

# The Political Role of the United Nations Secretary-General

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There is no such thing as *the* United Nations. Instead, there are several UNs. The political masters of the UN system are Member States and the UN is first and foremost a political organization. As such, its decisions result from political bargaining and accommodation based on competing national interests and power equations. The hope is that the international interest will somehow emerge from this interplay of hard negotiations among Member States.

The Secretariat of the United Nations is the most tangible evidence of the continuous existence of the international organization. The chief administrative officer of the Secretariat is the Secretary-General (SG) of the United Nations. He is the personification of the international interest and the custodian of the world conscience. The political role of the SG was a novel phenomenon of post-1945 international politics. We still have a long way to go before the concept of a spokesman for the world is firmly established and widely accepted. The SG is required to be a politician, diplomat and international civil servant all rolled into one. This is why Trygve Lie, the first SG, as he met his designated successor Dag Hammarskjöld at the airport in New York on 9 April 1953, remarked famously that Hammarskjöld was about to inherit “the most impossible job in the world” – certainly one that is impossible to fill to the satisfaction of all in an increasingly fractious community of states. Because of the nature of the responsibilities and burdens placed on the shoulders of the SG, he is bound to attract critical scrutiny and harsh judgment from one quarter or another.

In this paper, I will begin by outlining the bases of the SG’s authority and then describe the five key constituencies surrounding his political role. Third, I will highlight the importance of personal attributes in underpinning, finally, the international leadership role of the SG.

## **Bases of Power and Authority of SG**

There is a central paradox at the heart of the office of the SG: s/he is elected to office as

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an individual, not as the representative of a government or a region; yet the regions demand “their” turn at the office; and the UN is an organization of, by and for states. Is the SG the 192<sup>nd</sup> Member State of the UN, or the 16<sup>th</sup> member of the Security Council? What are the bases of his power and authority, and what means of action does he have? Is he mainly a symbolic figurehead or is he an influential actor in the turbulent world of international politics?

The origins of the office in both its administrative and symbolic roles lie in the League of Nations and the ILO. The prototypes of executive leaders of an international organization were an efficient but unobtrusive chief administrative head, and an articulate and dynamic leader in policy formulation who went beyond being just a secretary. While some framers of the UN Charter would have preferred to restrict the SG’s role to the traditional apolitical model of the head of a civil service, obedient and deferential to the political masters, others argued for a more clearly political and activist conception. In the end both conceptions found expression in the Charter, though they do not necessarily cohabit all that easily.

The status, authority and powers of the SG are derived chiefly from the clauses of the UN Charter, but depend also invariably on the skills and personality of the incumbent and the state of relations among the major powers of the world. The political role of the SG is in turn a function of the interplay between the Charter functions and powers, the personal attributes, and the political equations among the Member States.

On the one hand, the SG’s authority is less than that of a cabinet minister, for he does have Member States as his political bosses and is not a political minister himself. The SG has neither the trappings nor “the accoutrements of power” of a state, but is instead an aide to governments. On the other hand, the SG has greater authority than the head of a national bureaucracy, in that he has no cabinet and minister as the final political and policy boss. He provides the logistical and intellectual basis for many UNSC and UNGA resolutions and may urge particular courses of action. He is at the nerve centre of a sensitive communications network. As well as using the budget as a vehicle for inserting his priorities into the organization’s work agenda, he submits an annual report on the work of the organization that gives him a guaranteed instrument for outlining his vision for the UN.

The process of selecting Secretaries-General has been haphazard, ad hoc and subject to veto by a permanent member. This immediately changes the thrust from

selecting someone who commands the widest following to someone who is least unacceptable to the major powers. By definition, the major powers are the most active in world affairs. Therefore the procedures place a premium on a non-activist, if not passive, SG. Rosemary Righter notes that “In the history of the United Nations, not one UN secretary-general has been appointed because he was expected to provide outstanding leadership.... In Dag Hammarskjöld, the five permanent members simply made a mistake of judgment.”

The Secretary-General is the chief symbol of the international interest, advocate of law and rights, general manager of the global agenda and a focal point in setting the direction of world affairs. Some of the built-in disadvantages of the office could be overcome by altering the term from five to seven years and making it non-renewable. The procedure could also be exempted from the veto.

