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How do countries join NATO?

Any European country is eligible to join NATO.

The only requirement for any applicant is that they are in a position to further the principles of the founding 1949 Washington Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area.

This paper looks at who can join, the process of joining and the ratification process in the UK.

1 What is NATO?

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was formed in 1949 as an alliance of 12 nations dedicated to ensuring their collective security and preservation, and to counter the perceived threat from the Soviet Union and later the countries of the Warsaw Pact. There are 31 countries in NATO.

The main tenet of the Alliance is Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (also referred to as the Washington Treaty), which states unequivocally that an armed attack against one shall be considered an attack against all. This is often referred to as the core principle of collective defence.

The principle of collective defence applies only to attacks in Europe or North America, the Mediterranean Sea and the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer. For further background, see Library paper What is NATO?.

1   Who can join?

NATO [says it has an 'open door' policy](#) and any European country can join.[1]

The only requirement is that they agree to further the principles of the Washington Treaty and contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area.[2]

NATO's principles include a commitment to democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law, and to promote "stability and well-being" in the North Atlantic area.[3]

NATO operates on consensus, meaning all existing members must agree to invite an aspiring country to join. These requirements are [set out in Article 10 of the Washington Treaty](#).

Aspiring members are also expected to meet certain political, military and economic criteria. These are set out in the [1995 Study on Enlargement](#) and include requirements such as having a functioning democratic system, the fair treatment of minority populations and a willingness to make a military contribution to NATO operations. It also says that states which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, or internal jurisdictional disputes, must "settle those disputes by peaceful means". It goes on to say that resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance.[4]

However, the study also makes clear there is no fixed or rigid list of criteria, and each applicant is assessed on a case-by-case basis.[5]

The UK was a founding member of NATO in 1949.

2   Can countries leave?

Yes. Article 13 of the Treaty gives Allies the right to leave should they wish to: "any Party may cease to be a Party one year after its notice of denunciation has been given".[6]

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1   The United States and Canada were founding members of NATO.
2   [The North Atlantic Treaty](#), 1949
3   [The North Atlantic Treaty](#), 1949
4   NATO, [Enlargement and Article 10](#), 12 April 2023
5   NATO, [Study on NATO enlargement](#), 3 September 1995
6   [The North Atlantic Treaty](#), 1949

No country has left the Alliance.

France did withdraw from NATO's integrated military structure in 1966 (returning in 2009) but remained a member of NATO.[7]

3 Preparing to join: The Membership Action Plan (MAP)

Countries interested in joining the Alliance are usually invited to join what is called a Membership Action Plan (MAP). This process was launched at the 1999 Washington Summit to help countries aspiring to NATO membership prepare for membership, and evolved out of lessons learnt from previous enlargements and the conclusions of the 1995 Study on Enlargement. The MAP is described as "a practical manifestation of the Open-Door policy".[8]

Each MAP is tailored to the individual country and may involve political, legal, military, defence and security reforms.[9]

Countries participating in the MAP submit individual annual national programmes on their preparations for possible future membership. There is some flexibility which allows members to choose how they participate in the Alliance. Iceland, for example, does not have its own armed forces and so cannot deploy military personnel. However, it does provide civilian peacekeepers to NATO-led operations and hosts NATO exercises and events.[10]

Between 1999 and 2020 every new member that joined NATO had used a MAP. Aspiring member Bosnia and Herzegovina was invited to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP) in April 2010.[11]

However, neither Sweden nor Finland have used the MAP process. Finland and Sweden joined NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in 1994. Participation in the MAP does not guarantee membership of NATO.

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7   NATO, Member countries, 8 June 2022.
8   For an overview, see: NATO, Membership Action Plan (MAP), Last updated: 14 May 2022
9   NATO enlargement and open-door factsheet, July 2016, accessed 14 June 2022
10 NATO, Member countries, 8 June 2022. This also provides other examples of flexible arrangements for other countries.
11 NATO, Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, 12 July 2022 (accessed 9 June 2023)

4   How do countries join NATO?

Joining the Alliance requires a country to accede to the North Atlantic Treaty (also known as Washington Treaty).

