NATO: 70th Anniversary Debate on 2 April 2019

Summary

This briefing has been prepared in advance of the 70th anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which was founded on 4 April 1949. NATO is an inter-governmental military alliance of 29 countries in Europe and North America. Its mission is to safeguard the freedom and security of its members by political and military means.[1] The UK was a founder member of NATO and played a prominent role in its formation. Since being founded by twelve countries in 1949, NATO membership has increased through several waves of enlargement.

NATO currently has approximately 20,000 troops deployed in operations across the world.[2] Its primary mission in Europe consists of various defensive operations in eastern Europe following Russia's invasion of the Crimea in 2014.[3] NATO has a funding target whereby members should commit a minimum of 2 percent of their GDP on defence spending. In 2018, the UK was one of five NATO members to meet the target (2.1%).

In December 2018, NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, stated that modern forms of warfare meant that, although the Cold War was over, for NATO "significant challenges remain".[4] He stated that challenges include: aggressive action from Russia in eastern Europe; international terrorism; and cyberwarfare.[5] Following his election as President of the United States, Donald Trump described NATO as "obsolete" because it was not doing enough to tackle terrorism.[6] President Trump has criticised other members for not contributing enough to the NATO budget and he has reportedly threatened to withdraw the US from the organisation if other members do not increase their financial commitment.[7] These challenges have prompted debate about NATO's capacity to maintain the trans-Atlantic alliance in future.

The current UK Government remains committed to NATO and has described it as the "cornerstone of our national security".[8] An event to mark NATO's 70th anniversary will take place in Washington DC in April 2019, and London has been chosen to host the next NATO leaders' summit in December 2019.

This briefing provides a summary of recent developments concerning NATO, followed by a historical overview of its founding and subsequent enlargement.

Current Developments

NATO currently has approximately 20,000 troops deployed in crisis management and peacekeeping operations across the world.[9] While Afghanistan remains its primary operational theatre, NATO continues to conduct missions in Kosovo, Iraq, the Mediterranean, and policing of airspace in eastern Europe following the invasion of Crimea.[10]

Since 2017, NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence operation in the Baltic states surrounding Russia has become fully operational.[11] The operation consists of four multinational battlegroups deployed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, to deliver a defensive presence in the region at the request of the

host nations. The UK is leading the battlegroup in Estonia, comprised of approximately 800 troops.[12]

At the 2018 NATO leaders' summit held in Brussels, President Trump repeated his criticism that other NATO members were not contributing enough to the cost of protecting Europe. The *Guardian* reported that President Trump had made an ultimatum at the summit, saying the US may consider quitting the organisation if other members did not increase their financial commitments:

> NATO's European leaders were left reeling after one of the most divisive summits in the organisation's 69-year history, at which Donald Trump set a January deadline for them to increase defence spending and hinted that the US might quit the alliance if they failed to meet it.[13]

However, the report also quoted the French President, Emmanuel Macron, who disputed that President Trump had secured any concessions on the NATO funding timetable or that Mr Trump had threatened to withdraw the US from NATO:

> There is a communique that was published yesterday. It's very detailed. It confirms the goal of 2 percent by 2024 […] President Trump never at any moment, either in public or in private, threatened to withdraw from NATO.[14]

The official Brussels summit declaration, issued following the conclusion of the summit, confirmed the 2 percent defence spending commitment by NATO members by 2024.[15] The declaration also stated NATO's opposition to Russian aggression in eastern Europe and it reaffirmed NATO's position on the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Ukraine and Georgia.[16] In response to what it described as "a more unpredictable security environment", the declaration committed NATO members to a new 'readiness initiative'.[17] Under the proposals, all members committed, by 2020, to have "30 major naval combatants, 30 heavy or medium manoeuvre battalions, and 30 kinetic air squadrons, with enabling forces, at 30 days' readiness or less".[18] The declaration also reaffirmed NATO's commitment to tackle cyberwarfare:

> Cyber defence is part of NATO's core task of collective defence. We must be able to operate as effectively in cyberspace as we do in the air, on land, and at sea to strengthen and support the Alliance's overall deterrence and defence posture. We therefore continue to implement cyberspace as a domain of operations.[19]

