12. Grand Strategy: 
Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Wartime Conferences

Within hours of receiving news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, British prime minister Winston Churchill resolved to travel to Washington, DC, to meet with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. On December 13, Churchill secretly boarded the British battleship HMS Duke of York. With both their countries now officially at war against Germany and Japan, the two leaders came face-to-face at the White House a few days before Christmas 1941.

These events formally inaugurated the “Grand Alliance,” a phrase coined by Churchill to describe the coalition of three major powers— the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)—that together would battle the Axis. Born of urgent necessity, it was an alliance of nations with quite different histories and political philosophies, led by three markedly different men often referred to as the “Big Three”—FDR, Churchill, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

A de facto alliance among the three Allied powers began even before Churchill’s trip to the White House in the wake of Pearl Harbor. FDR had launched secret staff talks among British, American, and Canadian military chiefs in January 1941. And in March, he had established the Lend-Lease program to begin rushing war supplies to Great Britain and, before the year was out, to the Soviet Union. Finally, in August 1941 FDR and Churchill had met in a secret shipboard rendezvous on the Atlantic to hammer out preliminary war aims in a document called the Atlantic Charter.

Confident in his powers of communication, FDR engaged directly with his two fellow leaders, always careful to nurture the ties that bound the coalition together against the Axis, but also ready to disagree sharply on matters of strategy and principle alike.

In his work with Churchill and Stalin, FDR shaped how the war would be fought. Perhaps even more important, he took the lead in setting forth the principles the Allies were fighting to defend. Though the Grand Alliance shared a single, paramount near-term objective—to squelch the Axis—the USSR’s communist totalitarianism and Britain’s imperialism cast doubt on whether the leaders could share the same hopes for a postwar world. Even while waging the immediate life-or-death struggle for victory, FDR looked to the future. In taking the initiative to define the coalition’s war aims, he played a prominent part in setting the terms of an eventual peace and the direction of postwar geopolitics.

Winston Churchill’s daughter, Mary, receives her father’s salute aboard the HMS Duke of York as Churchill prepares to journey across the Atlantic to meet with Franklin D. Roosevelt in their first conference as official war allies, December 1941. Two weeks earlier, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor had brought America into the war, to Churchill’s relief. He knew America’s industrial and military capacity might well prove the key to Britain’s survival. LOC
A

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins: A Wartime Partnership

Harry Hopkins, a social worker from Iowa, served Franklin D. Roosevelt for years as “the whirling dervish at the center of the New Deal,” as historian Michael Fullilove put it. Then Hopkins took up a notably different job as FDR’s most trusted wartime counselor, gatekeeper, and emissary.

Hopkins’s elevation to this position came on May 10, 1940—the day Nazi Germany launched its furious attack on France and the Low Countries and Winston Churchill became prime minister of Great Britain. Dining with Hopkins at the White House that night, the president invited him to stay the weekend. FDR’s valued advisor and indeed close friend would live at the White House for the next three and a half years. With this extraordinary access to the president, Hopkins quickly assumed a central role in the most pressing work at hand—developing and carrying out U.S. war strategy and diplomacy.

An important aspect of this role was acting as a go-between to facilitate FDR’s relations with his partners in war. FDR could rely on Hopkins to represent him with skill and discretion, and to relay his impressions back to the president candidly.

It was to Hopkins that FDR turned in early 1941 when he wanted to know more about Winston Churchill, sending Hopkins to London to meet with the man who, even as France was being overrun by Nazis, had stirred the British House of Commons by declaiming, “We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be...we shall never surrender.” FDR was himself constrained from engaging in high-profile war talks, since the United States had not yet entered the conflict and isolationist sentiment ran high at home. But he thought it vital to cement an understanding with Churchill, in part so the two men could work in tandem to build political support for FDR’s Lend-Lease legislation, which proposed to provide Britain with essentially any war supplies it needed to hold the Germans at bay.

