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# military matters issue [01]

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**The beginnings  
of NATO's military structure:  
birth of the Alliance to the fall of the Berlin Wall**

## The beginnings of NATO's military structure: birth of the Alliance to the fall of the Berlin Wall

(Front Cover Photo)  
Two Belgian workmen mark out the area on the site of the "new" NATO Headquarters in Brussels, in March 1967. It is home to the NATO Secretary General and support staff; national military delegations from NATO and Partner countries; the International Military Staff; and the Military Committee, which shapes military direction from political guidance and provides consensus-based military advice to NATO's civilian authorities. The other Belgian-based NATO headquarters is near Mons, less than an hour southwest of Brussels, where the Alliance's military operations are planned and coordinated.

**More than five decades since NATO's founding, it is hard to imagine that the Organisation did not always have the complex military and political structures that have long been key features of its decision-making process. When the Alliance was created by the Washington Treaty of 4 April 1949, it possessed very little in the way of political structures and virtually no military establishments.**

The first organisational structures were created by the Washington Treaty itself. Article 9 established a Council that became known as the North Atlantic Council (NAC), the top political decision-making body within the Alliance. Initially composed of member country foreign ministers, it was authorised to "set up such subsidiary bodies as may be necessary." The Council was specifically instructed to "establish immediately a defence committee which shall recommend measures for the implementation of Articles 3 [maintain and develop individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack] and 5 [an armed attack against one or more of them shall be considered an attack against them all]."

The Defence Committee, composed of defence ministers or their representatives, came into existence at the first NAC meeting of 17 September 1949. The Council also directed the new Defence Committee to establish subordinate bodies for defence matters: a Military Committee composed of the chiefs of defence of member nations; the Standing Group, a three-nation executive body for the Military Committee with representatives from France, the United Kingdom and the United States; and five committees known as Regional Planning Groups (Northern Europe, Western Europe, Southern

Europe/Western Mediterranean, United States/Canada, and the North Atlantic Ocean) to examine issues of military import in each respective area.

The first meeting of the Military Committee was held on 6 October 1949, a day after its creation, in Washington DC. It was composed of the chiefs of defence from 11 of the 12 founder countries (Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States), and civilian representation from Iceland, which did not (and still does not) have military forces. The Defence Committee no longer exists as such, and thus the Military Committee is the oldest regularly convened body in NATO after the North Atlantic Council.

The Alliance's initial organisational structure was very loose. Bodies meeting at the ministerial level were only obliged to convene once a year, although they could have met more frequently. During the early years when the Alliance structure was being put into place, the Council actually met four times between September 1949 and May 1950. However, it soon became clear that a mechanism was needed for decision-making during the periods between ministerial-level Council meetings. It was not until a major NATO reorganisation was approved at the Lisbon Conference of 1952 that a true, full-time permanent session of the NAC came into existence. In parallel, a Secretary General was appointed to head a new international staff for NATO and chair the permanent session of the Council.



NATO foreign ministers sign the accession agreement in Paris, admitting the Federal Republic of Germany as the Alliance's 15th member, on 23 October 1954. The Organisation has admitted new members five times since the original 12 nations formed NATO in 1949.

On the military side of the Alliance, the Military Committee faced the same situation as the Council: because it existed at a very senior level, it did not meet very frequently. Nonetheless, it had a permanent executive body – the Standing Group – to carry out its decisions, direct military planning, and provide staff support.

The limitation of the Standing Group's membership to France, the United Kingdom and the United States was a real source of irritation to the other nine NATO members. Eventually, pressure exerted by the non-members for more influence during the periods when the Military Committee was not in session led to the creation of the Military Representatives Committee, with national liaison officers as "Accredited Military Representatives." Nevertheless, the Standing Group, with its permanent office, full-time operations and influence over agenda-setting, remained the predominant body giving direction to planning within the Military Committee during the 1950s. This situation also contributed to making the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) at that time the pre-eminent source of military advice to the Secretary General and the NAC. In 1957, each non-member of the Standing Group was invited to send a planning officer and in 1963, all NATO members were fully represented. From then on, the Standing Group became known as the International Planning Staff.

Despite these changes, the Standing Group remained an unwieldy instrument, in which national viewpoints tended to outweigh international perspectives. Faced with the pending relocation of NATO's political and military headquarters from France, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Lyman Lemnitzer, in May 1966 suggested a major reorganisation: one Supreme Allied Commander NATO, to replace the three positions of SACEUR, the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, and the Chairman of the Military Committee.



The Standing Group, initially composed of officers from the United States, the United Kingdom and France, was the forerunner to the International Military Staff. The latter was created in 1967 to support the work exclusively in a corporate, or international capacity, of the Military Committee and its chairman.

