year earlier, it appeared that Amineh Kakabaveh would once again have the decisive vote in a very even parliamentary constellation. Kakabaveh took the podium again and addressed the parliament. This time the non-aligned politician had a more confrontational approach towards Turkey, calling its president Erdogan an authoritarian leader who is pursuing racist policies directed specifically towards the Kurdish population in Turkey and the middle east (Sveriges Riksdag, 2021). Kakabaveh continued by questioning Sweden's application for NATO membership and the fact that the political deliberations at the time were to make compromises, accommodating Turkey's demands. She reiterated her previous insinuations that Sweden would officially support the autonom Rojava and democratic forces in Turkey. The agreement that Kakabaveh had reached with the Social Democrats resurfaced in her speech, as she implicitly expressed her expectations that the party would uphold their agreed positions. As she had done in her address in November of 2021, Kakabaveh emphasized the significance of the YPG, as she made numerous remarks urging Sweden to persevere in their support for the group. The vote took place and once more it resulted with one vote margin in favor for the Social Democrats, Amineh Kakabaveh abstained from voting (ibid.).

Later that day, after the vote had taken place, Turkish media outlet *Türkiye Gazetesi* published an article that accused Kakabaveh of being a supporter of the PKK. The article also described Kakabaveh's role in recent Swedish politics as one where she has successfully managed to blackmail the government to support PKK and its affiliates (*Türkiye Gazetesi*, 2022). What followed this parliamentary episode was a time of diplomatic challenges, and a holdback for the Swedish NATO-bid as Swedish politicians were forced to waiver for Turkish

demands as well as maintaining political stability domestically. Turkey's Directorate of communications issued a statement on June 13 where it took a "stance against the admission of countries that support terrorist organizations to NATO" (2022), and repeated President Erdogan's remark from a previous NATO summit where he stressed that "Türkiye will not compromise its stance towards countries that support terrorism and terrorist organisations" (Directorate of Communications, 2022).

In late June 2022, only weeks after the diplomatic efforts seemed to have frozen between Turkey and Sweden, they met under NATO patronage in Madrid, together with NATO co-spirant Finland. During the meeting, the three countries reached an agreement that came to be known as the *Trilateral Memorandum*. The agreement, signed by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs from Sweden, Turkey, and Finland included a number of points that Sweden and Finland committed to follow for Turkey to ratify their membership application to NATO. Several of the points in the agreement referred to the PKK and its supposed affiliated organizations. Among other points, number four in the agreement stipulates that "Finland and Sweden extend their full support to Türkiye against threats to its national security", and "Finland and Sweden will not provide support to YPG/PYD" (Trilateral memorandum, 2022). The agreement continued by stating that Sweden (as well as Finland) recognizes the fact that the PKK is a designated terrorist organization and that their activities will be combated domestically and internationally (ibid.).

### 3.2 Sweden arms embargo to Turkey in 2019

On October 15, 2019, the Swedish Inspectorate for Strategic Products (ISP) decided to revoke all active licenses allowing exports of military equipment to Turkey. ISP's decision had been preceded by a Swedish government statement condemning a Turkish military offensive in northern Syria, referring to violations of humanitarian law and the UN-charter (Regeringen, 2019). The Turkish military operation in Syria had begun less than a week prior to the Swedish decision to practically stop exports of military materiel. The motive behind the military offensive was to combat Kurdish fighters on the Turkish-Syrian border and establish a safe zone (Uras, 2019). The belligerents that the Turkish Armed Forces, together with the Syrian National Army aimed to defeat was the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition

of actors led by YPG, designated by Turkey as closely connected to the PKK, and a terrorist organization. Turkey was subjected to widespread criticism by the international community, particularly its European and NATO allies, following the military operation. The criticism derived from the fact that SDF had played an important role as an ally in the coalition that fought the Islamic State (ISIS) (ibid.). At the time, the Swedish revocation of its military export to Turkey did not result in any specific diplomatic tensions as the Swedish decision was part of a more widespread European approach in banning arms export to Turkey (Bargiazzi & Weise, 2019)

The embargo however, resurfaced in 2022, after Sweden had formally applied for NATO-membership when the Turkish Presidency's directorate of communications issued a statement accounting for Turkey's stance on a Swedish membership in the alliance. In the statement, criticism was expressed directed at the Swedish government's decision to revoke the necessary permits for arms trade with Turkey in 2019. The statement argues that the decision had proved lack of support and loyalty that it would expect from a NATO-member, in its legitimate rights to combat terrorism in its direct proximity. Moreover, Turkey stated that the 2019 arms embargo was "against the spirit of the alliance" (Directorate of communications, 2022). In the aforementioned Trilateral Memorandum, struck between Turkey and NATO aspirants Sweden and Finland, the seventh paragraph of the deal stipulated "that there are no national arms embargoes in place between them [Turkey, Finland and Sweden]" (Trilateral Memorandum, 2022). The paragraph further specifies that "Sweden is changing its national regulatory framework for arms exports in relation to NATO Allies" (ibid.). The arms embargo thus became a significant talking point in light of the Swedish NATO-application, and in September of 2022, ISP commented on Swedish arms trade with Turkey stating that they were going to grant permission for the export of electronic equipment, software and technical aid to Turkey (Instektionen för strategiska produkter, 2022.). After close to three years of not allowing Swedish military companies to conduct business with Turkey, ISP now referred to changed conditions of security policy and a Swedish NATO-membership as the best guarantee for safeguarding the security of the Swedish people.



