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زبانهای اروپایی

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09.02.2025

## *Yalta 1945 – Between Cooperation and Rivalry: What Lessons for Today's World Order? Part 1*

There are 80 years, Yalta February 4-11, 1945 showed that even rival powers could cooperate for global stability—so why is such diplomacy impossible today? This article explores the lessons of Yalta and why a new grand bargain remains unreachable in our fractured world.



### **The Yalta Conference: A Major Turning Point in International Diplomacy**

The Yalta Conference of February 1945 remains one of the most significant moments in international diplomacy, shaping the post-war global order and establishing frameworks for security and cooperation.

Despite the ideological divide between the Allies and the Soviet Union, the Big Three—Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, and Franklin D. Roosevelt—managed to reach crucial agreements that not only determined the fate of post-war Europe but also laid the groundwork for the United Nations.

The shared objective of defeating Nazism temporarily overshadowed their long-term strategic differences

However, the spirit of Yalta appears distant in today's fractured geopolitical climate. The hopes of building a stable, cooperative world order after the Cold War have gradually eroded, giving way to rising tensions, particularly between Russia and the West. NATO expansion, the crisis in Ukraine, and a resurgence of ideological rivalry have created an environment where a new Yalta-style agreement seems increasingly implausible.

This article revisits the major decisions of the Yalta Conference, examines how powers with opposing worldviews found common ground and explores why such cooperation appears unattainable in 2025.

### **The Yalta Conference: A Defining Moment for the Post-War World Order**

By February 1945, the defeat of Nazi Germany was imminent. The Red Army had already liberated most of Eastern Europe, while the Western Allies were pushing through France and Belgium towards the German border. With the war's outcome clear, the Allied leaders convened in Yalta, a Crimean city, from 4–11 February 1945, to negotiate the terms of peace and the reorganization of Europe.

The key decisions of the conference included:

**Germany's Occupation and Demilitarization:** The leaders agreed to divide Germany into four occupation zones (controlled by the US, UK, USSR, and France) and committed to eradicating Nazism.

**Poland's Borders and Government:** Stalin secured recognition of a pro-Soviet government in Poland, in exchange for a promise of free elections—a promise that was not fully realized.

**United Nations Formation:** The conference laid the foundation for the United Nations, with Stalin agreeing to participate in exchange for securing membership for Ukraine and Belarus as separate entities.

**Japan and the Pacific War:** Stalin committed to entering the war against Japan after Germany's surrender, in return for territorial concessions in Asia.

The Yalta agreements reflected both cooperation and mistrust. While the leaders managed to reach compromises, the seeds of the Cold War were already evident. The Western Allies sought democratic governance in liberated nations, while the Soviet Union prioritized security guarantees through a buffer zone of friendly states. Despite these tensions, the conference remains a testament to diplomacy overcoming ideological divisions in pursuit of a common goal: preventing future conflicts.

### **The Meaning of Yalta for the Post-War Order**

Although Yalta later became synonymous with the division of Europe, at the time, it was seen as a necessary compromise to ensure stability. The conference's decisions shaped the Yalta-Potsdam system, which, despite its flaws, established an international order that prevented another global war.

The cooperation achieved in 1945 was remarkable given the stark ideological divide between the capitalist West and the communist Soviet Union, as put by historian S.M. Plokhy. The shared objective of defeating Nazism temporarily overshadowed their long-term strategic differences. This demonstrates that even among rival powers, pragmatic diplomacy can yield agreements that serve broader global interests.

However, this spirit of cooperation quickly faded. By 1947, the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan signaled the West's commitment to containing Soviet influence, while Stalin tightened control over Eastern Europe. The Cold War had begun, and the unity forged at Yalta gave way to decades of geopolitical rivalry.

### **Missed Opportunities for a New Security Architecture**

Despite the Cold War tensions, there were moments when a cooperative security order seemed possible. Here are a few examples of these moments:

#### **Gorbachev's "Common European Home"**

In a 1989 speech to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, Mikhail Gorbachev articulated his vision for a "Common European Home". He envisioned a Europe free of ideological divisions and advocated for security cooperation between East and West. Gorbachev emphasized the importance of political reality and mutual security cooperation between East and West.

However, after the Soviet Union collapsed, NATO expansion replaced the idea of indivisible security, alienating Russia from the European security structure.

#### **The 1989 Malta Summit**

In December 1989, Gorbachev and U.S. President George H.W. Bush met in Malta, agreeing on the end of the Cold War and expressing optimism for a new European order based on cooperation. They committed to rapid progress on arms reduction and emphasized political solutions over military ones. Gorbachev urged for NATO and the Warsaw Pact to be transformed to meet the challenge of the new times. They 'should not remain military alliances, but rather military-political alliances, and later on just political alliances'.

This hope, however, was short-lived as NATO expansion intensified, including NATO's eastward expansion.

#### **Medvedev's 2008 Proposal for a New European Security Architecture**

In June 2008, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev proposed a new European security treaty, emphasizing the principle of indivisible security—that the security of one state should not come at the expense of another. This initiative aimed to create a comprehensive security framework inclusive of all European nations.

Despite its potential, the proposal was ignored in favour of continued NATO enlargement, leading to further estrangement between Russia and Western security structures.

### **Putin's 2010 Proposed an Economic Free Trade Zone**

In November 2010, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin proposed the creation of a “harmonious economic community stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok,” envisioning a unified market encompassing Europe and Russia. He suggested that this could evolve into a free trade zone or more advanced forms of economic integration, potentially resulting in a continental market worth trillions of euros.

Despite the ambitious nature of this proposal and a European study recognising it as best for EU interests, European leaders largely dismissed it, opting to continue NATO enlargement and other policies that excluded Russia from key security decisions. This approach contributed to Russia's perception of being marginalized in the European security framework.

### **In conclusion, a deeply rooted mistrust**

These instances highlight moments when a more inclusive and cooperative European security architecture seemed attainable. These missed opportunities reinforced Moscow's perception that the West sought to weaken and marginalize Russia rather than integrate it into a broader security framework. This perception has contributed to the deep mistrust defining today's geopolitical landscape.

Ricardo Martins, February 06, 2025

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