The Promise and Record of International Institutions

Abstract:

In 1919 the attempt was made to reset the institutions governing international relations, with new patterns of expected behaviour and new international organisations. The key organisation, the League of Nations, effectively remains in place, albeit rebranded as the United Nations, but in 2019 great power relations have reverted to pre-1914 modes of conduct; attempts to extend the range of international institutions after the end of the Cold War have failed at the level of the central system. Outside of this central system, an extensive human rights regime, new notions of sovereignty and the development of international criminal law have produced a new set of institutions and expectations, an embryonic ‘global polity’ based on post-1945 European political experience and extending to democracies in Latin America and Africa. The rise of populism is placing strains on this global polity and the relations between this mode of doing international relations and that of the three major powers is also a source of tension – the fate of the liberal internationalist ideas set in train in 1919 remains in the balance.

Keywords: League of Nations: United Nations: Wilsonianism; liberal internationalism: great powers; global polity.

In English at least, the term ‘institution’ is somewhat ambiguous; on the one hand, it simply designates a pattern of behaviour that persists over time, on the other it is sometimes used as a near-synonym for ‘organisation’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Thus, a university course on ‘International Institutions’ might focus on international law, the balance of power or diplomacy, all of which are institutions in the first sense, but is much more likely to involve analysis of the UN, the WTO or NATO, which are institutions in the second sense. Fortunately, for the purposes of this article an examination of the promise and record of international institutions that is oriented towards 1919 does not have to make a choice between these two meanings because in that year the ambitions of at least some of the major international actors – including the philanthropists who financed early chairs in International Relations – was to change both. For President Woodrow Wilson, the British radicals in bodies such as the Fabian Society and the Union for Democratic control, and the philanthropists who supported them, the aim was first and foremost to change the ground rules for relations between nations, that is, to produce new, institutionalised patterns of behaviour, but all of these players also understood that a new set of organisations was required to embed these new patterns in the actual conduct of diplomacy. The new patterns of behaviour summarised by terms such as collective security and peaceful change needed to be reinforced, and if necessary enforced, by new institutional structures, in particular, of course, by the establishment of a League of Nations. And so was born the powerful doctrine that outlived its original name, Wilsonianism, and came to be known as Liberal Internationalism or, in its most recent incarnation, as liberal institutionalism.

This package of ideas offered a two-part diagnosis of what had gone wrong in 1914 (thus producing, or at least allowing, to happen the most disastrous war in European history since the 30 Years War of the 17th century), and a corresponding two-part prescription for avoiding similar disasters in the future. The first element of this diagnosis and prescription concerned domestic rather than international politics*.* Liberals held that the ‘people’ do not (really) want war; war comes about because the people are led into it by militarists or autocrats, or, more controversially, because their legitimate aspirations to nationhood are blocked by undemocratic imperial systems. The answer is to promote both liberal-democratic, constitutional regimes, and the principle of national self-determination*.* If all regimes were national and liberal-democratic, there would be no occasion for wars – although, as was actually noted at the time but, rightly, has been given more emphasis in recent years, this formula was not to be extended to the Empires of the victors or to the so-called lesser races. This belief links to the second component of liberal internationalism, of greater relevance to this article – its critique of pre-1914 international institutional structures*.* The claim was that the anarchic pre-1914 system of international relations undermined the prospects for peace. The institution of secret diplomacy led to an alliance system that committed nations to courses of action that had not been sanctioned by Parliaments or Assemblies (hence the title of the Union for Democratic Control, a British pressure group formed in 1914 to press for a foreign policy responsible to Parliament). There was no mechanism in 1914 to prevent war, apart from the ‘balance of power’ – a notion that was associated with unprincipled power politics and which was believed to have failed catastrophically in 1914. What was deemed necessary was the establishment of new institutional patterns of behaviour conducive to peace, and a new institutional structure for international relations – a League of Nations*.*

The aim of the League was to provide the security that states had attempted, unsuccessfully, to find under the balance-of-power system. The latter was based on private commitments of assistance made by specific parties; the League would provide public assurances of security backed by the collective will of all nations – hence the term ‘collective security’. The basic principle would be ‘one for all and all for one’. Each country would guarantee the security of every other country, and thus there would be no need for nations to resort to expedients such as military alliances or the balance of power. Law would replace war as the underlying principle of the system.[[2]](#endnote-2)

