

NATO from the Cold War to Today: Defending Democracy in Europe

NATO-The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a political and military alliance. Its members are the United States, Canada and numerous European countries, and its headquarters are in Brussels, Belgium.

NATO alliance: membership

NATO was established in 1949 as a defense against the Soviet Union and its eastern European allies, but this changed following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

NATO includes the United States, Canada and several countries in Europe. Many joined after 1949 when NATO was founded. Map: Wikimedia/Public Domain. [click to expand]

The original 12 members of NATO were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States. Later, Greece, Turkey, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic joined NATO. These were followed in 2004 by Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Today, 26 member countries are part of NATO.

Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States fought as allies during World War II, but when the war ended in 1945, their alliance disintegrated. The United States, with its democratic government and free market economy, had developed into the world's leading political and economic power. The single greatest power in Europe, however, was the Soviet Union.

U.S. worried about communism

Governments make and enforce laws, while economies control the production and distribution of goods. There are many different philosophies about the role that a government should play in the economy. The differences between these ideas were a key part of the Cold War.

Capitalism is a system where there is little government control of the economy, and where people can generally own as much private property as they wish. Socialism is when the government controls portions of the economy, usually big industries. A more extreme form of socialism is called communism. Under communism, the government controls everything and there is no private property.

The United States has a capitalist system, while most of its European allies have mixtures of capitalism and socialism. All members of the NATO alliance have democratic forms of government, in which the people vote to choose their leaders. The Soviet Union was formed based on the philosophy of communism, with an extremely centralized economy. Democracy was very limited there, with the Communist Party running the government as well as the economy. The United States and its allies worried that the Soviet Union might try to spread communism to other countries.

The Truman Doctrine

After World War II, the rest of the European nations were economically and socially devastated. The Soviet Union incorporated the weakened nations of eastern Europe along its western frontier. Meanwhile, communist political parties gained influence in other parts of Europe and it seemed like the Soviet influence would spread.

In 1947, United States President Harry S. Truman announced that the United States would aid anti-communist forces throughout the world. This policy became known as the Truman Doctrine. In 1948, the government of Czechoslovakia was overthrown and aligned with the Soviets, causing alarm in western Europe and the United States. In the same year, the United States launched the European Recovery Program, or Marshall Plan, to offset communist efforts by helping the region's war-torn economies. The Marshall Plan poured billions of dollars of aid into Europe. However, the Soviet Union did not allow the eastern European states to incorporate or participate in the plan.

Many advocated greater military spending and planning to counter Soviet strength. This brought about the Brussels Treaty, signed by Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. It was generally believed, however, that without the assistance of the United States the treaty would not stop the Soviets.

NATO takes shape

The United States and Canada signed the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington, D.C. along with 12 other countries in 1949, and NATO was officially born. The member nations agreed that "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all."

The creation of NATO was one of the most important events in the early years of the Cold War. For more than 40 years, Soviet Union and its supporters were against the United States and its allies.

In NATO's early period, member countries jointly planned, financed and built bases, airfields, pipelines, and communications networks. The United States provided the largest share of the funding. In 1950, NATO began to set up an integrated military force in Europe, which established America as NATO's military leader.

NATO's rival: the Warsaw Pact

After World War II, Germany was divided into four main zones of occupation. East Germany was made up of the Soviet zone, and West Germany included the American, British, and French zones. In 1949, East Germany and West Germany became their own countries. West Germany joined NATO in 1955 and the Soviet Union responded by creating the Warsaw Pact, a security alliance made up of the Soviet Union and other communist states in eastern Europe.

By then, nuclear weapons were the basis of NATO's defense system. NATO's nuclear buildup was seen as a deterrent to war because it meant that a Soviet attack could be met by an overwhelming nuclear response.

Developments in the Cold War

In 1966, the French government withdrew from NATO's integrated military force, though it remained a NATO member and promised to help repel any unprovoked invasion. France was concerned that the United States was unduly dominating the alliance. France rejoined the military committee in 1995.

The mid-1960s through the late 1970s was a time of increased cooperation and trade between NATO and the Soviet Union. This was called the period of detente, a French word meaning the easing of tensions. Although weapons treaties were signed, several new types of missiles were deployed during this period.

In 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, many NATO members believed that Soviet expansionism had begun again.

The Cold War ends

By the late 1980s, the Cold War was winding down as the Soviet Union began to unravel. Many countries reorganized themselves, moving away from communist ideas. This drastically changed the balance of power between Eastern and Western Europe.

In July 1990, NATO and Warsaw Pact leaders signed a treaty and declared that they were no longer adversaries. The Warsaw Pact broke apart a year later.

After the Cold War, many political analysts questioned whether NATO was still useful while others worried that Russia could again become a threat. Regardless, NATO continued to provide the ability to share resources such as weapons, supplies and communications.

New mission, new members

NATO reevaluated its mission during a civil war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. NATO warplanes struck forces there, and NATO peacekeeping troops were later sent to the area as the fighting ended.

After the deadly terrorist attacks in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, NATO members aided the United States in its efforts to pursue al-Qaeda and other international terrorist networks.

The most visible sign of NATO's changes after the Cold War was its increased membership. In 1994 strict military, political, and economic guidelines were adopted for NATO applicants, including support for democracy and free market economic policies.

NATO also began to consult with nonmember countries, including Russia. The Partnership for Peace was established in 1994 to promote European strength while reaching out to former rivals. The cooperative relationship between NATO and Russia was furthered with the creation of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002.