What are NATO's rules of war and rules of engagement?

NATO has no war code of its own: its forces follow international humanitarian law, and each operation gets rules of engagement agreed by all allies.

What the treaty allows

The North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 sets the outer limits on the use of force.

- **Peaceful settlement first.** Article 1 commits the allies to settle disputes by peaceful means and to refrain from the threat or use of force "in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations."
- **Self-defense in a fixed area.** Article 5 covers self-defense against an armed attack on an ally, within the area Article 6 defines, and each ally acts under its own constitution. The details are in What is NATO Article 5?
- **The UN comes first.** Article 7 says nothing in the treaty affects the Security Council's primary responsibility for international peace and security.
- **Beyond self-defense.** For crisis-management missions, NATO's own doctrine says the legal basis is a UN Security Council resolution under Chapter VII or the invitation or consent of the legitimate government of the country where troops deploy.

The rule has a contested exception. NATO's 78-day air campaign over Kosovo in 1999 was launched on a North Atlantic Council decision, "to halt the humanitarian catastrophe" there; the Security Council's resolution on Kosovo came only when the bombing was suspended. International lawyers still disagree about whether the campaign was lawful.

How NATO decides to use force

Every NATO decision, including one to launch an operation, is taken by consensus in the North Atlantic Council. There is no vote; one ally's objection is enough to stop it. The same rule covers the operation's rules of engagement, which the Council approves on the advice of NATO's military authorities. The general framework, a document called MC 362/1 issued in 2003, was unclassified according to NATO's 2010 legal deskbook; the actual rules for each operation become classified once they are written into its plan.

Rules of engagement translate law and politics into orders: when troops may open fire, against which targets, with which weapons and after what warnings. In the words of NATO doctrine they are "not a comprehensive statement of either the law or policy, although they take account of both", and they do not limit a soldier's legal right to self-defense where force is necessary and proportionate.

Who commands the troops

NATO owns almost no forces itself; nearly everything belongs to member states and is lent for a specific mission. When that happens, nations hand NATO commanders operational command or operational control, never full command. They can also attach national caveats, restrictions on what their own units may do, such as where they may deploy or which tasks they may take on. What the alliance does own, and how many troops its members have, is in How many troops does NATO have?

Which laws of war apply

Once force is used, NATO troops are bound by the same international humanitarian law as any army. All 32 allies are party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which protect the wounded, prisoners and civilians. Additional Protocol I of 1977 adds detailed rules on distinguishing civilians from military targets and on proportionate attacks. It has 175 states parties, but not every ally is among them: the United States signed it and never ratified it, and Türkiye has not signed it.

NATO adopted a policy for the protection of civilians in 2016, which states that "all feasible measures must be taken to avoid, minimize and mitigate harm to civilians."

What NATO cannot do

It cannot order any ally to go to war; each decides its own contribution. It cannot act unless every ally agrees. It cannot conscript soldiers or spend money its members have not given it. The strength of the system is that 32 governments have to agree before anyone moves. Its weakness, against an opponent who decides alone, is speed. The Article 4 page shows how allies consult when threatened, and European defence in numbers shows what Europe contributes.

All questions →

FREQUENTLY ASKED

Does NATO have its own rules of war?

No separate code. NATO forces follow the international law of armed conflict, above all the Geneva Conventions, to which all 32 allies are party. On top of that the North Atlantic Treaty limits when the alliance may use force, and each operation gets its own rules of engagement.

What are rules of engagement?

Orders that say when, where and how troops on a mission may use force: when they may fire, against what, with which weapons. NATO's doctrine describes them as neither a full statement of law nor of policy, though they take account of both. The rules for a specific operation are classified.

Who decides NATO's rules of engagement?

The allies, by consensus in the North Atlantic Council, on the advice of NATO's military authorities. Nations can add caveats that restrict how their own troops are used, and NATO commanders get only operational command or control of national forces, never full command.

Can NATO attack a country that has not attacked it?

Article 5 covers only self-defense, and Article 1 rules out force inconsistent with the UN Charter; for other missions NATO doctrine looks for a Security Council mandate or a host government's invitation. The 1999 Kosovo air campaign had neither, and its legality is still disputed.

Are all NATO members bound by the same laws of war?

Mostly. All 32 are party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions. Additional Protocol I of 1977, which spells out many rules on protecting civilians, has 175 parties; the United States signed it but never ratified, and Türkiye never signed.

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