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

NATO stands for North Atlantic Treaty Organization. NATO is a group of countries. They formed the group for military and political reasons.

The member countries are the United States, Canada and many countries in Europe. NATO main office is in Brussels, Belgium, which is in Europe.

**NATO's membership**

NATO was established in 1949. The member countries joined together to protect themselves against the Soviet Union and its allies in eastern Europe. Later, after the Soviet Union broke apart in 1991, NATO's focus changed.
There were originally 12 members of NATO. Later, seven more western European countries joined. Then, in 2004, many eastern European countries also joined NATO. Today, there are 26 member countries.

Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States were allies during World War II. After the war, Great Britain and the United States were no longer allies with the Soviet Union.

**After World War II**

The United States had developed into the world’s leading power. America had the democratic government and free market economy that it still has today.

In Europe, the Soviet Union was the most powerful. Its government controlled society and the economy. Many of Europe’s countries were weak from the war, and the Soviet Union included the weak eastern Europe countries into a bloc. Soviet power was spreading.

In 1947, United States President Harry S. Truman announced the Truman Doctrine. Its goal was to fight communism around the world.
U.S. worried about communism

Communism is one idea about the role the government should play in a country's economy. A country's government makes and enforces laws. An economy controls how goods are made and distributed. The Soviet Union was led by communists. The government owned everything.

The United States worried about communism spreading. In the U.S., the government is more separate from the economy. The government does not own everything. People can own private property.

Much of the Cold War was about a divide between capitalism and communism. It was also about democracy. The United States and its allies had democratic governments. Citizens vote for their leaders. Democracy in the Soviet Union was very limited. The Communist Party ran everything.

The Marshall Plan and NATO

In 1948, the United States launched the Marshall Plan to help Europe recover from the war. The Marshall Plan poured billions of dollars of aid into Europe.

The Marshall Plan was meant to discourage communism. The Soviet Union did not allow its eastern European allies to be part of the plan.

A year later, the United States and others signed the North Atlantic Treaty. NATO was officially born. The member nations agreed that an attack against one of them would be considered an attack against them all.

Creating NATO was one of the most important parts of the Cold War. For more than 40 years, the Soviet Union and its supporters were against the United States and its allies.

The Warsaw Pact

In NATO countries worked together to build military bases and communications systems. The United States provided most of the money and was NATO's military leader.

After World War II, Germany was divided. East Germany was supported by the Soviet Union. West Germany joined NATO in 1955. The Soviet Union responded by creating the Warsaw Pact, which was a group made of its allies in eastern Europe.

By then, NATO had built up its nuclear weapons. This was seen as a way to avoid war. It meant that a Soviet attack could be met by an overwhelming nuclear response by NATO.
The Cold War ends

The Cold War was winding down by the late 1980s as the Soviet Union began to break apart. Many countries were moving away from communist ideas. This drastically changed the balance between eastern and western Europe.

In July 1990, NATO and Warsaw Pact leaders signed a treaty. They declared that they were no longer enemies. The Warsaw Pact ended a year later, though NATO continues today.

After the Cold War, many questioned whether NATO was still useful. Others, however, worried that Russia could again become a threat. Either way, NATO allowed member countries to share weapons, supplies and communications.

NATO's new role

Since then, NATO troops have been sent to war zones. One examples is the civil war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. NATO members helped the United States in its efforts to fight terrorism after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

NATO also consulted with nonmember countries, including Russia. NATO established the Partnership for Peace in 1994. The idea was to help European countries become stronger and reach out to former rivals.

The relationship between NATO and Russia went even further in 2002. This is when the NATO-Russia Council was formed.