UK Commitments to NATO

NATO has estimated that in 2018, the UK was one of five NATO members to have met its 2% defence spending target. Those members were: United States (3.5%); Greece (2.27%); Estonia (2.14%); UK (2.1%); and Latvia (2%).[20] In 2018, the UK contributed approximately 10% of NATO's common funded budgets and programmes (the fourth largest contribution, after the US, Germany and France).[21]

The report of the House of Commons Defence Committee, *Indispensable Allies: US, NATO and UK Defence Relations*, published in June 2018, estimated that the UK provided 12–14% of NATO's total capability in 2017, and contributed £138 million a year to its budget.[22] In addition, the UK contributed £96 million to provide 971 personnel who work for NATO.[23] The report also summarised the UK's other contributions:

> The UK hosts two NATO headquarters (MARCOM [Allied Maritime Command] and ARRC, the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps), and also hosts NATO exercises. The UK commands one of the Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups (in Estonia), providing roughly 800 personnel and

contributes a squadron to the US-led battlegroup in Poland. Furthermore, the UK also contributes assets and personnel for NATO missions and operations, including Resolute Support in Afghanistan, Enhanced Air Policing in Romania and the Standing Maritime Group in the Mediterranean.[24]

The Government response to the committee's report affirmed the UK's commitment to NATO:

> As the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review makes clear, NATO is at the heart of UK defence policy and we reaffirmed our unconditional commitment to collective defence and security through NATO in the 2018 National Security Capabilities Review. The Prime Minister told the House of Commons on 16 July [2018] that NATO is more important than ever and the UK is committed to having a leading role in the alliance.[25]

The Secretary of State for Defence, Gavin Williamson, reiterated the UK's commitment to NATO and referred to its 70th anniversary in a speech to the Royal United Services Institute on 11 February 2019. Mr Williamson stated:

> 70 years on from its founding, [NATO] remains the bedrock of our nation's defence. In the past five years, the alliance has come a long way. It is far more focused and ready to deter and defend against Russian hostile acts. But, more European nations need to be ready and capable of responding too. Stepping up to the 2 percent NATO target and not being distracted by the notion of an EU army. Britain must be willing and able to lead the alliance, to bring stability in a changing-world. We are a leader in NATO, this year hosting the leaders' meeting here in London. Alongside this we have sent a Battle Group to Estonia to support NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. We lead multi-national maritime task groups in the Mediterranean and defend the skies over the Black Sea and the Baltics. And, we strongly support NATO's Readiness Initiative to make sure forces are available and ready to do their job.[26]

However, Mr Williamson's speech was criticised by the Labour Party's Shadow Defence Secretary, Nia Griffiths, who stated:

> The UK's ability to play our role on the international stage has been completely undermined by eight years of Tory defence cuts. The Conservatives have slashed the defence budget by over £9bn in real terms since 2010 and they are cutting armed forces numbers year after year. Instead of simply engaging in yet more sabre-rattling, Gavin Williamson should get to grips with the crisis in defence funding that is happening on his watch.[27]

Brexit and NATO

The UK's withdrawal from the EU will have no direct impact on its membership of NATO. The UK was a founder member of NATO and will continue to be a member after Brexit. However, of the 29 NATO members, 22 are current EU members.[28] NATO has stated that the EU is a "unique and essential partner", as the two organisations share strategic interests and common values.[29] NATO has cooperated with the EU in several of the EU's common security and defence policy operations. For example, the EU's Operation Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina is commanded by the NATO Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, and NATO operations in the Mediterranean are conducted in collaboration with the EU's Mediterranean anti-people smuggling mission, Operation Sophia.[30] Consequently, some commentators have argued that the UK's withdrawal from the EU may hinder its future ability to exert influence in NATO.[31]

The House of Commons Defence Committee recommended that the UK Government demonstrate its continued commitment to NATO in the context of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. The committee report stated:

> We expect the Government to fulfil its promises to increase support to NATO after leaving the European Union. We also expect to see the UK encouraging appropriate further cooperation between NATO and the EU.[32]

The Government's response to the committee rejected the suggestion that the UK's withdrawal from the EU reduced the UK's commitment to NATO or the UK's ability to cooperate with the EU on defence matters in the future. The Government response stated:

> The UK is leaving the EU but remains unconditionally committed to the security of Europe and our leading role in NATO. Collectively in Europe we face an unprecedented range of internal and external threats to the safety and security of our citizens, from international terrorism to cyber threats. Neither NATO nor the EU has the full range of capabilities to tackle these threats alone; they can only be tackled successfully through closer cooperation between the NATO, EU, and their Allies and Member States.

