NATO stands for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which is a political and military alliance. Its members are the United States, Canada and many European countries. NATO headquarters are in Brussels, Belgium.

**NATO’s changing membership**

NATO was established in 1949 as a defense against the Soviet Union and its eastern European allies. But, its goals changed following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991.

There were originally 12 members of NATO. They were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States.
Later, Greece, Turkey, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic joined NATO. Then, in 2004, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia also joined NATO.

Today, there are 26 member countries.

Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States fought as allies during World War II. But when the war ended in 1945, the alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States broke apart.

**U.S. worried about communism**

The Soviet Union, which had a communist economic system and government-controlled economy, was the single greatest power in Europe at that time.

The United States had developed into the world’s leading political and economic power, with the democratic government and free market economy that it still has today.
Communism and capitalism are different ways of thinking about how involved a government should be in a country's economy. Governments make and enforce laws, while economies control the production and distribution of goods. Communism is when the government controls the entire economy and nobody owns private property. In capitalism, the government does not control the economy. People can own as much property as they can afford to buy. Also, the United States and its allies had democratic governments. People in democracies vote for their leaders. Democracy was very limited in the Soviet Union. The Communist Party controlled the government and the economy. Much of the Cold War was about the rift between these two ways of thinking.

**The Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan**

Following World War II, the rest of the European nations were economically and socially devastated. The Soviet Union incorporated the weakened nations of eastern Europe into a bloc along its western frontier. Soviet influence was spreading.

To the United States, this was troubling.

In 1947, United States President Harry S. Truman announced that the United States would help anti-communist actions around the world. This became known as the Truman Doctrine.

In 1948, the United States launched the European Recovery Program, or Marshall Plan. It was meant to offset communist efforts by helping the Europe’s war-torn economies. The Marshall Plan poured billions of dollars of aid into Europe. The Soviet Union did not allow its eastern European allies to participate in the plan.

**The creation of NATO**

A year later, the United States and Canada signed the North Atlantic Treaty along with 12 other countries. NATO was officially born. The member nations agreed that “an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.”

The creation of NATO was one of the most important events in the early years of the Cold War. For more than 40 years, Soviet Union and its supporters were against the United States and its allies.

In NATO countries worked together to build military bases and communications systems. The United States provided the largest share of the funding. In 1950, NATO began to set up an integrated military force in Europe. This established America as NATO’s military leader.
NATO’s rival: the Warsaw Pact

After World War II, Germany was divided into four main zones of occupation. East Germany was made up of the Soviet zone, and West Germany included the American, British, and French zones. In 1949, East Germany and West Germany became their own countries. West Germany joined NATO in 1955. The Soviet Union responded by creating the Warsaw Pact. This was a security alliance made up of the Soviet allies in eastern Europe.

By then, NATO had built up its nuclear weapons. This was seen as a deterrent to war because it meant that a Soviet attack could be met by an overwhelming nuclear response.

In 1966, the French government withdrew from NATO’s integrated military force, though it remained a NATO member and rejoined the military committee in 1995. The country was concerned that the United States was dominating NATO.

The Cold War ends

By the late 1980s, the Cold War was winding down as the Soviet Union began to unravel. Many countries reorganized themselves, 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 and declared that they were no longer enemies. The Warsaw Pact broke apart 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. Regardless, NATO continued to provide the ability to share resources such as weapons, supplies and communications.

NATO reevaluated its mission during a civil war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. NATO warplanes struck forces there, and NATO peacekeeping troops were later sent to the area as the fighting ended.

Fighting terror, adding members

After the deadly terrorist attacks in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, NATO members helped the United States in its efforts to fight terrorism.

The most visible sign of NATO’s changes after the Cold War was that it has more member countries. There were guidelines for these countries, including supporting democracy and economies not controlled by the government.

NATO also began to consult with nonmember countries, including Russia. The Partnership for Peace was established in 1994 to promote European strength while reaching out to former rivals. The cooperative relationship between NATO and Russia was furthered with the creation of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002.