

32nd Eisaku Sato Essay Contest

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### Abstract

The premise of this paper lies in the notion that the Secretary-General is both affected by the limitations set by the United Nations' structure, and able to affect the organisation. From the outset, this paper avoids understanding the role of the Secretary-General in terms of the United Nations' challenges and how to address them, but instead brings to discussion the importance of the shifting global political network and unique power dynamics embedded in the organisation's structure that shape the role. The paper is of the view that the challenges facing the United Nations changes, but the conditions in which the Secretary-General's role is conceived is definitive. It is only in understanding the challenges and opportunities that come with the role, that the Secretary-General can push for progress both for the position and the United Nations. The paper starts by examining the source of the Secretary-General's autonomy, and the related importance of being able to redefine the role, or use the autonomy to carry out diplomatic mediation. Both aspects are shown to be vital in securing the continued relevance of the United Nations. And yet, the Secretary-General is also shown to be limited by a fragmented political climate and the political power wielded by the General Assembly and Security Council. Of great concern here is the Council's use of the veto, which permanently blocks the Secretary-General from re-election. With these conditions, this paper argues that the success of the Secretary-General lies in his or her ability to navigate between subjugation, mediation and leadership, and apply the necessary disposition in response to the context at hand. The paper further concludes that due to the interplay of power between the Secretary-General and Member-States, the ability to address the challenges of the United Nations successfully depends on *both* parties. As the political climate changes from unipolar to multipolar, with the rise of developing nation, this cooperation is of utmost importance in navigating the United Nations through times of change.

## 1.0 For better or worse – the United Nations at 71

In autumn 2015, *the Guardian* ran a special series to mark the United Nations' seventieth anniversary. The title used, "A World of Problems: The United Nations at 70"<sup>1</sup>, was particularly clever. For those who believe in the value of the organisation today, it could refer to the many problems in the world that require its attention. But for the cynics, it undoubtedly alluded to the problems *within* the United Nations – problems so large and heavy, akin to the size of the Earth.

Unfortunately, this latter attitude increasingly characterises criticism the United Nations faces today. Composed of five principal organs, fifteen specialised agencies, twelve separate funds and a secretariat that employs more than 40,000 people, the flabbiness of the organisation threatens its effectiveness and efficiency, and unwittingly reinforces impressions of a byzantine organisation mired in bureaucracy. Following the dismantling of the League of Nations, the United Nations was its replacement to foster international cooperation. But the structure of 193 Member-States (a 142 increase since its founding), each with their individual prerogatives logically implies greater chances for disagreement, often leaving the institution mired in gridlock. Other expanding means for inter-government communication and the formation of smaller transnational coalitions that had not existed at the United Nation's founding, such as the European Union or ASEAN, makes one wonder if such configurations with sharper focuses and greater common interests would better serve governments instead. Even if the United Nations at its inception was essential to international politics, the United Nations that it has evolved to today may not be.

And yet, to discredit the United Nations altogether is to jump the gun. The organisation remains an important diplomatic platform for nations with low global representation. In times of crisis, the United Nations is able help governments find coordinated roles in delivering aid. Smaller nations are able to tap onto the organisation's vast resources and logistical capabilities to deliver assistance to others. Moreover, the name of the United Nations carries political *gravitas*. In the realm of international politics, heads of state can ignore other organisations but rarely the United Nations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rice-Oxley, Mark. "The UN at 70: does the United Nations have a future?" *The Guardian*. 7 Sept, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/07/un-at-70-does-united-nations-have-a-future>

<sup>2</sup> McGreal, Chris, "70 years and half a trillion dollars later: what has the UN achieved?" *The Guardian*. 7 Sept, 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/07/what-has-the-un-achieved-united-nations>

With the United Nations' present situation, this essay seeks to ask how the Secretary-General can steer the organisation to its full potential. This requires a nuanced discussion of the Secretary-General's basis for authority and how he or she operates within the organisation, with the understanding that the Secretary-General's influence is limited, that the changing focus of the organisation affects his or her role, but also that certain aspects of the role alone can secure the relevance of the organisation.