> NATO-EU cooperation has never been more important. The UK has championed closer cooperation between the EU and NATO for over a decade, and will continue to support better working between the two institutions while we remain in the EU and after we leave.[33]

70th Anniversary Event

NATO has announced that an event to mark its 70th anniversary will take place on 4 April 2019 in Washington, DC, the location of the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949. The event is due to be attended by the foreign ministers of NATO's 29 members. The *New York Times* has claimed that the event had been intended as a meeting of the political leaders of NATO's members, as had been the case at the event to mark the organisation's 50th anniversary in 1999, hosted by US President, Bill Clinton.[34] However, the *New York Times* claimed it had been downgraded to avoid the event being overshadowed by any negative comments made by President Trump:

> NATO had planned to hold a leaders meeting in Washington to mark its 70th anniversary in April, akin to the 50-year celebration that was hosted by President Bill Clinton in 1999. But this year's meeting has been downgraded to a foreign ministers gathering, as some diplomats feared that Mr Trump could use a Washington summit meeting to renew his attacks on the alliance.[35]

The UK Government was asked, in a written parliamentary question on 5 February 2019, what its "aims and objectives" would be when attending the anniversary event. In reply, Mark Lancaster, Minister of State for the Armed Forces, stated:

> NATO foreign ministers will meet in Washington DC to commemorate NATO's 70th anniversary and to drive forward progress since the July 2018 NATO summit. The Government's objectives will be to underscore the position of NATO at the cornerstone of UK and Euro-Atlantic defence and security, and to support NATO's continuing adaptation to meet the complicated and evolving threat environment.[36]

NATO Summit 2019

On 6 February 2019, the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, announced that London would host the next NATO leaders' summit in December 2019. At the press conference announcing the decision, Jens Stoltenberg was asked whether there was a "political message" in the decision to choose London, given that the UK is due to have left the EU by the time of the summit. Jens Stoltenberg replied:

> Brexit will change UK's relationship to the European Union but it will not change the United Kingdom's relationship to NATO. So, for me, it's perfectly natural that UK's hosting the leaders meeting at the end of the year, not least because London was the first seat for the NATO headquarters back in 1949 when the alliance was established, and the first Secretary General of the alliance was actually a Brit. So, Britain, United Kingdom, is a founding member of NATO and we started in London with our first headquarters. So, we are extremely grateful to the Government of the United Kingdom, to Prime Minister May, for offering to host the next leaders meeting. And that will be part of the way we mark the 70th anniversary of our alliance.[37]

In a statement released by the UK Government, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, stated:

> For 70 years NATO has been the cornerstone of our national security. But today's challenges are very different from those we faced when the alliance established its first headquarters in London. The UK has played a central role throughout NATO's history as it has adapted to deal with new and complex threats to our security. So, as we pay tribute to the service men and women who have worked so hard over so many years to keep us safe, December's meeting is an important opportunity to determine the steps we must now take to modernise the alliance and ensure its continued success.[38]

Background: NATO's Founding and Subsequent Enlargement

NATO was founded on 4 April 1949, with the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington, DC, by its twelve founding members. In addition to the UK, the other eleven founder members were: Belgium; Canada; Denmark; France; Iceland; Italy; Luxembourg; Netherlands; Norway; Portugal; and the United States.[39] The impetus for the formation of a trans-Atlantic military alliance had its roots in the aftermath of the Second World War. NATO was founded to serve three broad purposes: to prevent the re-emergence of a military threat from Germany; to address the increased threat of an expansionist Soviet Union; and to encourage European political integration in order to maintain peace on the continent.[40]

Previously, in March 1947, the UK and France had signed the bilateral Dunkirk Treaty, a treaty of "alliance and mutual assistance" in the event of "any renewal of German aggression".[41] Also in March 1947, US President, Harry Truman, had announced what became known as the Truman doctrine—the reorientation of US foreign policy towards a more interventionist policy of providing political, military, and economic assistance to countries under threat from authoritarian forces, in particular the expansion of Soviet communism in Europe.[42] The Truman doctrine was followed, in June 1947, by the announcement of a programme of US development aid, the European recovery programme, provided to several European countries to aid post-war reconstruction and the rebuilding of democratic institutions.[43] The programme became known as the Marshall plan, after its initiator, US Secretary of State, George Marshall.

