NATO from the Cold War to Today: Defending Democracy in Europe

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U.S. President Harry S. Truman signs a proclamation declaring into effect the 12-nation Atlantic Pact binding North America and Western Europe in a common defense alliance. AP Photo by: Byron Rollins

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, known as NATO, is a group of countries. They are allies, which means they are on the same side. NATO is called an alliance.

The United States, Canada and many countries in Europe belong to NATO. NATO's main office is in Belgium, a country in Europe.

**NATO's member countries**

NATO began in 1949. The countries joined together to protect themselves against the Soviet Union. At first, there were 12 member countries.

NATO still exists today. Its goals are different. The Soviet Union broke apart in the 1990s. However, NATO countries still benefit by working together.
Today, there are 26 member countries.

Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States were once allies. They fought together in World War II.

This changed after World War II. The U.S. did not get along with the Soviet Union anymore.

**Worried about the Soviet Union**

At that time, the United States was the most powerful country in the world.

The Soviet Union was the most powerful country in Europe.

The two countries were different. They had different ideas about the government and the economy.

A country's government makes and enforces laws. A country's economy controls how goods are made and distributed. The Soviet Union was led by communists. Communism is one idea about government and the economy. In the Soviet Union, the government owned everything. People did not own anything.
Capitalism versus communism

The U.S. thought about the government and the economy differently. It preferred the idea of capitalism. The government owns very little. People can own as much as they can afford to buy.

The two ideas of capitalism and communism created distance between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. They disagreed about which one was better. This was one reason for the Cold War. Another reason was democracy. The U.S. and its allies were democracies. People could vote for their leaders. Democracy was very limited in the Soviet Union, where the Communist Party ran the country.

In Europe, many countries were weak from the war. The Soviet Union took charge of some of them. The U.S. worried it might try to take charge of more countries.

NATO is formed

In 1947, U.S. President Harry S. Truman decided America would fight communism. A year later, the U.S. gave European countries money to help them recover from the war.

Then in 1949, the U.S. and others signed the North Atlantic Treaty. The countries agreed to help each other if they were attacked. NATO was born.

For the next 40 years, the U.S. and the Soviet Union competed. This was a period known as the Cold War. In many ways the Cold War was a conflict of ideas. The U.S. wanted to keep communism from spreading to other countries.

The Cold War ends

NATO countries worked together to build military bases. The United States provided most of the money. It became NATO's military leader.

The Cold War was ending in the late 1980s and the Soviet Union began to break apart into separate countries. There are 15 countries today that were once part of the Soviet Union. Russia is one of them.

In 1990, NATO countries and the Soviet Union signed a treaty. They said that they were no longer enemies. In 1991 the Soviet Union broke up. Russia and the other countries in the Soviet Union were no longer communist.

NATO today

NATO still exists today. The Cold War is over, though. Many people wonder if NATO is needed.
NATO countries share weapons, supplies and communications. NATO members also helped the United States after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

NATO also works with countries that are not members. One of those countries is Russia.