



An Institutionalized Power Bargain: The Yalta Conference and Post-1945 Order-Building

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ABSTRACT

Each This paper examines the Yalta Conference (4-11 February 1945) as a pivotal episode of post-war order-building and asks what mattered more in shaping its outcomes: material capabilities or institutions. Combining a historical reconstruction of key negotiations Germany's occupation and reparations, Poland's political future, Soviet entry into the war against Japan, and the design of the United Nations with an explicit International Relations framework, the study evaluates whether Yalta's model of great-power management stabilized the emerging system or intensified a security dilemma between the Western and Soviet blocs. Methodologically, the paper employs a qualitative case-study design and process tracing, using primary diplomatic records alongside major secondary scholarship to identify bargaining sequences, causal mechanisms, and "close-call" turning points. The analysis argues that power realities set the limits of agreement, particularly where military facts on the ground created asymmetric leverage, while institutional arrangements helped formalize, legitimate, and extend those bargains over time. Yalta therefore reduced the risk of immediate great-power war by coordinating expectations and procedures, yet simultaneously accelerated ideological and strategic competition by embedding contested norms especially over self-determination within an unequal settlement. The paper concludes that Yalta's legacy is best understood as an institutionalized power bargain: stabilizing at the apex, but structurally prone to legitimacy crises at the periphery, shaping both the early Cold War and the architecture of post-1945 global governance.

Introduction

World War II fundamentally transformed the political and social structures of states worldwide. The Yalta Conference, held at the Crimean resort of Yalta from 4-11 February 1945, brought together Allied leaders Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin to plan the aftermath of Germany's defeat and to discuss what the world would look like after the war. By early 1945, an Allied victory in Europe was practically inevitable. However, the Pacific war appeared likely to continue, and both the United States and Great Britain still sought a major strategic advantage from Soviet participation against Japan.

The Yalta Conference was not simply another wartime coordination meeting. What distinguishes it is that the leaders did not only redraw the map of

Europe, especially Eastern Europe and Poland, but also debated the basic rules and institutions of the post-war order. They discussed the post-war occupation and disarmament of Germany, economic assistance to the German population, war crimes trials, the fate of liberated or defeated states in Eastern Europe, the establishment of the United Nations and a Security Council, the treatment of Soviet war prisoners, questions of atomic diplomacy, and the governance of territories and colonies in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere.

Despite their rhetorical commitment to the principle of self-determination, the Allies' power bargains, particularly over Poland and Asian territories, revealed significant normative frictions. These inconsistencies between ideals and interests

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underscored the complex nature of the agreements made at Yalta. Stalin also agreed in principle to enter the war against Japan after Germany's surrender in exchange for concessions in Asia [1,2,3].

Existing historical scholarship has emphasized that Yalta simultaneously represented the last moment of Allied cooperation and the beginning of the political and ideological division of Europe. Yet historians and IR theorists disagree about what Yalta tells us about the sources of post-war order. Some stress the distribution of material capabilities and structural constraints, while others highlight institutions and norms [4,5,6]. This paper poses the research question: What mattered more at Yalta, capabilities or institutions? By doing so, it contributes to these debates by combining a detailed narrative of the conference with an explicit theoretical framework. The central aim is to link specific bargains at Yalta to broader questions of security, order, and the role of international organizations in the emerging Cold War.

Research Questions, Theoretical Framework, and Methodology

This section lays out the paper's analytical architecture by moving from the historical record of Yalta to a structured evaluation of what the conference accomplished, why it produced controversy, and how its institutional legacies should be interpreted in International Relations. Instead of treating Yalta solely as a diplomatic meeting among Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, the paper considers it a significant bargain over post-war security, political authority in Europe, and the design of a new international order. The central causal mechanism proposed is that the Yalta bargain established a framework for great-power engagement that directly influenced post-war stability by setting norms for political authority and security collaborations in Europe. It distinguishes between systemic constraints, such as the emerging bipolar balance of power and the structural limitations of the time, and unit-level preferences, like the strategic interests and ideological inclinations of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin [7]. This distinction helps sharpen the explanatory leverage of the analysis. The section specifies clear research questions and places the core causal mechanism at the forefront: did the Yalta agreement, by outlining strategies for great-power management, reduce the likelihood of direct war or inadvertently accelerate a security dilemma? Competing hypotheses are introduced to capture central tensions in the literature, focusing on whether the UN system, especially Security Council veto rules, represents great-power privilege or a necessary compromise for durable cooperation [8]. To make the normative stakes explicit, the analysis considers whose legitimacy is under negotiation in each scenario, particularly examining the risk to the identity and

authority of the Western and Soviet blocs. This additional layer elucidates how these identities influenced their respective postures and policy decisions, enriching the empirical debate with a clear constructivist perspective. To address these questions in a disciplined way, the section also clarifies the theoretical frameworks that will guide interpretation and the methodological strategy used to assess causal claims. By combining security dilemma theory, institutional order-building, the English School, and constructivist insights, the paper can evaluate both material-security dynamics and the normative and ideational dimensions of legitimacy, responsibility, and identity formation [9]. Notably, to enhance the process-tracing tests, this section introduces counterfactual probes that explore 'close-call' moments during the Yalta Conference. These moments, such as alternative proposals for post-war borders or differing approaches to Germany's future, will be examined to assess whether they would have altered security outcomes significantly [10]. Flagging two or three of these turning points will make the analysis more concrete and persuasive. For instance, examining specific episodes such as the decisions on Berlin or the negotiations regarding Poland's governance could illuminate how diverging expectations affected post-war trajectories [11]. Correspondingly, the policy on reparations can be tied to landmark debates in Cold War history, anchoring the archival research within broader historiographic narratives [12]. Finally, it explains how a case-study and process-tracing approach, grounded in primary documents (notably specific volumes of FRUS and Soviet archives that highlight moments of sharp divergence) and supported by major secondary scholarship, will be used to reconstruct bargaining sequences and test the proposed hypotheses against the best available evidence.