FDR, who’d met Churchill only once, briefly, in 1918, sent Hopkins to London as his personal representative “so that he can talk to Churchill like an Iowa farmer,” as the president explained. “Harry is the perfect ambassador for my purposes,” FDR went on. “He doesn’t even know the meaning of the word ‘protocol.’ When he sees a piece of red tape he just pulls out those old garden shears of his and snips it.”

Churchill would give FDR’s top advisor the admiring moniker “Lord Root of the Matter.” Hopkins assured Churchill of the president’s readiness to back the war effort and told the president the British could be counted on to hold the line against the Nazis. Thanks in part to Hopkins’s efforts, the Lend-Lease bill passed in March 1941; he would become its chief administrator.

As chief New Deal relief administrator, Harry Hopkins testifies before a Senate committee in April 1938, urging a jobs-creating expansion of public works—and the establishment of a permanent system for ensuring full employment in America. Hopkins was unique among Franklin D. Roosevelt’s advisers in that he played lead roles in both crafting the New Deal and helping FDR address the industrial, military, and diplomatic challenges of World War II. LOC
was unusually open with Hopkins about the state of Soviet military preparations. Hopkins relayed to the president the information most critical to American security: the Soviet Union needed help but showed no sign of folding to the German assault. With Hopkins’s recommendation, the United States would soon extend its Lend-Lease war aid to the Russians.

Having established himself as a skilled communicator, Hopkins went on to become FDR’s foremost aide at nearly every major Allied conference. There he served as liaison not only between FDR and the other leaders of the Grand Alliance, but also between the president and his military service chiefs. All these important figures soon came to recognize that speaking to Hopkins was tantamount to speaking with the president.

At the Tehran Conference in November–December 1943, Hopkins’s closeness to Churchill helped him persuade the British leader to support a high-risk Allied invasion of France, opening a second front in the war to relieve the exhausted Soviets. After the conference, having remarried following the death of his second wife, Hopkins moved out of the White House. Complications from the stomach cancer diagnosed in 1937, which had tormented Hopkins during his trip to Russia, once again began to take a serious toll on him, and he faded from public view in the first half of 1944.

But by the end of the year, the driven public servant resumed his work advising on war strategy. In January 1945, FDR sent Hopkins back to London to review British and American war plans in anticipation of the final defeat of Germany. From there, Hopkins traveled to the Crimea to join FDR at the Yalta Conference, where he assisted the president by warding off many Russian demands. Exhausted and in terrible pain, Hopkins left Yalta by air rather than sail home with FDR aboard the USS Quincy. This was the last time the two men ever saw each other. Hopkins spent the next several months recuperating at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where he received the news of FDR’s death on April 12, 1945.
The Arcadia Conference: The Planning Begins, December 1941

Just weeks after Japan’s stunning assault on Pearl Harbor, British prime minister Winston Churchill and his top war advisors traveled to Washington, DC, to meet with Franklin D. Roosevelt and his military counselors in the first of many wartime conferences between the two powers. The Washington Conference, code-named Arcadia, would last from December 22, 1941, to mid-January 1942.

At Arcadia, the Allies established an organization to administer the new Anglo-American military project: the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS). It joined the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and the British Chiefs of Staff, and, at FDR’s insistence, would have its headquarters in Washington. The CCS advised Churchill and Roosevelt on military strategy and implemented their decisions.

On January 1, 1942, at FDR’s initiative, the conference also produced a groundbreaking diplomatic announcement. FDR, Churchill, Joseph Stalin, and representatives of China and twenty-two other states issued a statement of war goals built on the Atlantic Charter affirmed by FDR and Churchill in August 1941. In what FDR called the United Nations Declaration, signatories pledged to adhere to the principles of the Atlantic Charter; employ their full resources against the Axis powers until they were defeated; and cooperate with one another, not accepting a separate peace with any Axis power. In all, twenty-six states had for the first time officially agreed that they were in the fight together and would accept no outcome short of victory.

