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Canada, the European Union and NATO

Handout A: Historical Perspective



Source: NATO, 2025 member map, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/organization/nato-on-the-map>

Canada

The 20th Century saw Canada take part in both World Wars, sending thousands of soldiers to fight on European soil. In the First World War, the Dominion of Canada participated as a part of the British Empire, and in the Second World War, Canada participated as its own independent nation. These two conflicts are widely viewed as formative moments in Canadian history and for Canadian identity.

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Canada took part in the League of Nations during the Interwar period, and immediately following World War II, Canada joined the United Nations in 1945. Four years later, in 1949, Canada became a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), along with the United States and ten European countries.² This was Canada's first peacetime military alliance, placing the nation in a defensive security arrangement with the United States, Britain, and the nations of Western Europe. NATO was formed to “[deter] Soviet expansionism, [forbid] the revival of nationalist militarism in Europe through a strong North American presence on the continent, and [encourage] European political integration.”³ In the period after World War II, NATO reinforced the US’ Marshall Plan, an extensive program of economic aid to rebuild the war-torn countries of Europe, helping to assure that Western Europe would remain strong in the face of potential Soviet encroachment. During the Cold War, up until the collapse of the Soviet Union (also known as the USSR) in 1991, NATO forces provided a frontline deterrence against the Soviet Union and its satellite states which formed a Soviet-led military alliance called the Warsaw Pact in 1955. The European continent formed the central focus of NATO activities during the Cold War.



Source: Encyclopædia Britannica.

² Founding members were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

³ NATO History: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_139339.htm

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War came to an end. The new Russian leadership seemed committed to a Westernizing path, involving democratic and economic reform. Several former satellite countries of Central and Eastern Europe that were once under Soviet influence aspired to EU membership, becoming closer to the West. Therefore, in the early 1990s, many analysts believed that the original NATO mandate might contract, as the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and Russia's westward turn seemed to suggest NATO had lost its relevance.

Although the Soviet Union collapsed, NATO's two other original mandates still held: to deter the rise of militant nationalism and to provide the foundation of collective security that would encourage democratization and political integration in Europe. Moreover, NATO member states decided to reconfigure its purpose to include new tasks, such as peacekeeping and crisis-management. As the definition of 'Europe' expanded eastward following the fall of the Iron Curtain, so did NATO. After the 1990s, NATO positioned itself as the foundation for a larger, pan-European security architecture. More recently, the organization has asserted its members' strategic interests in countering terrorism, cyber defence, hybrid warfare, the security implications for China's rise, and safeguarding the freedom and security of all Allies, against all threats from cyber, space, land, air, and sea domains.

NATO has also seen a considerable expansion of membership since its founding, with the addition of Greece and Turkey in 1952, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) in 1955, and Spain in 1982. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, several post-communist states joined (Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland in 1999). In 2004, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became the only members once to be directly part of the Soviet Union. Currently NATO has thirty-two members, including the recent addition of Finland in 2023, and Sweden in 2024. Following a continual process of enlargement to include all but four⁴ of the member states of the European Union, including Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta. All four states uphold positions of neutrality, and all except Cyprus are members of NATO's Partnership for Peace.

At the same time, Russia is not a member of NATO and has felt threatened by the expansion of NATO into its former sphere of influence. As the successor to the USSR, the Russian Federation has been identified in the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept as, "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area."

NATO in the post-Cold War period

NATO's first test in the post-Cold War period was in the Yugoslav civil war, where NATO deployed an UN-mandated, multinational force of 60,000 soldiers to help implement the Dayton Peace Agreement and to create the conditions for a self-sustaining peace. In 2004, NATO handed over this role to the EU.

The events of September 11, 2001, led to NATO invoking its collective defence clause for the first time in its history. A coalition of countries – including many NATO allies – militarily intervened in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001.

⁴ Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta are not NATO members.

As NATO continued to accept new members and build new partnerships, the NATO- Russia Council was established in 2002. However, after Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Alliance suspended all cooperation between NATO and Russia, designating Russia as the Alliance's largest immediate threat.

Over the course of the last decade, a number of security threats have served as a sobering reminder of the importance of NATO's core task: collective defence. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, its ongoing aggression against Ukraine, the Syrian conflict, and the rise of ISIL and global terrorism have all reinforced this notion. Additionally, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has completely altered NATO's security environment, leading to major increases in defence spending across the Allied states.

Canada's current involvement comes primarily in the form of providing armed forces to be stationed in Latvia, as part of NATO's 'Enhanced Forward Presence' in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. This measure is intended to provide reassurance and reinforce the visibility of NATO's commitment that "an attack on one Ally will be considered an attack on the whole Alliance".⁵ In addition to this, Canada also acts as the lead nation for NATO's multinational battlegroup in Latvia, where it coordinates and commands the allied forces stationed there. This is an essential aspect of NATO's reinforced deterrence priority since 2017.

Resources:

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⁵ Government of Canada. *Operation REASSURANCE*. (26 August 2025). Available at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-reassurance.html>