Realising that such a major change would be very difficult to implement at a time when NATO was attempting to deal with the French withdrawal from the integrated military structure, General Lemnitzer also presented an alternative proposal to the Secretary General: the establishment of a “completely integrated, international military staff, headed by a director of three-star rank, to serve as the executive agency for the Military Committee.” On 15 June 1966 the North Atlantic Council adopted this proposal, and on 10 February 1967, the International Military Staff was born. The Standing Group stood down and in October that same year the International Military Staff moved permanently from Washington DC to NATO Headquarters in Brussels, where it works still, on behalf of the Military Committee.

Initially, the chairmanship of the Military Committee was held on a one-year rotational basis by each of the members according to the alphabetical order of nations in English, beginning with the United States. As such, in 1949-50, American General Omar Bradley became the first chairman. This approach held firm until 1964, when it became clear that the range, scope and complexity of issues and activities called for a full-time Chairman to assist and guide the work of the Committee. The Chairman is now elected by a simple majority vote by all NATO chiefs of defence, and normally serves a three-year term, though this can be for a shorter period, or extended one year. He also acts exclusively in an international capacity.

The Military Committee, composed of all NATO's chiefs of defence, is the highest military authority in the Alliance and its chairman the senior officer in NATO. It is through him that consensus-based military advice is brought forward to the political decision-making bodies and the Secretary General.

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## THE ISSUE OF “COMMAND”

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In the early 1950s, in addition to the disputes about who would give direction to Alliance military planning, were the questions of who would actually *do* the planning, and then execute the plans in time of war. The military structure initially developed made no provisions for war-time command and control. It had no fixed military headquarters or commanders and relied instead upon committees with representatives from the member states. As a consequence, the only military bodies subordinate to the Military Committee and the Standing Group during the Alliance's early years were the five Regional Planning Group committees, none of which was capable of providing command and control to NATO forces.

Europe did have one combined military headquarters in 1950, but this belonged to NATO's predecessor, the Western Union Defence Organisation, created by the Brussels Treaty of 17 March 1948 and signed by Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Although it had a military headquarters at Fontainebleau, France, the organisation lacked a true command structure. Additionally, its senior military officer, Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, was the chairman of a committee – the Western Union's Commanders-in-Chief Committee – and not a supreme commander. Neither Montgomery nor the three subordinate heads of the land, sea, or air forces had any operational authority in peacetime, and “Monty” did not even have real authority over the commanders, as was demonstrated by his frequent disagreements with the head of the ground forces. Still, the development of a professional, international headquarters and loyalty to an Alliance concept rather than staff representing national perspectives, found root here.

At the NAC meeting of 16-18 September 1950 in New York, Alliance foreign ministers discussed the need for the “creation, in the shortest possible time, of an integrated military force adequate for the

defence of freedom in Europe.” This work had been expedited by the invasion three months earlier of South Korea by communist North Korea, backed by the Soviet Union. There was concern that the Soviets might turn this war into a world-wide struggle by supporting a similar invasion of Europe, where Germany was also divided into communist and non-communist blocs. Following consultations with their governments, the ministers reconvened in New York on 26 September 1950 and announced that an integrated force would be created “at the earliest possible date” and would be placed “under a Supreme Commander who will have sufficient delegated authority to ensure that national units allocated to his command are organised and trained into an effective, integrated force in time of peace as well as in the event of war.”

In December 1950, the NAC approved the principle of German contributions to European defence, and had reached agreement on the establishment of an integrated military command structure with Supreme Commanders for both Europe and the Atlantic Ocean. There was universal agreement on both sides of the Atlantic that General Dwight Eisenhower be selected as the new SACEUR. He had led the Allied forces to victory in Western Europe during World War II and was now serving as president of Columbia University. His official appointment as SACEUR was announced at a meeting of the NAC on 18-19 December 1950, and a small group of officers was dispatched to Paris to plan for the new headquarters.

## BUILDING THE MILITARY STRUCTURE

General Eisenhower and staff from seven other countries were now faced with the daunting task of establishing an Allied command structure that would be acceptable to all 12 NATO members. The “SHAPE [Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe] Planning Group” quickly began to draft the new command and staff structure for Europe, benefiting greatly from the plans – and later the personnel – it inherited from the Western Union Defence Organisation. To avoid unnecessary duplication of Allied defence efforts, the Western Union agreed that its defence roles and responsibilities would be assumed by NATO when SHAPE was activated on 2 April 1951. Field Marshal Montgomery moved over as well, serving as the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe for the next seven years and played an important role in SHAPE's early development.

Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein briefs media on the successful defence of Europe following a NATO exercise in 1955. “Monty” was the Deputy SACEUR for seven years, having previously served the Western Union Defence Organisation. The development of an international headquarters and staff working on behalf of the NATO Alliance and not national interests found root here.