Once an aspiring country has met all the requirements, or indicated it will be able to do so, it then informs NATO of its desire to accede to the Treaty. If all the members agree, NATO then invites the country to begin accession talks.

The remaining steps involve the signing of the Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty on the accession of the invited country. This is known as the Accession Protocol.

The accession process involves seven steps:

1. Accession talks to confirm the invited countries willingness and ability to meet the political, legal and military obligations and commitments of NATO membership.

2. The aspiring country's Foreign Minister sends a letter of intent to the NATO Secretary General formally accepting the obligations and commitments of membership, plus a timetable for the completion of any required reforms, if relevant.

3. An Accession Protocol is signed by all NATO members.

4. The Accession Protocol is then ratified by each individual member, according to their national requirements and procedures.

5. Once all member countries have notified the US Government, which is the depositary of the North Atlantic Treaty, of their acceptance of the Protocol, the Secretary General then invites the potential new member to accede to the North Atlantic Treaty.

6. The invited country accedes to the North Atlantic Treaty in accordance with their national procedures.

7. Upon depositing their instruments of accession with the US Government, the invited country formally becomes a member of NATO.[12]

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[12]   NATO, NATO enlargement and Article 10, Last updated: 10 June 2022

5   How long does the process take?

In practice, the application process can take several years if the aspiring country is required to complete any political, legal, military, defence or security reforms, or resolve any outstanding issues. Or it can occur very quickly if NATO members agree, as in the case of Finland.

Some examples of the timescale for recent members:

- Montenegro was invited to join the MAP in December 2009. It started accession talks in December 2015 and the Accession Protocol was signed by Allied foreign ministers on 19 May 2016. The ratification process took nearly a year, and Montenegro became a member of the Alliance when the instrument of accession was deposited in Washington on 5 June 2017.[13]

- The Republic of Macedonia joined the MAP in 1999. It was invited to begin accession talks at NATO's Brussels Summit in July 2018, after resolving the longstanding issue of its name with Greece. Allies signed the Accession Protocol on 6 February 2019 and North Macedonia became a member of the Alliance when the Instrument of Accession was deposited in Washington on 27 March 2020.[14]

- Finland (and Sweden) submitted their letters of application to join NATO on 18 May 2022. Allied leaders agreed to invite both countries at the Madrid Summit on 29 June 2022. Finland completed accession talks on 4 July, and on 5 July 2022 Allies signed the Accession Protocols for both countries. Türkiye was the last member to ratify the protocol, and Finland deposited its Instrument of Accession to the North Atlantic Treaty on 4 April 2023.[15] At the time of writing, Türkiye has not ratified the Swedish protocol, meaning Sweden is not yet a member of NATO. See Commons Library paper NATO enlargement: Finland and Sweden (CBP 9574) for more on this.

A list of ratification and deposits by NATO member is maintained on the US State Department website. To give an example, this is timeline for the ratification of the accession protocol for Finland.

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13   NATO, Relations with Montenegro (archived), 14 December 2017 (accessed 15 June 2022)
14   NATO, Relations with the Republic of North Macedonia, 17 September 2020 (accessed 15 June 2022)
15   NATO, NATO member countries, 8 June 2023

5.1 Timeline for ratifying the Accession Protocols

The ratification process usually takes about a year after the initial signing of the Accession Protocol by all the Member States.

