

NATO, Its Purpose,

NATO is an alliance of 28 countries bordering the North Atlantic Ocean. It includes the United States, most European Union members, Canada, and Turkey. NATO is an acronym for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The United States contributes three-fourths of NATO's budget. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump said other NATO members should spend more on their military. Only four countries reach the targeted spending of 2% of gross domestic product.¹ They are the United States, the United Kingdom, Greece, and Estonia.

At the July 11, 2018, NATO summit, President Trump requested that NATO nations increase their defense spending to 4% of GDP.² In 2017, the United States spent 4.5%. That's \$886 billion in military spending divided by \$20 trillion in U.S. GDP.

Trump also criticized Germany for asking the United States to protect it from Russia while importing billions in natural gas from it.

Trump has accused NATO of being obsolete.³ He argued that the organization focuses on defending Europe against Russia instead of combating terrorism. Member countries worry that Trump's criticism of NATO and praise of Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, mean they can no longer rely on the United States as an ally in case of attack.

Purpose

NATO's mission is to protect the freedom of its members. Its targets include weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and cyber attacks.

At its July 11, 2018, meeting, NATO approved new steps to contain Russia.⁴ These include two new military commands and expanded efforts against cyberwarfare and counterterrorism. It also contains a new plan to deter Russian aggression against Poland and the Baltic States. Trump agreed to these measures.

On July 8, 2016, NATO announced it would send up to 4,000 troops to the Baltic states and eastern Poland.⁵ It increased air and sea patrols to shore up its eastern front after Russia's attack on Ukraine.

On November 16, 2015, NATO responded to the terrorist attacks in Paris.⁶ It called for a unified approach with the European Union, France, and NATO. France did not invoke NATO's Article 5.⁷ That would be a formal declaration of war upon the Islamic state group. France preferred to launch air strikes on its own. Article 5 states, "an armed attack upon one... shall be considered an attack upon them all."

The only time NATO invoked Article 5 was after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

NATO responded to U.S. requests for help in the War in Afghanistan. It took the lead from August 2003 to December 2014. At its peak, it deployed 130,000 troops. In 2015, it ended its combat role and began supporting Afghan troops.⁸

NATO's protection does not extend to members' civil wars or internal coups.⁹ On July 15, 2016, the Turkish military announced it had seized control of the government in a coup. But Turkish President Recep Erdogan announced early on July 16 that the coup had failed. As a NATO member, Turkey would receive its allies' support in the case of an attack. But in case of a coup, the country will not get allied help.

NATO's secondary purpose is to protect the stability of the region.

If the stability is threatened, NATO would defend non-members. On August 28, 2014, NATO announced it had photos proving that Russia invaded Ukraine. Although Ukraine is not a member, it had worked with NATO over the years. Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatened nearby NATO members. They worried other former USSR satellite countries would be next.

As a result, NATO's September 2014 summit focused on Russia's aggression. President Putin vowed to create a "New Russia" out of Ukraine's eastern region. President Obama pledged to defend countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

NATO itself admits that "Peacekeeping has become at least as difficult as peacemaking." As a result, NATO is strengthening alliances throughout the world. In the age of globalization, transatlantic peace has become a worldwide effort. It extends beyond military might alone.¹⁰

Member Countries

NATO's 28 members are: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States.

Each member designates an ambassador to NATO. They supply officials to serve on NATO committees. They send the appropriate official to discuss NATO business. That includes a country's president, prime minister, foreign affairs minister, or head of the department of defense.

On December 1, 2015, NATO announced its first expansion since 2009.¹¹ It offered membership to Montenegro. Russia responded by calling the move a strategic threat to its national security. It's worried by the number of Balkan countries along its border that have joined NATO.

Alliances

NATO participates in three alliances.¹² They expand its influence beyond its 28 member countries. The Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council helps partners become NATO members. It includes 23 non-NATO countries that support NATO's purpose. It began in 1991.

The Mediterranean Dialogue seeks to stabilize the Middle East. Its non-NATO members include Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. It began in 1994.

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative works for peace throughout the larger Middle East region. It includes four members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. They are Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. It began in 2004.

NATO cooperates with eight other countries in joint security issues. There are five in Asia. They are Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mongolia, and New Zealand. There are two in the Middle East: Afghanistan and Pakistan.

History

The founding members of NATO signed the North Atlantic Treaty on April 4, 1949. It worked in conjunction with the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. The organizations were created during the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference.

NATO's primary purpose was to defend member nations from threats by communist countries. The United States also wanted to maintain a presence in Europe. It sought to prevent a resurgence of aggressive nationalism and foster political union. In this way, NATO made the formation of the European Union possible. U.S. military protection gave European nations the safety needed to rebuild after World War II's devastation.¹⁰

During the Cold War, NATO's mission expanded to prevent nuclear war.

After West Germany joined NATO, the communist countries formed the Warsaw Pact alliance. That included the USSR, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. In response, NATO adopted the "Massive Retaliation" policy. It promised to use nuclear weapons if the Pact attacked. NATO's deterrence policy allowed Europe to focus on economic development. It didn't have to build large conventional armies.

The Soviet Union continued to build its military presence. By the end of the Cold War, it was spending three times what the United States was with only one-third the economic power. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, it was due to economic as well as ideological reasons.

After the USSR dissolved in the late 1980s, NATO's relationship with Russia thawed. In 1997, they signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act to build bilateral cooperation. In 2002, they formed the NATO-Russia Council to partner on shared security issues.

The collapse of the USSR led to unrest in its former satellite states. NATO got involved when Yugoslavia's civil war became genocide. NATO's initial support of a United Nations naval embargo led to the enforcement of a no-fly zone. Violations then led to a few airstrikes until September 1999. That's when NATO conducted a nine-day air campaign that ended the war. By December of that year, NATO deployed a peace-keeping force of 60,000 soldiers. That ended in 2004 when NATO transferred this function to the European Union.

The Bottom Line

Protecting democratic freedom among its 28-member nations remains NATO'S core purpose. As a political and military alliance, the coalition's value to global security continues to be paramount.

Its longevity, since its inception in 1949, is attributed to its members' shared values championing democracy, freedom, and free market economies. NATO has remained America's most important alliance.¹³

[Article Table of Contents](#) [Skip to section](#)

[Expand](#)

[Purpose](#)

[Member Countries](#)

[Alliances](#)

[History](#)

[Article Sources](#)

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