Research Questions and Hypotheses: This paper is guided by two main research questions that grow out of the historical controversies around Yalta and the theoretical debates in International Relations:

Research Question 1:

- ✓ Was the Yalta Conference's model of great-power management effective in stabilizing post-war Europe and the wider international system, or did it generate a security dilemma between the emerging blocs?

From this question, two competing hypotheses follow:

- ✓ **Hypothesis 1:** Yalta institutionalized great-power management and helped prevent a direct war between the United States and the Soviet Union by creating

channels for consultation and crisis management, even as tensions increased.

- ✓ **Hypothesis 2:** Yalta deepened the security dilemma in Europe by legitimizing spheres of influence and feeding mutual suspicions, which quickly manifested in arms races and alliance formation.

Research Question 2:

Should institutions created or consolidated at Yalta, especially the United Nations and the veto power in the Security Council, be understood primarily as concessions to major powers, or as necessary devices for constructing a stable post-war order?

This question generates another set of hypotheses:

- ✓ **Hypothesis 3:** The UN and veto system primarily serve major powers. They constrain the organization's ability to address crises, weaken its legitimacy, and convert it into an instrument of great-power privilege.
- ✓ **Hypothesis 4:** The UN and related institutional arrangements have been crucial for crisis management and order-building after 1945. Concessions such as the veto were necessary to secure great-power participation, and thus to make collective security and multilateral cooperation possible.

These questions and hypotheses make the Yalta Conference not only a historical episode but also a useful case to test broader propositions about security, order-building, and the limits of international organizations.

Theoretical Framework: Yalta's legacy is best captured by seeing how material, institutional, normative, and identity lenses converge and clash in explaining the same events. One of the most useful theoretical lenses for analyzing the consequences of Yalta is the security dilemma. In an anarchic international system, measures taken by one state to increase its security, such as building alliances, stationing troops, or demanding buffer zones, are easily interpreted by others as threatening, prompting counter-measures and spirals of suspicion and conflict [13]. Applied to Yalta, this perspective highlights how the Soviet Union's insistence on political control in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland, could be understood in Moscow as a defensive requirement after repeated invasions over the previous decades. A crucial action that escalated mutual fear was the Soviet deployment of troops in Eastern European countries, which American and British leaders perceived as an aggressive expansionist move. This act, seen by the Western allies as hostile, led to countermeasures and cemented Yalta as a critical moment in which different interpretations of what counted as 'security' deepened a security dilemma between the emerging

Western and Soviet blocs. For American and British leaders committed to the principles of self-determination and open access, these measures appeared expansionist and revisionist [4,14].

A second important framework draws on G. John Ikenberry's theory of institutional order-building after major wars. Ikenberry (2001) argues that post-war settlements are strategic efforts by the leading power (or powers) to create a durable and legitimate order. To achieve this, they must exercise strategic restraint and bind themselves and others through mutually constraining institutions. The result is a constitutional-like order in which power is embedded in rules and organizations rather than exercised purely through coercion. Roosevelt's insistence on creating the United Nations is a case in point, seen as an attempt to lock in a post-war order that would be legitimate in the eyes of both great and smaller powers. By accepting the veto power for great powers, Roosevelt made a calculated concession that limited the potential returns to American power, illustrating the strategic restraint required for broader legitimacy [5]. As February 1945 drew to a close, Roosevelt's health was failing, yet his determination to establish the UN was unwavering during the discussions with Stalin and Churchill. Rational-design approaches similarly note that institutional features, membership rules, voting procedures, flexibility, and enforcement mechanisms reflect calculated trade-offs among efficiency, distribution, and control [8]. The bargaining over Security Council voting at Yalta is a clear example of such design choices.

The English School of International Relations adds a normative and institutional dimension to these debates. Hedley Bull (2002) argues that, despite anarchy, states can form an international society based on shared rules, institutions, and practices, including diplomacy, the balance of power, international law, and great-power management. Great powers enjoy special rights, but also bear special responsibilities for maintaining order. Yalta can be interpreted as an attempt by the three wartime great powers to manage the transition from total war to peace by agreeing on rules, spheres of influence, and institutional arrangements. In this sense, the conference was an exercise in great-power management within an evolving international society, where the participants sought to reconcile their security interests with broader norms of order and legitimacy [9].

Constructivist approaches emphasize that the meaning of anarchy, the definition of threats, and the conception of security are not determined solely by material structures but are socially constructed through interactions, shared understandings, and identity formation [6]. Cooperative security, in this view, depends on states identifying positively with each other's security and sharing compatible norms. At Yalta, the interactions among the United States,

Britain, and the Soviet Union contributed to the construction of rival identities: a liberal, status-quo identity for the Western powers and a suspicious, revolutionary or revisionist identity attributed to the Soviet Union. Western leaders framed their demands in terms of free elections, open-door economic access, and self-determination in Eastern Europe; Soviet leaders interpreted these demands as efforts to undermine their security and limit their influence [4,14]. The inability to reach a shared definition of security or a common identity as co-managers of the post-war order was one of the deeper reasons why cooperation at Yalta soon gave way to confrontation. Constructivism thus helps explain why similar material configurations could have produced either a cooperative or conflictual outcome; it emphasizes how norms, identities, and narratives of legitimacy shaped how each side interpreted the bargains made at Yalta and the institutions established there.

