

Engineering Multilateral Diplomacy: Molotov and the Soviet Preparation for the Geneva Conference, 1954

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Abstract

The 1954 Geneva Conference has commonly been studied from the perspective of the course of negotiations and the outcomes of the agreements concerning Indochina. Yet a substantial part of the diplomatic activity took place before the conference formally opened. This article analyses the Soviet Union's preparations for the Geneva Conference under the coordination of Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, treating Geneva as a significant case of multilateral diplomacy in the context of the Cold War. Drawing on Soviet, US, British, and Chinese diplomatic documents, together with relevant historical scholarship, the article reconstructs three dimensions of the preparatory process: information gathering and the definition of the negotiating space; coordination with China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; and the preparation of the negotiating team and contingency plans. The study employs the concept of "diplomatic engineering" to describe the deliberate construction of informational, political, coalition-building, and procedural conditions before formal negotiations began. The findings indicate that the Soviet Union's negotiating capacity at Geneva was substantially prepared before the conference itself. Such preparation, however, did not amount to the ability to control the outcome. The article argues that a full understanding of multilateral diplomacy requires attention not only to what takes place at the table, but also to the process of constructing the table.

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Introduction

The 1954 Geneva Conference represents one of the most significant cases for examining the operation of multilateral diplomacy in the context of the Cold War. Held from April to July 1954, the conference brought together major powers and parties directly involved in, or otherwise connected with, the Indochina conflict, including the Soviet Union, China, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). With an agenda addressing both the Korean question and Indochina, Geneva was not merely a negotiating forum for ending the war; it was also a diplomatic arena in which the participating parties sought to shape a new political and security order in Southeast Asia. Geneva has therefore long occupied an important place in the study of diplomatic history and international relations (Randle, 1969; Cable, 1986).

The scholarship on the Geneva Conference has offered a range of approaches to explaining its course, context, and outcome. Randle (1969) examines Geneva in relation to the search for a settlement to the Indochina conflict, while Cable (1986) emphasises the conference as a complex diplomatic process in which the parties had to address differences in interests, strategy, and procedure simultaneously. Devillers and Lacouture (1969) approach Geneva from the historical perspective of the ending of the Indochina War, highlighting the relationship between diplomatic negotiations and developments on the battlefield. Watt (1967), by contrast, focuses on the significance of the Geneva

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Agreements for Vietnam and demonstrates the gap between diplomatic commitments and the issues that arose during their implementation. At a broader level, Tønnesson (1985) situates the Indochina War within a longer historical process extending from 1945 to 1975, thereby helping to explain Geneva as a critical juncture in the history of regional conflict rather than as an isolated event. Logevall (2012) and Waite (2012) further broaden the analytical scope by placing Geneva within the transformations of the international order after the Second World War and within the global history of the Indochina War.

From the perspective of Soviet foreign policy, Gaiduk (2003) situates Geneva within Moscow's adjustment of its policy towards the Indochina conflict and its relations with Asian communist movements. Olsen (2006) extends the analysis to Soviet–Vietnamese–Chinese relations, demonstrating that Soviet actions at Geneva cannot be separated from the complex interactions and intersecting interests among the three countries. Scholarship on China also illuminates another important dimension of the conference. Zhai (1992) examines China's role at Geneva, while Shao (1986) emphasises Zhou Enlai's efforts to promote a neutralisation settlement for Indochina. Wang (2017) further demonstrates how Beijing employed Geneva diplomacy to constrain the possibility of US intervention in Indochina, while Zhang (2007) situates Geneva within China's broader diplomatic strategy towards international conferences in 1954–1955. Taken together, these studies show that Geneva was not merely a site of negotiation between the Western powers and communist forces; it was also an arena in which communist actors adjusted their own interests and strategies.

From the perspective of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Asselin (2011) places particular emphasis on Hanoi's agency, thereby cautioning against interpreting Geneva simply as the product of negotiations among the great powers. This approach is important for assessing the role of the Soviet Union: Moscow could seek to shape the negotiating environment, but Soviet preparations should not be equated with an ability to control the actions of its partners. Recent scholarship has likewise continued to qualify interpretations that place excessive emphasis on the role of any single great power. Šipla (2024), for example, demonstrates that the question of US military intervention, and the failure of that option, constituted an important element of the diplomatic structure that led to Geneva. At the level of primary documentation, official Geneva documents, including the Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference (Geneva Conference, 1954), provide a basis for comparing the preparatory process with the conference's eventual outcome, while US Department of State documentation on the Korean question demonstrates that Geneva was structured from the outset as a multi-issue conference in which Indochina was addressed alongside the Korean question (U.S. Department of State, 1954).