Table 1 Timeline of recent Accession Protocols		
Country or countries	Date of signature of Accession Protocol	Date of Accession to the Washington Treaty
Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia	26 March 2003	29 March 2004
Albania and Croatia	9 July 2008	1 April 2009
Montenegro	19 May 2016	5 June 2017
The Republic of North Macedonia	6 February 2019	27 March 2020
Finland	5 July 2022	4 April 2023

Source: NATO enlargement, accessed 8 June 2023

5.2 What is the ratification process in the UK?

Since the passing of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 (also known as CRAG), an Accession Protocol should be laid before Parliament for 21 sitting days' scrutiny under the Act.[16] Provided there are no objections, the UK then deposits its instrument of ratification.[17]

This was the case for Montenegro's Accession Protocol, which the Government laid before Parliament on 29 June 2016 as a Command Paper (CM 9293). The Protocol completed its Parliamentary scrutiny period

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[16]   Commons Library paper, Parliament's role in ratifying Treaties, SN05855
[17]   PQ 219389 [Macedonia: NATO], 19 February 2019

following the summer recess on 15 September.[18] The UK ratified the Protocol in November 2016.[19]

The Accession Protocol for the Republic of North Macedonia was also laid under CRAG. The Protocol was signed on 6 February 2019, then laid before the House on 27 June.[20] The objection period ended on 25 September 2019 (after the summer recess) and the UK deposited the treaty on 24 October 2019. The process can be viewed on Parliament's treaty tracker.

A speedier ratification for Finland and Sweden

However, the Government opted to ratify the Protocols for Finland and Sweden without the 21-day requirement under CRAG having been met. The Government explained this was because of the urgent need to integrate the two countries into NATO as quickly as possible, and the lack of 21 sitting days of parliamentary time before summer recess.[21] This decision was supported by the Shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, who said he recognised the need for the Government to "act with haste in these exceptional circumstances."[22]

The UK signed the Accession Protocols on 5 July. They were laid in Parliament on 6 July 2022 as Command Papers: CP 730 (Finland) and CP 731 (Sweden). The Protocols were deposited with the US State Department on 8 July 2022.[23]

Accession Protocols can be found in the FCDO's Multilateral treaties published in the Miscellaneous Series (from 2013 to present) collection.

The progress of the Protocols through the House can be found on Parliament's treaty tracker: Finland and Sweden.

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18   PQ47202, 17 October 2016
19   PQ 59579 [Montenegro: NATO], 19 January 2017
20   The treaty was originally laid on 13 June but withdrawn because of a typographic error with the date of signature. Gov.uk, Withdrawn: Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty on the Accession of the Republic of North Macedonia [MS No.20/2019], 13 June 2019
21   HC Deb 6 July 2022 c878; HCWS188 [Sweden and Finland NATO Accession], 6 July 2022; This was in accordance with section 22 of CRAG, that allows for a treaty to be ratified without the requirements of section 20 having been met.
22   HC Deb 6 July 2022 c880
23   Finland Accession Protocol – Notification of Deposit of Instrument; United Kingdom, July 8, 2022; Sweden Accession Protocol – Notification of Deposit of Instrument; United Kingdom, July 8, 2022, US State Department, accessed 24 February 2023

6   NATO enlargement: From 12 to 31 Allies

NATO's original 12 members were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the UK and the United States.

Since then, NATO has seen several periods of expansion. These periods have not been without controversy, with members having differing views about the speed or benefits of enlargement.

Greece and Turkey were the first to join the founding 12 nations in 1952, followed by the Federal Republic of Germany in 1955. Then there was a gap until Spain joined in 1982.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War prompted much discussion within NATO about its role and purpose, and how to establish a new relationship with the states of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

At its Brussels summit in 1994 NATO confirmed it was prepared to accept new democratic members from central and eastern Europe, though it specifically avoided any timeframe for NATO expansion. This led to the 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement, which sets out the basic criteria for NATO membership.

The Brussels Summit also launched the Partnership for Peace Initiative. A 1997 Commons Library paper described this as "an attempt to reconcile eastern Europe's demands for NATO membership with Russian fears of NATO enlargement."[24]

There were concerns at the time about the affect expansion might have on European stability. In 1997 a group of leading US diplomats, including former US Defence Secretary Robert S McNamara, wrote an open letter to President Clinton in which they characterised the expansion of the Alliance as "a policy error of historic proportions" which would "decrease allied security and unsettle European stability".[25]

However, NATO reaffirmed its open-door policy by formally inviting the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary to apply to become members of the Alliance at its Madrid summit in July 1997. They subsequently joined in 1999.

