

A Wilsonian Perspective

Wilsonian Principles in Context

We live in a time of radical interdependence. Our condition is one of ever more penetrative connections constituting a network of cultures, economies and polities across the globe. Distinctions between local, national and global are constantly being challenged and negotiated. Accelerating and non-territorial contingencies (flows of money, people, disease etc) are contesting borders, putting states into question (though not rendering them irrelevant), rearticulating geopolitical spaces, reforming political identities, and constituting new actors.

This time of radical interdependence means we have gone beyond national, international and even transnational politics to *transversal* politics. Rather than our political horizons being constituted by an ever larger and more inclusive form of organization, our time is marked by contests across, over and about borders. The result is uneven development, asymmetric relationships, non-linear growth, and differentiated and hybrid communities. The time of radical interdependence is thus also a time of *an-arche*. Not a time of anarchy, chaos and disorder, but a time in which we are without clear foundations, grounds or first principles for both the organization and understanding of our emerging political complexes.

In many respects, this condition is far from novel, as interdependence has historically been the norm. The rise of the European world order in the Middle Ages was made possible by the prior establishment of cultural and trading links. Trade diasporas of socially interdependent but spatially dispersed communities can be dated to the beginning of cross-cultural trade as early as 3500BC. This means that while the quantitative dimensions of interdependence have accelerated and expanded in recent times, the qualitative features have a long history. Populations have always existed through interconnections, with isolated societies being no more than temporary phenomena.

A time of radical interdependence refigures the nature of power, and changes how societies understand the question of responsibility. Power can no longer be understood solely as a commodity that can be wielded over others. Power is relational, and made possible by the networks in which those seeking to exercise it find themselves situated. As a result, responsibility is not something that can be optional. Being situated in the context of interconnectivity means we are always responsible to others and rarely enjoy autonomous freedom.

An effective foreign policy strategy for a time of radical interdependence can be built upon the legacy of Woodrow Wilson. We can envisage fourteen points for a new millennium, building on and revising the language of the fourteen points Wilson articulated in the previous century:

- I. The approach should be universalistic in character (i.e. irreducible to a single community's prejudices) without being hegemonic in application.

- II. International order has to be grounded in something other than the unilateral application of force or the exercise of the balance of power.
- III. The economic and cultural foundations of international order have to be open and transparent, with intervention only for reasons of equity.
- IV. Statecraft and diplomacy should proceed frankly, in the public view, and subject to public accountability, so that world public opinion can be heeded.
- V. International cooperation rather than state conflict should be the modus operandi of international order, with each nation serving its own interests and those of the world at large.
- VI. A multilateral, international organization, such as the United Nations, must be enabled to ensure the interests of all states and the world at large are met.
- VII. The peaceful resolution of disputes should be the aim, with collective security architecture to provide for military force in the service of sovereignty and territorial integrity if required.
- VIII. Democracy is the political form best suited to achieving cooperation, openness and accountability in international order.
- IX. Freedom of movement in international space beyond the territorial boundaries of states' air, land and water should be guaranteed.
- X. War and militarism are to be prevented, with limits to the production and distribution of arms to be established.
- XI. International law needs to be developed as the primary medium for cooperation and resolution.
- XII. International law needs to be in the service of international interests and guided by the principle of humanity, with codes for the conduct of war, dispute resolution, and the defense of human rights to be established and fostered.
- XIII. Colonialism and imperialism in all their forms are to be opposed, with the United Nations establishing secure international spaces for those overcoming oppression and violence.
- XIV. The self-determination of peoples should be the principle behind political community.

2. Wilsonian Strategic Goals for the US

The fourteen Wilsonian principles give rise to a number of specific strategic goals for the US. Above all else, though, these principles demonstrate the need for a clear international political strategy about the nation's place in the global networks of radical interdependence. In January 1918 Wilson laid out his original fourteen points before most American troops had arrived in Europe. A similar prioritizing of politics over force, so that force comes to serve politics, needs to be replicated in the current context.

Wilsonian principles have always been about the way nationalism and internationalism intersect. In the current global environment recognizing that sovereign states find their meaning and purpose in relation to the whole is a paramount concern. According to traditional measures of economic and military power, the US is the principal actor in the current international order. But in a time of radical interdependence, where no state escapes the constraints, pressures and potentialities that flow through the connectivity of global networks, how relevant are these traditional measures of power? How readily do static notions of superiority and sovereignty translate into influence? For the US to give real purpose to its status as the lone superpower, its position has to be continually reinforced and reproduced through the actual exercise of leadership (as opposed to constant declarations about leadership and supremacy). As a result, the strategic goals that flow from a Wilsonian perspective include the following:

- (a) Secure global leadership by exercising global leadership so that the primary place of the US is earned and respected.
- (b) Revivify the United Nations as a principal site through which global leadership, in concert with others, will be exercised.
- (c) Support and develop international law as a framework of norms and sanctions for an open, just and non-violent international order.
- (d) Support, develop and reform the international institutions of global governance – the IMF, World Bank, UN agencies, the ICC, WTO and the like – so that they are more accountable, democratic and fair as fora for the exercise of global leadership.
- (e) Reform the international trading regime so that unfair barriers and subsidies are removed.
- (f) Support and enhance a collective security architecture involving the UN, NATO, the EU, and regional allies, based on reliable threat assessments, and able and willing to provide compatible and interoperable forces in a time of crisis or need.
- (g) Support and develop international regimes of arms control that will prohibit or limit nuclear, biological, chemical and conventional weapons, as well as the transfer of technology essential for such weapons.
- (h) Support and develop norms of democracy and human rights to secure the rights of individuals and communities, and provide sanctuary for the displaced and dispossessed.