Taken together, the existing body of scholarship has provided substantial explanations of the context, interests of the various actors, course of negotiations, and outcome of Geneva. Yet the richness of this scholarship also highlights a notable gap: the diplomatic work that took place before the Geneva Conference formally began. Exploratory contacts, the collection and assessment of information, the identification of the parties' positions, coordination with partners, preparation of delegations, agenda-setting, and the anticipation of alternative negotiating scenarios have generally appeared as supporting elements in studies of the conference rather than as an independent object of analysis. This article therefore shifts the focus from the question of what happened at Geneva to how the conditions for negotiation were prepared before Geneva, with particular attention to the activities of Molotov and the Soviet Foreign Ministry.

The article approaches the Geneva case from this preparatory period, focusing on the role of Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and the Soviet diplomatic apparatus. The central question is: How did Molotov and the Soviet Foreign Ministry engineer the diplomatic conditions for the Geneva Conference before formal negotiations began? The article argues that multilateral diplomacy did not begin when the delegates sat down at the negotiating table; rather, it was partly shaped through the preparatory process preceding the conference. Examining this process makes it possible to understand Geneva not only as an outcome of negotiation, but also as a case of “diplomatic engineering”—the deliberate construction of information, coordination, agenda, procedures, and alternative options in order to create an environment conducive to multilateral negotiation.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

Theoretical Framework

This study approaches the 1954 Geneva Conference from the perspective of multilateral diplomacy, but does not restrict multilateral diplomacy to the negotiations conducted at the conference table. In conventional approaches, Geneva is viewed as a negotiating process in which multiple governments participated in seeking agreement on issues of international and regional significance (Randle, 1969; Cable, 1986). The Geneva case, however, demonstrates that a multilateral conference does not emerge as a fully constituted negotiating arena. Before the delegations formally met, the parties had to identify their interests, probe the positions of their counterparts, consult with allies, prepare the agenda, and anticipate possible developments during the negotiations. This study therefore treats the pre-conference phase as a constitutive component of multilateral diplomacy rather than merely as the administrative prelude to the conference.

On this basis, the article employs the working concept of “diplomatic engineering” to describe the deliberate preparation of informational, political, coalition, and procedural conditions for multilateral negotiation. The concept does not imply that any single actor could control the conference outcome in its entirety. Rather, “engineering” is used here in a more limited sense: the construction or adjustment of the initial conditions within which the actors entered negotiations. This approach is consistent with studies demonstrating that Soviet policy towards Indochina must be understood within the broader context of the Cold War and Soviet relations with China and Vietnam (Gaiduk, 2003; Olsen, 2006). At the same time, it avoids an overly deterministic interpretation of Moscow’s role, since Geneva was not a product of the Soviet Union alone. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) possessed its own calculations and capacity for action during the negotiations, while China, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States pursued distinct objectives (Asselin, 2011; Cable, 1986).

Within this framework, diplomatic engineering is operationalised through a six-stage analytical sequence: information gathering → position mapping → coalition coordination → agenda-setting → procedural preparation → contingency planning. First, information gathering helps identify the positions and limits of action of the various parties; position mapping then enables an assessment of areas of convergence, divergence, and potential compromise. Coordination with partners, particularly within Soviet–Chinese–Vietnamese relations, facilitates the formation or adjustment of common positions, while agenda-setting determines which issues are brought to the negotiating table and in what sequence. Finally, procedural preparation and contingency planning enable a diplomatic delegation to maintain its capacity to adapt when negotiations do not proceed according to the initial scenario (Gaiduk, 2003; Olsen, 2006; Asselin, 2011).

