
Introduction: secretary or general?

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The Secretary-General of the United Nations is a unique figure in world politics. At once civil servant and the world's diplomat, lackey of the UN Security Council and commander-in-chief of up to 100,000 peacekeepers, he or she depends on states for both the legitimacy and resources that enable the United Nations to function. The tension between these roles – of being secretary or general – has challenged every incumbent. The first, the Norwegian Trygve Lie (1946–1952), memorably welcomed his successor to New York's Idlewild Airport with the words: “You are about to enter the most impossible job on this earth.”¹

The formal responsibilities of the job are few and ambiguous. The UN Charter defines the position as “chief administrative officer” of the United Nations Organization, a capacity in which he or she serves the Security Council, the General Assembly, and the Economic and Social Council, as well as performing “such other functions as are entrusted to him by these organs.”² At the same time, the Secretary-General is granted significant institutional and personal independence: the Secretariat he or she leads is itself a principal organ of the United Nations; the Secretary-General and the staff serve as international officials responsible only to the organization; and the Secretary-General is given a wide discretion to bring to the attention of the Security Council “any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.”³

The manner in which these responsibilities have been fulfilled over the past six decades has depended as much on politics as it has on personality. The Cold War severely constrained the ability of the United Nations to play a significant role in major issues of peace and security, yet created an opportunity for a little-known Swedish cabinet minister,

¹ See chapter 2 by Shashi Tharoor in this volume.

² UN Charter, arts. 97–98. Relevant provisions of the Charter and other documents are excerpted in the appendix to this volume (p. 00).

³ UN Charter, arts. 99–100.

Dag Hammarskjöld (1953–1961), to carve out an independent space in which the Secretary-General could conduct what he called “informal diplomatic activity”.⁴ The end of superpower rivalry created larger possibilities for the United Nations, but mismanaged expectations and Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s (1992–1996) abrasive manner led to a crisis of confidence in the organization’s political role. His successor, Kofi Annan (1997–2006), was widely respected for his diplomatic skills, but tensions with the United States over the 2003 invasion of Iraq coincided with revelations of corruption and mismanagement in the UN Oil-for-Food Programme, severely undermining his own tenure and efforts at reform.

A central question for each Secretary-General has been the extent to which he – all previous seven incumbents have been men – could pursue a path independent of the member states that appointed him. Soviet Chairman Nikita Khrushchev is said to have dismissed the very idea of a truly international civil servant: “While there are neutral countries, there are no neutral men.” Walter Lippmann, who had interviewed Khrushchev on this subject in 1961, interpreted the Soviet position as being that the “political celibacy” called for in the ideal British civil servant was, in international affairs, a fiction.⁵ Hammarskjöld, in articulating his vision of precisely such an individual, archly suggested that it was possible to be politically celibate without being politically virgin.⁶

U Thant (1961–1971), who took office after Hammarskjöld was killed in a plane crash over Congo, was more modest in his rhetoric and emphasized the harmonizing function of the office.⁷ Kurt Waldheim (1972–1981) was even more reticent in asserting himself, once described by an Israeli at a Middle East peace conference as “walking around like a head-waiter in a restaurant”.⁸ The last Cold War Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (1982–1991), also espoused a minimalist view of the office – he was said to be the type of person who wouldn’t make a splash if he fell out of a boat⁹ – while at the same time quietly laying the

⁴ Dag Hammarskjöld, “The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact (Lecture Delivered to Congregation at Oxford University, 30 May 1961),” in Wilder Foote (ed.), *Servant of Peace: A Selection of the Speeches and Statements of Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the United Nations 1953–1961* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 335.

⁵ Walter Lippmann, “Interview with Chairman Nikita Khrushchev,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 April 1961. ⁶ Hammarskjöld, “The International Civil Servant”, p. 331.

⁷ U Thant, *View from the UN* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), p. 31.

⁸ Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab–Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 121.

