

Research Briefing
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What is NATO?

This paper explains what NATO is, its structure and purpose, and how it has evolved since its formation in 1949. It also explains what articles 4 and 5 are, the role of summits, and the new Strategic Concept the Alliance adopted in June 2022.

1	A transatlantic alliance	2
2	Article 5: An attack on one is an attack on all	2
3	Membership: 32 countries are part of NATO	2
4	How are decisions made?	4
5	How is NATO funded?	5
6	What is the 2% target?	5
7	What is Article 4?	6
8	Does NATO have its own armed forces?	6
9	Why was NATO in Afghanistan if it is a “North Atlantic” alliance?	6
10	2022: A new strategic concept	7
11	What is NATO’s policy on nuclear weapons?	7
12	What is the role of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly?	8

1 A transatlantic alliance

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was formed in 1949 with the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington. The treaty created an alliance of ten European and two North American states – the UK, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and the United States. It was formed to ensure their collective security and preservation and intended to counter the perceived threat from the then Soviet Union.

2 Article 5: An attack on one is an attack on all

At the heart of the Washington Treaty is Article 5. This states that an armed attack against one shall be considered an attack against them all.

Article 5 was invoked for the first time the day after the 11 September 2001 attacks in America.

It is important to note that Article 5 does not necessarily commit an ally to a military response. Rather, that they will assist the party or parties attacked “such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.”

The reference to the North Atlantic is also important. [Article 6](#) defines the geographic application of Article 5. This has been amended over the years but broadly relates to the territories of the parties in Europe or North America and in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer. This is why Article 5 did not apply when Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic in 1982.

Article 5 was invoked for the first time the day after the 11 September 2001 attacks in America.

3 Membership: 32 countries are part of NATO

NATO has seen several periods of expansion.

Greece and Turkey were the first to join the founding 12 nations in 1952, followed by the Federal Republic of Germany in 1955. Then there was a gap until Spain joined in 1982.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War prompted much discussion within NATO about the possibility of enlargement and the

involvement of former Warsaw Pact countries. The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland subsequently joined in 1999. 2004 saw the accession of seven countries - Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Albania and Croatia joined five years later, in 2009, followed by Montenegro in 2017 and the Republic of North Macedonia in 2020.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine of early 2022, Finland and Sweden applied to join the Alliance. Finland became the 31st member on 4 April 2023, followed by Sweden on 7 March 2024. The reasons for their joining and the process followed is set out in Commons Library briefing [NATO enlargement: Sweden and Finland](#) (CBP 9574).

3.1 How can countries join the Alliance?

Article 10 of the Washington Treaty sets out the membership requirements. Any European state may be invited by unanimous agreement to "further the principles" of the Treaty and to "contribute to the security of the North Atlantic Area." NATO often says it has "[open door policy](#)".

In practice, the accession process can take several years and require the invited country to complete any required reforms. These may involve political, legal, military, defence and security reforms.

3.2 Who will join next?

Currently only Bosnia and Herzegovina is participating in [the Membership Action Plan](#) (MAP). This is the programme by which NATO supports an aspiring country prepare for possible future membership. It was launched in 1999.

There is no set duration for participation in the MAP as the requirements will differ for each country. The Republic of North Macedonia, for example, had been participating in the MAP since 1999 before formally joining NATO in 2020. Participating in a MAP is not a requirement; neither Finland nor Sweden underwent the MAP process.

At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, Allied leaders agreed that Georgia and Ukraine will one day become members, though differences among Allies at the time meant they stopped short of inviting them to begin the MAP process.¹

¹ Jonathan Eyal, "[NATO's Bucharest Summit: The unanswered questions](#)", RUSI Newsbrief, Vol 28 issue 4, 28 April 2008

Georgia was invited to participate in the meeting with the leaders at NATO's summit in Madrid in June 2022.²

At its summit in Vilnius in July 2023, NATO reaffirmed the commitment made in 2008 that Ukraine "will become a member" of the Alliance. Further discussion of Ukraine's potential membership is set out in Commons Library briefing [NATO enlargement: Ukraine](#).