The chief constitutional basis of the powers and authority of the SG is the Charter status of the Secretariat as one of the principal organs headed by the SG as its chief administrative officer. Any SG can interpret the dignity so conferred on the office to claim a responsibility to uphold the principles and purposes of the Charter independently of the mandates of the UNSC and the UNGA. Article 98 requires the SG and the Secretariat to discharge normative and operational mandates entrusted by the other principal organs. In practice this has evolved into the delegation of considerable authority to the SG in the implementation of those mandates.

An intriguing and potentially very far-reaching innovation from the League to the UN was the insertion of Article 99 into the UN Charter which authorizes the SG to bring to the attention of the UNSC *any matter which in his opinion* may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security. Absent this independent determination and possible initiative, and absent the opportunity to report every year to the Assembly on the work of the organization for the year just past and in so doing outline the vision and requirements for the forthcoming year as well, the post of SG in the League of Nations had rested on a purely administrative conception. Article 99 vests the SG with an explicitly political responsibility. And Articles 98 and 99 are further reinforced by Article 100 which seeks to protect the independence and impartiality of the SG.

During the Cold War, the failure of the principal political organs to function as originally envisaged placed a disproportionate burden on the shoulders of the Secretary-General. As a result the office became one with little power but considerable influence.

Article 99 confers on the SG both a broad reservoir of authority and a wide margin of discretion. The exercise of authority under Article 99 therefore requires the most careful political judgment. Between them, Articles 98 and 99 have helped to move the office of the SG from the periphery closer towards the centre of UN decision-making.

### **The Key UN Constituencies**

In order to maximize his influence and expand his role, the SG must also be attentive and sensitive to five key constituencies and must demonstrate a grasp and command of intergovernmental processes. First, he must ensure that his corps of international civil servants are in broad sympathy with his vision for the organization, responsive to his wishes and commands, and motivated as well as being able and competent. Equally, though, the staff look to the SG to articulate UN values, to be the voice of moral clarity on behalf of the international community as a whole, to issue clarion calls for action in defence of the international interest.

Second, the SG must retain the confidence of the Member States who constitute the voting majority in the GA as the plenary body of the organization. Developing countries, who control the UNGA by sheer force of numbers, have resented the reallocation of resources and energy to peace and security to suit the West's agenda at the cost of an attention deficit syndrome to their needs and priorities.

Third, the SG must ensure he has the support of Member States who control the resources without which the UN cannot implement its mandate and carry out its necessary operations.

Fourth and these days most importantly, the SG must not alienate those who control the Security Council, in particular the P5, and in particular the P1. During the Cold War, deadlock in the Security Council often produced an authority and policy vacuum that the SG could fill through creative interpretations of his role and expansion of his remit to include the establishment and oversight of peacekeeping operations and mediation efforts, in particular through the good offices role of the SG.

With the end of the Cold War, great power agreement in the UNSC translated into a greatly expanded agenda of the UN and a multiplication of peacekeeping and conflict resolution missions and activities. As the nature of PKOs changed to reflect the more demanding challenges of complex humanitarian emergencies, so the SG found himself

at the heart of a complex web of several multifaceted peace operations.

The fate of the peace and security agenda of the United Nations then hinged on the relationship between the UNSC and the SG as its two principal organs. In the Balkans, Boutros-Ghali was given an overly ambitious mandate against his advice and not given the resources to implement it. In effect the UNSC, meaning largely the major Western powers, transferred responsibility for dealing with the atrocities being committed in the Balkans to the SG when rightfully it was theirs to discharge. When things went wrong, he was an easy target by the very same members of the UNSC. Nevertheless, personality differences also are part of the explanation for Perez de Cuellar's easy and confident relationship with the UNSC, while Boutros-Ghali had a comparatively difficult one. Iraq placed an impossible burden on Kofi Annan last year. If the Security Council is united, he cannot be an alternative voice of dissent; if it is divided, he cannot be a substitute for inaction by a splintered Council.