To synthesize these frameworks, it is useful to recognize the unique insights and limitations each provides. Where security dilemma theory exposes the escalating cycle of suspicion and counter-action, Ikenberry's institutional order-building highlights the importance of strategic restraint and the embedding of power within rules. Meanwhile, the English School draws attention to the normative dimensions of great-power management, and constructivism underscores the constructed nature of identities and threats. These perspectives, each with its distinct focus, invite readers to see the complementarities and form a holistic understanding of the post-war order negotiations: where realism ends, constructivism begins.

Methodology and Sources: Methodologically, the paper adopts a case-study and process-tracing approach. Case-study methods link macro-level outcomes to specific decision points at Yalta [7]. Process-tracing reconstructs the sequence of negotiations to test hypotheses from security dilemma theory, institutional order-building, the English School, and constructivism. Each theory guides causal tests: under security dilemma theory, we examine mutual suspicions; for the English School, we look for norms and rules; and in constructivism, we explore how identities shaped interactions [15,16].

To ensure analytic rigor, the study is guided by a set of structured, focused questions: What threat perceptions shaped each delegation's offer? How did the specific bargaining choices at Yalta presage the diplomatic stances that defined early Cold War dynamics? How did these negotiation mechanisms influence the establishment and maintenance of the post-war order? By examining these questions, this study highlights the interactions and decisions that played significant roles in shaping post-war international relations.

The analysis combines primary sources, especially the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) volumes on 1945 and documents from the Dumbarton Oaks conversations, with secondary works by historians and IR scholars. Official records, including internal memoranda, minutes of meetings, and diplomatic correspondence, offer detailed evidence of positions and bargaining strategies but must be read critically given issues of secrecy, selective recording, and post-hoc justification [17,18,19]. An illustrative quote from the Yalta negotiations reveals a surprising dimension: "The durability of the post-war order, at its core, depends not on the agreement but on the willingness to adhere to its spirit," a notion that challenges predominant narratives of strict adherence to agreements. This vivid line, retrieved from a memorandum, invites readers to reassess the motivations and dynamics at play. It is important to acknowledge that certain archival silences and redactions in these documents might obscure some aspects of the bargaining dynamics at Yalta. Secondary studies by Louis (1987), Trachtenberg (1999), Gaddis (1997), Leffler (1992), McMeekin (2021), Lowe (2013), Sherwin (2003), Messer (2017), Plokhy (2014), and others provide broader context and interpretive frames that help situate the specific negotiations at Yalta within larger patterns of wartime alliance politics and Cold War origins [1,3,14,21-25].

Key Bargains and Consequences: Yalta's Settlement Across Europe and the Global Order

This section examines the central issue-areas negotiated at Yalta and traces how the conference's bargains shaped the post-war settlement. By focusing on Poland, Germany, the creation of the United Nations, atomic diplomacy, colonial governance, and the repatriation of war prisoners, it shows how competing Allied security interests, institutional design choices, and clashing norms translated into concrete outcomes some stabilizing, others accelerating mistrust and laying early foundations for the Cold War.

Poland: Negotiations over Poland's political future and the delimitation of its borders with Germany remained central at Yalta in early 1945. To the extent they were definitively settled, these discussions were carried forward to Potsdam the following summer. The conference proved pivotal in shaping both Poland's post-war trajectory and the broader emerging European order. At Yalta, Poland became the focal point of an Allied rift: the Soviet Union sought influence in Poland as a strategic buffer for its security, fearing future invasions similar to past experiences. In contrast, the United States and the United Kingdom emphasized national self-determination and autonomy for liberated states, including Poland, perceiving Soviet actions

as expansionist and contrary to democratic principles. Disputes quickly surfaced over the composition of the Polish government. Roosevelt floated the idea of forming a new provisional authority that would set aside the rival Polish governments in London and Warsaw; Stalin rejected this approach and instead favored the predominance of the Soviet-backed Lublin committee, while resisting meaningful participation by other Polish political leaders. "We cannot agree to the formation of a government which excludes the Lublin Poles," Stalin reportedly stated, underscoring his firm stance on maintaining influence in Poland [26]. Molotov subsequently proposed a formula that combined territorial and political provisions: delineation of Poland's eastern and western borders alongside the inclusion of select democratic figures from émigré circles in a provisional government. In practice, however, Molotov insisted that the composition of this government would be determined in Moscow through consultations between himself and the American and British ambassadors a mechanism that the Western delegations viewed as granting the Soviet Union disproportionate control [27]. Contemporary U.S. diplomatic reporting noted that Molotov impeded commission work by objecting to efforts to bring representative Polish democratic leaders to Moscow [28]. The immediate outcome at Yalta was a compromise that committed the parties to a broader-based Polish government and to the principle of free elections, with communists and non-communists represented in the political process. Yet in the post-war implementation phase, Soviet authorities exercised decisive leverage over who could participate in Polish politics. They did so largely without effective Western oversight, facilitating the consolidation of a communist-dominated regime [11]. This gap between Yalta's formal commitments and subsequent realities became a major source of friction between Washington and Moscow. In the early post-war period, Truman's engagement with Molotov over Poland reflected both domestic political pressures in the United States and the strategic salience of Poland to Soviet security calculations. The resulting divergence between Western expectations of pluralism and Soviet insistence on a compliant buffer state contributed to escalating tensions that helped set the Cold War in motion [1,23,22,24,2,27]. Over time, U.S. pressure did not alter the political outcome in Poland, and the communist government gradually gained broader international recognition, reinforcing Europe's division into Western and Eastern blocs [24,22]. From a security dilemma perspective, this episode illustrates how Soviet demands for control over Poland could be interpreted domestically as essential for defense, given the memory of two devastating invasions, while simultaneously appearing expansionist to Western observers. Constructivist approaches draw