⁹ See chapter 10 by James Traub in this volume.

foundations for a more activist role through his mediation in the Iran–Iraq War.¹⁰

The limits of such activism depend, crucially, on relations with the member states that make up the United Nations. The Secretary-General is sometimes said to be a kind of secular Pope, recalling Stalin's underestimation of the pontiff for his lack of military divisions.¹¹ As Brian Urquhart has observed, however, if he is indeed a Pope then he is one who also frequently lacks a church.¹² Key tests have been whether the Secretary-General has been able to say “no” to the member states that direct him, and whether, in the face of international indifference to a crisis, he could sometimes cajole them into saying “yes”. Achievements in both areas have been modest, with states being most enthusiastic about the independence of the Secretary-General only when his decisions have coincided with their national interests. On occasion Annan, like some of his predecessors, was heard to joke that the abbreviation used within the United Nations for his position – “SG” – stood for “scapegoat”.¹³

Past Secretaries-General have, nonetheless, demonstrated the capacity for significant influence. The “good offices” function – an intentionally vague formulation that denotes public and private efforts to prevent disputes from arising, escalating, or spreading¹⁴ – is routinely underestimated in its importance to the prevention of conflict between and within countries, in part because successes draw so little attention. Another form of influence is in mobilizing international support for a cause that transcends national interest, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Past Secretaries-General have also led normative changes, ranging from the development of a legal basis for peacekeeping to the embrace of a “responsibility to protect” vulnerable populations. Two have been awarded Nobel Peace Prizes: Hammarskjöld in 1961; Annan in 2001.

Surprisingly, however, the vicissitudes of the office have been the subject of little scholarly attention. Most generalist titles are many decades old, frequently being out of print as well as out of date.¹⁵ Other titles focus on

¹⁰ See chapter 4 by James Cockayne and David M. Malone in this volume.

¹¹ See Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, trans. Leif Sjöberg and W.H. Auden (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), p. xviii.

¹² Brian Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld* (New York: Knopf, 1972), p. 51.

¹³ See chapter 2 by Shashi Tharoor in this volume.

¹⁴ See chapter 5 by Teresa Whitfield in this volume.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Stephen M. Schwebel, *The Secretary-General of the United Nations: His Political Powers and Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952); Leon Gordenker, *The UN Secretary-General and the Maintenance of Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967); Arthur W. Rovine, *The First Fifty Years of the Secretary-General in World*

the biographies of specific individuals, often with great insight but more relevant to understanding the personality than the institution.¹⁶ The purpose of this volume is, for the first time, to bring sustained attention to the normative and political factors that shape the role of the Secretary-General, with particular emphasis on how that role has evolved in response to changing circumstances after the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the “war on terror”. Such geopolitical transformations define the contours of the Secretary-General’s universe – a universe shaped also by the economic forces of globalization, and increasingly by tensions between the industrialized North and the developing South. Across these various influences, the difficulties experienced by each Secretary-General further reflect the profound ambivalence of states towards entrusting their security, interests, or resources to an intergovernmental body. The ambiguities in the job description are far from accidental.

The approach adopted here is necessarily selective. There is, for example, no chapter that focuses solely on the administrative responsibilities of the office.¹⁷ Such issues will be considered to the extent that they impact on the normative and political questions identified earlier. More often than not, they do. When Annan gave his first press conference as Secretary-General in 1997, he acknowledged criticisms that UN reform

Politics: 1920–1970 (Leyden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1970). For more recent works, see Thomas E. Boudreau, *Sheathing the Sword: The UN Secretary-General and the Prevention of International Conflict* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); Benjamin Rivlin and Leon Gordenker (eds.), *The Challenging Role of the UN Secretary-General: Making “the Most Impossible Job in the World” Possible* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993); Edward Newman, *The UN Secretary-General from the Cold War to the New Era: A Global Peace and Security Mandate* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998). A fuller list of relevant works is provided in the bibliography of this volume.

¹⁶ See, e.g., James Barros, *Trygve Lie and the Cold War: The UN Secretary-General Pursues Peace, 1946–1953* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989); Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld*; June Bingham, *U Thant: The Search for Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1966); Seymour Maxwell Finger and Arnold A. Saltzman, *Bending with the Winds: Kurt Waldheim and the United Nations* (New York: Praeger, 1990); George J. Lankevich, *The United Nations Under Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, 1982–1991* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001); Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *Unvanquished: A US–UN Saga* (New York: Random House, 1999); James Traub, *The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of American World Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006).

