

The relationship between the Secretary-General and the General Assembly

Before dealing with the role of Secretary-General of the United Nations, it might be appropriate to look back briefly into the past and recall what was the role of Secretary-General of the League of Nations. In accordance with Article 6 of the Covenant of the League, he was exclusively an administrator. The Secretariat of the League was never intended to be one of its principal organs. Those were limited to two, the Assembly and the Council.

It may be of interest to note that, during the brief period of activity of the League, its two Secretaries-General were nationals of permanent members of the Council:

- 1. Sir Eric Drummond, United Kingdom (1920-1933)**
- 2. Joseph Avenol, France (1933-1940)**

As the Second World War was still raging, people of goodwill held a number of conferences aimed at creating a new organization of peace without repeating the errors of the past.

At the Dumbarton Oaks Conference, in 1944, representatives of the United States, the United Kingdom, the USSR and China agreed on the text of a draft Charter that called for four principal organs: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the International Court of Justice and the Secretariat. Why the Secretariat? Probably to grant the Secretary-General of the future organization some political prerogatives, not just administrative functions.

At its very first session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 11 (I) of 24 January 1946, entitled “Terms of appointment of the Secretary-General”. When you read paragraph 1 of that resolution, you realize that some

progress has been made in the past 60 years regarding gender parity. That paragraph reads as follows:

“The terms of the appointment of the Secretary-General shall be such as to enable a man of eminence and high attainment to accept and maintain the position.” [Why a “man” and not a “person”?]

In that same resolution, the General Assembly decided that “The first Secretary-General shall be appointed for five years, the appointment being open at the end of that period for a further five-year term”. It added that the term of office of future Secretaries-General might be modified in the light of experience. In fact, no Secretary-General has served more than two five-year terms.

In accordance with our programme, I shall deal now with the relationship between the Secretary-General and the General Assembly.

There is a fundamental difference -- I may even say a physical difference -- in the Secretary-General's relations with the Security Council and his relations with the General Assembly.

In the Security Council, the Secretary-General is closely associated with a small group of delegates from 15 States sitting at the same table, most of the time in the informal consultations meeting room.

In the General Assembly, the setting is much more formal. Sitting on an elevated podium at the right of President, he must face anonymously delegates from 192 countries. He does not usually attend the organizational meetings convened by the President with the chairmen of the regional groups. Yet, the Secretary-General's relationship with the General Assembly is most important and comprehensive. The General Assembly is the only principal organ where all Member States are represented. It is therefore the only organ where decisions can be made by the whole membership, including the adoption of the

budget, the election of members of the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council and, of course, the appointment of the Secretary-General.

When the General Assembly holds a summit meeting, the event provides a unique opportunity for the Secretary-General to orchestrate that exceptional gathering and to meet with the leaders of the world.

In the early days of the Organization, an atmosphere of extreme enthusiasm prevailed at the United Nations. Delegates were convinced they had adopted a system of collective security that would ban all wars for ever. As members of the Secretariat – and I was one of them -- we felt like pioneers. That feeling was shared by the first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie of Norway, who served from 1 February 1946 to November 1952. He realized that, by being the first Secretary-General, any of his decisions was likely to become a precedent. For example, by appointing a Soviet citizen to head the Department of

Political and Security Council Affairs, he set a trend for decades to come.

Trygve Lie was replaced by Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General, who was appointed in April 1953 as a non-political compromise candidate. By then, the international situation had begun to deteriorate. The euphoria of earlier days was replaced by an atmosphere of extreme tension, the cold war, that led to the polarization of the world – and therefore of the United Nations – into two camps, East vs. West. The Security Council was almost paralysed by the repeated vetoes cast by the Soviet Union (its only means of defence) and by an overwhelming majority from the West.

Since one member of the United Nations family, the Security Council, had become incapacitated, other members came to the rescue. Indeed, all Member States had a vested interest in the United Nations and none of them wanted the Organization to fail. As a result, some of the topics that the Security Council was unable to deal

with, because of the East-West confrontation, were transferred to the General Assembly through a procedure established by resolution 377 (V) of 3 November 1950, entitled “Uniting for peace”. Under that procedure, the General Assembly held several emergency special sessions.

For other questions, which could not be discussed openly in the General Assembly, Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld extended his good offices and resorted to quiet diplomacy, a trend that was followed by all his successors.

On several occasions, Dag Hammarskjöld decided to use the podium of the General Assembly to reply publicly to the attacks of Nikita Khrushchev, Head of the Government of the USSR, who had advocated the replacement of the Secretary-General by three persons: one from the East, one from the West and one from the South, the famous “troika”.

In 1959, I was transferred to the Office of the Secretary-General to deal with matters related to the General Assembly. I was then able to witness on many occasions the extraordinary energy of the Secretary-General. Once, as I was sound asleep at 2 o'clock in the morning, a phone call woke me up. A cheerful female voice at the other end of the line requested me, on behalf of the Secretary-General, to come to his office immediately in order to help him draft a letter in perfect French that he intended to send to the Belgian Government. Since I worked at the United Nations, I assumed negotiation would be in order and it was then agreed that I did not have to come until 6 a.m.