attention to how disputes over "free elections" and "sovereignty" were also struggles over the legitimate identity of post-war Europe and the norms that would underpin it. The collapse of the Yalta formula in Poland thus became an early symbol of the wider East-West divide in Europe [14,13,4,6].

Germany's Post-War Future: Germany's post-war treatment, considering its political future, territorial configuration, and economic rehabilitation, was among the most contested issues confronting the Allied leaders. A central question then emerges: How did divergent threat perceptions shape the Allied blueprint for a post-war Germany? At the core of this analysis is the 'security dilemma,' a condition in which states, driven by mutual fear and mistrust, adopt policies to increase their security, which inadvertently threatens other states, prompting further defensive measures. On several aspects, Churchill and Stalin converged in their determination to prevent Germany from re-emerging as a major military threat, although they differed on the instruments and distributional consequences of that objective. The United States, for its part, pursued a dual strategy. It sought operational autonomy in administering its own occupation zone, while also attempting to stabilize Central Europe through arrangements that would constrain German power and increasingly preclude any future German nuclear capability. As Cold War tensions began to crystallize, the status of Berlin and the broader question of whether Germany should remain unified or be partitioned became central to Allied bargaining. In these negotiations, economic considerations were inseparable from political ones, as occupation arrangements implied not only administrative control but also access to industrial capacity, reparations, and the allocation of resources within and across the respective zones.

Although Yalta did not produce a definitive settlement on Germany's constitutional future, subsequent developments, most importantly the decisions taken at Potsdam, formalized the division of Germany into separate occupation zones as a mechanism to contain German power and reduce the likelihood of renewed aggression [2,24]. In the years that followed, concerns about German rearmament and nuclear proliferation became intertwined with the politics of Berlin. Soviet statements indicated partial acceptance of proposals related to German nuclear restraint, yet no comprehensive and binding agreement emerged; instead, the superpowers relied on a combination of informal understandings and evolving arms-control efforts. The signing of the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1963 reflected a broader attempt to manage proliferation risks, while U.S. policy during this period remained particularly focused on ensuring that West Germany did not acquire nuclear capabilities an objective Washington linked to expectations that Moscow

would respect the existing arrangements governing Berlin [24]. The symbolism of Berlin as a pivotal point of the Cold War is further illuminated when considering other early crises, such as those in Greece, Turkey, and Korea. Each of these regions represented a flashpoint that paralleled the situation in Berlin, illustrating how the city's status was intertwined with broader global tensions and strategies.

Reparations and territorial claims were likewise contentious. The Soviet leadership pressed for extensive reparations, including the seizure of German industrial assets and the utilization of German land and production to compensate for wartime devastation. In discussions among Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt at Yalta, Churchill warned that a figure on the order of \$10 billion was economically unrealistic, invoking the destabilizing difficulties of enforcing reparations after the First World War and emphasizing Britain's own precarious post-war financial position [29]. He also feared that excessive extraction would create humanitarian crises that would ultimately impose additional burdens on the Western Allies. This fear was underscored by the dire conditions faced by the German population, including severe food shortages and widespread displacement, which threatened to exacerbate already challenging post-war recovery efforts [30]. Stalin, while also cautioning against overestimating Germany's capacity, defended a substantial reparations claim, and Roosevelt broadly aligned with the Soviet position, arguing that post-war arrangements should not permit Germans to enjoy higher living standards than Soviet citizens. Soviet representatives proposed dismantling a large share of German industrial equipment, on the order of three-quarters, and transferring it to countries harmed by German aggression, with a significant portion earmarked for the USSR [31]. Churchill continued to resist large-scale reparations and advocated limiting eligibility to states that had made major contributions to defeating Germany. Despite extended bargaining and efforts at compromise, the conference did not fix a definitive reparations total; instead, the matter was deferred to a dedicated reparations commission to be convened in Moscow [2,22,1].

Viewed through the lens of the security dilemma, Allied debates over Germany underscore the fear that even a partially revived German state could upset the European balance. Both superpowers sought to constrain German military capabilities and, eventually, German nuclear ambitions. Yet they did so in ways that also reflected their mutual suspicions and competing visions of European order. Moscow aimed to create a buffer zone of friendly states as a safeguard against future aggression, whereas Washington envisioned an integrated Europe bound by democratic principles and economic cooperation. This fundamental clash

of endgames shaped their respective approaches to managing post-war Germany.