The Allied leaders conferring in Washington affirmed their “Germany First” strategy promising to tackle the Nazis before trying to subdue Imperial Japan. On the question of how to pursue victory over the Nazis, the British proposed continuing their policy of closing the ring around Germany through maximum aid to the Soviets fighting in the East, a possible invasion of North Africa, and an ongoing campaign of bombing, blockade, and subversion.

As newcomers to the war, U.S. military chiefs were not in a position to argue strongly against the British proposals at Arcadia. But in the weeks and months that followed the conference, as the Japanese continued their rapid advance in the Pacific and the Soviet Union seemed to falter after a brilliant defense of Moscow in December, the American chiefs began to see the British plans for 1942 as too leisurely and indirect. Army chief General George C. Marshall put forward an alternative plan drawn up by General Dwight D. Eisenhower. It called for landings in France in 1942, followed by a large-scale invasion in 1943.

The British balked. They had firsthand experience in direct clashes against the formidable German forces and preferred to wear down German military strength by all possible means—including the dispersion of German forces—before crossing the English Channel in an all-out invasion to retake France. Britain refused to undertake a landing on the coast of France in 1942, but accepted in principle the American long-range strategy, which included the build-up of forces in the UK in 1942 in preparation for a cross-channel attack on France in 1943.

Now it was FDR’s turn to press. He insisted the Allies open a front somewhere in the European theater in 1942, both to relieve the Russians and to get the American public involved in the war against Germany as soon as possible. In a compromise, FDR suggested the Allies proceed immediately with their proposed invasion of North Africa. On November 8, 1942, a massive Anglo-American amphibious force landed in Morocco and Algeria. Operation Torch was underway.
The Casablanca Conference: Birth of the Mediterranean Strategy, January 1943

The Casablanca Conference took place in January 1943, just two months after the Anglo-American invasion of North Africa. The meeting had been scheduled in anticipation of a quick victory in that campaign. But Adolf Hitler’s surprise move flooding Tunisia with reinforcements meant the Allies would struggle until May to clear North Africa of German and Italian forces.

Well aware that ongoing combat in Africa might delay an invasion of France, Winston Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff urged continued operations in the Mediterranean, suggesting the possible invasion of Sardinia or Sicily as the most logical next step in the Allied advance. Although U.S. Army chief General George C. Marshall still preferred getting to France as quickly as possible, he now thought it unlikely this would be possible in 1943, and he agreed to the idea of attacking Sicily once the North African campaign was over.

The decision to move against Sicily marked the beginning of what became known as the “Mediterranean strategy,” which Churchill argued was the most direct and immediate way to both weaken the German hold on France and provide relief to the Soviets. This argument became all the more persuasive once it became clear there could be no attack on France in 1943. Hence, the Allies took Sicily in July and invaded Italy in September.

Joseph Stalin had been invited to Casablanca but declined to attend. Concern was mounting that he might seek a separate peace with the Germans, a worry that led Franklin D. Roosevelt to announce, at a postconference press briefing, an Allied promise to accept no peace terms other than “unconditional surrender” by the Axis. FDR had advocated this policy before, but now it seemed imperative to issue a clear promise to Stalin that, in spite of the likely delay in launching a cross-channel attack on France, the British and the Americans would stay in the war until the Nazi threat was utterly eliminated. The Soviets would not be left to contend with the enemy alone.

The Allies also agreed to do all they could to defeat the German submarine threat in the Atlantic and to launch a joint bombing offensive against Germany. Both were logical preludes to a cross-channel assault on France, opening Atlantic sea-lanes for the buildup of invasion forces, and suppressing German industry and airpower to soften its defenses.

Finally, the two sides agreed to beef up support for the American campaign in the Pacific, building on recent American successes repelling a Japanese invasion at Midway and seizing control of Guadalcanal.
Tehran and the Second Front, November–December 1943

The attack on Italy decided upon at Casablanca went well initially. Benito Mussolini having been deposed in July, the Italians surrendered to the Allies in September 1943, and the invasion went forward. This course of events seemed to the British to open up glittering possibilities—a rapid advance to Rome and beyond, and perhaps the opening of new fronts in the Axis-occupied Balkans and Aegean.

