The Tehran Conference, 1943

The Tehran Conference was a meeting between U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin in Tehran, Iran, between November 28 and December 1, 1943.

During the Conference, the three leaders coordinated their military strategy against Germany and Japan and made a number of important decisions concerning the post World War II era. The most notable achievements of the Conference focused on the next phases of the war against the Axis powers in Europe and Asia. Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin engaged in discussions concerning the terms under which the British and Americans finally committed to launching Operation Overlord, an invasion of northern France, to be executed by May of 1944. The Soviets, who had long been pushing the Allies to open a second front, agreed to launch another major offensive on the Eastern Front that would divert German troops away from the Allied campaign in northern France. Stalin also agreed in principle that the Soviet Union would declare war against Japan following an Allied victory over Germany. In exchange for a Soviet declaration of war against Japan, Roosevelt conceded to Stalin’s demands for the Kurile Islands and the southern half of Sakhalin, and access to the ice-free ports of Dairen (Dalian) and Port Arthur (Lüshun Port) located on the Liaodong Peninsula in northern China. The exact details concerning this deal were not finalized, however, until the Yalta Conference of 1945.

At Tehran, the three Allied leaders also discussed important issues concerning the fate of Eastern Europe and Germany in the postwar period. Stalin pressed for a revision of Poland’s eastern border with the Soviet Union to match the line set by British Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon in 1920. In order to compensate Poland for the resulting loss of territory, the three leaders agreed to move the German-Polish border to the Oder and Neisse rivers. This decision was not formally ratified, however, until the Potsdam Conference of 1945. During these negotiations Roosevelt also secured from Stalin his assurance that the Republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia would be reincorporated into the Soviet Union only after the citizens of each republic voted on the question in a referendum. Stalin stressed, however, that the matter would have to be resolved “in accordance with the Soviet constitution,” and that he would not consent to any international control over the elections. Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin also broached the question of the possible postwar partition of Germany into Allied zones of
occupation and agreed to have the European Advisory Commission “carefully study the question of dismemberment” before any final decision was taken.

Broader international cooperation also became a central theme of the negotiations at Tehran. Roosevelt and Stalin privately discussed the composition of the United Nations. During the Moscow Conference of the Foreign Ministers in October and November of 1943, the United States, Britain, China, and the Soviet Union had signed a four-power declaration whose fourth point called for the creation of a “general international organization” designed to promote “international peace and security.” At Tehran, Roosevelt outlined for Stalin his vision of the proposed organization in which the future United Nations would be dominated by “four policemen” (the United States, Britain, China, and Soviet Union) who “would have the power to deal immediately with any threat to the peace and any sudden emergency which requires action.”

Finally, the three leaders issued a “Declaration of the Three Powers Regarding Iran.” Within it, they thanked the Iranian Government for its assistance in the war against Germany and promised to provide it with economic assistance both during and after the war. Most importantly, the U.S., British, and Soviet Governments stated that they all shared a “desire for the maintenance of the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Iran.”

Roosevelt secured many of his objectives during the Conference. The Soviet Union had committed to joining the war against Japan and expressed support for Roosevelt’s plans for the United Nations. Most importantly, Roosevelt believed that he had won Stalin’s confidence by proving that the United States was willing to negotiate directly with the Soviet Union and, most importantly, by guaranteeing the opening of the second front in France by the spring of 1944. However, Stalin also gained tentative concessions on Eastern Europe that would be confirmed during the later wartime conferences.