¹⁷ The best critical account of this function is to be found in the report of the inquiry into the Oil-for-Food scandal: The Management of the United Nations Oil-for-Food Programme: Volume 1 – The Report of the Committee (Independent Inquiry into the Oil-for-Food Programme, New York, 7 September 2005), available at www.iic-offp.org/documents/Sept05/Mgmt_V1.pdf. See also Leon Gordenker, *The UN Secretary-General and Secretariat (Global Institutions Series)* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

had not moved fast enough in his first weeks in office. Russian Ambassador Sergey Lavrov in particular had observed that God had taken less time to create the earth – to which Annan responded that the Almighty had the great advantage of working alone, without committees and without 185 members.¹⁸ The Oil-for-Food scandal (and the image of Secretariat staff going to prison for corruption¹⁹) provided some much needed urgency to the reform process, but efforts to establish more accountability through granting more responsibility foundered when member states realized that this would reduce their own capacity to micromanage budgetary processes.²⁰ As *The Economist* concluded of the Oil-for-Food investigation, if Annan had been the chief executive officer of a company that oversaw such mismanagement and corruption he should have been sacked. In reality, however, he lacked those powers and the United Nations lacked a comparable structure: to locate the blame in his person would ignore the structural problems that discouraged effective management and facilitated corruption.²¹ Further evidence of the Secretary-General's limited administrative power was provided by an internal rebellion against efforts in 2006 to increase financial oversight, simplify hiring and firing, and outsource non-essential functions – leading to the UN Staff Union passing a “no confidence” motion in Annan and his senior managers.²²

Similarly, there is no dedicated chapter in this volume on the relationship between the Secretary-General and the General Assembly, to whom he or she must make an annual report.²³ This relationship is important but is considered here in the context of the wider relationship with the member states rather than with the Assembly as an institution. An important exception to this is the changing role of the Assembly in the appointment process, considered in chapter 3 by Colin Keating in this volume.

¹⁸ Cameron Stewart, “Annan Refuses to Rush on Reform”, *Weekend Australian*, 15 February 1997. By 2007 the United Nations subsequently had 192 members.

¹⁹ The case of Aleksandr V. Yakovlev, a UN procurement officer, was made public through the Volcker investigations but did not directly involve the Oil-for-Food Programme. In August 2005 he pleaded guilty in Federal District Court in Manhattan to charges of bribing contractors: Warren Hoge, “UN Looking at Charges of Fraud in Procurement”, *New York Times*, 24 January 2006.

²⁰ See chapter 12 by Simon Chesterman and Thomas M. Franck in this volume.

²¹ “The Oil-for-Food Fiasco,” *Economist* (London), 10 September 2005. See also Brian Urquhart, “The UN Oil-for-Food Program: Who Is Guilty?”, *New York Review* LIII(2), 9 February 2006.

²² “United Nations: Staff Votes ‘No Confidence’ In Annan”, *New York Times*, 10 March 2006.

²³ UN Charter, art. 98.

A final preliminary observation is that the present work spends disproportionate time discussing the first two post-Cold War Secretaries-General, Boutros-Ghali and Annan. These two men held the office in a significantly different political environment from their predecessors, but the book is not intended to be a definitive account of their tenure. Instead, the focus is intended to be forward-looking, drawing upon the experiences of the past seven incumbents, their opportunities and their crises, with a view to informing the practice and analysis of the eighth, _____ (2007–), and beyond.

Structure of the book

The book is organized in four parts. Part I examines the manner in which the position of Secretary-General was initially conceptualized and how that job description has changed over time. Chapter 1, by Brian E. Urquhart – who worked with or advised every Secretary-General to date – surveys the manner in which the first incumbents were selected and how each interpreted the ambiguous mandate that he enjoyed. From the inauspicious appointment of Trygve Lie, the emphasis has tended to be less on finding the best person than on avoiding a veto by one of the five permanent members. This has encouraged Potemkin campaigns and lowest-common-denominator candidates. Much has depended, therefore, on qualities of the individual that were revealed after his appointment. Indeed, Urquhart suggests that a more transparent process might have prevented Hammarskjöld, the most dynamic and influential Secretary-General the United Nations has seen, from being appointed at all.

The lack of a true job description has encouraged the tendency to vest the Secretary-General with the aspirations of an emerging international community. As Shashi Tharoor shows in chapter 2, this has frequently conflicted with the administrative responsibilities of the office as well as the extent to which it is beholden to member states. The Secretary-General, once appointed, is given both a “platform and a straitjacket”: how he or she uses that platform and responds to those constraints will determine his or her legacy. It is ironic that there has been greater attenuation of the administrative responsibilities of the Secretary-General – for which there is clear Charter authority – than of the political role located in more creative readings of that text.

