

U.S. BACKS NATO BIDS, TURKEY SAYS 'NO'

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Expanding tribe: U.S. President Joe Biden, centre, Sweden's Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson, right, and Finland's President Sauli Niinistö at the White House on Thursday. AFP/MANDEL NGAN

U.S. President Joe Biden hosted the leaders of Finland and Sweden on Thursday to discuss their NATO membership bids, while Turkey's leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his country would oppose the Nordic countries joining the military alliance.

"I warmly welcome and strongly support the historic applications from Finland and Sweden for membership in NATO," Mr. Biden said in a statement on Wednesday, offering U.S. support against any "aggression" while their bids are considered.

Mr. Biden met President Sauli Niinistö of Finland and Sweden's Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson in Washington on Thursday for consultations.

But their accession faces new challenges amid Turkey's stiff opposition.

"We have told our relevant friends we would say 'no' to Finland and Sweden's entry into NATO, and we will continue on our path like this," President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told a group of Turkish youths in the video for Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day.

Turkey's approval of Finland and Sweden's application to join the Western military alliance is crucial because NATO makes decisions by consensus. Each of its 30 member countries has the power to veto a membership bid.

Mr. Erdogan has said Turkey's objection stems from its security concerns and grievances with Sweden's and to a lesser degree Finland's — perceived support of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, and an armed group in Syria that Turkey sees as an extension of the PKK. The conflict with the PKK has killed tens of thousands of people since 1984.

In the remarks made available earlier on Thursday, Mr. Erdogan branded the two prospective NATO members and especially Sweden as "a focus of terror, home to terror". He accused them of giving financial and weapons support to the armed groups, and claimed the countries' alleged links to terror organizations meant they should not be part of the trans-Atlantic alliance.

Mr. Erdogan's ruling party spokesman, Omer Celik, said on Thursday they had proof that Swedish weapons were showing up in PKK hands, while also warning the U.S. and France for "giving to the group that kills my country's citizens." If NATO is to expand, Mr. Celik argued, then potential members must "cut off their support to terror groups."

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