The theoretical framework thus shifts the focus from the question of “What did the parties achieve at Geneva?” to “How were the conditions that enabled the parties to negotiate at Geneva prepared?”. From this perspective, diplomatic power lies not only in the capacity to persuade or exert pressure in the negotiating room, but also in the ability to shape information, relationships, agendas, and available options before formal negotiations begin. Geneva can therefore be understood as a case through which multilateral diplomacy can be observed at two interconnected levels: diplomacy at the negotiating table and diplomacy in the process of constructing the negotiating table itself.

Research Methodology

This study employs a diplomatic history approach combined with process tracing to reconstruct how the Soviet Union prepared for the 1954 Geneva Conference and to identify the diplomatic activities that took place before formal negotiations began. Rather than focusing solely on statements made and outcomes reached at the conference, the study examines a sequence of interconnected actions linking the international context, information gathering, assessment of positions, coordination with partners, agenda-setting, and the preparation of negotiating options. This approach is consistent with the character of Geneva as a diplomatic process that extended both before and throughout the conference, while also allowing Soviet decisions to be situated within the broader context of Soviet policy towards Indochina and its relations with China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Gaiduk, 2003; Olsen, 2006; Cable, 1986).

The source material is organised into groups according to provenance and function. The most important group comprises contemporaneous diplomatic documents, including the Soviet documentary

collection on the Geneva Conference edited by Shashkova et al. (2017), Russian documents published by the Cold War International History Project (Wingrove, 2008), and the Foreign Relations of the United States volumes on the Geneva Conference and Indochina (U.S. Department of State, 1981, 1982a, 1982b). British documents are also used to cross-check the course of events and the positions of the parties (British Government, 1954a, 1954b). In addition, scholarship drawing on Chinese archival materials is used to corroborate the process of Soviet–Chinese–Vietnamese coordination and interaction (Chen & Shen, 2008; Wang, 2017; Zhai, 1992), while the works of Randle (1969), Cable (1986), Gaiduk (2003), Olsen (2006), and Asselin (2011) provide the broader historical interpretive framework.

Process tracing is organised around the sequence information gathering → position mapping → coalition coordination → agenda-setting → procedural preparation → contingency planning. Each link in this sequence is examined through comparison across sources of different provenance in order to distinguish direct evidence from the author's interpretation. This method also helps to avoid attributing the entire Geneva process to Molotov or the Soviet Union. The study identifies the role of preparatory activities in creating the conditions for negotiation, rather than assuming that these activities predetermined the conference's eventual outcome. The agency of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and other actors is therefore retained as an essential component of the analysis (Asselin, 2011; Randle, 1969).

Results

From Berlin to Geneva: Information Gathering and Defining the Negotiating Space

The Soviet Union's preparations for the Geneva Conference did not begin when the official delegations arrived in Geneva in April 1954; rather, they took shape through earlier diplomatic contacts, particularly at the Berlin Foreign Ministers' Conference held from 25 January to 18 February 1954. Berlin provided an important exploratory setting in which Moscow could assess the possibility of bringing the Indochina question into an international negotiating framework. The joint communiqué issued by the four foreign ministers on 18 February confirmed the convening of a conference in Geneva to discuss the Korean question and the restoration of peace in Indochina, thereby providing the formal diplomatic basis for the transition from discussions among the great powers to a broader multilateral forum (Foreign Ministers of France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States, 1954). For the Soviet Union, the important issue was not simply to secure agreement on convening the conference, but also to anticipate the political conditions under which the negotiations would take place.

Against this background, the meeting between Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault on 11 February was of particular significance. The encounter enabled Molotov to probe directly the French view of the Indochina War and the prospects for seeking a negotiated settlement. Diplomatic records indicate that Moscow was concerned with establishing Paris's position before the conference was convened, since the French attitude would directly affect both the scope of the negotiations and the prospects for reaching an agreement at Geneva (U.S. Department of State, 1981, 1982a; Wingrove, 2008). Berlin was therefore not merely the venue at which the decision to convene the conference was reached; it also marked the starting point of a process of position mapping, through which the Soviet Union sought to identify the limits, priorities, and potential flexibility of the relevant parties.

