

GREAT DECISIONS

1918 • FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION

HIGH SCHOOL

OCTOBER 2023

TEACHERS:
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NATO

**WAR IN
UKRAINE**

**A LONG
HISTORY**

**BATTLING
TERRORISM**

**LOOKING
FORWARD**

BY MELISSA MCDANIEL





UNITED AGAINST CONFLICT

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (third from right) was invited to attend a July 2023 meeting of NATO leaders, where he sought promises of aid in defending his country from Russian attacks even though Ukraine is not a NATO member nation.

In early 2022, Russian tanks and troops amassed along the border between Russia and [Ukraine](#). Russia had previously invaded Ukraine in 2014, claiming some Ukrainian land. But this time, Russia was aiming for Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital. On February 24, Russia attacked. Tanks rumbled across the border, and missiles rained down on Ukrainian cities.

Russia dwarfs Ukraine. It has more than 100 million more people and a far larger army. The United States and many European nations began sending Ukraine weapons and ammunition to help counter the Russian attack. But the situation would have been vastly different if Ukraine were

part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In fact, the invasion would have been unlikely to happen at all.

NATO is a defensive military **alliance** comprising many European nations as well as the United States and Canada. NATO members are committed to supporting each other in the event of an attack. It differs greatly from the **United Nations** (UN), an international organization made up of almost all the nations in the world. The [goal of the UN](#) is to solve conflicts between nations and promote cooperation. NATO is much smaller. Countries have to be invited to join, and they are obligated to defend each other.

The invasion of Ukraine alarmed other nations that border Russia. Like Ukraine, many had been part of the Soviet Union, a large nation that spread from Eastern Europe all the way across Asia. In 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved and became fifteen separate countries, the most powerful being Russia. In recent years, Russia has sometimes laid claim to parts of neighboring countries such as Georgia and Ukraine or even questioned their **sovereignty**. Some of these nations, including Lithuania and Latvia, became [members of NATO](#). This gave them security that Russia would not attack them because doing so could start a larger war.

Other European countries near Russia had not been part of the Soviet Union and were not NATO members. Finland and Sweden had maintained **neutrality** throughout the **Cold War** as the United States and the Soviet Union vied for power. But the Russian invasion of Ukraine so rattled them that Finland has since joined NATO and Sweden has begun the process of joining.

THE HISTORY OF THE ALLIANCE

NATO was created in 1949, after World War II, to defend Western Europe from Soviet expansion. At the time, the Soviet Union had begun to dominate countries in Eastern Europe. Soviet troops were stationed in Eastern and central Europe, and the US was concerned that Soviet power would spread into Western Europe.



Surrounded by ambassadors from the original NATO nations, US president Harry S. Truman signs a proclamation making NATO official in 1949.

THE DEBATE

IS NATO STILL NECESSARY?

YES

- ✓ Russia and other countries, such as China, have been aggressive toward many of their neighbors.
- ✓ Alliances that serve as a **deterrent** could be useful in an uncertain future.
- ✓ NATO can be an important part of the response toward problems ranging from climate change to terrorism.

NO

- ✗ Russia is much weaker than the Soviet Union was and is not a threat to Europe.
- ✗ The presence of NATO nearby makes Russia more aggressive.
- ✗ Countries should be self-sufficient for their defense.



NATOWikimedia

When NATO was formed, it included twelve countries, including the US. The member states agreed to work together to deter Soviet aggression in Europe. They coordinated on military planning and built bases and airfields

throughout Europe to support NATO forces.

Over the years, NATO gradually expanded. In the 1990s and 2000s, the alliance grew quickly as many Eastern European nations rushed to join following



Musadeq Srdceq/AP Images

An Italian soldier instructs Afghan police at a NATO training facility during the War in Afghanistan. Occurring in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the US, the war was the first conflict where NATO participated directly in combat.

the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, NATO has thirty-one member nations.