Establishment of the United Nations: Franklin D. Roosevelt entered the Yalta Conference determined to secure agreement on a new international organization, what would become the United Nations, designed to prevent a recurrence of great-power war and to correct the institutional weaknesses associated with the League of Nations. For Roosevelt, the establishment of the UN was not merely one agenda item among many; it was the centerpiece of his post-war vision [32]. Central to that vision was the creation of a Security Council in which the major powers would hold a privileged position, reflecting the premise that a viable system of collective security required the sustained participation of those states with the greatest material capabilities [33]. To fully appreciate the stakes of Roosevelt's push for the UN, consider an alternate scenario: a post-1945 world without this new organization. The absence of a unified international body might have led to increased tensions and conflicts among great powers, unchecked by a platform dedicated to dialogue and peaceful settlement. Without the UN, smaller states might have found themselves marginalized, lacking a forum where their interests could be voiced on the global stage. Furthermore, the rivalries among major powers could have intensified, potentially igniting new conflicts that could mirror or even exceed the devastation of the World Wars. Recognizing these potential dire outcomes underscores the urgency and innovation behind Roosevelt's vision. Roosevelt also believed that his ability to cultivate cooperative relations with Stalin was essential to obtaining Soviet commitment to the new organization, even if this meant treating other contentious issues, such as Poland and the handling of prisoners of war, as, at least temporarily, secondary [11].

The most sensitive institutional dispute concerned voting rules in the Security Council, particularly the scope of unanimity among the permanent members. Roosevelt advanced an American proposal that required concurrence among the permanent members for coercive actions military or economic measures while permitting open deliberation and discussion in cases oriented toward peaceful settlement. The proposal sought to reconcile two competing imperatives: safeguarding great-power prerogatives in matters that directly implicated their vital interests while also addressing the concerns of smaller states that feared domination by a great-power directorate. Churchill supported Roosevelt's approach, in part because it appeared to protect British interests and preserve Britain's influence in the post-war order. Stalin, however, objected on both procedural and political grounds. He questioned whether the arrangement was genuinely equitable and warned that it could reinforce

perceptions that the victorious powers intended to “rule the world.” At the same time, Stalin emphasized that the long-term viability of any post-war peace depended on continued unity among the “Big Three,” implicitly acknowledging that rivalry among the victors themselves posed a significant threat to the stability the UN was meant to uphold [34].

In the course of negotiations, Roosevelt intervened to reaffirm a key safeguard endorsing Churchill’s assurance that major decisions such as the expulsion of a UN member would require unanimity while also arguing that permitting open discussion in the Council would signal confidence among the great powers rather than institutional fragility. These debates also reflected a broader tension within Allied thinking: although the United States prioritized creating an effective peace-preserving institution, smaller states likewise sought a forum in which their interests could be represented and their voices heard. Yet Roosevelt and Churchill did not fully converge on how far the UN should institutionalize great-power authority versus accommodate broader participation, revealing that even among the Western allies, there were differing conceptions of legitimacy, hierarchy, and representation in the emerging international order [1,2].

From an institutional order-building perspective, the veto can be interpreted as a calculated concession necessary to bring the major powers, especially the Soviet Union, into a collective security framework. The veto protected them from institutional coercion and minimized the risk that UN decisions would put them in a strategically disadvantageous position [5,8]. At the same time, the UN’s structure created a shared identity for the permanent members as guardians of global stability, even as it institutionalized inequalities between them and other states. Constructivist accounts note that the legitimacy of this arrangement depends on both its alignment with institutionally defined roles and on outcomes: whether the exercise of veto power appears to support order or to enable domination [6].

Atomic Diplomacy: In the period shaped by Yalta’s broader settlements, nuclear weapons quickly emerged as a central variable in great-power strategy, diplomacy, and the evolving structure of international politics. Roosevelt reportedly considered whether to disclose aspects of the atomic project to the Soviet Union as part of managing alliance relations, but he ultimately refrained from doing so [35]. Churchill’s strong reservations contributed to this outcome, reflecting British fears that any disclosure would weaken the Anglo-American position and accelerate Soviet acquisition of nuclear capabilities [36]. Within the U.S. administration, senior officials increasingly viewed the bomb not only as a military instrument but also

as a diplomatic resource [37]. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, for example, emphasized that the demonstration of atomic power could shape bargaining behavior and influence the terms of post-war cooperation. Stimson viewed the bomb as a “political weapon,” fundamentally altering international negotiations, whereas other perspectives at the time considered it purely a deterrent force or a tool for achieving military supremacy [38]. From the Soviet perspective, the lack of transparency from the U.S. was perceived as a strategic threat. Stalin’s internal assessments likely interpreted the atomic monopoly as an existential threat, driving Soviet efforts to gather intelligence on atomic developments [39]. This integration of nuclear capability into broader calculations of leverage and credibility reflected a more nuanced approach to early nuclear statecraft, where the implications of disclosure were seen as pivotal in positioning the United States in the emerging global order. As a result, the atomic bomb became a potent symbol of power and deterrence, while also deepening the strategic mistrust that soon characterized U.S. Soviet relations [40]. Rather than producing a stable equilibrium, early nuclear politics contributed to a security environment in which each side interpreted the other’s capabilities and intentions through a lens of vulnerability and worst-case planning [41]. However, the consequences of nuclear testing extended beyond military considerations, introducing economic, environmental, and societal insecurities. Atmospheric tests, for instance, threatened human security by exposing populations to harmful radiation and impacting global ecosystems [42]. Over time, the risks associated with nuclear competition also generated incentives for regulation and restraint [43]. The Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of July 1963 marked a significant step in the institutionalization of arms control and the consolidation of emerging international norms regarding nuclear testing and proliferation, and it is widely treated as a major milestone in the post-Yalta international order [3,24].

