

# NATO in 2025

## 25 years of strategic engagement

### ISAF in Afghanistan (2003–14)

In 2003, NATO assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, marking its first deployment outside Europe and North America. The mission aimed to support the Afghan government, provide security and facilitate reconstruction following the US-led invasion in 2001. ISAF grew to include troops from over 50 nations and oversaw significant development efforts. However, persistent Taliban insurgency and political instability limited long-term success. The operation concluded in 2014, transitioning to a smaller non-combat mission. ISAF remains one of NATO's most ambitious, and controversial, engagements, shaping its identity as a global security actor.

### Libya intervention (2011)

Following a UN Security Council Resolution authorising intervention to protect civilians during Libya's civil war, NATO launched Operation Unified Protector in March 2011. The mission involved enforcing a no-fly zone, arms embargo and air strikes against forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi. The operation ended in October 2011 after Gaddafi's fall. While it successfully averted mass atrocities in the short term, NATO was criticised for overreaching its mandate and contributing to Libya's long-term instability. The operation remains a defining example of NATO's controversial use of force under the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine.

### Enhanced Forward Presence (2017–present)

In response to growing concerns over Russian aggression, NATO deployed multinational battlegroups to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in 2017 under the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) initiative. These deployments serve as a tripwire to deter further Russian incursions into Eastern Europe and reassure NATO's eastern members. Troops from several member-states rotate through these battlegroups, which are integrated into national forces. EFP represents a return to territorial defence and Cold War-era deterrence strategies, reaffirming NATO's core commitment to collective defence in a more contested European security environment.

### Afghanistan withdrawal (2021)

NATO's 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan marked the end of a two-decade mission that defined the post-9/11 era. As the US negotiated an exit with the Taliban, NATO forces followed suit. The rapid collapse of the Afghan government and return of Taliban rule shocked the international community and raised questions about the effectiveness of NATO's long-term nation-building efforts. The withdrawal prompted internal reflection on the limits of military intervention and the importance of strategic clarity. It marked both a symbolic and practical turning point for the alliance.



### NATO in Iraq (2004–present)

In response to a request from the Iraqi interim government in 2004, NATO launched the NATO Training Mission – Iraq (NTM-I). This focused on training and mentoring Iraqi security forces rather than engaging in direct combat. NATO's presence was designed to stabilise the post-Saddam Hussein regime and prevent a resurgence of extremist violence. The mission paused in 2011 but resumed in 2018 under the NATO Mission Iraq (NMI), reflecting ongoing instability and the need to counter ISIS. It highlights NATO's shift towards long-term capacity-building in fragile states rather than direct military engagement.

### Cyber defence and the Wales Summit (2014)

The 2014 Wales Summit marked a significant shift in NATO's priorities, catalysed by the annexation of Crimea by Russia and escalating cyber threats. Member-states pledged to spend 2% of GDP on defence and enhance collective cyber defence capabilities. Cyber attacks were formally recognised as potential triggers for NATO's Article 5 collective defence clause. This moment represented a strategic pivot: NATO began focusing on hybrid warfare, information security and rapid response readiness. It underscored the alliance's modernisation in the face of non-traditional, twenty-first-century threats.

### NATO response to the war in Ukraine (2022–present)

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted a reinvigoration of NATO. Though Ukraine is not a member, NATO provided unprecedented levels of support: military aid, intelligence sharing and logistical coordination. NATO also strengthened its eastern flank with more troops, new battlegroups and a heightened state of readiness. Finland joined NATO in 2023, with Sweden following in 2024, further expanding the alliance's reach. The crisis rekindled NATO's founding purpose: defending Europe from military aggression. It reasserted the alliance's relevance and unity in a time of renewed great-power rivalry.

### Evolution

Between 2000 and 2025, NATO evolved from a post-Cold War security alliance into a globally engaged actor confronting terrorism, cyber threats and geopolitical instability. Its interventions reflect shifting strategic priorities, from large-scale military operations in Afghanistan to deterrence measures against Russian aggression.

### Summary

From counter-insurgency in Afghanistan to deterrence in Eastern Europe, NATO's post-2000 record reflects both a broadening of roles and a return to its founding mission. Each intervention or shift – whether military, strategic or diplomatic – demonstrates NATO's ability to adapt to evolving security challenges. As the alliance enters its eighth decade, it faces an increasingly complex global environment, but it remains a cornerstone of transatlantic security and a key actor in preserving international order.

### ACTIVITIES

#### Class debate

1 'This house believes that NATO's intervention in Libya did more harm than good.'

#### Essay

2 Evaluate the view that NATO's global role since 2000 has been defined more by failure than by success. (30 marks, Edexcel-style)

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