3.3 What are partners?

Partners are countries or international organisations with whom NATO works. These include the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue (with north African nations), the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (with four Gulf states) plus less formal partnerships with individual countries. A full list is available at [NATO: Partners](#).

4 How are decisions made?

Major decisions are approved at heads of government and state summits, held over one or two years. In between these summits, the foreign and defence ministers of Allies meet regularly. All decisions are made by consensus.

Each member is represented at NATO's political headquarters in Brussels by a delegation headed by an Ambassador. The [UK Joint Delegation](#) is currently headed by Dame Sarah MacIntosh.

The [North Atlantic Council](#) (NAC) is the principal political decision-making body at NATO and each member country has a seat on the council. It meets at least weekly and is chaired by the Secretary General.

The [Secretary General](#) is the Alliance's top position. They are often a senior politician from a member state. The current Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, was Prime Minister of Norway. His predecessor, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, was a Prime Minister of Denmark. The last British Secretary General was Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, who held the post from 1999 to 2004. The Secretary General position is traditionally a European.

The top military position, the [Supreme Allied Commander Europe](#) (SACEUR), is filled by an American, who is also the Commander of US European Command. General Tod D. Wolters is the current SACEUR.

² NATO, [Pre-Ministerial press conference](#), 15 June 2022

The NATO website explains further the [other political and military bodies and committees](#).

5 How is NATO funded?

NATO is funded by Allies both directly and indirectly. Direct contributions are made to NATO budgets and programmes on an agreed cost-share formula, based on Gross National Income. This is the principle of “common funding” and finances NATO’s principal budgets.

Indirect funding is where allies commit capabilities or troops to a military operation. On these occasions the member state bears the costs themselves.

See also: [Funding NATO](#)

6 What is the 2% target?

Discussions about NATO funding between Allies or in the press are generally less about the direct funding of NATO as an institution, and more about whether allies are fulfilling the agreed 2% target.

The 2% target was set at the 2006 Riga Summit. Member states agreed that 2% of a member’s gross domestic product (GDP) should go towards defence expenditure, and that 20% of defence expenditure should go towards the development and acquisition of equipment. It is a target, not a requirement. This has been reaffirmed at subsequent summits, including at [Vilnius in 2023](#) when allies committed to invest “at least” 2% of GDP on defence, and agreed that in many cases expenditure beyond 2% of GDP will be needed.

Historically, the US has spent a far greater percentage of its GDP on defence than any of the European members. The introduction of the 2% target was perceived as achievable goal in an attempt to address this imbalance. In recent years successive US administrations have pointedly called on European allies to do more to meet the target as a way of demonstrating their commitment to their shared defence.

Commons Library briefing [The two NATO targets: Which countries are hitting the mark?](#) explains the evolution of the target and who was hitting the target in 2018. Library briefing [Defence spending pledges by NATO members since Russia invaded Ukraine](#) looked at pledges made up August 2022.

NATO publishes annually the [defence expenditures of all member countries](#), including which countries have reached or surpassed the 2% target. By NATO’s count, the UK has for successive years [spent over 2% of GDP](#) on defence.

7 What is Article 4?

The Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened.

Article 4 is rarely used and has only been [invoked six times](#) since the Alliance was created (as of February 2020). Five of those occasions were by Turkey, in relation to events in Syria and Iraq, and once by Poland, in relation to events in Ukraine.³

8 Does NATO have its own armed forces?

No. Each member contributes forces and equipment to specific operations or exercises.

The UK, for example, regularly contributes military assets to NATO operations and exercises. Royal Navy ships are frequently attached to the two standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Groups and to the two standing NATO maritime groups. RAF combat aircraft regularly patrol airspace above the Baltic nations with NATO's [Baltic air policing mission](#). British army units are in the Baltics supporting NATO's [enhanced forward presence mission](#).