After Berlin, Moscow's information-gathering activities expanded in several directions. Soviet documents indicate that the Soviet Foreign Ministry and leadership monitored not only the positions of France and the Western powers, but also paid particular attention to China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). In March 1954, Molotov held successive discussions with the Chinese Ambassador in Moscow, Zhang Wentian, through which he gathered and assessed information about Beijing's position on developments in Indochina. These contacts took place alongside Moscow's preparations for direct consultations with Zhou Enlai and Ho Chi Minh, indicating that Soviet preparations were conducted as a process of multidirectional information gathering rather than merely as an exercise in formulating a unilateral position (Shashkova et al., 2017; Wingrove, 2008).

Significantly, the information gathered was not intended merely to describe the situation; it also served to define the negotiating space. Studies of Soviet policy towards Indochina show that Moscow had to consider simultaneously its relations with the DRV, China, and the Western powers (Gaiduk,

2003; Olsen, 2006). Assessing the position of each party therefore had to be situated within a broader relational structure: what the DRV might accept, what China might support, what level of concessions France might contemplate, and what constraints the United States and its Western allies might impose. When US documentation on Indochina and Geneva is read alongside Soviet records, it becomes possible to identify more clearly the differences between Moscow's and Washington's perceptions of the possibility of US intervention and the prospects for a negotiated settlement (U.S. Department of State, 1981, 1982a; Wingrove, 2008).

The period from Berlin to early April 1954 can therefore be understood as a process through which the Soviet Union gradually moved from information gathering towards strategic assessment. Molotov and the Soviet Foreign Ministry could not control the actions of the various parties, but they could seek to reduce uncertainty by gathering information, comparing positions, and identifying issues that were likely to become central to the negotiations. This process provided the basis for the subsequent stages of "diplomatic engineering": coordination with China and the DRV, agenda-setting, and the preparation of alternative courses of action for Geneva (Gaiduk, 2003; Shashkova et al., 2017; Wingrove, 2008). In this sense, Geneva had already begun diplomatically before the conference formally opened: before the parties entered the negotiating room, they had begun to determine what issues the negotiating table would encompass, which actors could influence it, and which constraints might shape the outcome of the negotiations.

Soviet–Chinese–Vietnamese Coordination and Agenda-Setting

If the period from Berlin to Geneva enabled the Soviet Union to define the strategic space of the negotiations, the contacts with China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in March and early April 1954 marked the transition from information gathering to position coordination and agenda preparation. This was particularly important because the Soviet Union did not enter Geneva as an actor capable of unilaterally determining a settlement for Indochina. Moscow had to take into account the demands of the DRV, China's position, and the responses of the Western powers simultaneously. Studies of Chinese diplomacy at Geneva show that Beijing also pursued its own objectives, including limiting the possibility of direct US intervention and promoting a settlement capable of stabilising the situation in Indochina (Zhai, 1992; Wang, 2017; Zhang, 2007). Soviet–Chinese–Vietnamese coordination should therefore be understood as a process of negotiation among partners whose interests were aligned in important respects but were not identical.

In March 1954, Molotov held discussions with the Chinese Ambassador in Moscow, Zhang Wentian, while also preparing for meetings with Zhou Enlai and Ho Chi Minh in Moscow in early April. Soviet diplomatic documents indicate that these contacts were intended to clarify the military and political situation in Indochina, assess the positions of China and the DRV, and identify the issues that needed to be coordinated before entering the Geneva Conference (Shashkova et al., 2017; Wingrove, 2008). Newly published materials from Chinese archives likewise demonstrate that Geneva must be understood in close relation to Chinese diplomacy, the strategy of the DRV, and the calculations of powers outside the region (Chen & Shen, 2008; Cold War International History Project, 2008). Soviet–Chinese–Vietnamese coordination was therefore not simply a matter of Moscow transmitting instructions to Beijing and Hanoi; rather, it was a process of consultation aimed at securing the degree of compatibility necessary for multilateral negotiation.

A clear manifestation of this process was Molotov's preparation of the issues for consultation with Zhou Enlai and Ho Chi Minh. According to Soviet documents, the plan approved by Molotov on 4 April addressed a range of issues, including the parties' positions on Indochina, the question of elections, Western reactions, the possibility of a ceasefire, the risk of US intervention, and proposals that the DRV might advance at Geneva (Shashkova et al., 2017; Wingrove, 2008). The structure of the plan indicates that Moscow was concerned not only with the substance of a potential settlement, but also with anticipating how particular issues might emerge and be handled during the negotiations. This is precisely where the concept of diplomatic engineering becomes analytically useful: the agenda was prepared as an instrument for organising the negotiating space rather than simply as a list of issues for discussion.