The heart of the treaty that established NATO is **Article 5**. It states that an armed attack against one member nation is an attack against all. Although NATO has existed for more than seventy years, Article 5 has been invoked only once, following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. The US led NATO forces into Afghanistan, and NATO aircraft patrolled the skies over the US for months after the attacks.

SHARING COSTS

In the early years of NATO, the US contributed most of the funds needed for NATO to function because it was wealthier than the other member nations. Many NATO nations had suffered severe damage during World War II and were still rebuilding.

As other NATO members grew

more prosperous, the United States encouraged them to spend more. In 2014, NATO members agreed to spend 2% of their **gross domestic product** (GDP)—the total value of all the goods and services produced in the country—on their militaries. (The US typically spends about 3.5%.) But by 2023, only ten NATO countries were meeting that goal. Still, many NATO nations

have increased their defense spending in recent years as Russia has become more threatening.

The United States’ European allies have also contributed to the common defense in ways beyond just their defense spending. For example, they have paid for construction costs of US military bases in their territory, and they have allowed the US to use the

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE UNITED STATES PAY TO DEFEND OTHER COUNTRIES?

YES

- ✓ The US is wealthy and can afford to pay more than some countries.
- ✓ It is in the interest of the United States to deter Russian aggression.
- ✓ The NATO countries have been valuable US allies, and the US has a responsibility to them.

NO

- ✗ Helping defend other countries could drag the US into wars that it has no interest in.
- ✗ The US should be focused on solving problems at home.
- ✗ The US has a large national debt that it should pay off before it spends money helping other countries.



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land tax-free. The NATO allies also helped the US avoid direct conflict with Russia during the Cold War era.

When Donald Trump was president, he frequently complained about NATO members not paying their fair share. He stated that the United States was not getting much for all the money it spent on NATO. He often threatened to withdraw from the alliance. Since Joe Biden became president, he has tried to reassert the place of the US as a global leader. He has smoothed relations with other NATO members and tried to assure them that the US remains committed to the alliance.

NATO IN ACTION

During the Cold War, the NATO nations and the Soviet Union were at a **stalemate**. The Cold War ended without outright conflict between them and without Article 5 being invoked. NATO had succeeded at its goal of preventing war in Western Europe.

The first military action by NATO was not until the 1990s. Violence broke out in Yugoslavia, a southeastern European nation that broke apart following the Cold War. In 1992, NATO intervened in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a part of the former Yugoslavia, by enforcing a **no-fly zone**.

Since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, NATO's definition of an attack has included international terrorism. With an expanded mission, NATO has taken on varied challenges. It has trained troops to provide security in Afghanistan, and it has secured trade routes

that pirates were attacking in the Mediterranean Sea.

As the world continues to change, NATO's mission will also change. The alliance will have to deal with [climate change](#), a growing number of [refugees](#), and the [disinformation](#) that has swamped social media. NATO is also seeking greater cooperation with Japan, Korea, and other Asian nations, in part to counter the growing power of China.

THE FUTURE OF NATO

Until Russia invaded Ukraine, some people doubted whether NATO was [still relevant](#). They did not consider Russia a real threat to

the West. In previous years, Russia had invaded the nations of Georgia and Ukraine, but these attacks had not prompted major responses from the United States and European nations. Many people thought major wars in Europe were a thing of the past.

The invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, was on a much larger scale than previous conflicts. Shortly before the invasion, Russian leader Vladimir Putin gave a speech denying Ukraine's legitimacy as a country. He argued that Ukraine was fundamentally Russian.

NATO troops are not active participants in the war in Ukraine. But NATO nations are helping





Yevhenii Zakhorodnii/Getty Images Ukraine/Getty Images

Ukrainian soldiers undergo training in May 2023. Thanks to financial aid and equipment supplied by NATO nations, Ukraine has been able to put up a surprisingly effective defense against Russia's attacks.

arm Ukraine. Meanwhile, many NATO nations are improving their own defenses in case the situation escalates.

Some people believe the invasion was caused partially because Russia felt threatened by NATO's expansion to the east. But Russia already borders several NATO nations. And although Ukraine wanted to join the alliance, it was not about to happen. Moreover, NATO is a defensive alliance, not an active threat to Russia.