Fifth and finally, the SG must mobilize the support of civil society. After all, the opening words of the Charter are "We the peoples of the world." They are a ready and powerful resource and reservoir of political support and goodwill for the UN.

### **Personality**

The chief executive of the organization came to symbolize as well as represent the United Nations. In turn this enhanced the importance of the qualities required of Secretaries-General: integrity, independence of mind and the ability and willingness to set the collective interest of the United Nations above the partisan interests of Member States. The SG is looked to to provide intellectual leadership, managerial ability, negotiating skill and, in an age of mass communications, the ability to establish a rapport with an international audience. S/he must know when to take the initiative in order to force an issue and when to maintain a tactful silence; when courage is required and when discretion is advised; and when commitment to the UN vision must be balanced by a sense of proportion and humour. The personal skills and attributes that are most crucial include charisma, the ability to articulate complex arguments in crisp and clear soundbites, powerful oratory, patience beyond human tolerance, the ability to listen and keep confidences, an instinct for grasping the big picture without neglecting the necessary details, and a strong sense of the demands and expectations of the

organization against the limits of the possible.

The simple reality is that often, in the most volatile and conflict-torn areas of the world, the SG is the only channel of communication between the parties concerned, and the only possible interlocutor between them and outside actors. This vests in the SG the responsibility to exploit the clauses of the Charter under Chapter 6 for the pacific settlement of disputes and thereby to expand the gamut of his political role. Through his network of special representatives and special envoys, the SG is engaged in the process and substance of multilateral diplomacy on a 24/7 basis around the world.

Some lapses and bad judgment calls notwithstanding, Kofi Annan's enduring political legacy will be his deep commitment to universal human rights and human security. On the first point, he has been openly critical of the lack of good governance in Africa in a way that only an African SG could be. On the second point, at the same time, he has successfully articulated the African continent's desperate plight with respect to the new or soft threats of poverty, disease and HIV/AIDS. His legacy will also include a series of reforms of the Secretariat in his capacity as chief administrative officer of the United Nations.

## **Leadership**

As will be clear by now, the single most important political role of the SG is to provide leadership: the ability to make others connect emotionally and intellectually to a larger cause that transcends their immediate self-interest. Leadership consists of establishing standards of achievement and conduct, explaining why they matter, and inspiring or coaxing others to adopt these agreed benchmarks as their personal goals.

Nelson Mandela occupies a unique niche in the second half of the twentieth century for the way in which he combined the inspirational and aspirational qualities of national leadership and international statesmanship. Among SGs, only two are generally thought to have combined the same qualities of inspirational and aspirational leadership: Dag Hammarskjöld and Kofi Annan. Perhaps most poignantly, Annan is without precedent in the annals of the SGs in the way in which he commissioned reports into the organization's most painful failures in Rwanda and Srebrenica, and then permitted those harshly critical reports to be published for the record and accepted personal responsibility for some of those failures.

Kofi Annan has been astonishingly skilled at trying to balance the interests of his stakeholders. At times he appears to have lost the confidence of Washington even as he is attacked for being their pliant tool in the rest of the world. At others he gently chides Washington, for example with respect to the risks of the proliferation of the unlawful use of force in the context of the Iraq war, even while urging others to understand why particular states should feel the urge to act unilaterally when existing institutions fail to confront today's changed threats.

Kofi Annan has also been a uniquely skilled SG in norm generation and entrepreneurship. Ideas matter. Gradually over the course of the last century the idea of an international community bound together by shared values, benefits and responsibilities, and common rules and procedures, took hold of peoples' imagination. The United Nations is the institutional expression of that development. But, unlike the situation within countries where different political parties and civic groups can compete for public attention and political office in order to convert their contested ideas into public policy, there is no world government at the international level.

How then to ensure that the clash of ideas for international security and global welfare is turned into a productive contest over international public policy? One answer has been to look to "blue ribbon" international commissions as a means of leveraging emerging new ideas into widely accepted global norms. Such commissions can be a catalyst to register norm shifts and convert them into public policy. Annan has used the technique to record changed ideas about familiar institutions and practices, as with the Brahimi Panel, or to call for fresh thinking on how the UN can remain the centre of collective action to respond to changing circumstances and threats, as with the High-Level Panel.