By 7 April, Molotov had approved a draft agenda comprising nine groups of issues. These included representation at the conference, the question of US intervention, China's position, principles concerning the DRV, and specific issues concerning France, including recognition, troop withdrawal,

elections, economic interests, amnesty, and prisoners of war. The draft also envisaged the possibility of establishing a form of relationship with the French Union, the question of a ceasefire, the establishment of an international commission, and, if no agreement could be reached, a shift towards direct negotiations among the parties concerned (Shashkova et al., 2017; Wingrove, 2008). The inclusion of both a formal negotiating route and alternative options within the same structure indicates that the agenda was being used as a mechanism for preparing for the uncertainty inherent in multilateral diplomacy.

The process of agenda-setting should not, however, be interpreted as evidence that the Soviet Union exercised complete control over the substance of Geneva. Studies of Chinese diplomacy demonstrate that Beijing pursued its own priorities, particularly with regard to the neutralisation of Indochina and the limitation of further US intervention (Shao, 1986; Wang, 2017; Zhai, 1992). Similarly, the DRV was not a passive actor within the Soviet–Chinese–Vietnamese configuration. Asselin (2011) emphasises Hanoi's agency in pursuing its own interests and objectives at Geneva, thereby placing limits on interpretations that treat the outcome of the conference simply as a product of great-power calculations. Moscow's principal contribution during the preparatory phase therefore lay not in an absolute capacity to determine outcomes, but in its ability to connect information, coordinate partners, and translate strategic assessments into an agenda structure that could be deployed in negotiations.

Viewed through the sequence information → coordination → agenda, Molotov's activities before Geneva demonstrate that multilateral diplomacy had been substantially shaped before the conference opened. Coordination with China and the DRV enabled Moscow to identify which issues could be brought to the negotiating table, which required priority, and which options might be employed if negotiations reached an impasse. In this sense, the agenda did not merely reflect pre-existing interests; it also became a means of organising and structuring the negotiating process. Geneva was therefore not simply a venue in which the parties brought fully formed positions to the table and bargained over them; some of those positions, issues, and options had already been constructed through consultations and diplomatic preparations before the conference (Gurtov, 1967; Joyaux, 1979; Olsen, 2006).

Preparing the Negotiating Team and Contingency Plans

If information gathering and position coordination provided the political foundations for Geneva, the preparation of the negotiating team and contingency plans translated these assessments into operational capacity at the conference. Soviet documents indicate that preparations began relatively early and were undertaken systematically, encompassing personnel arrangements, the preparation of dossiers, facilities, communications, transportation, and other logistical requirements for the delegation. A plan dated 12 March 1954 specifically addressed accommodation, communications systems, working rooms at the Palais des Nations, press conferences, transport arrangements, flights, and the dispatch of advance personnel to prepare the venue (Shashkova et al., 2017; Wingrove, 2008). These details suggest that Moscow regarded Geneva not merely as a political event but also as a diplomatic operation requiring institutional and logistical organisation.

The preparation of the negotiating team must also be understood in the context of the need to manage a complex agenda. The Soviet Union had to prepare for a conference in which the Indochina questions involved multiple actors and different levels of interest, ranging from a ceasefire, troop withdrawals, and elections to prisoners of war, economic interests, and international mechanisms for supervising the implementation of an agreement. US and British diplomatic documents indicate that, both before and during the conference, questions concerning participation, representation, and the sequencing of issues had significant implications for negotiating capacity (U.S. Department of State, 1981, 1982a, 1982b; British Government, 1954a, 1954b). Preparing the delegation therefore involved more than selecting personnel; it also meant establishing an apparatus capable of processing information, responding to initiatives from counterparts, and maintaining the consistency of the Soviet position.