But, bent on preventing the Allies from gaining this foothold, Germany soon crushed Britain’s hopes by mounting its own occupation of Italy. Italy’s mountainous terrain, coupled with the Nazis’ quick replacement of Italian garrisons in the Balkans and in Greece, would make the Italian campaign a slow, grueling one. The Allies could scarcely afford to attempt further incursions into other parts of the eastern Mediterranean. Nevertheless, throughout the fall of 1943, Winston Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff continued to argue in favor of expanding Allied operations in the region, even if it meant yet another delay in the invasion of northwest France, now tentatively set for May 1944.

To the Americans, however—to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, and other military leaders—any expansion of the Mediterranean campaign that would delay the cross-channel attack was completely unacceptable. The Americans went so far as to recommend that after the fall of Rome, the Italian campaign should be shut down, with the bulk of the Mediterranean forces regrouped for an attack on southern France, to coincide with the invasion of Normandy in the north, now known as Operation Overlord.

It was with these matters still unsettled that FDR and Churchill arrived in the Iranian capital of Tehran in late 1943 for their first tripartite meeting with Joseph Stalin. It soon became apparent that FDR and the American delegation not only concurred with Stalin that an invasion of France should be the centerpiece of Allied operations in 1944 (and a date certain set for its execution), but also that they were quite willing to enlist Stalin’s help in driving this point home to Churchill and his delegation.

The result: an agreement to begin an assault on France in May 1944. The conference overruled Churchill’s pleas for operations in the Aegean, replacing this strategy with the American preference for landings on the French Riviera (Operation Anvil). As for the Italian campaign, Churchill was able to win the Allies’ assent to advancing north as far as the Pisa–Rimini line. His subsequent requests to cancel Anvil in order to maintain the initiative in Italy would go unheeded.

Pleased at these decisions, Stalin in turn agreed to open a new offensive on the Eastern front to coincide with the invasion of Normandy, and, most important for the Americans, he reiterated an earlier promise that the USSR would declare war on Japan once Germany had been defeated.

Looking ahead to a victory that at last seemed likely, FDR also succeeded in winning Stalin’s agreement in principle to support the establishment of a United Nations organization to maintain peace after the war.

The three leaders agreed to move the postwar borders of Poland west (it would gain territory from Germany and lose it to the Soviet Union), and they discussed possible zones of Allied occupation in the wake of a German defeat. They referred the question of whether and how Germany might be dismembered into separate states to a tripartite committee meeting in London, the newly established European Advisory Commission.

The understandings achieved at Tehran, which set the tone for the remainder of the war, marked the high point of what Churchill would call the Grand Alliance of the three major Allied powers. But given FDR’s clear determination to establish a bilateral working relationship with Stalin and to side with the Soviet leader on the question of a second front, Tehran also marks the moment when the world’s two emerging superpowers, the United States and the USSR, began to eclipse the influence of Great Britain, not only in the conduct of the war, but also in the world that was to follow.
The Yalta Conference, February 1945

On June 6, 1944, the long-awaited invasion of Normandy finally began. For seven weeks the Allies struggled to expand their beachhead, finally breaking through the German line near the end of July. On August 25, they liberated Paris. By mid-September most of France was in Allied hands.

This unexpectedly rapid advance across France led many to speculate the war would be over by Christmas. But the Western Allies failed to outflank the Germans in their airborne invasion of Holland in September (Operation Market Garden), and the Germans launched a counteroffensive in the Ardennes forest (the Battle of the Bulge)—events that delayed the Allied advance into Germany until early March 1945.

Still, by early 1945, victory over Germany was clearly in sight. With a number of postwar issues still to be settled, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin determined to convene their second—and last—tripartite meeting in February. Held at the Black Sea resort of Yalta on the Crimean peninsula, the Yalta Conference remains the most prominent—and controversial—of the wartime summits.

