explainity explains: NATO – Collective Defense

When we talk about NATO, we're also talking about collective defense. But what exactly is collective defense? And when does it come into play?
It's actually pretty simple:

On paper, NATO is a defensive alliance.
That means that if there's an armed attack on a single NATO member, all member states help defend that country.

You can think of it like a group of kids in a playground who decide to support each other if one of them gets bullied. By sticking together, they can take on any bully that gets in their way.

Of course, an alliance on an international level is not quite as simple as kids in a playground. But to make it as clear as possible, NATO stipulates in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty that:

"The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all…"

Whether or not there's an armed attack is decided by the North Atlantic Council in Brussels.
That's NATO's principal decision-making body which consists of representatives from all member states.

The North Atlantic Treaty, and thus collective defense, was developed during the Cold War to deter the Soviet Union from expanding further into Western and Central Europe, although it never actually came to that.

The first and to date only time that collective defense was invoked was in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.
Here, All NATO members sent troops to support the U.S.'s campaign in Afghanistan.

Whether this long international conflict was justified and invoking collective defense was the right decision is disputed.
So, even though we can compare collective defense to a group of kids in a playground, war is a lot more serious, as it puts the lives of innocent people at risk.