The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a political and military alliance between the United States, Canada, and numerous European countries. Established in 1949 as a defense against the Soviet Union and its eastern European allies, NATO changed its membership and its goals following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. NATO headquarters are in Brussels, Belgium.
The original 12 members of NATO were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom (Great Britain), and the United States. They were joined by Greece and Turkey in 1952, West Germany in 1955 (replaced by a united Germany in 1990), Spain in 1982, and Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic in 1999. These were followed in 2004 by Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, bringing the number of members to 26.

Origins

Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States fought as allies during World War II. But as soon as the war ended in 1945, the 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, with its communist system and government-controlled economy. The rest of the European nations were economically and socially devastated.
The Soviet Union, despite its own wartime losses, wasted no time in incorporating the weakened nations of eastern Europe into a chain of satellites along its western frontier. In addition, communist political parties gained influence in other parts of Europe, seemingly increasing the likelihood that the Soviet sphere of influence would spread. Meanwhile, the United States, Great Britain, and France had drastically reduced their military strength in Europe after the war’s end. A general sense of weakness and vulnerability pervaded western Europe.

In 1947 U.S. 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 a communist coup overthrew the government of Czechoslovakia and aligned it 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, which aimed in part to resist communist inroads by reviving the region’s war-torn economies. The Marshall Plan poured billions of dollars of aid into Europe. However, the Soviet Union did not allow its eastern European satellites to participate in the plan.

Not everyone had faith in economic solutions alone. Many advocated greater military spending and planning to counter Soviet strength. This brought about the immediate precursor to NATO—a defensive alliance known as the Brussels Treaty, concluded on March 17, 1948 (one month after the coup in Czechoslovakia), 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 deter the Soviets. Therefore, the United States, along with Canada, was consulted about an enlarged defense arrangement. On April 4, 1949, 12 countries signed the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington, D.C. In Article 5, the heart of the treaty, 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 among the most important events in the early years of the Cold War. For more than 40 years this tense rivalry pitted the Soviet Union and its supporters against the United States and its allies.

**NATO during the Cold War**

NATO’s development during the Cold War can be divided into four main periods: (1) NATO’s initial organization in 1949–55; (2) building the alliance’s strength from 1955 to 1967; (3) the 1967–79 period of détente; and (4) increasing tensions from 1979 to the late 1980s. The Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

In NATO’s early period, member countries jointly planned, financed, and built infrastructure such as 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 under the command of United States Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. This established the precedent that the military leader of NATO would be American, while the political leader would
be European. In 1955 West Germany, the most populous nation of western Europe, was admitted to NATO. This alarmed the Soviet Union, which responded by creating the Warsaw Pact, a security alliance made up of the Soviet satellites in eastern Europe.

During NATO’s second period (1955–67), the alliance emphasized building military strength. Nuclear weapons were the basis of NATO’s defense system. This decision was made partly because of the high cost of stationing large numbers of United States troops in Europe and also because of American nuclear superiority in the early stages of the Cold War. NATO’s nuclear buildup was seen as a deterrent to war because it assured that a Soviet attack could be met by an overwhelming nuclear response.

The alliance was somewhat weakened in 1956 after France and Britain unsuccessfully attempted to take the Suez Canal back from Egypt—an attack that the United States criticized harshly. In 1966 the French government, concerned that the United States was unduly dominating the alliance, withdrew from NATO’s integrated military force, though it remained a NATO member and promised to help repel any unprovoked invasion. (France rejoined the military committee in 1995.) In addition, many questioned the role of NATO, and some believed that it had outlived its usefulness.

The third phase of NATO’s history (1967–79) was the era of détente, a French word that means “the easing of tension.” This was a time of increased cooperation and trade with the Soviet Union and the signing of the strategic arms limitation treaties known as SALT I and SALT II. However, several new types of missiles were also deployed during this period. Détente definitively ended in 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, causing many NATO members to believe that Soviet expansionism had begun again.

The fourth period of NATO’s Cold War history was a time of growing international tensions. The United States aided Afghan rebels and shifted forces to the Mediterranean Sea and Persian Gulf because of fears of further Soviet actions. The Soviet Union maintained nuclear missile sites in eastern Europe, and NATO planted new nuclear missiles in western Europe. The United States and the Soviet Union sent large amounts of military aid to opposing forces in Central America, Africa, and other regions to fund civil wars. In addition, many people throughout the world felt that the renewed focus on strategic weapons was increasing the risk of nuclear war, whether on a global scale or in a limited European war.

In the 1980s NATO remained strong militarily, but it was beset with controversies and political problems. Many European members were reluctant to accept new nuclear weapons on their soil, and the United States complained about the cost of stationing hundreds of thousands of its troops in Europe. Meanwhile the United States military spent vast sums building ships, aircraft, and missiles and researching a missile-defense system called the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), nicknamed Star Wars. Many NATO allies argued that SDI would violate earlier arms-control treaties and accelerate the arms race.
By the late 1980s, however, the Cold War was winding down as the Soviet Union began to unravel. The Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev allowed for greater economic and political freedom in the Soviet bloc, and anti-Soviet independence movements gained strength. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and a reunited Germany joined NATO in 1990. The governments of several Warsaw Pact countries soon fell or reorganized along non-communist principles, drastically changing the political and military balance between eastern and western Europe. In July 1990, at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, NATO and Warsaw Pact leaders signed a major arms-control treaty and declared that they were no longer adversaries. The Warsaw Pact was dissolved in 1991.

**NATO’s evolving role**

After the Cold War many political analysts again questioned the usefulness of NATO. Others, however, cautioned that Russia could again become a threat and that NATO might be needed to protect the newly independent countries of eastern Europe. Regardless of such debates, NATO continued to provide one undeniable benefit to its members: the ability to share resources such as weapons, supplies, and communications.

NATO reevaluated its mission when civil war and ethnic cleansing erupted in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. On one occasion in 1994 and several times in 1995, NATO warplanes struck Serbian and Bosnian Serb forces, primarily around the city of Sarajevo. Following the 1995 Dayton peace accords, tens of thousands of NATO peacekeeping troops entered the region. In 1999 NATO launched massive air strikes against Serbian forces to protect ethnic Albanians (who were mainly Muslims) in the province of Kosovo. As hostilities ceased, NATO sent a peacekeeping force to occupy the province.

Terrorism also became a major concern for NATO in the post–Cold War era. After the deadly terrorist attacks in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, NATO invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty for the first time. Alliance members provided substantial aid to the United States in its efforts to pursue al-Qaeda, the terrorist group responsible for the attacks, and other international terrorist networks. Because of the controversial nature of the United States–led invasion of Iraq in 2003, however, a number of NATO members were reluctant to participate in the war and subsequent occupation of the country.

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. In 1999 three countries of the former Warsaw Pact—Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic—joined NATO. Seven more formerly communist countries joined in 2004: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

NATO also began to consult with nonmember countries through its Partnership for Peace, established in 1994. This program enhanced cooperation on security and defense matters between NATO members and non-NATO states, including Russia, several former Soviet allies, and Switzerland. By working with these countries, NATO sought to promote European
stability while reaching out to onetime rivals. The Partnership also allowed countries to prepare for future NATO membership by introducing them to NATO military and political practices. The cooperative relationship between the alliance and Russia was furthered with the creation of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002.