### 1.1 Distinguishing the Secretary-General from the United Nations

Descriptions of the Secretary-General typically oscillate between identifying the Secretary-General as the personification of international political interest and custodian of world conscience,<sup>3</sup> and questioning if the role should lean towards that of leader or clerk.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, however, these descriptions understate the fluidity of the role that precisely defines it. Understanding the Secretary-General in terms of one definition or having to choose in an either-or scenario implies stasis, and overlooks the dynamic network of power operating within the United Nations that continually shapes and reshapes the role. Complexity in the role stems not from the tasks demanded in the performative duties (administrating the Secretariat, reporting to the General Assembly and so on), but from his or her changing relative political influence to each member-state that affects the ease of carrying out these tasks. Thus while it is accurate to say that the Secretary-General represents the United Nations in his or her performative task as spokesperson, he or she cannot *and will never be* symbolically and politically synonymous with the United Nations.

Rather than reading the organisation as a unified whole, the United Nations must be understood in terms of its political divisions that traverse existing structural categorisations, such as the broad organs of General Assembly, Secretariat and Security Council. Ironically, as a diplomatic organisation, politics of power inserts itself at every opportunity in the organisation's structure. Member-States continually fight to have their country's civil servants appointed to senior positions in

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<sup>3</sup> Thakur, Ramesh. "The United Nations, Peace and Security; From Collective Security to the Responsibility to Protect." Cambridge University Press (2006), 1.

[http://www.ligi.ubc.ca/sites/liu/files/Publications/1Dec2003\\_PoliticalRoleUNSG.pdf](http://www.ligi.ubc.ca/sites/liu/files/Publications/1Dec2003_PoliticalRoleUNSG.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy, David. "Leader, clerk or policy entrepreneur? The Secretary-General in a complex world." In *Secretary or General? : The United Nations Secretary-General in World Politics*, edited by Chesterman, Simon. 158. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

the Secretariat,<sup>5</sup> and while the Secretary-General is meant to play a neutral party in global politics, each region waits their turn to have the candidate elected from their region, as though subconsciously their region's interests would have better representation in diplomatic discussions. With each nation jealously guarding its own prerogative, at any point in time any party can view itself as separate from the collective or, when political alliances form, judge another party as being outside or against their interests. This attitude extends to the Secretary-General, where each member can view the incumbent as friend or foe, and can change this perspective at any time.

This notion that the Secretary-General is outside of each nation's prerogative thus awards the incumbent a measure of independence from the body of the United Nations. Set against a fluid political network, this autonomy both creates opportunities for and restricts the incumbent's actions. No matter the various and changing duties of the Secretary-General, the success of the incumbent lies in his or her understanding of this fluid relationship, and ability to tap on the advantages, control the disadvantages, and continually reposition him or herself in relation to the changed political landscape.

## **2.0 The unchanging responsibilities of the Secretary-General**

A discussion of the Secretary-General's role must thus bring to the fore aspects that remain unchanged no matter the interplay of power equations. While there are numerous duties that appear to do this, of greater importance are those responsibilities that serve to continue the legitimacy of the Secretary-General's authority, to allow the Secretary-General to affect change, or those that can only be fulfilled when in this specific position.

### **2.1 Expanding the Secretary-General's Role**

At this point, the UN Charter is typically cited as the basis for authority, whereupon a detailed investigation into the articles are thought to provide clues into the proper functioning of the organisation. But while Chapter XV centres on the Secretariat, it only scantily describes the normative duties of the Secretary-General. The Charter's fundamental weakness lies in its nature as an obligatory constitution rather than as juridical regulation.<sup>6</sup> Essentially an articulated social contract, its openness

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<sup>5</sup> Sutterlin, James. "The U.N. Secretary-General as Chief Administrator," presented at the Ralph Bunche Institute on the UN System, September 1991, in Benjamin Rivlin & Leon Gordenker (eds.) *The Challenging Role of the United Nations Secretary-General* (forthcoming 1993); 311.