More significantly, Molotov's preparations included the development of options for different contingencies at Geneva. On 4 April, Molotov approved a six-point plan for consultations with Zhou Enlai and Ho Chi Minh, covering assessments of positions on Indochina, the question of elections, Western reactions, the possibility of a ceasefire, the risk of US intervention, and proposals that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam might advance (Shashkova et al., 2017; Wingrove, 2008). The structure of the plan indicates that Moscow was not preparing for a single scenario but was attempting to anticipate different possibilities that might arise during the negotiations.

This approach is even more apparent in the nine-point draft agenda approved by Molotov on 7 April. Alongside substantive issues, the draft included the possibility of a ceasefire, the establishment of an international commission, and, if no settlement could be reached at the conference, a transition to direct negotiations among the parties concerned. Preparing such an alternative had strategic significance: it helped the Soviet delegation avoid complete dependence on a single negotiating process and maintain room for adjustment as circumstances changed (Shashkova et al., 2017; Wingrove, 2008).

From the perspective of diplomatic engineering, this represented a transition from agenda-setting to procedural preparation and contingency planning. Randle (1969) and Cable (1986) demonstrate that Geneva was a complex negotiating process in which outcomes depended upon continuous interaction among multiple actors. Soviet policy likewise had to be situated within the relational structure involving the DRV and China, rather than being separated from the calculations of these partners (Gaiduk, 2003; Olsen, 2006). At the same time, the agency of the DRV placed limits on Moscow's ability to impose a predetermined scenario (Asselin, 2011). The significance of these preparations therefore did not lie in the Soviet Union's ability to predetermine the outcome of Geneva, but in Moscow's efforts to reduce uncertainty, standardise its response procedures, and expand its range of available options before entering the negotiations. In this sense, the preparation of the negotiating team and contingency plans constituted the final link connecting information gathering and political coordination with bargaining capacity at the conference table (Gaiduk, 2003; Wingrove, 2008; Shashkova et al., 2017).

Discussion

The findings above suggest that the 1954 Geneva Conference should be understood not only as a sequence of negotiations conducted between April and July, but also as a diplomatic process that had been prepared and shaped in the weeks preceding its formal opening. Classic studies have generally focused on the structure, course, and outcome of Geneva, thereby illuminating bargaining among the great powers, the choices made by the parties to the conflict, and the conditions that led to the Geneva Agreements (Randle, 1969; Cable, 1986). Yet, when these studies are considered alongside Soviet, US, British, and Chinese diplomatic records, it becomes apparent that a significant part of multilateral diplomacy took place before the parties actually sat down at the negotiating table. The Molotov case demonstrates that the conference should be understood as a continuous process encompassing preparation, consultation, agenda-setting, and only subsequently formal negotiation (Gaiduk, 2003; Wingrove, 2008; Shashkova et al., 2017).

This finding first allows for a broader understanding of diplomatic power. If attention is confined to debates at Geneva, power is generally identified through the ability to exert pressure, persuade, or secure concessions. Yet the Soviet preparatory process demonstrates that power could also be exercised through the capacity to reduce uncertainty and structure the negotiating environment. Molotov's collection of information on France, China, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, his consultations with partners, his preparation of issues for discussion, and his anticipation of alternative courses of action enabled Moscow to enter Geneva with a degree of preparedness (Gaiduk, 2003; Olsen, 2006; Wingrove, 2008). In this sense, diplomatic engineering is not a form of power that controls outcomes, but a capacity to shape the conditions under which actors conduct negotiations.

Second, the Geneva case demonstrates that the agenda is an instrument of diplomatic power. The nine-point draft agenda approved by Molotov on 7 April 1954 did not merely list issues for discussion; it also reflected a conception of the sequence and scope of negotiation, ranging from representation, the question of US intervention, and China's position to a ceasefire, an international commission, and the possibility of shifting to direct negotiations if the conference failed to produce an agreement (Shashkova et al., 2017; Wingrove, 2008). This is consistent with scholarship on Geneva that emphasises the role of procedural questions and the structure of negotiations in shaping diplomatic outcomes (Cable, 1986; Randle, 1969). In particular, studies of Chinese diplomacy demonstrate that Beijing was also acutely aware of the strategic value of shaping the framework of negotiation, especially in pursuing the neutralisation of Indochina and limiting the possibility of further US intervention (Shao, 1986; Wang, 2017; Zhai, 1992; Zhang, 2007). Agenda-setting should therefore be understood as part of the bargaining process rather than as a technical activity external to politics.