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[24]   Commons Library, NATO enlargement, RP 97/51, 8 May 1997

[25]   Open letter from former US diplomats to President Clinton opposing NATO enlargement, 26 June 1997

At its Prague Summit in November 2002, the Alliance invited Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia to begin accession talks and reaffirmed. They joined in 2004.

Albania and Croatia joined five years later, in 2009, followed by Montenegro in 2017 and the Republic of North Macedonia in 2020. Finland became the 31st member of NATO, joining in April 2023.

Potential members?

Sweden was invited to join the Alliance (alongside Finland) at the Madrid Summit on 29 June 2022.

Only Bosnia and Herzegovina is formally involved in the Membership Action Plan. NATO says it "needs to continue pursuing democratic and defence reforms to fulfil its NATO and EU aspirations and to become a well-functioning independent democratic state."[26]

At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, Allied leaders agreed that Georgia and Ukraine will one day become members, though differences among Allies at the time meant they stopped short of inviting them to begin the MAP process.[27] Georgia was invited to participate in the meeting with the leaders at NATO's summit in Madrid in June 2022.[28]

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[26] NATO, Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, 23 May 2022 (accessed 15 June 2022)
[27] Jonathan Eyal, "NATO's Bucharest Summit: The unanswered questions", RUSI Newsbrief, Vol 28 issue 4, 28 April 2008
[28] NATO, Pre-Ministerial press conference, 15 June 2022

Nato enlargement in Europe

Date of joining

- 1949
- 1952-1955*
- 1982
- 1999
- 2004-2009
- 2017-2020
- 2023

* East Germany was not a member until reunification in 1990.

Map: House of Commons Library
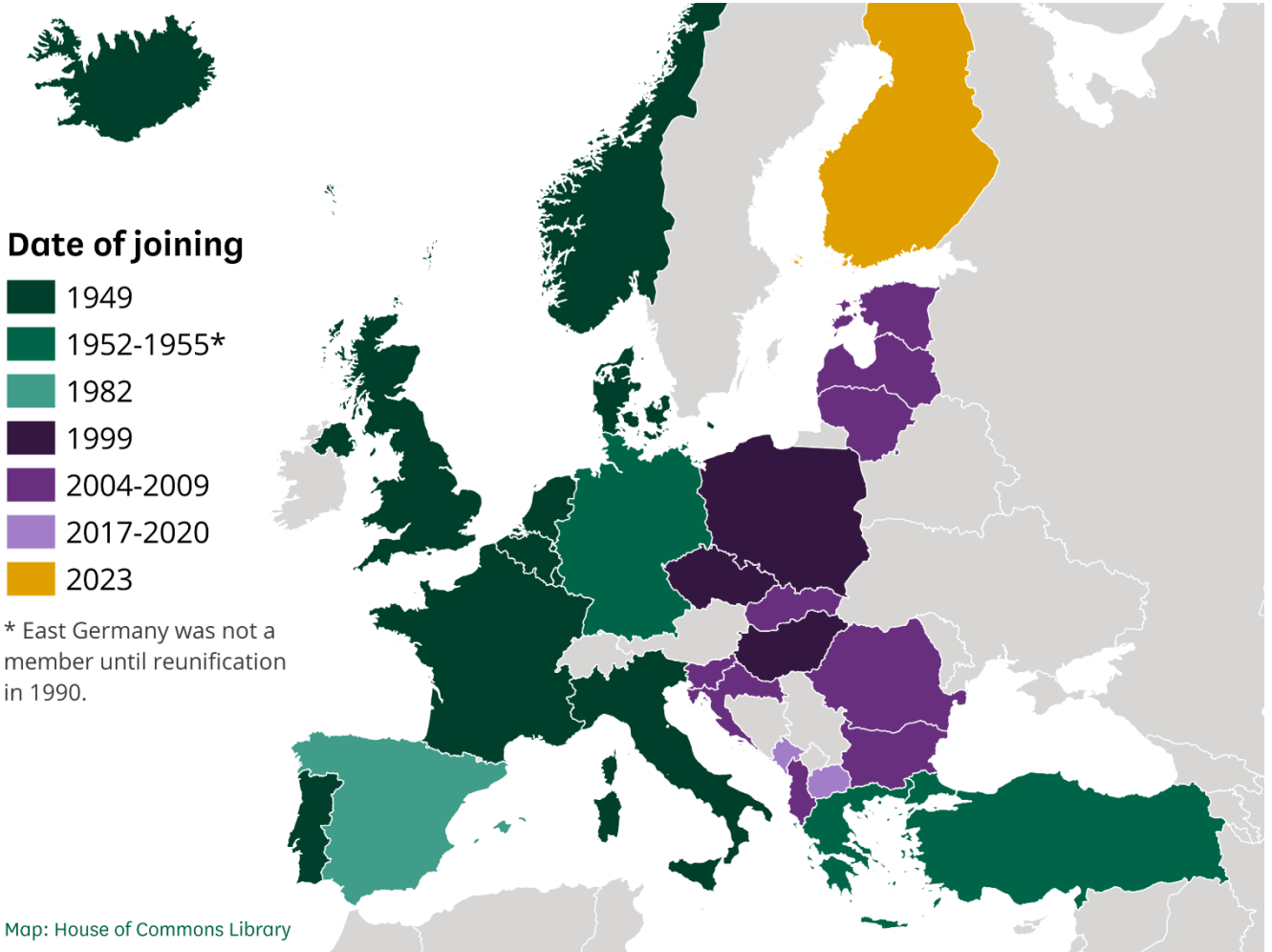
7   What does Russia think of NATO enlargement?