Chapter 3, by Colin Keating, examines the appointment process itself. From 1946 to 2006, the General Assembly was largely quiescent, having

established that the Security Council should provide it with only one name and that the procedures for appointment should be conducted in closed meetings. With the exception of an extension of Lie's tenure, the Assembly's role merely involved voting on a single candidate proposed by the Council and it always accepted the Council's recommendation. Within the Council there was more activity: Waldheim was appointed to his first term in 1971 after fourteen vetoes (a potential third term was prevented by no less than sixteen Chinese vetoes); Boutros-Ghali was denied a customary second term by a US veto in 1996. The appointment process is now governed more by convention than by the Charter, with principles such as regional rotation and a two five-year term limit having emerged over time. Such practices are not immutable, however, and from 1997 the General Assembly has at least claimed the right to make full use of the powers given to it in the Charter. This might eventually take the form of a meaningful election – that is, choosing from more than one candidate proposed by the Security Council – or approaching its task in the manner of a confirmation hearing, with the possibility of a rejection and request for a new candidate.

As indicated earlier, one of the few explicit powers granted to the Secretary-General is that of bringing matters to the attention of the Security Council. Part II examines how this power has been exercised – though it is rarely invoked in terms – and the broader role that the office plays in the area of peace and security. Chapter 4, by James Cockayne and David M. Malone, describes how practice has put flesh on the bare bones of the Charter, shaped in part by creative interpretation of the relevant Charter provisions but also by the personal relationship different Secretaries-General have had with the Council and its members. Long-standing questions about the independence of the office have, with the end of the Cold War, been replaced largely by hand-wringing over a love-hate relationship with the United States, and increasing time spent managing North-South tensions.

Even when the Council is not engaged in a crisis, however, the Secretary-General may be able to mobilize governments through encouraging interested states to form supportive informal coalitions. Such “groups of friends” are discussed in chapter 5 by Teresa Whitfield. This innovative formulation built on the good offices function of the Secretary-General, itself the product of a liberal interpretation of the Charter. Generating such coalitions may enhance the leverage that a Secretary-General enjoys, or at least focus diplomatic efforts on conflicts to which inadequate or incoherent attention is being paid.

Another way in which the Secretary-General has engaged in issues of peace and security is through using the bully pulpit of his office. Kofi Annan was studiously reticent in giving sound-bites on contentious issues such as the Kosovo war of 1999 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. When finally drawn on the topic of Iraq, however – after being asked three times on a BBC radio interview whether it was “illegal”, and finally agreeing that indeed it was – that word became a focus for conservative criticism of the man and the institution. Chapter 6, by Quang Trinh, describes the inconstant practice of using this pulpit on such matters of peace and security. It is most effective, he concludes, in a normative vacuum or when the interests of lead states are not engaged. With respect to specific issues of peace and security, silence may be more wise and, on some occasions, more effective.

Part III of the book turns to more general normative and political dilemmas arising from the public functions of the office. Sir Eric Drummond, Secretary-General of the League of Nations from 1919 to 1933, famously refused to speak to the press at all. Such prudence might have been considered appropriate for the United Nations during the Cold War, but today the office-holder is expected to issue statements and have views on virtually every event of international significance. The power that accompanies this prominence is sufficiently novel for there to be no real consensus on how it should be used. Though many of a Secretary-General's pronouncements may be evanescent, it is increasingly clear that the position plays a role in creating and shaping norms. Chapter 7, by Ian Johnstone, develops a framework for understanding and operationalizing this role of “norm entrepreneur”. He argues that the Secretary-General will be most effective when he or she builds on or stretches prevailing interpretations of a norm, ideally helping to crystallize the views of a group of states, rather than attempting to generate such norms on his or her own.

Such an entrepreneurial Secretary-General may be most influential and most needed in Africa: influential because so many powerful countries appear to see little national interest in the continent's problems; needed because those problems challenge the ideals for which the United Nations was established. Chapter 8, by Adekeye Adebajo, examines the office through the lens of the two African Secretaries-General whose tenure coincided with the initial post-Cold War period – the Egyptian Boutros-Ghali and the Ghanaian Annan. Boutros-Ghali was notoriously known by his staff as “the Pharaoh”, due to his perceived aloofness and authoritarian leadership style. Annan, by contrast, came to be viewed by

some as a kind of prophet, at times one without honour in his own land. Adebajo teases out these metaphors to give texture to the cliché of the secular Pope, while critiquing the disjunction between rhetoric and resources devoted by the organization to its poorest and most conflict-prone continent.