NATO does own and operate some capabilities of its own, for example AWACS early warning radar aircraft.

9 Why was NATO in Afghanistan if it is a “North Atlantic” alliance?

“We shall act as custodians of peace and as determined opponents of aggression.” Ernest Bevin, May 1949

The North Atlantic focus reflects the transatlantic concerns of the founding countries in the years immediately following the Second World War about the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc. Ernest Bevin, the UK Foreign Secretary at the time, explained to the House that it was driven by the need of “like-minded, neighbourly peoples” to get together “[not for the purpose of attack, but in sheer self-defence](#).”⁴

When the Cold War ended in 1989 and the threat of the Soviet Union diminished, some began to question NATO's continued relevance. However,

³ Turkey invoked Article 4 in February 2020, July 2015, June and October 2012, and February 2003. Poland invoked Article 4 in 2014. “[The consultation process and Article 4](#)”, NATO, 28 February 2020, accessed 14 January 2022

⁴ [HC Debs 12 May 1949 c2013](#)

conflict in the Balkans and instability throughout the former Soviet bloc countries in the early 1990s led NATO to develop a new role. In addition to its original purpose of collective security, NATO became a catalyst for extending security and stability throughout Europe via its peacekeeping and peace-support operations.

The invocation of Article 5 following the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States drew many NATO allies to support US operations in Afghanistan. NATO took control of international forces in Afghanistan in 2003. NATO continued to look further afield, operating anti-piracy missions off the Horn of Africa.

However, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 changed this dynamic. Since then, NATO has refocused on the Euro-Atlantic area, boosting its military presence along its eastern flank. In 2018 it announced a new [Atlantic Command](#), to protect sea lanes between Europe and North America, and a new [European Logistics Command](#) to support the movement of allied troops and heavy weaponry through Europe.

10

2022: A new strategic concept

NATO adopted a new [Strategic Concept](#) at its summit in Madrid in June 2022. The concept will “[define the security challenges facing the Alliance and outline the political and military tasks NATO will carry out to address them.](#)”

Much has changed since the current Strategic Concept was adopted in 2010, when NATO was still leading operations in Afghanistan. Since then, NATO has refocused on the Euro-Atlantic area, hybrid and cyber warfare have been discussed at length, while [China merited inclusion](#) in the 2021 [Brussels Summit communiqué](#).

11

What is NATO's policy on nuclear weapons?

“As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.”
NATO, 2021

NATO has at successive summits reaffirmed its commitment to being a nuclear-armed alliance. The 2021 Brussels summit communiqué said:

Credible deterrence and defence is essential as a means to prevent conflict and war and will continue to be based on an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional, and missile defence capabilities.⁵

⁵ [Brussels Summit Communiqué](#), NATO, 14 June 2021

The same communiqué said the strategic (nuclear) forces of the Alliance “are the supreme guarantee of the security of Allies.”⁶

The Commons Library has a series of briefings on the policies, capabilities and programmes of the nuclear weapon states: [Nuclear weapons – at a glance](#).

12

What is the role of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly?

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly is independent of NATO and institutionally separate to it. However, it provides a link between NATO and the legislative bodies of NATO members. The UK has 18 seats in the Assembly. Library paper [The NATO Parliamentary Assembly and UK delegations](#) explains the purpose of the Assembly and the role of the UK delegation.

The Parliamentary Assembly's committees draft reports and policy recommendations examining all security and policy challenges confronting Allied countries. Library paper [NATO Parliamentary Assembly: Reports of the 2021 annual session](#) provides an overview of the reports that were adopted at the 2021 Annual Session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, which took place in October 2021 in Lisbon, Portugal. Each report's Executive Summary is reproduced in this paper.

⁶ [Brussels Summit Communiqué](#), NATO, 14 June 2021

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