

The Origins of NATO

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

Over the past six decades, NATO has held together and grown, but not without its share of controversy and dissent.

In 1949, after two world wars, Europe was in shambles and the communist Soviet Union had become the most powerful military force on the continent. The democracies of Western Europe, fearing for their security, asked the United States to join them in a permanent political alliance. Lawrence Kaplan, a history professor at Georgetown University, says the US was uncertain.

"We did not want to make that kind of obligation, which would indeed have broken with the past. We didn't want to join a European alliance."

For over 140 years, the United States had made a principle of avoiding entanglements with foreign powers. But, Kaplan says, "The British and the French were so persistent. So the 'North Atlantic' becomes the key term to get away from the notion that this was joining Europe. Europe was joining us in a very specific way."

US President Harry Truman explained his decision to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, as part of the struggle between communism and democracy known increasingly then as a "Cold War."

Truman, at the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, said, "For us, war is not inevitable. We do not believe that there are blind tides of history which sweep men one way or another. In our own time, we've seen brave men overcome obstacles that seem insurmountable, and forces that seem overwhelming. Men with courage and vision can still determine their own destiny. They can choose slavery or freedom, war or peace. I have no doubt which they will choose. The treaty we are signing here today is evidence of the path they will follow."

Kaplan says the critical takeaway from the treaty is Article 5: If there were an attack on any one member of the alliance, each member would respond according to its constitutional processes.

In addition to fears of Soviet aggression, European democracies also feared a resurgent Germany. Accordingly, NATO's founding Secretary General, Lord Ismay, memorably described the purpose of the treaty in Europe as "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down."

However, says Kaplan, there was another goal. "That was to reorganize Europe to see to it that there never would be a World War III or another self-destructive war such as Europe has had so many times since the 17th century."

This secondary goal eventually made it necessary to reconsider German membership in the alliance. "Because there was no real rehabilitation of Europe without bringing the Germans in," says Kaplan, "and the question was always how to bring the Germans in without reviving the curse of the past."

The Germany that joined NATO was, more specifically, the Federal Republic of West Germany. East Germany at the time was a Soviet satellite state, and the border between the two was one of the great flashpoints of the Cold War. A different flashpoint lay far to the east, in Korea.

"The fear was," explains Kaplan, "in June of 1950 that the Soviets would be using the Asian conflict as a model for a European conflict, in which the East Germans would play the role of the North Koreans and would invade West Germany."

As NATO evolved, Soviet strategy evolved with it. The Warsaw pact formed in 1955. Moscow organized all Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe into a military coalition of its own. In 1956, tensions with Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser over his nationalization of the Suez canal sparked a dispute among NATO member states.

France and Britain bombed Cairo, while smaller NATO member states publicly conveyed their opposition to the attack.

Another greater challenge to NATO unity came ten years later, when French president Charles de Gaulle quit the alliance – and evicted its leadership and headquarters from his country.

Relations soured between the US and other NATO allies over the American war in Vietnam, which it fought until 1975. But five years later, Europe again looked to the United States for assurance.

"By 1980," says Kaplan, "the Europeans were fearful that the Soviets, who had developed new intermediate-range nuclear weapons, aimed at European cities, would leave them defenseless if the United States wouldn't counter."

President Ronald Reagan, a strong opponent of communism for decades, did his best to reassure Europe.

"This energized our allies," explains Kaplan, "knowing that under Reagan we were very much on their side. But at the same time, [it] worried them. Were we going too far? Would we nudge the Soviets into some kind of military conflict? That didn't happen."

The divide between East and West Germany was breached in 1989. This historic shift sparked obvious questions for NATO.

"The question arose in 1990 and 1991," says Kaplan, "Where do we go from here? Do we need NATO any longer? This was one of the options – to dissolve the alliance. We have this whole issue of how the future should play out and the answer was that NATO would have to enlarge."

Former Soviet satellite states Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic – now newly minted democracies – joined the alliance in a moving ceremony in 1999.

But a new European crisis emerged in the Balkans – bloody ethnic wars among Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Between 1992 and 1995, NATO intervened: first to support a UN peacekeeping mission; and later to enforce a no-fly zone over Bosnia. NATO's intervention culminated in 1995 in Operation Deliberate Force, an aggressive air campaign against Bosnian Serbs following their massacre of 8,000 unarmed civilians. Finally, in 1999, the conflict approached its climax.

"Just while NATO was celebrating the 50th anniversary of the alliance," says Kaplan, "war broke out in Kosovo. The Albanian majority in that district of the former Yugoslavia, now Serbia, was subject to an attack by the Serbs."

US ambassador Richard Holbrooke was sent to meet with Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic. Holbrooke later said, "Milosevic said to me at one point, 'Are you crazy enough to bomb us over these issues? We're talking about that lousy little Kosovo?' I replied, 'You bet; we're just crazy enough to do it.'"

"We have by the end of the century," says Kaplan, "an enlarged NATO that could be growing even more; a Russia that was unhappy but working with NATO up to a point, and yet ready to challenge it when it could."

Over the past decade, NATO's major commitments and greatest tensions have arisen from the ashes of September 11th.

NATO Secretary General George Robertson, days after the Twin Towers collapse, reassured the United States of NATO's help. "At this critical evening," said Robertson, "the United States can rely on its 18 allies in North America and Europe for both assistance and for support. NATO solidarity remains the essence of our alliance."

Kaplan notes the irony. "Article 5, which was the critical article in the defense of the alliance, was summoned not to defend Europe but to defend the United States which was a wonderful irony. Unfortunately that didn't last very long."

NATO joined the United States in attacking Afghanistan. But as a more prolonged campaign of nation-building set in, differences emerged between Europe and the US over the scope of the operation. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, its longtime German and French allies stridently opposed the war.

But by the time of the Arab spring in 2011, when rebels in Libya faced a campaign of brutal suppression by the government of Muammar al-Gadhafi, it was Europe that pressed for intervention. The US, overextended militarily, was reluctant to take the lead.

"The United States," says Kaplan, "did not want to get involved in Libya. It certainly did not discourage. In fact, it encouraged the allies to take the initiative, because we were in no position to try another Afghanistan or Iraq. The French, Italians, and British did take the initiative and it succeeded. But we also

know that it would not have succeeded had the United States not provided the intelligence, the weaponry, the money that our allies didn't have."

This is the state of affairs in which NATO's member states will convene for a historic summit in Chicago. Afghanistan, Libya, and the future of the alliance will be among the burning issues at the table.

"I think looking back over the 60-plus years history of NATO," says Kaplan, "you can look upon it with a great deal of appreciation. It ended America's non-entanglement, which I think had to be ended formally. It solved the problem of the division of Europe, which was a tremendous issue, between France and Germany. It made for new relationships – economically and politically. My own judgment is more positive than negative. But the future, in my view at least, should be less ambitious than it's been in the recent past."