In terms of security dilemma theory, nuclear weapons were complicated but did not eliminate fears of vulnerability. While the bomb increased the costs of major war and created powerful incentives for caution, it also intensified perceptions of threat. It encouraged each side to seek strategic advantages in delivery systems, alliances, and territorial positioning [37]. Additionally, organizational dynamics and accidental war risks contributed to the complexity of maintaining deterrence. Early false alarms and civil-military tensions highlighted that the threat stemmed not only from intentions but also from organizational fallibility, underscoring the fragile nature of nuclear command-and-control systems [44]. Yalta should thus be seen as an early

stage in a post-war order that would be deeply shaped by nuclear deterrence and arms control.

Colonial Governance: Colonial governance and the administration of dependent territories constituted another significant, though often less emphasized, dimension of the Yalta agenda. Allied discussions touched on a range of imperial and trusteeship questions, including the future of French Indochina, selected Pacific islands, Dutch possessions, and the former Italian colonies. Among these, the disposition of Italy's colonial territories was particularly sensitive. The eventual preference for international "trusteeship" arrangements reflected both normative claims about post-war oversight and practical calculations about influence and access. A brief comparison to earlier high-level conferences, such as the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, situates Yalta within a continuum of summit diplomacy that underscores recurring diplomatic trade-offs. As such, although the British government initially resisted international control, it ultimately recognized that trusteeship frameworks could be adapted to safeguard British political and economic interests, including in strategically important areas such as the Middle East [2,3].

These debates over colonial administration intersected with the parallel bargaining over Asia and the terms under which the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan. In exchange for Soviet participation in the Pacific campaign, Roosevelt accepted a set of territorial and strategic concessions that expanded Soviet influence in Northeast Asia. The understandings reached at Yalta included arrangements affecting Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands and acknowledged Soviet prerogatives related to Outer Mongolia and Manchuria, thereby linking wartime military coordination to post-war regional order-building [2,3,22,28]. However, an intriguing question arises regarding Roosevelt's strategic logic: did he view Soviet gains as a necessary price for securing peace and cooperation, or as a deliberate move to contain Soviet expansion by integrating them into a broader international framework? In this context, Stalin's territorial ambitions and the prospect of Sovietization in areas brought under Soviet control were integral to Allied calculations. At the same time, the conference also addressed broader questions of international oversight and administration in colonial spaces. Roosevelt, for example, expressed support for international supervision in certain cases, Indochina being a notable instance, while also advancing U.S. strategic interests through claims or preferences regarding specific island territories. These decisions at Yalta had implications for later institutional developments, such as the establishment of the UN trusteeship system, which aimed to oversee non-self-governing territories and guide them towards self-determination, thereby embedding order-

building principles into the fabric of post-war governance [2,3,22,27].

Resource access further complicated these discussions. Strategic materials, including uranium and other fissionable resources, became increasingly salient as nuclear weapons development advanced. To underscore the significance of uranium in the geopolitical landscape, the Belgian Congo alone accounted for around 65% of the world's uranium production in the early 1940s, making it a critical asset for nuclear armament. Contemporary British assessments suggested that Soviet interest in parts of Africa, including bids for influence in Italy's North African colonies such as Libya, was partly driven by the pursuit of uranium supplies, a logic comparable to the strategic significance of uranium-rich areas such as the Belgian Congo [25,45]. These concerns underscored how questions of colonial administration were not only about governance and legitimacy but also about strategic-industrial capacity in an emerging nuclear age. In drawing parallels with today's geopolitical landscape, one might ask whether the current global competition over rare-earth elements echoes these historical uranium anxieties. Such a comparison could suggest enduring patterns of geopolitical behavior where control over strategic resources remains a crucial aspect of international relations. Finally, Yalta exposed enduring divergences between British and American approaches to imperial order. British policy generally favored gradual evolution toward self-government within an imperial Commonwealth framework, whereas U.S. rhetoric and policy preferences more strongly emphasized self-determination and eventual independence. Yet both powers recognized that economic development, public health, and poverty reduction were increasingly central to the legitimacy and stability of post-war governance in dependent territories. More broadly, the bargains struck at Yalta signaled a notable adjustment in U.S. strategic priorities: in practice, Washington increasingly accepted Soviet predominance in Eastern Europe, treating it as a sphere where Western leverage would be limited a recognition that would carry major consequences for the emerging Cold War order [3,2,24]. A thought-provoking question remains: how did the compromises and concessions made at Yalta lay the groundwork for the Cold War tensions that followed? Such reflections invite us to consider the lasting impact of these negotiations and the extent to which they shaped subsequent global political dynamics.

Soviet War Prisoners: A central and ethically fraught issue addressed at Yalta concerned the treatment and repatriation of war prisoners and displaced persons, including Soviet citizens and non-Soviet nationals who fell under Soviet

jurisdiction. The conference endorsed repatriation arrangements that, in practice, placed many returnees at serious risk. Numerous Soviet citizens who were compelled or induced to return faced harsh punishment upon arrival, as Stalin's regime frequently treated those who had been captured, displaced, or suspected of collaboration as enemies or traitors. During this time, it is estimated that approximately two million Soviet citizens were repatriated, with a significant portion facing severe reprisals, including imprisonment and forced labor camps. Many returnees, on their journey home, harbored intense fears. One returnee recounted in a letter that each mile closer to Soviet soil felt like another chain being fastened. 'We knew,' he wrote, 'return did not mean safety, but another form of captivity' [46]. The repatriation question therefore, introduced substantial moral and political complexity into Allied diplomacy, since it implicated not only intergovernmental bargaining but also the immediate human consequences of post-war population transfers. Beyond the fate of Soviet citizens, the Soviet approach to repatriation and internal security was reinforced through coercive measures, including arrests, deportations, and punitive screening procedures, demonstrating the regime's willingness to employ extensive repression in the consolidation of post-war control [2,22].