These two packages of reforms were liberal in two senses of the word, in so far as they embodied the belief that constitutional government and the rule of law were principles of universal applicability, but also in so far as they relied quite heavily on the assumption of an underlying harmony of real interests. The basic premise of virtually all this thought was that while it might sometimes appear that there were circumstances where interests clashed, in fact, once the real interests of the people were made manifest it would be clear that such circumstances were the product of distortions introduced either by the malice of special interests, or by simple ignorance. Thus, while liberal internationalists could hardly deny that in 1914 war was popular with many people, they could, and did, deny that this popularity was based on a rational appraisal of the situation. The liberal belief in a natural harmony of interests led as a matter of course to a belief in the value of education. Education was a means of combating the ignorance that is the main cause of a failure to see interests as harmonious, and thereby can be found one of the origins of International Relations as an academic discipline. Thus, in Britain, philanthropists such as David Davies, founder of the Woodrow Wilson Chair of International Politics at University College Wales, Aberystwyth – the first such chair to be established in the world and the occasion for this collection of articles– and Montague Burton, whose eponymous chairs of International Relations are to be found at Oxford and the London School of Economics, believed that by promoting the study of international relations they would also be promoting the cause of peace.

It was with this expectation that liberal internationalism became the first orthodoxy of the new discipline of International Relations, and the attempt was made to impose a new institutional structure on the practice of international relations. The promise was that this new structure would create and maintain a better world for all, a world in which grievances would no longer be settled by war, a world where change, when necessary, would be peaceful. But, as will be familiar to all students of International Relations, this was a promise that was not met; World War I was followed by World War II, and writers such as E.H. Carr, Nicholas Spykman and Hans J. Morgenthau made the case that, far from creating a new world where violence was marginalised, these new liberal institutions either had no effect, or, worse, may actually have assisted those who disrupted the peace in the 1930s. These self-proclaimed realists denied the existence of an underlying harmony of interests and reasserted the importance of balance of power politics in a world that, at root, remained anarchical.

This is an old story, and although it is still used to initiate newcomers into the discipline, it is a story that very clearly lacks nuance – indeed, once investigated closely the apparently clear narrative of a realist victory over liberal idealists becomes so blurred as almost to disappear altogether. We now know that the ‘thinkers of the 20 years crisis’ were not starry-eyed utopians, and that the realism of some of their critics, Carr in particular, was corrupted by appeasement – when Carr spoke of the ‘have-nots’ who were let down by the assumption of an underlying harmony of interests, it was Hitler and Mussolini that he had in mind, not, as liberals today might hope, the victims of global inequality.[[3]](#endnote-3) We also know that in spite of the belief that realism demolished the foundations of liberal internationalism, the associated institutions actually remained in place, and indeed still exist. Today’s United Nations is different in many ways from the League, but the core idea of an institution based on collective security and peaceful change remains in place, national self-determination is still a central norm, and most states are, at least nominally democracies, even if the category of illiberal democracy is increasingly relevant. To a remarkable degree, the institutions – in both sense of the term – of 1919 are still with us.

False Promise?

To recap, it is now common ground in the discipline of International Relations that the founding myth of a debate between realists and idealists is, indeed, exactly that, a myth; there was no debate and the so-called idealists were no less oriented towards the real that the self-proclaimed realists. Still, even if that debate didn’t take place then, disputes over the role of institutions in both senses of the term have always been part of the discourse and have been particularly in view in the last thirty years with the dominance of liberal institutionalism, the rise of constructivist IR theory and the increasing acceptance that the normative structure of international relations is worthy of in-depth study. Constructivism as a term of art covers a variety of approaches, but they all have this much in common, that they stress the importance of ‘logics of appropriateness’ which is another way of referring to institutions in the first sense of the term, that is as patterns of behaviour which persist over time and around which expectations revolve, while part of the agenda for normative theorists is the study of the ways in which logics of appropriateness change over time. As with the non-debate of the 1930s, but this time for real, these approaches which valorise institutions are contested by realists for whom the ‘logics of consequences’ dominate and who, therefore, argue that the importance of institutions is overstated by the aforesaid constructivists and normative theorists, and indeed by liberals more generally.[[4]](#endnote-4)