- (i) Encourage sustainable global development through debt relief and guaranteed access to essential medicines for the world's population.
- (j) Enhance the global environment, and reduce the pressures of imperialism and militarism, through a commitment to energy independence via conservation and renewable resources, along with support for international regimes of environmental management.

3. Priority, effort and tools to achieve these strategic goals

To implement successfully a Wilsonian strategy, the priority has to be a political commitment about the place, role and purpose of the US. This political commitment is to leadership that goes beyond the empty rhetoric of leadership. The US needs to lead by example, something best achieved by exercising leadership in multilateral fora dedicated to the development of international practices and regimes designed to serve both the national and international interest.

The level of effort to successfully develop and implement a Wilsonian strategy will be considerable. Engagement with the full range of state and non-state actors that proliferate internationally will be a demanding task. But autarky is no longer – if it ever was – an option for a secure international policy.

The tools for a Wilsonian strategy are, in the first instance, diplomatic. Engagement with others is unavoidably and inherently political. Argument, discussion and negotiation are the primary mechanisms for achieving influence. Such diplomacy, however, requires a clearly articulated political objective, a detailed assessment of the problems and options, and the means and resources to act alone if it is unsuccessful.

One set of tools that will be important in this context involves relationships with non-government organizations and non-state actors better placed to implement aspects of an internationalist strategy. No state, not even the US, can do everything everywhere. As a result, better-placed actors in global civil society will be needed as alliance partners.

4. Challenges from the global environment to these strategic goals

Challenges to a Wilsonian strategy will come from two principal fronts. Globally, as for any strategy, the challenges will be the unexpected and unforeseen, which are ever more likely in a time of radical interdependence. With the increasing intensity and scope of global connectivity and flows, events and issues that seem remote and insignificant will quickly become close and important. Intelligence – in both senses of the word – will be a premium commodity. Jeremiad-like declarations of danger will be unhelpful.

The second front for challenges is both more predictable and perhaps even more trenchant – domestic politics. The US Senate's rejection of the Versailles Treaty and the Permanent Court of International Justice in the wake of World War I followed debates that went on for longer than the peace negotiations themselves. Congressional opposition, largely Republican, feared the infringement of independence and purity that US involvement in world organizations might bring. As a result, the US was left on the outside of these international organizations in the interwar years, harming both parties.

Opposition to an internationalist strategy is perhaps even greater today. The historical enmity to restraints on sovereignty remains, bolstered by particular readings of international events in the last forty years (what Richard Holbrooke has called ‘the Vietnam syndrome’). Along with the pre-eminence of military strategies such as the Weinberger doctrine, the Powell doctrine, the RMA, the use of airpower, and hostility to peacekeeping missions, the US increasingly relies upon strategies that distance and disengage it from many international political contexts. Add to this the ‘homeland’ focus of security strategies post-September 11, and one can see that an internationalist approach faces an uphill struggle.

However, even if an internationalist strategy was domestically welcome, there would still be a range of challenges that we can highlight with some questions. Some of these questions demonstrate the potential perils of translating a Wilsonian strategy for the decades ahead:

- (a) Wilson’s focus was universal. However, given that there is no state capable of imposing its will on each and every aspect of humanity, how can we cope with the inevitable failure to implement a universalistic approach globally? How do we justify the distinctions and discriminations between cases of apparently equal merit? For example, why intervene in some places and not all places where there are human rights violations and war crimes?
- (b) How, in pursuit of a universal approach, will the differences of particular contexts and situations be handled? While democracy is a political goal, how will practices inconsistent with liberal democratic institutions – but perhaps better placed to ultimately achieve an open and fair outcome – be regarded?
- (c) Given that the plural and hybrid nature of political community makes self-determination based on nationality a dangerous and violent principle, how can claims for self-determination be handled?
- (d) Although sovereignty and territorial integrity have been fundamental principles of Wilsonians and international society generally, what do such concepts mean in the age of radical interdependence, where connectivity, flows, networks and the resultant time-space compression are the norm?

5. Strategic approach required to address these challenges

Wilson remarked in February 1916 ‘America can not be an ostrich with its head in the sand.’ In a time of radical interdependence, that is even truer. A choice between isolationism and international involvement is no longer available. The strategic approach for our time has to be one of *global engagement*. That leaves the option of such engagement being operationalized unilaterally or multilaterally. From a Wilsonian perspective, the current global context mandates that global engagement be principally multilateral.

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