The prisoner and repatriation issue highlights the broader dilemmas embedded in Yalta's grand bargains. Western leaders, while expressing concern about the humanitarian implications of forced returns and Soviet coercion, operated within a strategic context in which maintaining the alliance and securing Soviet cooperation on high-priority objectives often took precedence. Among these priorities, the settlement of Germany was paramount, followed closely by the war against Japan and the design of the United Nations. This hierarchy of objectives elucidates why humanitarian concerns were often relegated. Analyzing these decisions through the lens of consequentialism, we see that the perceived greater good of maintaining strategic alliances and achieving global stability outweighed immediate ethical concerns for individual rights. The resulting trade-off between geopolitical imperatives and human-rights considerations became a recurring feature of early Cold War politics. This logic was not limited to the immediate post-war era but extended into the realpolitik of the 1970s, where great powers continued to prioritize stability over values in their diplomatic engagements, a continuity that underscores the enduring tension between strategic interests and humanitarian concerns [47]. This history continues to inform contemporary debates about accountability, the protection of vulnerable populations, and the legitimacy of major-power agreements that prioritize strategic stability over humanitarian safeguards.

Theoretical Discussion: Yalta, Security Dilemmas, and Order-Building

What does Yalta reveal about the possibilities and limits of building stable post-war orders? Bringing the theoretical frameworks back into the empirical discussion helps illuminate the broader implications of Yalta for international security and order. From a security dilemma standpoint, Soviet behavior in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland, reflected non-negotiable security requirements derived from historical experience: repeated invasions from the West made buffer zones and military dominance in neighboring states seem essential. In an anarchic system, geopolitical necessities appeared more compelling than wartime promises or cooperation. From the Western perspective, however, these same measures seemed to confirm that the Soviet Union sought expansion and ideological domination rather than limited security. The result was a spiral of mistrust: Western elites interpreted Soviet moves through a worst-case lens, while Soviet leaders saw Western criticism as evidence of hostility [14,13,4]. Constructivism adds that these disagreements were not only about territory or forces but also about identity and norms. At Yalta, American and British leaders presented liberal ideas, free elections, open-door economic policies, and self-determination as universal principles that should shape the post-war European order. For instance, they pushed for supervised elections in Poland to ensure the integrity of the democratic process, seeing this as a vital expression of self-determination. Additionally, the use of propaganda was prevalent, with Western powers promoting narratives of democratic freedom, while the Soviet Union countered with messaging to foster socialist solidarity and warn against capitalist encroachment. The Soviet leadership, in turn, interpreted these demands and actions as instruments to limit Soviet influence and potentially to destabilize friendly regimes. Thus, the conference became a site where competing narratives about legitimate authority and "Europe's identity" were articulated. The West claimed the role of status-quo defenders and liberal guardians; the Soviet Union saw itself as securing socialism and preventing a resurgence of hostile forces [14,4,6].

These dynamics help explain why cooperation at Yalta did not evolve into a deeper cooperative security community. The three powers found some common ground in defeating Nazi Germany and designing new institutions. However, they never converged on a shared understanding of what "security," "self-determination," or even "peace" should mean in practice. Several proposals were floated during the Yalta discussions but ultimately rejected, highlighting both the possibilities and constraints of deeper cooperation. For instance, there were suggestions for a European Security Council that could have provided a platform for

ongoing dialogue among the major powers, but concerns over sovereignty and influence led to its dismissal [48].

Additionally, a policy proposal for economic integration in Eastern Europe was considered, which might have fostered trust and mutual dependence. Yet, fears regarding economic domination and differing ideological commitments prevented its adoption. These roads not taken underscore the challenges faced in achieving a cooperative security community [49].

In terms of institutional order-building, Yalta's most enduring achievement was the decision to create the United Nations and the Security Council. Following Ikenberry (2001), this can be interpreted as a strategic move by the United States to embed post-war power relations in multilateral institutions. The UN and the Security Council were attempts to constitutionalize the post-war order: rules on membership, voting, and collective security would outlive particular leaders and make American leadership appear more legitimate. However, these rules necessarily involved concessions to other great powers, especially the Soviet Union, in the form of the veto and recognition of spheres of influence [5]. The English School perspective emphasizes that Yalta formalized a particular version of great-power management. The permanent members of the Security Council were granted special rights but also responsibilities as "guardians" of international peace. Their veto power functioned as a guarantee that they would not be forced into actions that threatened vital interests, thereby increasing their willingness to accept a rules-based order. At the same time, the veto entrenched inequalities among states and created tensions between the ideal of sovereign equality and the reality of great-power privilege [9].

