
Preventing Conflict Today: Learning from the First World War

23 February 2018

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants, and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event, every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions. The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery. © The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2018.

Introduction

To mark the centenary of President Woodrow Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' speech to the US Congress in January 1918, Chatham House and the Meridian International Center hosted a research workshop, held at Chatham House on 23 February 2018, bringing together practitioners, policymakers and the next generation of leaders, to discuss lessons learned from 1918, the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles, and the subsequent descent towards the Second World War. The discussions examined the current role of international institutions in resolving and preventing conflict, and, drawing on the Fourteen Points, what new mechanisms might be necessary to prevent another world war.

Participants included those studying as well as working in the areas of conflict, peace studies and international security, from academia, think-thanks and NGOs. Discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule.¹

The workshop, part of a series of meetings supported by the Richard Lounsbery Foundation, follows on from the [Great War Alliance Forum](#) which took place at the Meridian International Center on 15 September 2017.

Session one

The first session examined how British, French and US experiences of the First World War affected their approach to its resolution and the negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles. Three themes emerged from the discussions, some of which have resonance with today's efforts at preventing conflict.

Opening up of foreign policy

The first of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points calls for 'Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at ... diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view'.² The destruction caused by the First World War showed the inherent flaws in the international system and the inability of states to reach diplomatic solutions to their disputes. Discussion covered the sentiment circulating from 1918 onwards that opening up foreign policy decisions to popular scrutiny would prevent future mistakes. As a consequence, there was widespread popular support, including from mass political movements in Britain and from the US president, for a more open form of diplomacy. The aspiration was that making foreign policy decisions in the public domain would allow more people – women included – to participate in decision-making, leading to more democratic policies. Some voices at the time suggested that a more 'democratic' foreign policy came with its own elements of risk, leaving governments under greater pressure from popular emotion. Indeed, this could immediately be seen during the Versailles negotiations, with decision-makers reluctant to offer any terms to Germany that would be viewed as overly generous by their publics back home.

Participants returned to the theme of open diplomacy throughout the day's workshop sessions, examining whether there was currently a disconnect between the public and diplomacy, in particular the challenge of maintaining an understanding of the value of diplomacy over the long term, and its overall contribution to global security.

¹ When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

² Wilson, W. (1918), 'President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points', Yale Law School, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp (accessed 28 Aug. 2018).

Marginalization

This session also examined the hopes and expectations of some of the groups marginalized at the conclusion of the war. For instance, discussions covered the experiences of black soldiers serving in the US Army. Motivated by a desire to prove their patriotism and worthiness of citizenship and rights, many black people signed up to fight. Black units under US command were strictly segregated from their white counterparts, whereas those under French command were integrated with white units. President Wilson's support for segregation more widely sits at odds with his stated belief in self-determination for the people of Eastern Europe.³ The case was made that the rejection of the petition presented by Ho Chi Minh calling for independence for Vietnam was a result of a racist view that self-determination applied to whites only. These groups were not the only ones disappointed by the 'universal' principles of Wilson's Fourteen Points; Germany's surrender was linked to a belief that these principles would be upheld during the peace negotiations. In practice they were not.

A changing international system

1919 showed how diplomacy was changing and the geopolitical order was rebalancing. Versailles was the first international treaty to be written in English as well as French. President Wilson, who arrived in Paris in December 1918, was the first sitting US president to travel to Europe, spending nearly seven months there. This, coupled with the US's decisive entry into the war, pointed to a more influential US, both in Europe and globally. However, that the US did not join the League of Nations led to a weakened as well as reshaped international system that struggled to cope with the challenges of the 1920s and 1930s.

Session 2

In this session, participants discussed the case for conflict prevention, as well as the role and suitability of international institutions working in this area. Participants also considered what other mechanisms might be needed to prevent a future major war.