In November and December 1947, a 'four powers' conference took place in London, attended by the foreign ministers of the UK, France, the US, and the Soviet Union. The conference had been convened to consider how the four countries would continue to administer the post-war occupation of

Germany.[44] However, the conference ended without agreement, and responsibility for the failure was attributed to the Soviet Union by the other attendees.[45] On the evening that the talks collapsed, the UK Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, is reported to have stated to his US counterpart, George Marshall:

> I am convinced that the Soviet Union will not deal with the West on any reasonable terms in the foreseeable future and the salvation of the West depends upon the formation of some form of union, formal or informal in character, in western Europe, backed by the United States and the Dominions, such a mobilisation of moral and material force as will inspire confidence and energy within, and respect elsewhere.[46]

In March 1948, the Dunkirk Treaty between the UK and France was expanded, through the signing of the [Brussels Treaty](), to include Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.[47] The political structures created to implement the Brussels Treaty's military cooperation objectives formed the basis of what became known as the Western Union (later the Western European Union).[48] The Western Union was a precursor to NATO and it became Europe's primary defence alliance, influencing the security and defence policy of the European Community and later the EU.

Tensions with the Soviet Union had continued throughout 1948, due to incidents such as the Soviet blockade of Berlin and the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia.[49] In response, a series of negotiations between NATO's founder members began to take place which resulted in the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in April 1949.

The North Atlantic Treaty

The preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty states that its signatories seek to "promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area" and that they are therefore "resolved to unite their efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security".[50] Article 1 commits the signatories to settle any international dispute in which they may be involved by peaceful means.[51] Article 3 is the source of the requirement for NATO members to invest in their defence capability, as it commits signatories to "maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack".[52] Article 5 articulates NATO's commitment to collective defence, stating that signatories agree "that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all".[53] Article 5 has only been invoked once in NATO's history—following the terrorist attacks on the US of 11 September 2001.[54]

NATO Enlargement

The membership of NATO has increased through various waves of enlargement since the organisation's founding. First, Greece and Turkey joined in 1952, followed by West Germany in 1955.[55] The accession of West Germany prompted the Soviet Union to implement its own military alliance—the Warsaw Pact—with seven of its satellite states in central and eastern Europe. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, negotiations took place between 1990 and 1991 for the re-unification of Germany. During these negotiations, it is reported that the US Secretary of State, James Baker, assured the President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, that following East Germany's entry into the alliance, NATO would expand "not one inch eastward".[56] However, since the 1990s NATO has expanded to include many of the former Soviet republics of eastern Europe. The following countries have joined NATO since 1949:[57]

- Greece (1952)
- Turkey (1952)

- Germany (1955)
- Spain (1982)
- Czech Republic (1999)
- Hungary (1999)
- Poland (1999)
- Bulgaria (2004)
- Estonia (2004)
- Latvia (2004)
- Lithuania (2004)
- Romania (2004)
- Slovakia (2004)
- Slovenia (2004)
- Albania (2009)
- Croatia (2009)
- Montenegro (2017)

On 6 February 2019, it was announced that Macedonia had signed an accession agreement with NATO, following the settlement of a long-running dispute with Greece to approve its formal title of the Republic of North Macedonia.[58] If ratified by the other NATO members, Macedonia will become the organisation's 30th member.

[1] NATO, 'Frequently Asked Questions', 15 June 2017.

[2] NATO, 'Operations and Missions: Past and Present', 2 October 2018.

[3] ibid.

[4] Jens Stoltenberg, 'NATO Secretary General: The Cold War is Over, but Big Challenges Remain', *Defence News*, 10 December 2018.

[5] ibid.

[6] BBC News, 'Trump Worries NATO with 'Obsolete' Comment', 16 January 2017.

[7] Julian E Barnes and Helene Cooper, 'Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia', *New York Times*, 14 January 2019.

[8] Prime Minister's Office, 'UK to Host NATO 70th Anniversary Meeting', 6 February 2019.