For years, Ukraine has expressed interest in joining NATO because it wants protection against future Russian aggression. In a July 2023 meeting, NATO said Ukraine would eventually be invited to join the alliance but refused to give a clear timeline. NATO is not ready to bring

Ukraine into the alliance because NATO nations do not want to get involved in an active war. Some are hesitant to invite a nation with

disputed borders to be a NATO member. The odds of military conflicts arising that may require NATO action are too great.

THE DEBATE

SHOULD UKRAINE BE ADMITTED TO NATO?

<p style="margin: 0;">YES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Russia has invaded Ukraine more than once, and Ukraine needs help protecting itself. ✓ Ukrainian armed forces have significantly damaged the Russian military and deserve to be full-fledged members. ✓ Ukraine has been in a long-time partnership with NATO, so they already have experience working together. 	<p style="margin: 0;">NO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ It would antagonize Russia and make the world a more dangerous place. ✗ The US might be drawn into direct conflict with a nuclear power. ✗ Most of the cost of defending Ukraine from Russia would be paid by the current NATO countries.
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Government of Ukraine/Wikimedia

WHAT YOU CAN DO

• **Participate** in [Model NATO](#) or similar programs that simulate NATO actions during crises.

These programs allow students to dive into the details of how decisions are made among NATO nations.

• **Stay informed** by reading reliable news sources to learn what NATO is doing.

• **Write or call elected officials** to let them know what you think about NATO and other aspects of international diplomacy.

• **Vote** when you are old enough.

In most cases, you can't vote until you're 18, but in many states you can register at 16 or 17, and you'll be all set when 18 rolls around.

WHAT TEENS THINK

We asked high school students to let us know what they think about NATO, and here's what they had to say.



In today's fractured world, NATO remains a unifying mosaic of vigilance.

—Anahita P., *Imagine International Academy of North Texas, McKinney, TX*



The very knowledge of powerful nations being allied and willing to support one another in a potential conflict is enough to scare away most countries or leaders

considering stirring up trouble.

—Liam C., *North Side High School, Fort Wayne, IN*



NATO enhances the collective capabilities of member countries, making them more resilient against emerging security challenges such as cyber threats, terrorism, and border disputes.

—Gabriel M., *Westmoore High School, Oklahoma City, OK*



NATO showcased its commitment to collective defense by invoking Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty most recently after the September 11 attacks in 2001. This swift action to mobilize nations

against extremism displayed the organization's readiness to respond to global security threats.

—Annika S., *The American School in London, London, England*

Balancing the diverse interests, concerns, and strategies of each participating nation is a challenge that requires compromise.

—Felipe H., *PrepaTec Eugenio Garza Lagüera, Monterrey, Mexico*

Interested in writing for Great Decisions High School? [Click here to submit your answer to the following prompt:](#) *Do you ever avoid purchasing products that are made in China? Why or why not?* Please keep your answer to 150 words or less. Good luck!



Ukraine in NATO by Monte Wolverton, Battle Ground, WA/PoliticalCartoons.com

LOCKED OUT

1. What is this cartoon trying to say? Why do or don't you agree with its message?
2. Is it fair for NATO to deny membership to a country that wants to join? Explain your answer and what might change your opinion on this?
3. Do you think Ukraine would still be trying to join NATO if it weren't under attack from Russia? How could it be a valuable addition to the alliance in the future?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. Why should or shouldn't wealthy countries pay to assist poorer countries with defense and other needs?
2. When countries like Russia or China try to invade or otherwise pressure their neighbors, how does it affect the US?
3. **YOUR STORY:** Have you or anyone you know been directly affected by the war in Ukraine? If so, how has this influenced your opinion on NATO?

KEY WORDS & TERMS

alliance
Article 5
Cold War
deterrent
gross domestic product

neutrality
no-fly zone
sovereignty
stalemate
United Nations



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GREAT DECISIONS NATO

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