### 3.3 Alternative Explanations for Turkey's VETO against Sweden

In accordance with the methodological section, this part of the analysis will address the alternative explanations for Turkey's decision to deny Sweden's membership application. The explanations presented in this section are those that have frequently been reported in the media and have occurred in the diplomatic negotiations around Sweden's inclusion in NATO. It should be noted however, that Turkey has throughout the Swedish membership process, maintained its demands for a more robust approach in Sweden's handling of the PKK. In his article for the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Director of the Institute for Turkish Studies at Stockholm University Paul Levin summarizes three potential motives for Erdogan's decision to block the Swedish endeavor to join NATO apart from the PKK narrative.

In May 2023, Turkey held its presidential election, an election that Recep Tayyip Erdogan won. Prior to the election, Levin described the upcoming election as a difficult one for the incumbent Erdogan. The background section of this thesis addressed the Kurdish population and PKK's historic influence on Turkish identity, as well as the Kurdish political presence and its historic conflict with Turkey. These aspects testify to the fact that the Kurdish population and PKK has constituted a political divide in the country that has resonance with the Turkish population. It has been reiterated in the media that PKK's role as a watershed in Turkish politics offered a possibility for President Erdogan to cultivate large parts of the Turkish population. In an attempt to do so, Erdogan adopted a stance against European countries at the international stage by vetoing Sweden's application for membership, thus entertaining the interests of a large constituency (Levin, 2023).

An additional explanation presented by Levin and that has been frequently mentioned in the diplomatic and media discourse surrounding Sweden's NATO-application is that Turkey has been banned from purchasing F-16 fighter jets from the United States. After Turkey acquired military equipment from Russia, a US and NATO antagonist, they have been excluded from obtaining the F-16. Considering this, Turkey's stalling of Sweden's membership has been perceived as a diplomatic and security political move to persuade the United States to approve the sale of the F-16 (Levin, 2023). The United States has consistently reiterated its support for

Sweden as a member in NATO (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023), and NATO's secretary general Jens Stoltenberg has been persistent in his support for a Swedish membership (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2023). The widespread support for a Swedish NATO-membership has given Turkey a negotiation leverage that they are seemingly using to their benefit by stalling the accession process of Sweden. Moreover, as described in the introduction of this thesis, the US have been allied to Kurdish militia groups in Northern Syria, a stance that have created security predicaments for the United States. Since the United States and Turkey are allied through their NATO-membership, the cooperation with Kurdish groups in combating IS has been a diplomatic balance for both nations. The Turkish blocking of Sweden's membership is viewed as an act to make the US change its stance on the Kurdish groups (Levin, 2023).

A final motive for the Turkish veto presented by Levin, is the complex dynamics of Turkey's relations with Russia. Russia's leverage in their relations is their immense presence in the Syrian regions controlled by Kurdish groups. Due to the Russian manifestation in these areas, the Turkish military operations require approval from Russia which gives the Russians negotiation leverages as they oppose a NATO enlargement (Levin, 2023)

## 4 Findings and Discussion

This research actively pursued to establish a minimally sufficient explanation to why Turkey decided to veto Sweden's membership-application to NATO. By employing an explaining-outcome process-tracing model, this thesis has argued for validity in the Turkish claim when they referred to Swedish leniency towards the PKK in the country. The introduction presented the dilemma and emphasized instances where the PKK and its affiliated organizations have been present and determined political discourses and outcomes in Swedish politics.

The analysis started by treating a formation of government in Sweden that consisted of different interests and political maneuvering in order to maintain leadership in the country. This event included explicit statements and concessions connected to Kurdish groups associated with the PKK. The governing party preserved its power, and retained its ministers, ostensibly in exchange for supportive measures towards the autonomous region of Rojava, as well as PYD and YPG. This could be considered problematic in light of the Swedish NATO-application and lends validity to the Turkish claims. The second occurrence that the analysis accounted for was the Swedish decision to ban exports of military equipment to Turkey. The rationale for this decision was the Turkish military operation in Syria, targeting Kurdish militia groups in the region. This offensive received widespread condemnation at the time, from Sweden and the European Union but resurfaced in connection to the Swedish NATO-application. The second instance alone does not create a minimally sufficient explanation. However, through examination of these events, it is argued that the two *causal mechanisms* presented in the analysis, together produce a minimally sufficient explanation for the Turkish veto and subsequent deteriorated diplomatic relations between Turkey and Sweden. The analysis of these events (causal mechanisms) that have shown to be directly connected to the observed outcome, strengthens the internal validity of this research within the methodological endeavor to create a causal explanation. Building on this foundation, the hypothesis presented at the outset of this research has been substantiated, as detailed below:

*There has been a notable presence of the PKK in Swedish politics in recent years. This presence is demonstrated by Sweden's leading party's ambition to deepen its collaboration with organizations connected to the PKK, and the Swedish reluctance to export military materiel to Turkey as a direct result of their operation targeting PKK-affiliated organizations. These events constitute a chain of causal mechanisms that lends validity to the Turkish veto against Sweden's membership application to NATO.*

The research has shown that there has been an impactful presence of the PKK in Swedish politics in recent years. A presence that has manifested itself within important domestic political trajectories in the country.

The theoretical foundation of this research was the IR theory of constructivism, that serves as an explanatory perspective on the PKK's presence within the bilateral relations of Turkey and Sweden. As the theoretical section outlined, constructivism emphasizes the construction of ideas and norms as an explanation to behavior in international relations, rather than material interests. Applying the constructivist framework in the case of this research involves an examination of how shared norms and identity between Turkey and Sweden has affected their bilateral relations. From a constructivist viewpoint, Turkey's attitude regarding a Swedish membership in NATO could stem from a lack of a shared identity and shared norms within the alliance. The background section of this thesis outlined that the Kurdish populations in Turkey have historically constituted a significant determinant in how Turkey perceives its own identity. In line with this description, the constructivist framework further underscores a clash of identities between Turkey and Sweden. Sweden's accommodation to the Turkish demands, displayed by the agreements in the Trilateral Memorandum, can be interpreted as an ambition to align with Turkey and its norms within the NATO-alliance. In this constructivist analysis, Turkey, and Sweden both have shown degrees of influence by shared identity and an ambition to conform to the shared norms of NATO.

Rational choice theory was the second approach used in the analysis. This perspective posits that actors base their decision on rational calculations of *costs and benefits* and *utility maximaiton* in order to optimize their interest. In the context of the Turkish decision to veto Sweden's application to NATO, rational choice provides perspectives on factors that impacted Turkey's position. Turkey has been in a protracted conflict with the PKK, and the Swedish leniency towards the organization constitutes a security threat to Turkey. In this

context, a NATO-ally that is perceived to evidently support a direct security threat goes against the interests of Turkey. The theory of rational choice emphasizes rationality in decision-making, and Turkey acted in a rational manner by halting the Swedish NATO-bid. Sweden on the other hand, in light of the agreement they struck with Turkey and Finland also acted in a way that can be explained by rational choice. The NATO-membership is an apparent interest for Sweden, considering the benefits of a membership. By aligning with Turkey in a way to enhance the possibilities of membership, Sweden acted in a rational way by facilitating their interests and utility. Both Turkey and Sweden have displayed rational calculations by safeguarding their respective national interests and maximizing the beneficial aspects of their respective positions.

## 5 Conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in the bilateral relations between Turkey and Sweden within the Swedish ambition to join NATO. The thesis also sought out to shed light on the complex nature of Sweden's policy involvement connected to the PKK. The research puzzle was to examine the validity in the Turkish claims of Swedish leniency towards the PKK, which have caused diplomatic tensions between the two countries. Based on this, the research question of this thesis is as follows:

*To what extent has the presence of the PKK affected Turkish-Swedish bilateral relations within the context of Sweden's endeavor to join NATO?*

As the previous discussion section outlined, the response to the research question will be answered by the hypothesis of this research, as its validity has been confirmed:

*There has been a notable presence of the PKK in Swedish politics in recent years. This presence is demonstrated by Sweden's leading party's ambition to deepen its collaboration with organizations connected to the PKK, and the Swedish reluctance to export military materiel to Turkey as a direct result of their operation targeting PKK-affiliated organizations. These events constitute a chain of causal mechanisms that lends validity to the Turkish veto against Sweden's membership application to NATO.*

The aim of the research question was to dismantle the diplomatic predicaments, signified by the presence of the PKK, that has characterized the bilateral relations between Turkey and Sweden in the Swedish ambitions to join NATO. The analysis did so by scrutinizing two independent variables using the method of process-tracing in order to establish a causal mechanism that could explain the Turkish veto and give it credence.

The analysis also delved into some alternative explanations for the Turkish veto. Within the context of this research, these explanations merely aimed at widening the perspective of the research and nuance the understanding of the intricacies involved in this case. These explanations will not be subjected to a more in-depth analysis; but ought to inspire interesting future studies on the topic. The thesis also addressed counterfactuals as a combination to process-tracing, in order to enhance the validity and robustness of a research. The thesis actively refrained from a counterfactual analysis due to the limited scope of the research. A counterfactual analysis would have created intriguing research but will be left to future research.

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