An interesting text here is an *International Security* article, ‘The False Promise of International Institutions’ by John Mearsheimer.[[5]](#endnote-5) This was a response to a particular constellation of events in the early 1990s, and reflected Mearsheimer’s hard-line scepticism on the subject of international organisation, but still the argument is one that is relevant to the (non)debate of the 1930s, and to the future of international institutions in the 2010s and 2020s. The end of the Cold War between 1989 – 91, and especially the way in which it ended, led many liberal internationalists to believe that the international institutions that had been produced in the West during that conflict – in particular, NATO and the EU – lay behind its apparent victory, and based on this premise they drew the conclusion that the scope of these institutions should be extended to include the newly-liberated countries of Eastern Europe. These institutions were seen as the producers and guarantors of peace, but Mearsheimer argues that this perception – typical of liberal thinking – was inaccurate. Part of Mearsheimer’s substantial article is devoted to those he describes as critical theorists – mostly Wendtian constructivists – but the heart of the argument is the critique of liberal institutionalists such as, most prominently in those days, Robert Keohane.[[6]](#endnote-6) Mearsheimer argues that peace (when there is peace) is the product of a balance of power, and that institutions are, at best, intervening variables rather than the independent variables that liberal institutionalists take them to be. Indeed, a reliance on institutions may actually undermine peace, by undermining the balance of power. He argues that if (but it would actually be when) Russia recovers from the depths into which it had sunk in the early 1990s it will find that NATO and the EU are now its immediate neighbours and, far from encouraging peaceful relations, this will engender conflict. A resurgent Russia will attempt to regain its former place as one of the two superpowers and this will bring it into conflict with the West, a conflict that is likely to be more not less virulent now that the West has expanded its sphere of interest so dramatically.

This is an argument that is explicitly directed to the circumstances of the era, but, as suggested above, the structure of the argument resonates with the circumstances of the inter-war years and with the dilemmas of the present day. The latter will be the main focus of the second half of this article, but here a few points on the former may be useful. In 1919 the victorious allies attempted to create a structure of peace resting on multiple institutions but excluding two of the major powers. Both Russia and Germany were temporarily *hors de combat* but would eventually resurface and when they did they would destabilise the institutional structure that had been built without them. Even though towards the end of the 1920s the attempt was made to integrate Germany into the new structures, and the Soviet Union was, reluctantly brought on board in the 1930s, neither of these attempts to retro-fit the 1919 settlement for a more inclusive great power membership worked, because that settlement marked the destruction of the conditions for a balance of power. Unlike the peacemakers of 1815, the new world order of 1919 was made without the defeated powers of the preceding war, and this error could not be remedied without breaking the new system.

The hostility that was felt towards Germany and Soviet Russia in 1919 was not replicated in the 1990s and in that decade the institution-builders repeatedly attempted to reassure the Russians that the system they were creating was not aimed at them, but, Mearsheimer argues, such reassurance is ultimately worth very little. Fine words butter no parsnips as the old saying goes. Whatever the West said or believed, extending its borders, and issuing security guarantees, to the former Soviet satellites and, indeed, to former Soviet Republics in the case of the Baltic states, could only be interpreted as an attempt to limit the future power of the new Russian Republic – and this is indeed how Russia has interpreted these changes. Still, there is a problem with Mearsheimer’s analysis; if it was the case that Russia would eventually attempt to recover its superpower status, then the peoples of Eastern Europe would be in the firing line whether they were members of NATO and the EU or not, and membership of these institutions would give them a degree of protection albeit at the price of worsening relations between Russia and the West. We can see how this works out today; Ukraine, which was not included in NATO’s expansion, has been the victim of Russian aggression losing Crimea and having the Eastern part of its territory occupied by Russian troops, while the Baltic Republics, which were included, remain unoccupied, under threat but still preserving their territorial integrity and independence. Without NATO’s expansion relations between Russia and the West might be better today, but the East Europeans would pay the price for these better relations, as Czechoslovakia paid the price for the policy of appeasement in 1938.

Returning to the point of this article, Mearsheimer’s assertion that institutions are, at best, no more than intervening variables, subject to the ebb and flow of power politics deserves more attention – if this is so then the focus on institutions is, indeed, in large terms a mistake, even though there may still be gains from understanding how these intervening variables actually work. Here a crucial point concerns the very nature of institutions. Mearsheimer rejects as lacking analytical bite the broad definition of institutions, drawn from regime theory, as ‘pattern of behaviour around which expectations converge’ and offers instead institutions as ‘a set of rules that stipulate the ways in which states should cooperate and compete with each other’. There are two problems with this; first, although the latter definition has, perhaps, a little more bite than the former it is still somewhat slippery; and, second and more to the point, although he offers this definition, in practice his analysis focuses on organisations such as NATO and the EU, that is the institutions to which East Europeans were being invited to join. And, even more to the point, in order to relegate these organisations to intervening variable status, he stresses instead the importance of traditional realist notions such as the balance of power – but the balance of power itself is an institution, a set of rules that stipulates the way states should behave.

