

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

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Purpose

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a military alliance consisting of the United States, Canada, and more than a dozen European countries. Formed in 1949, NATO was set up largely to discourage an attack by the Soviet Union on the non-Communist nations of Western Europe.

After World War II ended in 1945, an intense rivalry developed between Communist countries, led by the Soviet Union, and non-Communist nations, led by the United States. This rivalry became known as the Cold War. In 1955, the Soviet Union and Communist nations of Eastern Europe formed their own military alliance to oppose NATO. The Soviet-led alliance was called the Warsaw Pact.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization also was established to keep the peace among former enemies in Western Europe. In World War II, for example, Italy and Germany had fought against most of the other countries that later became NATO members.

In forming NATO, each member country agreed to treat an attack on any other member as an attack on itself. Militarily, the United States was, and still is, the alliance's most powerful member, in part because of its supply of nuclear weapons. The NATO countries believed the Soviet Union would not attack Western Europe if such attack would lead to war with the United States. NATO's policy is known as deterrence because it is designed to deter, or discourage, an attack.

Organization

NATO has a civilian branch and a military branch. The civilian branch includes the North Atlantic Council, the highest authority in NATO. The council consists of the heads of government of the NATO members or their representatives. A secretary-general heads the council. Decisions of the council must be unanimous.

NATO's military branch includes three commands: Allied Command Atlantic, Allied Command Channel, and Allied Command Europe. Allied command Europe has traditionally functioned as the heart of NATO. Military commanders report to the Military Committee, which reports, in turn, to the North Atlantic Council.

History

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formed as a result of the North Atlantic Treaty, which was signed by 12 countries on April 4, 1949, in Washington, D.C. The 12 countries were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

During the Cold War, NATO helped maintain peace in Europe through its policy of deterrence. But it also experienced disagreements among its members. The most troublesome involved nuclear weapons. United States officials generally insisted that NATO rely on nuclear weapons to deter a Soviet attack. Some people in NATO countries, however, opposed the use of these weapons. Also, European countries occasionally doubted that the United States would actually use nuclear weapons to defend Europe. Their doubts were based on the fact that the Soviet Union also had a powerful nuclear force. For these reasons, the British and the French built their own nuclear weapons. In 1966, France pulled its troops out of the NATO military command, though it remained a NATO member. Before France withdrew its troops, NATO's central office had been in Paris. In 1967, the organization moved its headquarters to Brussels, Belgium.

NATO's biggest crisis followed the breakup of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union in 1991. The Soviet Union broke apart into a number of independent states. Most of these states – and the Soviet Union's former allies in Eastern Europe – rejected Communism. A number of them eventually joined NATO.

Some people felt that without its traditional Communist enemies, NATO had lost its purpose and should disband. But the alliance turned its attention to dealing with regional crises as they arose in Europe. For example, NATO became involved in civil wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Yugoslavia to stop the fighting in the two countries. NATO also entered these conflicts to stop efforts by Serbs to drive non-Serbs from most of Bosnia and from the Yugoslav region of Kosovo.



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