Third, Moscow's preparatory process also demonstrates that multilateral diplomacy is a multi-layered process, in which coordination with partners can be as important as negotiation with adversaries. The Soviet Union had to take both China and the DRV into account before entering Geneva. Studies of Soviet–Vietnamese–Chinese relations demonstrate that the interests of the three parties overlapped in important respects but were not identical (Olsen, 2006; Chen, 1969). Research on Chinese diplomacy likewise shows that Beijing pursued its own calculations at Geneva, particularly in seeking to prevent direct US intervention (Shao, 1986; Wang, 2017). At the same time, Asselin (2011) emphasises the agency of the DRV, thereby placing limits on interpretations that treat Hanoi merely as an object of Soviet or Chinese policy. Soviet–Chinese–Vietnamese coordination should therefore be understood as a process of adjustment and the search for compatibility among actors with interconnected interests, rather than as a vertically organised command structure.

Fourth, the findings help balance two common interpretations of the Soviet role at Geneva. On the one hand, studies of Soviet policy demonstrate that Moscow had clear interests in seeking a settlement to the Indochina conflict that was compatible with a changing international environment (Gaiduk, 2003). On the other hand, Geneva cannot be explained as an outcome that the Soviet Union had completely designed in advance. US and British documents demonstrate that Washington, Paris, and London possessed their own constraints, choices, and responses, while studies of China and Vietnam show that Beijing and Hanoi also possessed the capacity to shape the process in ways that did not fully coincide with Moscow's preferences (U.S. Department of State, 1981, 1982a, 1982b; British Government, 1954a, 1954b; Asselin, 2011; Wang, 2017). Molotov's contribution should therefore be understood at the level of constructing the conditions for negotiation, rather than controlling the outcome of the conference.

Finally, the Geneva case points towards a broader approach to the historical study of multilateral diplomacy. Diplomacy takes place not only at the table, but also through the process of constructing the table. Information must be gathered before positions can be established; positions must be coordinated before coalitions can operate; agendas must be prepared before negotiations begin; and contingency plans must be developed before crises emerge. The sequence information → coordination → agenda → procedure → alternatives → bargaining therefore demonstrates that multilateral diplomacy is a constructive process in which the capacity to shape the conditions of negotiation constitutes an important form of power. At the same time, the 1954 Geneva case reminds us that this process is always constrained by the agency of other actors and by unforeseen developments. It is precisely the combination of preparatory capacity and the uncertainty of negotiation that makes Geneva a particularly valuable case for studying multilateral diplomacy during the Cold War (Randle, 1969; Cable, 1986; Gaiduk, 2003; Waite, 2012).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the 1954 Geneva Conference should not be viewed solely as a sequence of negotiations extending from April to July 1954, but rather as a diplomatic process that began before the conference formally opened. By analysing the Soviet Union's preparations under the coordination of Vyacheslav Molotov, the study has identified three interconnected dimensions: information gathering and the definition of the negotiating space; coordination with China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV); and the preparation of the negotiating team and contingency plans. These activities indicate that negotiating capacity at Geneva was shaped, in part, by the capacity for preparation before the conference.

At the theoretical level, the study proposes the concept of “diplomatic engineering” to describe the deliberate construction of informational, political, coalition, and procedural conditions for multilateral negotiation. The Molotov case demonstrates that diplomatic power is expressed not only through the ability to exert direct influence at the negotiating table, but also through the capacity to reduce uncertainty, coordinate partners, shape the agenda, and prepare alternative options before negotiations begin. Accordingly, the sequence information → coordination → agenda → procedure → alternatives → bargaining provides an analytical approach for studying multilateral diplomacy as a continuous process of construction.

The study nevertheless emphasises the limits of this approach. Soviet preparations did not amount to an ability to control Geneva or predetermine the outcome of the conference. China, the DRV, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States each possessed their own interests, perceptions, and capacities for action. Molotov's contribution should therefore be understood as constructing the conditions for negotiation, rather than constructing the outcome of negotiation. The Geneva case consequently suggests that a fuller understanding of multilateral diplomacy requires attention not only to what takes place at the table, but also to the process of constructing the table before the parties enter the negotiating room.

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