In effect his argument works to undermine the importance of institutions qua organisations while reinforcing the importance of institutions qua informal sets of rules – but at this point things get even more complicated because it is clear from Mearsheimer’s own work, here and elsewhere, that the rules associated with the balance of power are no more likely to be adhered to than the rules associated with the formal institutions that he critiques. In effect, his article could just as easily have been entitled ‘The False Promise of the Balance of Power’; it might actually be the case that if the rules of the balance of power were generally followed this institution would fulfil its promise to bring stability to the international system, but the same might be said of the formal institutions Mearsheimer’s article puts to the test. Both notions fall foul of international anarchy and the resistance of states to actually creating a rule-based international order. In effect he is arguing that all institutions are necessarily defective, including those he regards as central. This is a point that could be elaborated further, but instead, in the spirit of this special issue, the remainder of this article will be devoted to the fate of international institutions, widely and narrowly defined, in 2019, one hundred years on from the peace of 1919 and the founding of the Woodrow Wilson Chair.

International Institutions and the Demise of a Rule-Based International Order?

There is a common perception that the rules-based international order, largely designed during the Cold War but re-fitted in the 1990s and 2000s is now in real trouble, with the institutions designed to support this order failing in the task with which they have been charged; the case is put that the management of great power relations has become increasingly difficult, to the point that it is no longer being attempted – this is, in effect, the argument that Mearsheimer’s fears of the mid-1990s have now materialised. Some regret that this is the case, while others welcome this decline, arguing that the rules-based order served the interests of the rich and powerful more than those of the poor and weak, although in this context it is worth noting that over the last twenty years most of the Millennium Development Goals set out in 2000 have been achieved and absolute global poverty is substantially less than it once was. In any event, it can also be argued that while the orderliness of the central system of power relations has deteriorated, new norms, new understandings of sovereignty and of the value of co-operation have also emerged in this period creating an international order parallel to the great power system. This latter international order – described here as the emergent Global Polity – will be addressed in the final section of this article; for the moment the focus will be on the crisis in great power relations. Before explicitly addressing the role of international institutions, a sketch of the problem is required.

Whatever new theories are required to convey the full flavour of twenty-first century world politics, the existence of very powerful states cannot be denied, and the ways in which these powerful states relate to each other remains of critical importance not just for the states concerned, but for the rest of the world as well. To write of ‘rising’ and ‘falling’ powers may seem anachronistic, but it describes an important reality; managing the relations of the great powers is central to any kind of order in the world and global institutions such as the UN and the World Trade Organisation. and more selective bodies such as NATO are oriented towards this task. Currently there are three countries that can accurately be described as part of the central system of world power – the United States of America, the Russian Federation and the Peoples Republic of China, three of the five Permanent members of the UN Security Council. The United States has been the quasi-hegemonic power since the 1940s, the largest and most dynamic economy, the leading military power, at the centre of the most powerful alliance in the world: in its former guise as the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation was for forty years the most important challenger to the United States but is now in decline, with an ailing economy, and over-dependent on the sale of its mineral assets, but still possessing a large and potentially dangerous military: China, on the other hand, is finally beginning to realize its great economic potential, is developing its military power and demanding recognition as at least an equal to the United States. For at least one and probably two decades, managing the rise of China and the fall of Russia has been identified as central to the development of a stable world order, and although other countries and groups of countries such as the European Union can contribute to this task, the general understanding has been that the United States, as the current leading power – the current hegemon, if you will – is the only possible manager. What makes the current situation so problematic – but also so interesting - is that the United States appears to be no longer willing, and perhaps no longer able, to perform this task.

