In 1949 the European allies formed an alliance with the United States and Canada in order to guarantee their security through a system of collective defence. The North Atlantic Treaty was signed on 4 April 1949 giving birth to an alliance to which 16 independent nations now belong.

NATO was set up to achieve the goals of the North Atlantic Treaty. The Organisation serves the member countries and undertakes all the tasks - political, military, economic or scientific - which they assign to it.

The policy of the Alliance is to maintain sufficient forces to deter aggression and safeguard peace while being ready to negotiate real reductions in forces and armaments. The policy calls for effective deterrence, real disarmament and genuine détente. Its purpose is to prevent war - not only nuclear war but any kind of war.

The Alliance is a joint endeavour between European allies and the countries of North America to defend their common beliefs and their common interests. It has preserved peace in Europe for more than a third of a century. It is dedicated to continue preserving peace and freedom while working towards constructive dialogue between East and West.
The North Atlantic Council is the highest authority of NATO. It is normally composed of the Foreign Ministers of the 16 Member countries or their permanent representatives. Its decisions are expressions of the collective will of the member governments. The Defence Planning Committee is composed of representatives of member countries participating in NATO’s integrated military structure and takes decisions on common defence issues.

The Secretary General of NATO is the Chairman of the North Atlantic Council and the Defence Planning Committee. He is assisted by an International Secretariat which has a civilian and military staff drawn from all the member countries. They are responsible to the Secretary General and are employed at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels and at NATO agencies located in different member countries.

The Military Committee is the highest military authority of the Alliance, under the Council. It is composed of the Chiefs of Staff of each member country participating in the integrated military structure of their member representatives.

The whole of the NATO area, covering the territory of the member countries and the oceans that lie between, is protected by a system of international commands responsible for defence plans and for the deployment and exercise of the national forces assigned to them. There are 3 Supreme Allied Commanders responsible for the Atlantic, European and Channel Commands. The Canada/US Regional Planning Group plans the defence of North America.