The case for conflict prevention

Participants discussed the benefits of investing in conflict prevention. One speaker pointed to recent research from the World Bank showing that, successful conflict prevention would, even under the most pessimistic of scenarios, allow for net savings of approximately \$5 billion per year, mostly at the national level. As part of this total, more than \$9 billion per year would be saved in prevented damage, including economic damage and deaths prevented.⁴ In terms of human costs, there would be a reduction in battlefield deaths, civilian casualties, refugee flows and human rights violations. Conflict prevention is also more effective than conflict resolution in that once a conflict takes root, new issues can emerge and conflict therefore becomes more difficult to bring to an end.

³ Schuessler, J. (2015), 'Woodrow Wilson's legacy gets complicated', *The New York Times*, 29 November 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/30/arts/woodrow-wilsons-legacy-gets-complicated.html> (accessed 28 Aug. 2018)

⁴ World Bank (2018), *Pathways for Peace - Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, Washington: World Bank, p. 3, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/publication/pathways-for-peace-inclusive-approaches-to-preventing-violent-conflict> (accessed 28 Aug. 2018). The equivalent figures under the World Bank's most optimistic scenario are for net savings of almost \$70 billion, including savings from prevented damage of some \$69 billion; and under a neutral scenario, \$33 billion and \$34 billion respectively.

International institutions

International institutions are crucial when it comes to conflict prevention. However, with the international configuration having changed dramatically since the end of the Second World War, with the growth in the number of states as well as the power shift among them, it is widely recognized that, despite efforts at innovation, the current international architecture is outdated.

Participants discussed how the International Criminal Court (ICC) can be seen as an institutional innovation aimed at contributing to the area of conflict prevention through acting as a deterrent and putting an end to cycles of violence. Since its creation, the Court has been deployed in ways not originally anticipated, including intervening in conflicts that are still ongoing and working with the aim of prevention in real time. Additionally, although the ICC was set up to be a court of last resort and to operate when states were not willing or able, the reverse has happened. It was also hoped that the ICC would play an important role in addressing how group identities and communities can become divided by conflict through prosecuting individuals, and so removing guilt from the collective. However, this has not been the case in a number of interventions, with the effect that identities have become hardened as a result of specific interventions. In so far as the ICC was expected to contribute to the architecture of preventive diplomacy, it has not been successful.

The role of the UN in current conflict prevention efforts was also considered. A number of deficiencies were identified, together with potential areas for change whereby the UN might move to a more effective culture of conflict prevention:

- **UN deficit in democracy** – A wide range of actors, from big multinationals to small NGOs, work on UN-related issues, but the organization remains state-centric in its decision-making processes. These non-state actors could be embedded in the UN structure and be given a formal role in global governance and delivery of public goods.
- **UN partnership deficit** – Development work accounts for 75 per cent of UN system funding, and two-thirds of its staff. By working with on-the-ground actors that are more cost-effective and more in tune with local needs, the UN could transfer capabilities, functions and funding to these organizations. It could then focus on its role in peace and security, and in global regulation of relevant areas, which are functions that cannot be easily replaced by other actors.
- **UN solidarity deficit** – While the UN has delivered a lot to poorer countries, there is still a North–South dynamic within the organization. The UN could address this by investing in regional organizations and transferring functions as appropriate.

Diplomacy is undervalued, and there has been a decline in efforts to engage in diplomacy in conflict prevention. Further investment should be allocated to enable diplomatic efforts for peace, conflict and security.

Session 3

In the present-day context of developments such as cyberattacks and election interference, this session considered the impact of communication technologies on modern conflict, and how these technologies may complicate or assist conflict prevention.

Information warfare

While the ‘weaponization’ of information is not a new phenomenon, it is now taking place in the digital sphere. In this sense, the cyber world is an additional dimension where classic subversive practices now take place, both in terms of mal-information (using real facts) and disinformation (using made-up information) for political gain.