China’s position is easiest to describe. A country with a population that is in excess of 1,350 million, with a civilisation at least two and a half millennia old, it is very conscious that for most of the last two hundred years it has suffered humiliation at the hands of the West, and, locally, chaos and disorder. Over the last quarter century the Communist regime has apparently managed to create a relatively stable system of single-party rule combined with a quasi-free market, quasi-capitalist economy, a combination that has produced very high growth rates – just how high is contestable, because even the Chinese Communist Party does not entirely trust its own statistics, but certainly sufficiently high to turn China into one of the great manufacturing and exporting centres of the world. It lags a long way behind the US in terms of GDP per capita, spending on research and development and military spending, and will not catch up to the US for many decades, if it ever does – but its relative position on all of these and many other indicators is improving, and the Chinese leadership clearly believes that it deserves greater respect than it has received even in the recent past, let alone the years of humiliation when Western empires rode roughshod over its interests. China denies that it seeks any kind of hegemony; its official position is that the traditional self-understanding of China as the Middle Kingdom and the centre of the world did not involve hegemony in the sense that that term is used in the West – rather it involved a kind of cultural but not necessarily political dominance.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Until fairly recently, the key term used by many analysts to describe China’s position was ‘China’s peaceful rise’, the idea being that China would not assert itself forcefully in the world as its economy grew, although, naturally enough, structural realists such as the afore-mentioned John Mearsheimer contested this position.[[8]](#endnote-8) Even those who were more sceptical about the prospects of China rising peacefully, assumed that it would not act aggressively until it was in a position to offer a more plausible challenge to the military might of the United States (and its allies, Japan, and Taiwan) than seemed possible in the near future. In fact, over the last few years, China has acted in ways that suggest that this presumed caution was overstated. By asserting its sovereignty over the South China Sea, waters regarded by everyone else as being part of the open seas, and backing up this claim by constructing artificial islands, China has managed to upset its neighbours to the south east, and similar claims to islands in the East China Sea have worsened relations with Japan, already poor. Add to this frontier disputes with India in the Himalayas, and China sometimes seems to be engaged in alienating almost all its neighbours, the one big exception being its relations with Russia which are currently good – although the medium to long term potential for conflict over the resource rich Siberian region, which China believes was taken from it by Tsarist imperialism, remains.

Russia’s good relations with China are in contrast to its poor relations with most of its European neighbours, with the exception of its client state Belarus. In December 1991, the Russian Federation inherited the Soviet Union’s permanent seat in the UN Security Council, its nuclear forces and most of its conventional military, but it lost half of the old superpower’s population, and its strategic position was seriously, perhaps fatally, weakened by the establishment of an independent Ukraine – Russian great power status for four centuries had been based on control of Ukraine and its loss was crippling.[[9]](#endnote-9) In the 1990s the rise of the oligarchs, who corruptly profited from the sell-off of state assets, especially oil and other raw materials, stifled genuine economic reform, and the political class who clustered around Boris Yeltsin were unable to reverse the decline. From 1999 onwards, Vladimir Putin has ruled Russia and established control over the oligarchs, imprisoning some and using others – but although Putin has established effective, authoritarian, government in Russia, with control of the political process and the mass media, suppressing opposition, sometimes violently, he has been unable to revitalise the Russian economy, which remains dependent on the sale of raw materials, a precarious position given the volatility of the price of oil and natural gas.

In short, President Putin has been dealt a very weak hand – which he has played with great skill and, recently, very aggressively. Regarding the status of the Ukraine to be crucial to Russia’s position in the world, his initial stance was to exercise control in that country through an alliance with its President, Victor Yanukovych. This strategy collapsed when, under pressure from Russia, in November 2013 Yanukovych refused to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union: demonstrations in Kiev led to the fall of Yanukovych in February 2014 – but representatives of the Crimean autonomous government supported him and requested Russian assistance and in March 2014 Crimea was annexed by the Russian Federation. Russian troops then entered the Donbass region of Eastern Ukraine in support of local separatists, a position they still occupy. These actions were certainly in violation of a large number of treaties which guaranteed borders in Europe and the peaceful settlement of disputes, and they led to economic sanctions being imposed by the EU and the US on Russia – as against this legal position, the annexation of Crimea almost certainly attracted majority support in the Crimea itself, which is largely Russian speaking, and for most of the last two centuries has been part of Russia.

Sanctions have damaged the Russian economy and lowered the already low standard of living of ordinary Russians, but patriotic sentiment combined with President Putin’s control of all the important media outlets meant that he preserved support at home. Since 2014, and intensifying tendencies that were already present in Russian policy, President Putin has adopted a policy of provocation and mischief towards the West. This has involved tacit and sometimes explicit threats to the Baltic Republics and Poland, a return to Cold War policies such as sending Russian bombers to probe the edges of NATO airspace, and, more innovatively, the use of Russian information services such as the Sputnik press service and RT (previously Russia Today) radio and TV to support a variety of Western anti-establishment movements, some of the left, such as Syriza in Greece, and the Scottish National party in Scotland, some of the right, such as the *Front National* in France and UKIP in Britain. Russian hackers have interfered with elections in the US and France and have entered into an alliance of convenience with the WikiLeaks group and its leader Julian Assange. This is a dangerous game, but Putin is a skilful player; even so it has had some adverse consequences even in its own terms – note, for example, the way in which Sweden and Finland have become closer to NATO than ever before as a result of Russian posturing in the Baltic. More seriously, it should be noted that Putin’s approach reflects the fact that Russia has few allies and is not tied in to patterns of alliances and co-operation – although it has nothing to lose by behaving irresponsibly, its freedom in this respect is a product of weakness not strength.