David Kennedy moves from norm to policy entrepreneurship in chapter 9. This role has become more important and more complicated as the state-based order has given way to a multiplicity of new actors, ranging from multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to civil society actors and networks of experts. In such an environment, a Secretary-General should not be seen solely through the lens of being at one extreme a leader, at the other a clerk. Engaging with issues such as development policy after the collapse of the Washington consensus, or the need for pharmaceuticals in impoverished countries, requires flexibility as well as creativity. The necessary role may be neither to lead nor simply to administer; frequently, the most important role a Secretary-General will play is as a catalyst.

Dag Hammarskjöld's most enduring contribution was in confirming the independence of the office; Boutros-Ghali referred to the relevant Charter provision as "the one-hundredth Psalm of the Secretary-General".²⁴ Part IV explores the limits of this independence. James Traub describes the political space within which the Secretary-General operates, focusing on the need for opportunism as much as strategy. A central paradox is that a Secretary-General can be most influential when he or she adapts him or herself to the wishes of the member states – even though those wishes may not be fully formed. Much as Johnstone links the power of the office to its ability to crystallize emerging norms, chapter 10 emphasizes the contingency of the office's political power. This is tracked through the rise and fall of Kofi Annan's political capital, built over his first few years, tested by debates over humanitarian intervention, spent in the Iraq crisis, and ultimately inadequate to drive a reform agenda in the final years of his second term.

By far the most problematic relationship that the Secretary-General must manage is that between New York and Washington. Edward C. Luck describes the tensions that have characterized this relationship in chapter 11, exploring contrasting hypotheses for its origins and the appropriate policy responses. The first explanation draws upon

²⁴ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Oxford Lecture, UN Press Release SG/SM/5870/Rev.1 (15 January 1996). See also chapter 2 by Shashi Tharoor in this volume.

traditional US concerns about “foreign entanglements” that have been exacerbated by the relative power now wielded by the United States. Luck questions, however, the common assertion that the hegemon simply cannot abide a strong and independent Secretary-General. An alternative analysis focuses on specific policies and pronouncements of the two post-Cold War Secretaries-General, some of which have irritated US decision-makers and poisoned the relationship. While giving somewhat more weight to this second explanation, the chapter also considers the geopolitical environment within which the United Nations now operates, suggesting that the current unipolar order will inevitably complicate UN decision-making and relations between Washington and the Secretary-General. The problematic relationship with the United States suggests the need for a more modest and sustainable agenda for the Secretary-General, one more in keeping with the original intent of those who drafted the Charter and, perhaps, more likely to lead the United Nations successfully in an age of US power.

The final chapter 12 by Simon Chesterman and Thomas M. Franck revisits some of the contradictions raised in this Introduction: the fact that the Secretary-General is asked both to follow states and to lead them, and that the person tasked with these extraordinary responsibilities is chosen through a process geared to select only the least objectionable candidate. Even within the respective roles of secretary and general the office is given insufficient responsibility and power either to perform the relevant function effectively or fairly be held to account if it is not. Resolving these contradictions requires a separation of the administrative and political roles: the administrative responsibilities should be delegated by the Secretary-General but with more discretionary authority being granted by member states; the political role would be enhanced by clarity as to its limits and by the Secretary-General being prepared, on occasion, to say “no” to his or her political masters.

This last point emphasizes a more far-reaching tension between the governance and management of the United Nations itself. Member states traditionally assume responsibility for governance issues while the Secretariat carries out management functions. A cursory examination of the history of the Secretary-General, however, shows that the division has never been so neat. As an increasing range of non-state actors assume roles of significance on the international plane, such a division may also come to be seen as inappropriate. The alternative is not a runaway Secretary-General, unaccountable to the member states, but a clearer description of the responsibilities of the office and a selection process

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designed to find a qualified candidate or candidates rather than satisfy the whims of five countries with vetoes. It requires a Secretary-General that will tell the Security Council what it needs to know, rather than what it wants to hear,²⁵ and who is sensitive to the normative and political constraints and possibilities of the office. Finally, it requires a relationship with the member states based on the assumption that a Secretary-General must have sufficient independence and be invested with sufficient power to be held accountable for how that power is exercised.

²⁵ Cf. Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (Brahimi Report), UN Doc. A/55/305-S/2000/809 (21 August 2000), available at www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations, para. 64(d).