There are three main components of subversion, but all can be countered by putting in place adequate response mechanisms:

1. **Intimidation** (e.g. the cyberattack on Ukraine’s electricity grid that caused a power blackout in Kyiv in December 2016⁵) – *Response*: Improving cybersecurity and putting in place measures to reduce countries’ vulnerability to cyberattack can serve as protection against such intimidation.
2. **Propaganda** (e.g. the use of social media to spread mal-information and disinformation) – *Response*: The media should be encouraged to delve into the arguments and educate the public to think critically about what they might be reading; the best way to win against propaganda is to win the argument.
3. **Dirty tricks** (e.g. the hacking attack that targeted the campaign of Emmanuel Macron shortly before the second round of the French presidential election in 2017⁶) – *Response*: Investigative journalism should be encouraged to counter dirty tricks by exposing the truth.

Social media and data manipulation

Social media and data manipulation pose new risks to peace and democracy, as revealed by US special counsel Robert Mueller’s February 2018 indictment of Russian nationals and entities in connection with alleged criminal interference in the US political system, including the 2016 US presidential election.⁷ According to the indictment, Russian organizations and nationals were involved in purchasing political ads on social media and using these platforms to spread derogatory information to disparage candidates including Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, and to promote political rallies, while posing as US grassroots activists.

According to the Mueller investigation the main objective of the Russian interference was to interfere with the US political and electoral process. It is also commonly recognized among those familiar with Russian tactics during the Cold War that such campaigns are aimed at causing confusion and doubt, and at undermining trust in objective reporting. It is worth noting in this context that the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, published in January,⁸ indicated that in the US trust among the general population had suffered the largest recorded drop in the survey’s history, attributed at root to lack of objective facts and national discourse, and with government seen as the most broken institution.

⁵ BBC News (2017), ‘Ukraine power cut ‘was cyber-attack’’, 11 January 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-38573074> (accessed 28 Aug. 2018).

⁶ Willsher, B. and Henley, J. (2017), ‘Emmanuel Macron’s campaign hacked on eve of French election’, *The Guardian*, 6 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/06/emmanuel-macron-targeted-by-hackers-on-eve-of-french-election> (accessed 28 Aug. 2018).

⁷ For the full text of the indictment, see United States District Court for the District of Columbia, Case 1:18-cr-00215-ABJ, 16 February 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download> (accessed 21 Sept 2018).

⁸ Edelman (2018), ‘Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report’, <https://www.edelman.com/news-awards/2018-edelman-trust-barometer-reveals-record-breaking-drop-trust-in-the-us> (accessed 28 Aug. 2018).

Cybersecurity and nuclear weapons

Participants discussed how forms of interference and disinformation could trigger conflict, with devastating result. For instance, nuclear weapons systems are vulnerable to cyberattack. Should such an attack take place at a time of heightened tension, this could lead to escalation and result in the use of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, unwitting reliance on false information and data could bring about inadvertent nuclear launches.⁹

The Hawaii ballistic missile alert in January 2018, when residents received in error a message informing them of an inbound missile threat and instructing them to seek immediate shelter, illustrates the potential risks of receiving compromised data. The false alarm, as well as causing panic, demonstrated weaknesses in the response system: the authorities did not confirm that there was no missile threat until approximately 30 minutes later.

This example underscores the need for developing cyber resilience measures and improving the cybersecurity of critical national infrastructure.

Conflict prevention in the 21st century

At the conclusion of the meeting, participants discussed how to improve international mechanisms for sustainable peace and conflict prevention in the 21st century, and came up with a set of broad recommendations:

1. Prioritize public diplomacy.
2. Establish global norms for tax structures so economic inequalities are reduced.
3. Redouble the global efforts for climate change, including renewed commitment to the Paris Agreement on climate change.
4. Reorder and frame the international system so there is fairer representation.
5. Recharge the UN Security Council to ensure new mechanisms are established for agreements, including interventions.
6. Set in place further measures to prevent conflict and curb military intervention.
7. Increase international emphasis on and commitment to sustainable development and education for all.

⁹ For a fuller discussion, see Unal, B. and Lewis, P. (2018), *Cybersecurity of Nuclear Weapons Systems Threats, Vulnerabilities and Consequences*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://reader.chathamhouse.org/cybersecurity-nuclear-weapons-systems-threats-vulnerabilities-and-consequences> (accessed 28 Aug. 2018).