The institutions in both senses of the term that underpin great power relations have been put under strain by Chinese growth and Russian weakness. At the centre of the network created by these institutions is the United States. In two major books and numerous articles. G. John Ikenberry has documented the way in which America’s post-war political leadership constructed this system, using the overwhelming material superiority the war had given them not for short-term gains but in order to create a system that would work in their interests in the longer term.[[10]](#endnote-10) This has been a strategy that has been remarkably successful. Devastated by war in 1945, the other major world powers, both former allies and former enemies, have recovered and exceeded their previous strength under the aegis of American power, and yet even while encouraging the growth of its rivals, the US has maintained its pre-eminent position in the world. The data to support this position is nicely summarised by Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth.[[11]](#endnote-11) US GDP amounts to 22.5% of world GDP and 36% of the GDPs of the nine major powers, while US defence expenditures are 34% of world defence spending, and 50% of that of the nine. Chinese and Russian military spending have increased but remain far behind the US.

Given this continued hegemonic position, what position should the US adopt towards China’s assertiveness and Russia’s mischief making? The usual response from scholars of IR to this question is that the US should continue to throw its weight behind the institutional structures that its own initiatives have created or strengthened over the last 100 years. What this involves in practice is, in the first place, that the US needs to reassure its allies in Europe and Asia that it remains committed to the military alliances which have underpinned world order for so long, and, in the context of China’s naval policies, that it remains committed to the principle of freedom of the seas. America cannot accept Russia’s unilateral actions over the Ukraine, and the Baltic Republics, as members of NATO, need to be reassured that the American guarantee of their independence and territorial integrity remains in place. Second, and in particular with respect to China, the US needs to continue to stress the gains from international economic cooperation; China’s remarkable growth over the last two decades has been made possible by its active participation in the world economy and in particular by the American willingness to provide a market for China’s goods – this hasn’t always been a comfortable process for the United States, jobs have been lost, but, in principle, America’s strength means it can accept short-term losses in the interests of preserving a system that has worked well for it in the past and will do so for it in the future. Put these two points together, and America’s path becomes clear; to put the matter dramatically, as seen from Washington, whereas Russia can sometimes behave like a naughty child, and China like a surly teenager, it is in America’s interest to behave like a responsible adult, refusing to respond hastily to provocations and boringly pointing out the unfortunate consequences of irresponsible behaviour. But this assumes that it is, indeed, in America’s interest to preserve the system of co-operation and international institutions established over the decades, and it is this assumption that is now being questioned.

The American foreign policy establishment makes that assumption and so have most recent presidents – indeed, ‘no-drama’ Obama was often criticised for taking the ‘responsible adult’ role to extremes. What has been less clear has been the wider support for this position in the country and in Congress. For the last three decades, there have been global initiatives that it would have made sense for the US to be part of – for example, in international criminal law, or with respect to climate change – but which have been impossible to get through the Senate, and, on the economic front, popular concern for the loss of jobs has become increasingly important. The culmination of this draining away of support for America leadership of an open world economy and global institutions more generally was, of course, the election of President Donald J. Trump in November 2016. President Trump has: called into question America’s commitment to its allies in NATO by suggesting that their failure to meet defence spending targets meant that US support could not be relied on in a crisis; expressed his admiration for President Putin’s strong leadership in Russia and hinted at striking a deal with him that could only involve recognising the status quo in Ukraine; withdrawn from the Paris Accords on climate change; accused the Chinese government of taking advantage of incompetent American leaders to carry out unfair trading practices and fired the opening shots of a trade war with China; broken the agreement with Iran over the latter’s nuclear capacity and threatened North Korea with nuclear war (although at the time of writing the Korean situation is fluid and unpredictable). His slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ is meant to signify a nationalist foreign policy stance, in which the US is no longer prepared to accept short-term losses in the interests of preserving the system – in short, the adult has left the room and the leading power in the central system is, apparently, no longer interested in actually leading.