[9] NATO, 'Operations and Missions: Past and Present', 2 October 2018.

[10] Further information on NATO's response to the 2014 Russian invasion, and other external threats to the alliance, can be found in the House of Lords Library briefing, *NATO Alliance: Recent Developments* (16 March 2017).

[11] NATO, 'NATO-Russia: Setting the Record Straight', 1 February 2019.

[12] NATO, 'NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence', December 2018, p 1.

[13] Ewen MacAskill, 'Trump Claims Victory as NATO Summit Descends into Mayhem', *Guardian*, 12 July 2018.

[14] ibid.

[15] NATO, 'Brussels Summit Declaration', 11 July 2018, para 3.

[16] ibid, para 7.

[17] ibid, para 15.

[18] ibid.

[19] ibid, para 20. Further information on the UK's cyber security policy, including a discussion of NATO commitments, can be found in the House of Lords Library briefing, *Cyber Security in the United Kingdom* (11 October 2018).

[20] NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2011–2018)*, 10 July 2018, p 3.

[21] NATO, 'Funding NATO', 27 June 2018.
[22] House of Commons Defence Committee, *Indispensable Allies: US, NATO and UK Defence Relations*, 26 June 2018, HC 387 of session 2017–19, p 25.
[23] ibid.
[24] ibid.
[25] House of Commons Defence Committee, *Indispensable Allies: US, NATO and UK Defence Relations: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report*, 20 September 2018, HC 1569 of session 2017–19, p 3.
[26] Ministry of Defence, 'Defence in Global Britain', 11 February 2019.
[27] Labour Party, 'Nia Griffith Responds to Gavin Williamson Speech', 11 February 2019.
[28] NATO, 'Relations with the European Union', 18 July 2018.
[29] ibid.
[30] NATO, *NATO—EU Relations*, July 2018, p 2.
[31] See: Institute for Government, 'UK–EU Defence and Security Cooperation After Brexit', 31 October 2018; Centre for European Reform, 'NATO, the EU and Brexit: Joining Forces?', 5 July 2016; and UK in a Changing Europe, 'Brexit and NATO: an Essential Piece of the Puzzle', 9 May 2018.
[32] House of Commons Defence Committee, *Indispensable Allies: US, NATO and UK Defence Relations*, 26 June 2018, HC 387 of session 2017–19, p 29.
[33] House of Commons Defence Committee, *Indispensable Allies: US, NATO and UK Defence Relations: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report*, 20 September 2018, HC 1569 of session 2017–19, p 10.
[34] Julian E Barnes and Helene Cooper, 'Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia', *New York Times*, 14 January 2019.
[35] ibid.
[36] House of Commons, 'Written Question: NATO', 8 February 2019, 216901.
[37] NATO, 'Joint Press Point', 6 February 2019.
[38] Prime Minister's Office, 'UK to Host NATO 70th Anniversary Meeting', 6 February 2019.
[39] NATO, 'What Is NATO?', accessed 8 February 2019.
[40] NATO, 'A Short History of NATO', accessed 8 February 2019.
[41] United Nations Treaty Series, *Treaty of Alliance and Mutual Assistance Between His Majesty in Respect of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the President of the French Republic*, 4 March 1947, p 188.
[42] US Department of State, 'The Truman Doctrine, 1947', accessed 11 February 2019.
[43] William Park, *Defending the West: A History of NATO*, 1986, p 5.
[44] ibid.
[45] ibid.
[46] ibid.
[47] ibid, p 4.
[48] Gustav Schmidt (ed), *A History of NATO: The First Fifty Years*, 2001, pp 3–5.
[49] William Park, *Defending the West: A History of NATO*, 1986, p 5.
[50] NATO, 'The North Atlantic Treaty', 4 April 1949.
[51] ibid.
[52] ibid.
[53] ibid.
[54] NATO, 'Collective Defence—Article 5', 12 June 2018.
[55] NATO, 'What Is NATO?', accessed 8 February 2019.
[56] National Security Archive, George Washington University, 'NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard', 12 December 2017.
[57] NATO, 'What Is NATO?', accessed 8 February 2019.
[58] NATO, 'NATO Allies Sign Accession Protocol for the Future Republic of North Macedonia', 6 February 2019.