Dag Hammarskjöld's successor, U Thant of Burma (now Myanmar), was well known to the New York diplomatic community when, in 1961, he was first appointed Acting Secretary-General, and later Secretary-General, to replace Dag Hammarskjöld who had perished, with 15 of my colleagues, in a plane crash on a mission of peace to Africa. Before his appointment as the third Secretary-

General, he had been Permanent Representative of Burma to the United Nations. I knew him particularly well since I was working in his office and, on account of my knowledge of French combined with his limited knowledge of that language – he knew only a few words such as “coup d’état” and “chargé d’affaires” -- he asked me to be his private interpreter.

U Thant was humble but had very firm convictions. He promoted both in the General Assembly and during his missions abroad his motto of the three Ds (decolonization, disarmament and development). He firmly believed in quiet diplomacy. Since I attended many of his private meetings, I can say with assurance that on many occasions, during the difficult period of the cold war, he extended his good offices to act as a discreet mediator. He served as Secretary-General until 1971.

U Thant was followed by Kurt Waldheim of Austria, who served two full terms, from 1972 to 1981. Prior to his appointment as the fourth Secretary-General, he had held

a number of diplomatic functions, including those of Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations and Minister for Foreign Affairs. Throughout his mandate, especially during the first three years, Kurt Waldheim made it a practice to visit areas of special concern to the United Nations: South Africa, Namibia, Cyprus, the Middle East and the Asian subcontinent. As international relations were still hampered by the cold war and the Security Council could not function properly, he often served as a mediator.

The fifth Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar of Peru, held that position from 1982 to 1991. His appointment came to him as a complete surprise, as he was just beginning to enjoy his retirement in Peru when he heard the news. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar knew the United Nations inside out, since earlier in his career he had been the Permanent Representative of Peru to the United Nations and later Under-Secretary-General for Special Political Affairs and Special Representative of

Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim for Cyprus and Afghanistan.

Through his mediation efforts, Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar contributed significantly to resolving the conflicts in Central America and defusing the war between Iran and Iraq. It was a happy coincidence that, during his 10-year mandate, a number of sources of tension associated with the cold war were gradually eliminated.

The sixth Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Egypt, served one five-year term, from 1992 to 1996. Before his appointment, he had held a number of important functions, including those of Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. He had a role in the negotiation of the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel which were signed in 1979.

From the very beginning of his mandate, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali was set on reform. He

submitted to the General Assembly a number of important proposals in the political and economic fields, including his “Agenda for peace”. He advocated inter alia measures of preventive diplomacy.

The seventh Secretary-General, Kofi Annan of Ghana, began his first term on 1 January 1997. In June 2001 he was reappointed for a second term ending on 31 December 2006.

Kofi Annan joined the United Nations system in 1962. Therefore, before becoming Secretary-General he had had 35 years of United Nations experience, including in the posts of Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management, Assistant Secretary-General for Programme Planning, Budget and Finance and Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations. When he became Secretary-General, Kofi Annan’s first major initiative was his plan for reform, “Renewing the United Nations”, which he presented to the General Assembly as early as 1997. In 2000, he issued a Millennium report

entitled “We the Peoples: the role of the United Nations in the 21st century”. That most comprehensive report served as a basis for the Millennium Declaration adopted by the Heads of State or Government in September 2000.

In 2001, the Secretary-General and the United Nations received jointly the Nobel Peace Prize.

Throughout his 10-year mandate, Secretary-General Kofi Annan has been relentlessly committed to the process of reform. On the day he took the first oath of office, on 17 December 1996, he said:

“The time to choose is now, for this organization, along with the rest of the world, must change. Let every Member State welcome this change, not resist it. Let us make change our ally, not our enemy; seize it as an opportunity, not a threat; recognize it as a necessity, not an imposition.”

On many solemn occasions he communicated with the leaders of the world from the rostrum of the General Assembly. And I do mean “from the rostrum”, since he often broke with tradition by leaving his seat at the top of the podium and going down a few steps to deliver his message standing at the rostrum like all the other speakers. Another sign of humility.

Last Thursday, 14 December, the eighth Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, took the oath of office in the General Assembly Hall. On that occasion, he pledged to follow the path of his predecessor in the process of reform and to promote action on what he called the three pillars of the Organization: Security, Development and Human Rights.

In conclusion, having been associated with the United Nations for over 60 years, may I say in all humility that I have greatly admired the qualities of conscientiousness and devotion to the United Nations displayed by all the

seven Secretaries-General I have had the privilege to know, qualities that will certainly be displayed by our new Secretary-General. They have no doubt realized that their high responsibilities could often be frustrating, that the initials “SG” too often stood for “scapegoat”, but that their functions could also at times be most rewarding.

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