Russia has long opposed NATO enlargement, seeing it as a "Cold War anachronism" and as a direct threat to its own security. Moscow views NATO enlargement as encroaching on its near abroad or its natural spheres of influence, including the former states of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.[29] These concerns are chronicled in historical Commons Library papers (links below).

In 1993 Yevgenii Primakov, the then director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service and later Boris Yeltsin's Foreign Minister, delivered a "blistering critique" of NATO expansion. For Primakov, the history of enmity between NATO and Russia was a "psychological mind-set [that] cannot be broken painlessly". NATO expansion to Russia, he argued, would create "a new geopolitical situation that is extremely disadvantageous to Russia". Overall, in terms which would later become familiar under Putin and Dimitry Medvedev (Russian President, 2008 to 2012), Primakov warned that "if the countries of Central and Eastern Europe join that organization, the objective result will be the emergence of a barrier between Russia and the rest of the continent".[30]

Successive Russian governments have also pointed to alleged verbal assurances given by the Americans to Soviet leaders, at the time of German reunification in 1989, that NATO would not expand further to the east.[31] However, nothing was written down to that affect in any agreement.

Relations between Russia and NATO deteriorated rapidly in 2008 after [Russia's military action in Georgia](). NATO indicated at its Bucharest Summit that Georgia and Ukraine could one day join the Alliance, something Russia vocally opposed. Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, said that "we will do all we can to prevent Ukraine's and Georgia's accession into NATO and to avoid an inevitable serious exacerbation of our relations with both the Alliance and our neighbours."[32]

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29 The [Warsaw Pact]() was a political and military alliance established by the Soviet Union and seven other Soviet satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe: Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania.

30 Yevgenii Primakov, cited in Robert H Donaldson and Joseph L Nogee, The Foreign Policy of Russia, Third Edition, 2005, p254; cited in Commons Library paper [Russia and the West](), RP09-36, 24 April 2009

31 See Commons Library papers [NATO enlargement](), RP97-51, 8 May 1997 and [Russia and the West](), RP09-36, 24 April 2009; Timothy Andrews Sayle "Enduring Alliance: A history of NATO and the postwar global order", Cornell University Press 2019

32 "[Russia Talks Tough in Response to NATO's Eastward Expansion]()", Deutsche Welle, 11 April 2008; cited in Commons Library paper [Russia and the West](), RP09-36, 24 April 2009

In the aftermath of the conflict between Russia and Georgia, relations between Moscow and the Alliance broke down completely.