Much of the early years of the Alliance were spent building the organisational and physical structures to effectively coordinate and defend against a direct military attack. Large standing forces required many large headquarters, a NATO joint army and air force HQ in Germany.



As the military structure started taking shape, it was clear that military considerations were not the only factors that needed to be taken into account and that questions of personalities, politics, and national prestige were also very important. Eisenhower quickly discovered that the task of “devising an organisation that satisfies the nationalistic aspirations of twelve different countries or the personal ambitions of affected individuals is a very laborious and irksome business.”

The greatest controversy concerned an appointment over which he had no control, that of the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT). As a second major NATO commander, he would be equal in status, not subordinate, to the SACEUR. In December 1950, the NAC had decided that the United States should fill the SACLANT post, which meant that Americans would hold both of NATO's Supreme Commander positions. This raised a storm of controversy in the United Kingdom, fuelled by opposition leader Winston Churchill's acerbic criticisms of the government. Against this backdrop, the SHAPE Planning Group worked to build a true command structure for their own area of responsibility, which proved to be a slow process.

In 1951, Allied Command Europe was divided into three regions: the Northern Region including Norway, Denmark, the North Sea and the Baltic; the Central Region consisting of Western Europe; and the Southern Region covering Italy and the Mediterranean (Greece and Turkey were not yet members of NATO). Resolution of command problems in the Northern Region required years of planning and delicate negotiations before an integrated NATO Command – Allied Forces Baltic Approaches, with German and Danish personnel – came into existence in 1962. The Central Region underwent its own considerable organisational changes up to 1953, then remained virtually the same until NATO-wide changes in 1966-67.

Trying to devise a command structure that would satisfy the national interests of France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, Greece, and Turkey in the southern area proved difficult. It took two years to integrate these countries into a NATO command structure that made sense only if viewed in political rather than military terms. The initial challenge was reconciling differences between the United Kingdom and the United States over command appointments, with the British determined to maintain their traditional dominance in the Mediterranean.

French desires for a stronger say were met with the creation of a Western Mediterranean Command under a French admiral in September 1951, and three months later an Italian-led Central Mediterranean Command was established, with the UK's naval forces remaining outside the whole Southern Region command structure.

The impasse began to be resolved in January 1952 when the British dropped their objections to an American serving in the post of SACLANT, and that headquarters became operational in the US in April of that year. This was all made easier by the United States' agreement in late 1951 that the boundaries of SACLANT's command should be redrawn to exclude the British home waters, in particular the vital channel ports. In February 1952 this area became part of a third major NATO headquarters, the Allied Command Channel, whose commander was the British admiral in charge of the Home Fleet. "Channel Command" was theoretically equal in status to Allied Command Europe and Allied Command Atlantic, even though its forces and geographic area of responsibility were much smaller. By March 1953, NATO had also created Allied Forces Mediterranean under British Admiral of the Fleet Earl Mountbatten of Burma, reporting to the SACEUR.

Given the conflicting views and interests, it was a major accomplishment that a command structure acceptable to all parties was developed at all. In the end, it was a temporary solution with problems of competing commands and overlapping responsibilities. However, despite its obvious flaws, no one wanted to disturb this laboriously achieved solution, at least for the moment.

## THE MILITARY COMMITTEE ADAPTS ITS WORK

As organisation and planning within the integrated military structure gained momentum in the late 1950s and 60s, the Military Committee faced another difficult task, that of refining and improving its own structure and work. During the 1950s, for instance, it was recognised that in an era of high-performance aircraft, the security of NATO's airspace could no longer depend on the sum of each member country's air defence efforts. In 1955, the Military Committee approved a concept for a coordinated system for air defence, and in 1957 agreed on a requirement for an early warning system.

They also supported the creation of special NATO forces whose multinational composition and capability for early deployment or activation would represent Alliance solidarity. The first of these forces, the Allied Command Europe Mobile Force Land was created in 1960, and was followed by the Standing Naval Force Atlantic in 1967.

The Military Committee was also dealing with the implications of the French announcement in March 1966 to withdraw from the integrated military command structure. This decision became a catalyst for NATO reform, informed by the Harmel Report, which shaped NATO's political strategy and its military structure for decades. The French decision also resulted in the move of SHAPE and NATO headquarters from France to Belgium in 1967. For almost 30 years thereafter, France's participation in the Military Committee was that of an observer, before it decided in December 1995 to resume its seat. As such, the French Representative to the Military Committee has the same status as other chiefs of defence and military representatives, with full voting rights and responsibilities on all topics except the defence planning process, the functioning of the integrated military structure, and nuclear issues.