## **Conclusion**

The temper of the times condition expectations of the role of the Secretary-General. The changing contours of world politics provide the context in which opportunities, requirements and constraints on the scope for UN role and independent action by the SG are shaped. For example Kofi Annan is personally credited with reaching out to the business sector through his Global Compact that seeks to instill civic virtue in the global marketplace, and to civil society representatives who have found the United Nations a

far more hospitable place under his stewardship. Yet both of these were made possible by major changes in a much larger context. The end of the Cold War marked the triumph of liberal economics over the command economy and the concurrent rise of civil society activism within and across borders. This was reflected in the abatement of reflexive hostility to market capitalism and nongovernmental activism by many UN Member States. Kofi Annan's genius as the leader of the preeminent international organization lay in channelling the historic ideational transformations into new institutional linkages.

The role of the SG expands and contracts in direct correlation with the standing of the organization itself at any given time. Far from being irrelevant, the UN is still the forum of choice for debating the great issues of the day. A considerable amount of the world's important business gets done in the corridors and chambers of the UN. Rare is the country that does not send a senior and skilled diplomat or politician as its Permanent Representative to the UN mission. The respect and attention commanded by the SG as the head of the organization reflects this reality. While the P5 may treat him "merely as a Foreign Minister," the rest accord him the status of a head of state.

The exercise of international leadership by the SG is still subject to the systemic and structural constraints of a unipolar world order whose bedrock organizational principle is state sovereignty. The SG simply does not have the luxury to act in isolation from the shifting power structures of world politics. As my colleague Edward Newman puts it, the fundamental issue underlying the political role of the office always has been and remains whether the SG "is more an adjunct of the intergovernmental system or part of a wider process of global governance that transcends state structures." He can unquestionably use the office as an international pulpit to shape policy and shift norms. But the latitude and impact will usually depend as much on exogenous forces beyond his control, most notably the state of relations between the key political constituencies at the United Nations, as on personal skills of charm, courtesy, judgment and persuasion.

Under modern conditions, the UNSC and the SG, as two principal organs of the United Nations, must understand and respect each other's powers, prerogatives and responsibilities in order to establish a harmonious relationship. Specifically, the SG must play a political role that is complementary to that of the Security Council and never in competition with it; respectful of the pivotal role of the Security Council in maintaining peace and security while mindful of the political temper in the GA which is

the truer barometer of the sentiments of the international community at large.

The SG has the power to advise, encourage, caution and warn. He does so with the benefit of having access to all sides of an argument and all parties to a dispute or conflict; being the confidant of governments or, in Hammarskjöld's words, "the trustee of the secrets of all the nations." This is why Member States with the requisite technical capacity may well seek to eavesdrop on his conversations in order to glean information on what he may be contemplating and others may be saying to him. By the same token, once it is commonly believed that conversations with the SG are not assured of confidentiality, one of the major assets and roles of the SG is effectively destroyed. Quiet diplomacy within the confidential confines of the SG's private office can be supplemented or substituted by the public diplomacy of the UN's bully pulpit. The annual report on the work of the organization, the many special reports of the SG, and the establishment and conduct of peace operations, provide him with additional sources of political leverage.

Dissatisfaction with US capture of the agenda often promotes wishful thinking about expanded independent powers for the SG. On the other side, those impatient to rush to enforcement often fail to appreciate that any public endorsement by the SG of the coercive instruments of statecraft can damage his credentials as the vital core of conciliatory diplomacy. And, potentially, the pacific settlement of disputes under Chapter 6 is among the SG's most valuable political roles with respect both to conflict prevention and constructive collaboration.

Finally, the ease and frequency of international travel brings the SG into contact with representatives of many governments, chief executives of international organizations and multinational corporations, and civil society organizations. This is a multi-textured milieu of international relations far removed from the elegant simplicity of the rational actor model of foreign policy decision-making. It provides the SG with many opportunities to probe and explain, test and tease, persuade and dissuade; to engage in diplomatic parlance but also to exercise ideational leadership.