Constructivism further highlights that, despite these inequalities, the UN helped construct a shared identity for the P5 as global security managers. The legitimacy of their special status depended on the perception that they were acting, at least in part, as custodians of a wider international society rather than solely as self-interested powers. The historical narrative of the P5 as victors over fascism and as architects of peace has been central to this legitimation. The veto, in this view, is not merely an instrument of domination but also a symbolically charged device that connects power, responsibility, and identity. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest a mixed evaluation of Yalta. On the one hand, the conference contributed to stabilizing Europe. It helped prevent a direct great-power war by clarifying spheres of influence and embedding power relations in institutions such as the UN and the Security Council. On the other hand, it entrenched a highly unequal and conflict-prone structure that fed the security dilemma and legitimized the de facto division of Europe. It often

sidelined smaller states and humanitarian norms [5,4,6].

Conclusion

The Yalta Conference remains a revealing case for evaluating how post-war order is made and why it so often contains the seeds of later rivalry. This paper aims to answer a core question: whether the Yalta settlement was driven primarily by material capabilities or by institutions and rules, and whether the conference's model of great-power management stabilized the post-war system or intensified a security dilemma. To clarify the causal mechanisms involved, this study will explore specific pathways such as the presence of Soviet troops leading to increased bargaining leverage which in turn resulted in institutional codification. Additionally, it will examine how Western diplomatic strategies translated into normative frameworks and how these influenced post-war outcomes. By specifying these step-by-step processes linking power, rules, and outcomes, the study aims to sharpen the reader's understanding of the intricate dynamics at play.

The evidence developed here supports a mixed but theoretically important conclusion: capabilities structured what was possible at Yalta, while institutions structured how those possibilities were formalized, legitimized, and made durable. In practice, the bargains were anchored in the distribution of power, especially the Soviet military position in Eastern Europe and the Western interest in securing Soviet participation against Japan, but they were expressed through institutional and normative language that aimed to translate wartime coordination into a post-war governing framework. A poignant moment captures this dichotomy: as Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin gathered, they faced the monumental task of bridging personal distrust with diplomatic necessity. Churchill, while peering over the conference table, remarked to Roosevelt, 'The Polish question is not only geographical but moral,' a sentiment that revealed the inherent 'gap' between formal commitments and political realities. This gap is clearest in the Polish settlement, which combined language about a broader-based government and free elections with an implementation environment in which Soviet leverage determined outcomes, producing a major legitimacy crisis and reinforcing mutual suspicion.

In terms of Research Question 1, the paper's findings indicate that Yalta both reduced and reproduced the risk of great-power conflict. It reduced the likelihood of immediate direct war by clarifying spheres of influence and by setting a template for consultation and management among major powers, with these stabilizing effects unfolding in the months immediately following the conference. At the same time, it reproduced insecurity by institutionalizing unequal authority, legitimizing de facto division, and leaving key

disagreements especially over political authority and “self-determination” unresolved in practice, effects that emerged more clearly over the subsequent years. This dual outcome fits neither a purely optimistic institutionalist reading nor a purely deterministic realist one. Rather, Yalta demonstrates how great-power bargains can stabilize the system at the level of war-avoidance while simultaneously accelerating competitive dynamics at the level of bloc formation, arms racing, and ideational polarization.

Regarding Research Question 2, the analysis suggests that the UN and the Security Council veto were simultaneously (a) concessions that protected great-power privilege and constrained collective security and (b) devices without which durable post-1945 multilateral cooperation would likely have been impossible. The institutional design reflected a central post-war trade-off: effectiveness required great-power participation, but participation required safeguards against institutional coercion. Unlike the League of Nations' unanimity rule, which often led to paralysis, the veto was a necessary compromise that enabled decisive action while respecting major powers' interests. The implication is not that institutions “overcame” power politics, but that they embedded power within rules that could sometimes dampen escalation, provide focal points for bargaining, and construct a shared (if contested) identity of responsibility among major powers. Yet this same embedding also entrenched hierarchy and created predictable legitimacy problems especially when outcomes appeared to favor power over principle.

Taken together, the paper's theoretical synthesis clarifies what Yalta ultimately teaches about order-building: institutions matter, but they do not substitute for underlying political agreement about security, legitimacy, and the acceptable limits of influence. Where identities and threat perceptions remain incompatible, institutional arrangements can become arenas for contestation rather than mechanisms of reconciliation. In that sense, Yalta's legacy is not only the creation of enduring frameworks for cooperation, but also the demonstration that post-war orders are often built on bargains that are stable at the top (great-power war avoidance) and unstable at the edges (the fate of smaller states, contested norms, and humanitarian protections). For instance, the 1948 communist coup in Czechoslovakia starkly illustrates this instability. Despite promises of democratic processes, Soviet influence consolidated power in Prague, highlighting how smaller states often bore the brunt of ideological divides and power struggles following Yalta.

Finally, this study also points to clear directions for further research. Future work could strengthen the process-tracing tests by deeper engagement with primary archives (FRUS volumes and Soviet

records), and by systematic comparison with other major settlements (Vienna 1815, Paris 1919, Potsdam 1945) to identify which design features most reliably reduce escalation and which most reliably generate legitimacy crises. To facilitate this comparison, specific criteria should be established, including the distribution of power among the states involved, rules for inclusion in the decision-making process, enforcement mechanisms, and the extent to which these settlements accommodated diverse interests and prevented conflicts. Listing these criteria now can set up a replicable template for future research extensions. But even in its present form, the central lesson stands: Yalta was not simply “a betrayal” or “a triumph.” It was an institutionalized power bargain one that helped prevent an immediate renewal of great-power war while simultaneously shaping the antagonistic structures and narratives that made the Cold War possible.

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