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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

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Updated: April 2, 2014

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Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a Cold War cornerstone of transatlantic security, has significantly recast its role in the past twenty years. Founded in 1949 as a bulwark against Soviet aggression, NATO has evolved to confront global threats ranging from piracy off the Horn of Africa to Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan. But while the modern NATO is generally more recognized for its role beyond rather than within Europe, Russian actions in recent years, particularly its 2008 conflict with Georgia and its 2014 annexation of Crimea, have [refocused the alliance's attention](#) on the continent. Recent developments have also exposed unresolved tensions over NATO's expansion into the former Soviet sphere.

A Post-Cold War Pivot

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, Western leaders intensely debated the future direction of the transatlantic alliance. The Clinton administration favored expanding NATO to both extend its security umbrella to the east and consolidate democratic gains in the former

Warsaw Pact. Others wished to peel back the Pentagon's commitments in Europe with the fading of the Soviet threat.

Across the Atlantic, NATO allies were also split on the issue. London feared enlargement would dilute the alliance, while Paris believed it would give NATO too much influence. Many in France hoped to integrate former Soviet states via European institutions. There was also concern about alienating Russia.

For the White House, the decision held larger meaning. "[President Clinton] considered NATO enlargement a litmus test of whether the U.S. would remain internationally engaged and defeat the isolationist and unilateralist sentiments that were emerging," wrote Ronald D. Asmus, one of the intellectual architects of NATO expansion, in [Opening NATO's Door \(2002\)](#).

In his first trip to Europe as president (January 1994), Clinton announced that NATO enlargement was "no longer a question of whether but when and how." Just days before, alliance leaders approved the launch of the [Partnership for Peace](#), a program designed to strengthen ties with Central and Eastern European countries, including many former Soviet republics like Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia.



(Courtesy NATO/Youtube)

Beyond Collective Defense

Many defense planners also felt that a post-Cold War vision for NATO needed to look beyond collective defense—Article V of the [North Atlantic Treaty](#) states that "an armed attack against one or more [member states] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all"—and focus on confronting acute instability outside its membership."The common denominator of all the new security problems in Europe is that they all lie beyond NATO's current borders," said Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN) in a [1993 speech](#) titled "NATO: Out of Area or Out of Business."

The breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and the onset of bloody ethnic conflict tested the alliance on this point almost immediately. What began as a mission to impose a UN-sanctioned no-fly zone over Bosnia and Herzegovina evolved into a bombing campaign on Bosnian Serb forces that military experts say was essential in ending the conflict. It was during [Operation Deny Flight \(April 1994\)](#) that NATO conducted its first combat operations in its forty-year history, shooting down four Bosnian Serb aircraft.

NATO Operations

As of 2014, NATO pursues five missions: peacekeeping operations in Kosovo; anti-terrorism patrols in the Mediterranean; anti-piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off the Horn of Africa; assistance to the African Union in Somalia; and the top alliance priority, the [International Security Assistance Force \(ISAF\)](#) mission in Afghanistan.

Headquartered in Brussels, Belgium, NATO is a consensus-based alliance, where decisions reflect the membership's collective will. But individual states or subgroups of allies may initiate action outside NATO auspices. For instance, the United States, France, and the UK began policing a UN-sanctioned no-fly zone in Libya in early 2011, and within days transferred command of the operation to NATO (once Turkish concerns had been managed). At the same time, all member states are not required to participate in every operation. For instance, Germany and Poland declined to contribute directly to the campaign in Libya.

NATO's military structure is split between two strategic commands: the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe located near Mons, Belgium, and the Allied Command Transformation located in Norfolk, Virginia. The [Supreme Allied Commander Europe](#), always a U.S. flag or general officer (currently Gen. Philip M. Breedlove) heads all NATO military operations. Although the alliance has an integrated command, most forces remain under their respective national commands until NATO-specific operations commence.

NATO's secretary general, currently Denmark's Anders Fogh Rasmussen, serves a four-year term as chief administrator and international envoy. (Former Norwegian prime minister Jens Stoltenberg will take office October 2014.) The [North Atlantic Council](#) is the alliance's principal political organization, composed of high-level delegates from each member state.

Sharing the Burden

The NATO budget is composed of [three separate accounts](#) dedicated to common alliance activities: funding civilian and military headquarters and certain security infrastructure. Member countries contribute to these budgets based on their relative economic size. As of 2014, the U.S. contribution was roughly 22 percent across all three accounts.

But the primary financial contribution made by member states is the cost of deploying their respective armed forces for NATO-led operations. These expenses are not part of the formal NATO budget. As of 2014, the Pentagon accounted for more than 70 percent of all [NATO defense spending](#), up from half during the Cold War.

Many U.S. officials have been critical of European members for hollowing their defenses. In 2006, members committed to spending 2 percent of GDP on defense, but by 2012 just four met this target—the United States, Britain, Greece, and Estonia.

In his [final policy speech](#) as U.S. defense secretary in June 2011, Robert Gates criticized the weakness of some NATO members, saying that "many of those allies sitting on the sidelines do so not because they do not want to participate, but simply because they can't. The military capabilities simply aren't there." He also reiterated his fears of a "two-tiered alliance," where some members specialize in "soft" humanitarian missions and others in "hard" combat roles. "This is no longer a hypothetical worry," he said. "We are there today. And it is unacceptable."