<sup>6</sup> As suggested in: Kennedy, 161, 174.

to interpretation means that the Charter does not present a strain of rigidity and objectivity, as a universal principle would, to protect it from being questioned. Furthermore, the Secretary-General holds no economic, physical or military power, and on his or her own cannot enforce adherence to the Charter.

But at the same time, the Charter's malleability plays precisely into the fluid network of power to the Secretary-General's advantage. The shrewd incumbent claims ownership of the articles pertaining to his or her role, and utilises the same flexibility of the text to go beyond what has been stated, and explore what is *implied*. This serves to expand and redefine the Secretary-General's role, a manoeuvre that becomes particularly crucial in times of change or when the incumbent seeks to trigger that change.

The actions of the successive Secretary-General's prove this. If we take Sir Eric Drummond as the original model of the Secretary-General, though of the League of Nations, his *modus operandi* was markedly different from the Secretary-Generals we have seen today. Sir Eric's take on the role was to serve the League as secretary, influential but invisible, faithful to the wishes of the political parties in government <sup>7</sup> By contrast each Secretary-General of the United Nations has asserted the independence of their office, an evolution from the original model. Trygve Lie took advantage of Article 99 of the UN Charter, which authorises the Secretary-General to exercise his or her opinion, to mean that the incumbent had the right to offer these opinions without solicitation, and the right to engage in fact-finding to establish grounds to support these opinions. Dag Hammarskjöld furthered Lie's progress by observing the Secretary-General's right to engage in informal diplomatic activity when it concerned matters that threatened international peace and security. Hammarskjöld has also been credited with inventing the so-called Peking Formula, a strategy he used to help secure the release of American aircrew from China during the Korean War, by utilising the independence between himself and a condemnatory resolution that had been adopted by the General Assembly. Kofi Annan in turn continued the adoption of the Peking Formula, and used a similar position when he

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<sup>7</sup> Thakur, Ramesh. "The United Nations, Peace and Security; From Collective Security to the Responsibility to Protect." 2-3.

signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Saddam Hussein in 1998, allowing for the return of the weapons inspectors without a formal mandate from the Security Council.<sup>8</sup>

In establishing the capacity of the Secretary-General's role, each incumbent builds upon the progress of his predecessor to either maintain what has been established or push for further progress. It is vital that the Secretary-Generals to come continue in similar fashion, if only to protect the position's authority and influence in decision-making in the United Nations. We must now understand the Charter as only the formal basis for the Secretary-General's course of action. Authority instead stems from a collection of instances where the Secretary-General was able to assert his interpretation of the Charter convincingly, or refer to a precedent as justification for actions in the present. The role of the Secretary-General is thus a normative one, and rather peculiarly, the authority of the Secretary-General is to an extent self-generated. At present, it continues to be defined by innovative, unprecedented actions that at inception were highly debatable, but normalised over periods of continual adoption to become entrenched as accepted 'law' in the Secretary-General's role.

## 2.2 Maintaining Norm Entrepreneurship

Ian Johnstone articulates this by reframing the Secretary-General as "norm entrepreneur,"<sup>9</sup> concerned with norm creation, institutionalization, and interpretation. Success is certainly dependent on the entrepreneur's powers of persuasion, but because the entrepreneur's motivations do not always align with that of the General Assembly or Security Council, success is best guaranteed when the normative trends are first suggested by other Member-States or non-state actors and then picked up and pushed forward by the Secretary-General.