If this brief sketch of the current situation is even partially accurate, it is clear that at the level of the central system the role of international institutions is today more limited than it has been for decades. The UN Security Council is as deadlocked as it ever was during the Cold War, certainly when it comes to matters of importance to the major powers, such as the fate of Syria. The Council can still act on some matters, for example endorsing action against Boko Haram in West Africa, but, as in the days of the Cold War, great power relations largely take place outside of the UN or any other international organisation. Institutions are still important for medium and small powers, but the giants find them too restrictive – the American Gulliver is no longer prepared to allow the Lilliputians to tie him down, now, in contrast to the past, agreeing on this point with his fellow giants. As will be set out in the final section of this article, much institutional cooperation takes place outside of the central system, and innovative new ideas such as the development of international criminal law and new definitions of sovereignty (as responsibility rather than autonomy) are behind the creation of new institutions such as the International Criminal Court, but these developments have little impact on the three major powers whose positions are sketched above – for the most part they hold to conventional conceptions of sovereignty, are unwilling to see the expansion of international law into new areas, and have refused to join the ICC.

This picture is drawn with a very broad brush, but if it is even partially accurate it suggests that the project of 1919 to produce a rule-governed institutionalised world politics is further away from fulfilment than it has been for some time. Certainly, for much of the 20th century the world was divided ideologically but in perhaps a counter-intuitive way this may have made co-operation via institutions easier than it might otherwise have been – not so in the case of Nazism and fascism where the ideology was based on the assumption of war as the norm, but capitalist liberal democracy and soviet communism both believed that History with a capital H was on their side which produced a sense of self-confidence that allowed for a degree of co-operation. Today the three major powers are much more like the great powers of the pre-1914 world, with no sense of confidence in the future; this produces a febrile atmosphere and perhaps a greater level of risk-taking than in the past – it is difficult to imagine that the leaders of the Soviet Union would have allowed such a blatant violation of the unwritten rules for the conduct of intelligence operations as the Salisbury nerve-agent attack, and Donald Trump’s bluster would surely not be so popular with his base if America was engaged in an ideological conflict – it is noteworthy that Ronald Reagan, most anti-communist of US Presidents in his rhetoric, did not descend to the kind of personal abuse that Trump employs in his tweets on a daily basis.

A Global Polity?

The three great powers are engaged in a conventional Westphalian contest for power and influence in which formal institutions are of minimal importance, and informal institutions are difficult to maintain. Meanwhile, in other parts of the world, the attempt is made to move beyond the rule-based version of Westphalia that was set out in 1919 and has developed over the last hundred years to create a world that is more highly institutionalised, a world that could be termed an embryonic global polity.[[12]](#endnote-12)

This global polity builds on the expansion of international organisations that took place post-1945, in particular is based on an expanding international human rights regime, the development of international criminal law, and a commitment to co-operative solutions to common problems such as environmental degradation. In this world, sovereignty is redefined in terms of responsibility and a general responsibility to protect (R2P) is widely accepted. Looking at institutions in a formal, organisational sense, the European Union and the wider system of co-operation is at the heart of the global polity, but democratic governments in the Commonwealth, in South and Central America and in Africa are part of this world via their membership of bodies such as the International Criminal Court. Although Europe is at the heart of this world, and the European belief that all problems can be resolved via co-operative institutions is central, it is worth noting that some of the most powerful advocates of notions such as sovereignty as responsibility have been Africans, most obviously former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and UN bureaucrat and later South Sudanese Ambassador Francis Deng.[[13]](#endnote-13)

In many respects, this emerging global polity reflects the hopes of 1919 rather more accurately than institutions such as the League of Nations and the United Nations have done. The underlying assumption of this world, as in 1919, is that liberal democratic government is the norm and, echoing, but usually not referencing, the ‘democratic peace’ literature, that democracies will handle their common problems by pooling sovereignty and co-operating rather than by violence. This is meant to be a world governed by Law not War, to return to a catchphrase of the 1930s. The instinctive reaction of members of this world is to extend institutional co-operation whenever possible, with none of the suspicion that the Westphalian great powers apply to formal organisations. The extent of the world of the emerging global polity is not universal; apart from the three major powers, a number of other important countries in the non-Western world, such as India, Pakistan and Indonesia, remain committed to conventional views of sovereignty and are suspicious of R2P and the International Criminal Court, but the hope of advocates of the global polity has been that eventually these countries, and indeed the three great powers themselves, will come to see the wisdom of more extensive co-operation to solve global problems.

This liberal expectancy – to reuse a phrase coined by Daniel P. Moynihan – may yet fail to come to pass. In spite of the strides towards the pooling of sovereignty amongst the countries of the global polity over the last decades, there are signs that limits to co-operation are being reached. In Africa, the initial approval of the idea of an International Criminal Court is wearing thin as the actual operation of the ICC has seemed to focus exclusively on African defendants. More worryingly, within the core of the new system, in Europe itself, the rise of different kinds of populism has increasingly demonstrated that the democratic basis of the global polity is weaker than might have been though a decade ago. Britain’s forthcoming withdrawal from the EU is one indicator of this problem, but only one and not necessarily the most important. The election of explicitly illiberal governments in Hungary and Poland, and, most recently in Italy poses a serious problem for the managers of the EU – these countries probably will not look to leave the Union, but they will want to change some of its most important principles, most obviously, but not only, in the area of migration policy.