Secretary-General Rasmussen echoed this concern in his [2012 annual report](#), warning of "an ever greater military reliance on the United States, and growing asymmetries in capability in European allies. This has the potential to undermine alliance solidarity and puts at risk the ability of the European allies to act without the involvement of the United States."

Afghanistan and ISAF

NATO invoked its collective defense provision (Article V) for the first time following the September 11 attacks on the United States, perpetrated by the al-Qaeda terrorist network based in Afghanistan. Shortly after U.S.-led forces toppled the Taliban regime in Kabul, the [UN Security Council authorized](#) an International Security Assistance Force to support the new Afghan government. NATO officially assumed command of ISAF in 2003, assuming its first operational commitment beyond Europe. The fact the alliance was used in Afghanistan "was revolutionary," said NATO expert [Stanley Sloan](#) in a 2012 CFR interview. "It was proof the allies have adapted [NATO] to dramatically different tasks than what was anticipated during the Cold War."

But some critics have questioned NATO's battlefield cohesion despite the historic nature of the mission in Afghanistan. The allies agreed on the central goals—the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan—but some members restricted their forces from participating in counterinsurgency missions and put operational restrictions on them, a practice known as "national caveats." Troops from the United States, Britain, Canada, and the Netherlands saw some of the heaviest fighting and bore the largest casualties, stirring resentments among alliance states.

As of February 2014, there were roughly 53,000 [ISAF troops](#) from nearly fifty countries (twenty-eight NATO) serving in Afghanistan, of which 34,000 were U.S. forces. Most are scheduled to leave the country by the end of 2014.

Relations With Russia

Moscow has viewed NATO's post-Cold War expansion in Central and Eastern Europe with great concern. (As of 2014, twelve Partnership for Peace members have joined NATO.) Many current and former Russian leaders believe the alliance's inroads into the former Soviet sphere are a clear betrayal of [alleged guarantees](#) to not expand eastward after German reunification in 1990—although some U.S. officials involved in these discussions dispute this.

To be sure, most Western leaders knew the risks of enlargement. "If there is a long-term danger in keeping NATO as it is, there is immediate danger in changing it too rapidly. Swift expansion of NATO eastward could make a [neo-imperialist Russia](#) a self-fulfilling prophecy," wrote then-secretary of state Warren Christopher in the *Washington Post* in January 1994.

Over the years, NATO and Russia have made significant attempts toward reconciliation, particularly with their signing of the [1997 Founding Act](#), which established an official forum for [bilateral discussions](#), but experts say that a persistent lack of trust has plagued relations.

NATO's Bucharest summit in the spring of 2008 sharply deepened the distrust. The alliance delayed Membership Action Plans for Ukraine and Georgia but declared its support for eventual full membership for both, despite repeated warnings from Russia of political and military consequences. Russia's [invasion of Georgia](#) in the summer, following Georgian shelling of South Ossetia after what it termed an occupation by Russian forces, was a clear signal of Moscow's intentions to protect what it sees as its sphere of influence.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014, which the United States and EU say violated both Ukrainian and international law, will likely poison relations with NATO for the foreseeable future. "We clearly face the [gravest threat to European security](#) since the end of the Cold War," said Secretary-General Rasmussen of Russia's intervention.



People hold a Crimean flag in front of Lenin's statue in the center of Simferopol March 18, 2014. (Photo: David Mdzinarishvili/Courtesy Reuters)

In a March 18, 2014 address honoring the [annexation of Crimea](#), President Vladimir Putin made explicit Russia's deep-seated grievances with the alliance. "They have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders," Putin told Russia's parliament. "In short, we have every reason to assume that the

infamous [Western] policy of containment, led in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, continues today."

Another perennial point of contention has been NATO's deployment of a ballistic missile defense shield across Europe, which the Kremlin asserts will tip the strategic nuclear balance toward the West. "The military people realize missile defense is part of the strategic arsenal of the United States," [Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov](#) said in February 2014. "When a nuclear shield is added to a nuclear sword, it is very tempting to use this offensive defense capability." NATO counters that the system, which is being [rolled out in several phases](#), is not designed to defend against large-scale strikes from Russia or China, but rather to guard against Iranian short- and mid-range missiles.

A Revived Alliance?

Fears of further Russian incursions have prompted alliance leaders to reassess NATO's defenses in Europe, particularly in the East. "This is a wake-up call for the Euro-Atlantic community, for NATO, and for all those committed to a Europe whole, free and at peace," said [Secretary-General Rasmussen](#) in May 2014.

The United States has shored up NATO's air presence over Poland and the Baltic states; other allies, including Britain, Germany, and Denmark, are looking to provide reinforcements as well. NATO is also reconsidering establishing permanent bases in the Baltics, which it has historically avoided for fear of provoking Russia. NATO will also increase outreach to Ukraine—an alliance partner since 1994—including promotion of defense reforms. But as a non-member of the alliance, Ukraine remains outside of NATO's defense perimeter, and there are clear limits on how far it can be brought into institutional structures.

As the Ukraine crisis stretched into the spring, NATO military planners were expected to announce additional measures to strengthen the alliance's collective defenses.

"What NATO countries need is reassurance that they are secure and that members will come to their aid. That is the relevance of NATO," said Lee Feinstein, former U.S. ambassador to Poland, after Russia's annexation of Crimea. "And there's no question that Putin has to take NATO and its Article V commitments very seriously in his calculations."