Preparing contingency plans, pre-positioning huge stocks of equipment and supplies in Europe, and conducting large-scale exercises with an emphasis on heavy mechanised forces were some of the main NATO outputs during the Cold War years. Here, American forces conduct a bridge crossing during the 1983 REFORGER (REturn of FORces to GERmany) exercise. This annual undertaking demonstrated the ability of the United States to quickly deploy forces to Germany in the event of a conflict with the Soviet Union.

In 1967, the Military Committee, with ministerial approval, adopted a new strategy of Flexible Response. This strategy called for a balance of both nuclear and conventional forces capable of deterring aggression, defending against attack, and if that was inadequate, permitting escalation under political control. During the late 1960s and 70s, the Military Committee also became increasingly involved in armaments standardisation, manpower requirements, infrastructure priorities, logistics and integrated communications systems in an overall effort to improve NATO military preparedness.

The organisational structure remained relatively static throughout the 1970s and 80s, with minor changes, normally additions, to headquarters and force structure, as NATO and Warsaw Pact armed forces continued to grow in quantity and quality. The main focus of the Military Committee continued to be geared toward the ways and means to deter the Soviet Union from

aggression or coercion. With this objective in mind, NATO decided to reorganise its air forces in the mid-1970s, modernise its air defence system, and in 1978, create a NATO airborne early warning force.

The work of the Committee was also becoming increasingly more complex as defence planning processes were created during the 1970s to project military requirements further into the future. The May 1972 Soviet-American agreement to limit strategic weapons also signalled the beginning of an era dedicated to nuclear arms reductions. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s much energy was directed toward talks on conventional forces reduction and confidence-building measures to reduce the fear created by large standing armies in Europe. In this, the Military Committee played an important but largely behind-the-scenes role, advising ministers of the possible effects of negotiations on military aspects of Alliance security.



During the Cold War, NATO regularly practised defending member states from attack by conventional and nuclear forces. As challenging as those exercises were for the forces taking part, including for these soldiers on Alloy Express in Norway in 1982, they were relatively easy to support and sustain. Today, complex and multiple NATO operations take place thousands of kilometres from home bases, in austere conditions, sometimes in hostile environments, and for months or even years at a time.



In the 1970s and particularly the 1980s, much of the Military Committee's work consisted of advice to political authorities on nuclear and conventional arms reductions. Thousands of nuclear warheads and major equipment pieces from both sides were removed from inventories and permanently disabled. Pictured here is the withdrawal of nuclear arms from Ukraine. (© ITAR-TASS)

## END OF ONE ERA, TRANSITION TO ANOTHER

By the 1980s, NATO bore little resemblance to the loose original structure of 1949. On the civilian side, the most important reforms had taken place at Lisbon in 1952, with the creation of a permanent session of the North Atlantic Council, an International Staff, and a Secretary General. The key developments on the military side had occurred one year earlier, following the NAC's decision to create an integrated military command structure and appoint Supreme Commanders for Europe and the Atlantic area. The process of creating the integrated command structure was not always easy, due to competing national interests, old rivalries and conflicts between some of the member states, as well as clashes of personalities. Nevertheless, compromises were ultimately reached and consensus was achieved.

At its 40th anniversary in 1989, the Alliance stood at 16 members, with virtually no military undertakings or dialogue with non-member states, nor any military operations or exercises conducted outside

its boundaries. At the time, 7.5 million Warsaw Pact soldiers and almost 8.5 million NATO soldiers were in the active and reserve ground forces alone. Warsaw Pact soldiers were buttressed by 145,000 main battle tanks and artillery pieces, against NATO's 61,000 and a military organisation directed by a surfeit of almost 80 NATO headquarters. Successful as it was as a collective defence organisation, NATO had but to sit and prepare in the event of a direct military attack.

In early November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, and five weeks later Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze visited Brussels for talks with NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner, the first such visit by a minister of a Central or Eastern European government. After four decades of relative predictability and stability, NATO was soon to be faced with regional instability at its borders. Responding to the "end of the Cold War" was certainly not NATO's first major test of resolve, but would present it with the most formidable challenge in its history.

Estimating the specifics of the NATO/Warsaw Pact military balance was the focus of much staff work on both sides during the Cold War. Here, at a 1989 news conference, Russian officials are explaining their calculation that there was now an "approximate parity" between the opposing military forces. (© ITAR-TASS)



## KEY DATES

<b>4 April 1949</b>	Signing of Washington Treaty and creation of NATO
<b>17 September 1949</b>	First North Atlantic Council meeting
<b>6 October 1949</b>	First Military Committee meeting
<b>2 April 1951</b>	SHAPE becomes operational
<b>10 April 1952</b>	SACLANT becomes operational
<b>1952</b>	Appointment of first Secretary General, full-time NAC, and creation of the International Staff
<b>10 February 1967</b>	International Military Staff created



The Berlin blockade and the construction of the Berlin Wall came to epitomise the divide between East and West.



## International Military Staff