However, norm entrepreneurship must be engaged with care. The power of setting precedents reminds members of the autonomy of the Secretary-General, and allows the incumbent to be able to periodically revise the role of Secretary-General to maintain relevance to present-day demands. But in parallel, decisions that severely undermine precedents set by previous Secretary-Generals reveal the instability of the Secretary-General's authority, while proposed norms that miss

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<sup>8</sup> Johnstone, Ian. "The Role of the UN Secretary-General: The Power of Persuasion Based on Law." *Global Governance*; Vol. 9, No. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 2003). Lynne Rienner Publishers. 443-444.  
<http://www.jstor.org.libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/stable/27800496>

<sup>9</sup> Johnstone, Ian. "The Secretary-General as Norm Entrepreneur," In a *Secretary or General? : The United Nations Secretary-General in World Politics*, edited by Chesterman, Simon. 158. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 125.

the mark set the unfortunate impression of an incumbent with poor understanding of the political climate. In addition, precedents must be established with care for fear that its future adaptations become misconstrued. Of particular concern here is the Annan Doctrine, a term coined by the Human Rights Watch to refer to Kofi Annan's statements that labelled state sovereignty, a guiding principle of the UN Charter, as a potential obstacle to human rights protection.<sup>10</sup> While supporters claim that the Annan Doctrine sets the precedent for future moral imperatives and provides legal justification for upholding universal rights, critics argue that the controversial statements merely set up excuses to establish the right to intervene other nations. In 2011, this political weapon was deployed by French politician Bernard Kouchner to intervene in Libya.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.3 Permanent Diplomacy

The morality of intervention is but one of many issues that will test the Secretary-General's own integrity and steadfastness in controversy. It is important that the Secretary-General's moral code appears uncompromised, as this affects his or her key role as mediator - a responsibility that arises only because of the independent understanding of the Secretary-General from the Member-States, against a backdrop of the United Nations. In times of dispute, the Secretary-General's autonomy is perceived favourably as neutrality. The Secretary-General is in principle absent of any political affiliation, and recalling the *gravitas* of the United Nations, now assumes an irreplaceable position as diplomatic negotiator between states. U Thant, Kurt Waldheim and Javier Pérez de Cuéllar each demonstrated this in their involvement in the negotiations between Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities in the Cyprus dispute.<sup>12</sup> And though the Secretary-General may have the United Nation's approval in engaging in mediation, as Pérez de Cuéllar had from the Security Council, contact with the Secretary-General does not equate to diplomatic recognition by any member of the United Nations. This explains the success of Hammarskjöld's Peking Formula, where he could negotiate with China while the United States maintained its political attitude of refusing to formally recognise the Chinese Republic.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Human Rights Watch World Report." New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999, p. 3

<sup>11</sup> Meyssan, Thierry. "Who is Kofi Annan? The United Nations "Peacekeeper" Handpicked by the CIA." *Global Research*. 31 March, 2012. <http://www.globalresearch.ca/who-is-kofi-annan-the-united-nations-peacekeeper-handpicked-by-the-cia/30057>

<sup>12</sup> Skjelsbæk, Kjell. "The UN Secretary-General and the Mediation of International Disputes." *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Special Issue on International Mediation (Feb., 1991). Sage Publications, Ltd. 106-107. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/424197>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 110.



Governments too, recognise the position of privilege the Secretary-General commands. One quintessential example of this occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Then-President John F. Kennedy had instructed Secretary of State Dean Rusk to have incumbent U Thant propose a *quid pro quo* between the Soviet Union and the United States, which were then caught in stalemate, on signal. Though the signal was ultimately never deployed, the orchestration demonstrates a face-saving means of dispute resolution that can only be accomplished by the neutral third-party of certain stature. A government's reliance on the Secretary-General manifests most obviously in times of conflict where they have already identified points of resolution but need the good offices of the Secretary-General to "sell" the approach. In doing so, the Secretary-General builds or relieves pressure for a particular set of actions without offending either party or internationalizing the conflict.<sup>14</sup>

The Secretary-General is, to borrow Hammarskjöld's words, "the trustee of the secrets of all the nations."<sup>15</sup> Having the ear of all heads of states, few positions in the field of politics whether from government or from non-governmental organisations can compare in terms of influence and established network. This significantly implies that regardless of the challenges the United Nations faces today, we must consider the relevance of the Secretary-General as apart from that of the organisation, and further giving value to the organisation's presence. It seems as though the Secretary-General today remains in a position of considerable influence, though that influence may periodically face contestation. The role of Secretary-General as mediator, in particular, is one that remains integral to the position no matter the shifting powers in modern politics.