In the same year President Medvedev outlined, in detail, his objections to NATO expansion, charging that the Alliance was seeking to encircle and contain Moscow by building-up its military presence on Russia's borders. Medvedev criticised Western governments for failing to honour the promises made at the end of the Cold War not to encroach beyond the territory of a unified Germany. To Medvedev, NATO's expansion was clearly aimed at Russia:

> Russia cannot feel comfortable in a situation where military bases are increasingly being built around it, and there are more and more missiles and anti-missile defence systems. Really, Russia just cannot feel comfortable in such a situation. […] how is this build-up not against us […] It is absolutely against us – there is no other way to understand the situation.[33]

In his annual news conference, on 23 December 2021, President Putin referred to the discussions in the 1990s, which he characterised as NATO promising Russia to "not move an inch to the east." He accused NATO of cheating Russia "shamelessly" with five waves of NATO expansion, saying "They told us: there will be no expansion, but they expanded."[34]

Prior to the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia had sought longer term security guarantees from the Alliance that Ukraine would not be admitted as a Member State and that NATO military infrastructure will not be deployed in the country. The Kremlin described these as "red lines" for Russia's national security. In remarks to the Russian Federal Assembly on 1 December 2021, Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, accused NATO states of seeking to "pull Ukraine into their orbit and turn it into an 'anti-Russia'".[35]

However, Putin has said he sees no threat to Russia of the inclusion of Sweden and Finland. He has caveated that comment by adding "the expansion of military infrastructure into this territory would certainly provoke our response."[36] Following the formal invitation to join, Putin reaffirmed this position:

> With Sweden and Finland, we don't have the problems that we have with Ukraine. They want to join NATO, go ahead.
>
> But they must understand there was no threat before, while now, if military contingents and infrastructure are deployed there, we will have to respond in

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[33]   Dmitry Medvedev, Transcript of the Meeting with the Participants in the International Club Valdai, 12 September 2008; cited in Commons Library paper Russia and the West, RP09-36, 24 April 2009

[34]   Press conference, President of Russia, 23 December 2021

[35]   Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks on Russia's foreign policy priorities, 1 December 2021

[36]   "Putin sees no threat from NATO expansion, warns against military build-up", Reuters, 17 May 2022

kind and create the same threats for the territories from which threats towards us are created.[37]

Putin has since told the Russian Board of the Defence Ministry if Sweden and Finland join NATO, Russia needs to respond "by creating a corresponding group of forces in Russia's northwest."[38]

The 1997 Founding Act

During discussions of expansion in the mid-1990s with NATO, Russia sought to prevent the stationing of forces and nuclear weapons from the existing Member states on the territory of the new Member states. In the 1997 Founding Act between NATO and Russia, NATO stated that "they have no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members".

However, they made no such commitment regarding forces, only that they would avoid the permanent stationing of substantial combat forces:

> NATO reiterates that in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.[39]

The Act does go on to say that "reinforcement may take place, when necessary, in the event of defence against a threat of aggression and missions." While NATO has deployed forces along its eastern flank in recent years, ever since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO argues these are on a continuous rather than permanent basis.

Related Commons Library papers

The section above draws on material from the following Library papers:

- Russian foreign and security policy, CBP7646, 5 July 2016

- Russia and the West, RP09-36, 24 April 2009 discusses in detail Russian concerns about NATO enlargement (section 5).

- NATO enlargement, RP97-51, 8 May 1997

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37 "Putin: Russia will respond if NATO sets up infrastructure in Finland, Sweden", Reuters, 29 June 2022

38 Meeting of the Russian Defence Board, President of Russia website, 21 December 2022

39 Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation, May 1997