The Pacific theater and the United Nations

FDR had two main goals for the meeting. He wanted to win Stalin’s firm commitment to join the war against Japan, an enemy that, though greatly reduced in strength, seemed determined to fight on. FDR also wanted Stalin to pledge Soviet participation in the postwar international peacekeeping organization, the United Nations.

At Yalta, Stalin agreed to send his forces against Japan within three months of an Allied victory in Europe. In return, FDR and Churchill agreed to support Soviet interests in the Far East, including the return of territories taken from Russia by Japan in 1905, a Soviet-dominated regime in Mongolia, and Soviet control of the Manchurian railroads. Stalin, for his part, agreed that he would recognize Nationalist Chiang Kai-shek as the leader of China and would urge the Chinese communists under Mao to enter a coalition government with him. (The two had been rivals for nearly twenty years and would resume civil war after their common enemy, Japan, was subdued.)

FDR also secured Soviet commitment to join the United Nations (UN). The leaders closed a critical gap in the blueprint for the UN by agreeing on a voting procedure for its Security Council, the eleven-member UN executive body that would be responsible for maintaining peace, by the deployment of armed forces if necessary. The council’s five permanent members—Great Britain, the United States, China, the Soviet Union, and France—each would have the right to veto resolutions, but not to unilaterally block council consideration of issues. This would guarantee a hearing on any issue for all member states.

The fate of Europe

A major piece of business at the conference was to finalize agreements about the disposition of Europe after the war. At Yalta the Big Three—FDR, Churchill, and Stalin—confirmed the planned westward shift of Polish borders, and, as discussed...
At the Yalta Conference, February 4, 1945, from left to right: Secretary of State Edward R. Stettinius Jr.; General Laurence S. Kuter (standing in for General Henry H. Arnold, chief of U.S. Army Air Forces, who was recuperating from a heart attack); Navy chief Admiral Ernest J. King; Army chief General George C. Marshall; U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union W. Averell Harriman; and chief of staff to the president Admiral William D. Leahy. LOC

at Tehran, they agreed that Germany would be temporarily divided into zones of Allied occupation, with France taking a fourth zone composed of territory from British and American sectors.

FDR and Churchill secured Stalin’s signature on the Declaration of Liberated Europe and the Declaration of Poland, both of which recognized the right of all people to choose the form of government under which they live. The agreement on Poland, where the Soviet army had installed a provisional puppet regime, specifically called for “the holding of free and unfettered elections as soon as possible on the basis of universal suffrage and secret ballot.”

The historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has called Stalin’s agreement to these principles at Yalta a “grave diplomatic blunder” on his part. Stalin’s subsequent establishment of Soviet-dominated buffer states between Russia and Germany would expose the Soviet leader to pervasive charges of bad faith.

Indeed, many historians hold that what set the stage for the decades-long Cold War division of Europe into a Soviet-dominated east and democratic west was not so much the positions taken by the leaders at Yalta, but the position of their armies in February 1945. From the east, Soviet forces had advanced to within forty miles of Berlin, while the Western Allies had yet to cross the Rhine into Germany. The Soviet Union’s dominance in Eastern Europe following the war may well have been decided on the battlefields of Russia in 1942–43 and by the Allied failure to land in France until June 1944. At Yalta, with the Soviet Union occupying much of Eastern Europe, FDR and Churchill sought not to eliminate Soviet influence there, but to mitigate it.

A final homecoming
FDR and the American delegation returned from the conference with a sense of cautious optimism about the future. They felt great relief that the Soviets had formally agreed to enter the war against Japan. And they were hopeful that, through the hard work of what FDR called “waging peace,” the United States and Great Britain could overcome the Soviet regime’s resistance to working with the international community.

It was to deliver this message that an exhausted FDR, with little more than a month to live, went before Congress and the American people on March 1, 1945. “It is good to be home,” he said, after apologizing for his sitting posture in an unusual acknowledgment of the “ten pounds of steel” he carried on his legs. Then FDR implored Americans to embrace their role in carrying out the project begun at Yalta. “Speaking in all frankness,” he said, “the question of whether it is entirely fruitful or not lies to a great extent in your hands.”