Conclusion:

When asked his view on the impact of the French Revolution, Zhou Enlai famously remarked that it was too soon to tell, and a similar reticence on the impact of 1919 may be appropriate.[[14]](#endnote-14) A reanimated advocate of world government from 1919 would be horrified by the great power posturing of Presidents Putin, Trump and Xi, but impressed by the commitment of European powers to peaceful relations and their willingness to allow their relations to be governed by law. The spread of notions of self-determination to the component parts of the old empires and the emergence of genuinely universal international institutions would have disconcerted the racist President Wilson but pleased the anti-imperialist wing of the Fabians.[[15]](#endnote-15) Those economists who looked to the revival of global trade after 1918 would be impressed by the World Trade Organisation but surprised that global financial arrangements allowed crises such as that of 2008 to occur. In short, when faced with an anniversary such as the one we are marking here, the tendency is to try to fit the events of the last century into a narrative of either progress or decline – but the promise and record of international institutions in this period does not fit easily into either of these two possible narratives. Instead we live in a complex world where some aspects of international relations are organised to a degree that would amaze the peacemakers of 1919, while other aspects exhibit the worst features of the international anarchy they hoped their innovations would undermine. The aspiration to create a more rule-governed world remains strong, but the obstacles to its achievement are equally powerful.

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1. I’m grateful for the comments and suggestions of Ken Booth and several anonymous reviewers; as always, I am solely responsible for the final version. The section on the current central system draws on Chapter 12 of Chris Brown *Understanding International Relations* 5th edition (London: Red Globe Press, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The literature on 1919 is extensive –Margaret Macmillan *Peacemakers: Six Months that Changed the World* (London: John Murray, 2003) Is excellent as is the more recent Adam Tooze *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916 – 31.* (New York: Viking, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. David Long and Peter Wilson (eds.) *Thinkers of the Twenty Years Crisis: Interwar Idealism Reassessed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) remains classic. W.T.R Fox ‘E.H. Carr and Political Realism: Vision and Revision’ *Review of International Studies* 11 (1), 1985, 1 – 16 is still the best take on Carr’s commitment to appeasement, while Michael Cox’s introduction to E.H. Carr *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 2016) offers the best defence. Ken Booth ‘Security in anarchy: utopian realism in theory and practice’ *International Affairs*, 67 (3) 1991, pp. 527-45 makes the case that Carr’s realism incorporated a substantial utopian element. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The two ‘logics’ were first defined by theorists of administration but were brought into the International Relations literature by Stephen Krasner in his *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. John Mearsheimer ‘The False Promise of International Institutions’ *International Security* 19 (1) 1994/5, 5–49. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Alexander Wendt ‘Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’ *International Organisation* (46) 1992, 391 – 426 was Mearsheimer’s constructivist target; Robert O. Keohane *International Institutions and State Power* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1989) is the most authoritative expression on liberal institutionalism. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. X Yan *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Barry Buzan ‘China in International Society: Is ‘Peaceful Rise’ Possible?’ *The Chinese Journal Of International Politics* 3 (1), 2010, 5 – 36 and John Mearsheimer ‘Can China Rise Peacefully?’ the final chapter the 2014 edition of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* ( New York: W.W. Norton, 2001/2014) (also available at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>) present the alternatives. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Dominic Lieven *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia* (London: Penguin, 2016) convincingly argues that the Ukraine was and is central to Russia’s great power status, and that threats to Russia’s possession of Ukraine were crucial factors in the run up to war in 1914. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. G. John Ikenberry *After Victory* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) and *Liberal Leviathan: Thee origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Stephen Brooks and William C. Wohlforth ‘The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century’ *International Security* 40 (3) 2015/16, 7 -53. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Chris Brown *International Society, Global Polity: An Introduction to International Political Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Francis Deng, Sadikiel Kimaro, Terence Lyons, Donald Rothchild and I. William Zartman, *Sovereignty as Responsibility: Conflict Management in Africa* (Washington DC: Brookings Institute, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Actually, Zhou’s comment in 1972 may have referenced the events of 1968 rather than 1789, but no matter, it’s a good story. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Tooze *The Deluge* documents Wilson’s racism. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)