



From 14 Points to 280 characters: Trump vs Wilson

by Ian Bond

It is a year since President Donald Trump took office, and a century since President Woodrow Wilson set out America's vision of the world after the Great War, in his so-called 'Fourteen Points'. The modern international system still bears the imprint of Wilson's ideas. Trump's utterances, however, show no respect for Wilsonian principles.

Wilson set out not only his war aims (the withdrawal of German forces from France and Belgium, the re-establishment of an independent Poland) but also some general and often innovative principles for the post-war period: no more secret treaties; freedom of navigation; trade liberalisation; arms reductions; due weight to the interests of colonial populations as well as their rulers; and the creation of a League of Nations to guarantee the independence and territorial integrity of states large and small.

The victorious allies did not always apply Wilson's principles strictly, particularly when it came to free trade, arms reductions and the rights of colonised peoples. Wilson himself could not persuade the US Senate to ratify the Covenant of the League of Nations. The inter-war period showed both the wisdom of Wilson's ideas and the shortcomings in their implementation. Protectionism in the 1930s contributed, at least modestly, to the economic damage caused by the Great Depression, and thus to the decline of democratic powers and the rise of the dictators. The design of the League of Nations, and America's refusal to join, left it too weak to stand up to Japan's aggression in Asia or constrain fascism and Nazism in Europe.

After the Second World War, the allies built the new international order in part on Wilson's foundations, while trying to learn from their predecessors' mistakes. They created (or tried to create) more effective international institutions, better able to constrain states' behaviour. The United Nations, and in particular the UN Security Council, had far-reaching powers, including the power to authorise the use of military force. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which evolved into the World Trade Organisation (WTO), reduced tariffs through multilateral negotiations and resolved disputes between its members with legally binding decisions.

These institutions were (and are) certainly not perfect. For most of the Cold War the UN Security Council was ineffective because the Soviet Union and the United States used their vetoes to keep it that way. But America and its allies benefited from the (relative) stability and prosperity that the UN, GATT/WTO and regional organisations like NATO brought. Successive administrations after 1945, and the US Congress, often called for reform of the institutions, but they also saw them as instruments to consolidate America's place in the world.

Trump is the first President to regard the post-1945 rules-based system as inimical to US interests. Not for him Wilson's search for international security and prosperity through institutions: his focus is narrowly national. He speaks of "this beautiful vision – a world of strong, sovereign and independent nations" and "a balance of power that favours the United States, our allies and our partners". He reportedly told his senior military and political advisers in July 2017 that he wanted to rebuild the US nuclear force to its maximum size in the Cold War – even though the US already has over 5,000 warheads deployed or stockpiled, more than enough to obliterate any enemy. In his first speech to the UN General Assembly, in September 2017, he repeatedly stressed the importance of sovereignty and urged other leaders, like him, to "put your countries first". As Noah Gordon argued in a CER insight ('Trump's trade policy: Separating the normal from the dangerous'), Trump is not the first president to try to reduce the US trade deficit by protectionist steps, but his hostility to free trade and to US partners who run trade surpluses goes further. He has undermined and threatened to ignore the WTO.

In the last year, there has often been a gap between the president's rhetoric – above all his tweets taunting adversaries and threatening conflict – and the actions taken by his administration. For all his reluctance

to restate US commitment to NATO's mutual defence guarantee, the Pentagon has put more resources into defending Europe. Despite Trump's bellicose language and personal insults directed at North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-Un, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has indicated that the US would be ready to talk to Pyongyang, without preconditions.

But, however his officials mitigate the harm, Trump is damaging the international system built by his predecessors. Even before Trump, countries like Russia were giving up on the rules-based order in favour of an older style of balance-of-power politics, and the ability to coerce neighbours in bilateral disputes. If the leader of the nation that designed most of the main international institutions has lost confidence in their ability to protect American interests, then the world is moving into a dangerous period.

Perhaps countries like China, Russia and the US can flourish in a world where might is once again right. The EU and its member-states, and other like-minded countries like Canada or Japan, cannot. They must make the case for Wilsonian order, not Trumpian anarchy, even if it takes them more than 280 characters.

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CER in the press

BuzzFeed News

16th January 2018
 "The idea that we would have all 40 or so agreements replicated and ready to go in time for March 30th was always little more than a Ministerial pipe-dream," said Sam Lowe of the CER.

BuzzFeed News

8th January 2018
 As Charles Grant of the CER, puts it. "The EU-27 do not take the threat of a UK walk out very seriously, believing that the consequences of no deal, while bad for the EU economy, would be catastrophic for the UK economy".

The Guardian

26th December 2017
 "The tortured relationship

that still exists between the Bundeswehr and broader society will keep coming back to haunt them if they don't address it," said Sophia Besch of the CER.

The Daily Mail

21st December 2017
 John Springford, deputy director of the CER, said he had reviewed the 'aerospace' analysis [one of the UK government's 39 sectoral reports on Brexit] and concluded: "It's entirely descriptive. Zero analysis of Brexit impact."

Bloomberg

15th December 2017
 "It comes down to the fact that countries have different economic models, different sets of existing

ties to the UK, different strategic interests," said Agata Gostyńska-Jakubowska of the CER. "The second phase of negotiations will be much more challenging for both the UK and the EU and it will be much more difficult for the EU to remain aligned."

The Financial Times

12th December 2018
 "The biggest gain for Germany will come if European migrants choose to work there, mitigating its growing shortage of workers, instead of in Britain," wrote Christian Odendahl and John Springford of the CER.

The Independent

11th December 2017
 The EU's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier

made it clear last month that, when the UK leaves the single market, financial services firms based in Britain will lose their "passporting" rights. "On financial services, UK voices suggest that Brexit does not mean Brexit. Brexit means Brexit, everywhere," Mr Barnier told the CER last month.

The Telegraph

8th December 2017
 Charles Grant, director of the CER, published his 10 predictions for the whole Brexit process. Within eight days, his first four – on Ireland, money, citizens' rights and transition – have been proved correct. [On] Mr Grant's remaining predictions, I see little reason to doubt his prescience.