### **3.0 The Secretary-General – Unloved**

And yet, unless the interests of Member-States align with the actions of the Secretary-General, very rarely does he or she gain full support for the chosen course of action. The harsh reality is that the Secretary-General's room for manoeuvre is limited by the member's receptivity. The United Nations is after all an organisation where sovereign states come together to negotiate matters of international importance, but where these states have the imperative to protect their own national interests first. In the push and pull of international politics, it seems as though the more a Secretary-

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<sup>14</sup> Rivlin, Benjamin. "The Changing International Political Climate and the Secretary-General." in *The Challenging Role of the UN Secretary-General*, Rivlin, Benjamin and Gordenker, Leon (eds.) ABC-CLIO, 1993. 7

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

General acts, the more likely one or another political interest becomes alienated and with it, any Member-State that leans toward that interest.

In light of this, some scholars argue that the Secretary-General should align his or her work with that of the superpowers to become more “evident”.<sup>16</sup> The course of logic is simple: if any action will alienate at least one Member-State, then it would be highly prudent to ensure that any action taken avoids alienating those with dominant influence on international relations, conventionally embodied by the superpowers. On the other hand, the Secretary-General is responsible for the budgetary and administrative matters of the Assembly, of which majority of the members pull relatively less political weight. If any international political decision involves to some degree either playing the developed countries against the developing, North against South or East versus West, the Secretary General must find a way a way to strike a balance between any polarity.

It is widely assumed that the Secretary-General, and the United Nations, is more popular with developing nations than with the United States and other developed Western nations. Sadly, surveys of the Secretary-General over the years show that the Secretary-General has generally not endeared himself to either side, regardless of the imagined political divide brought into discussion. In 2004, Pew Research Centre’s survey of public confidence in Annan showed mixed reviews from both the North and South. Rather ironically, both sides thought of Annan as favouring the other.<sup>17</sup> In 2012, five years after Ban Ki-moon had assumed office, Pew Research Centre’s survey concluded that Ban was simply relatively unknown in many nations.<sup>18</sup> Given the diversity of national interests brought to the United Nations’ table, it is unlikely that the Secretary-General can avoid some manner of causing alienation. However, the Secretary-General can and should always work to improve the odds rather than become his or her own obstacle.

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<sup>16</sup> Musambachime, Mwelwa C. “Professors World Peace Academy The Role of the UN Secretary-General in Conflict Resolution in the Gulf.” *International Journal on World Peace*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (JUNE 1999), pp. 37-67 Professors World Peace Academy <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20753204>. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Luck, Edward C. “The Secretary-General in a unipolar world.” 2007; 228; Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press, “A Year After Iraq War”, 16 March 2004. A number of polls showed a decline in the Secretary-General’s popularity in the United States after that time, perhaps as word of the Oil-for-Food scandal spread. See Public Opinion Online (n. 16).

<sup>18</sup> Pew Research Centre. *Chapter 5. Rating World Leaders*, 13 June 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/06/13/chapter-5-rating-world-leaders/>

### 3.1 Overcoming the Election

From the onset, the role of the Secretary-General is a tough one. With the Security Council's hold over the veto during election process, the voted-in candidate has historically been assumed by critics to be the "least offensive"<sup>19</sup> amongst the pool of contenders, rather than the strongest. Secretary-General Ban was widely believed to have been only reluctantly supported by Britain and France during election, and that the then-Bush administration wanted the weakest candidate possible following their fall-out with the United Nations due to Annan's opposition to the Iraq war. In line with Pew Research Centre's survey, Ban's initial unassuming demeanour had earned him the reputation of the "faceless" diplomat,<sup>20</sup> a hinder to media-friendliness especially when compared with his more charismatic predecessor. His supporters though, have attributed his personality as appropriate to his cultural background.

The odds are stacked against the Secretary-General the moment he or she assumes office. Ironically, the elected must perform a 180-degree manoeuvre and transform from least offensive to most inspired. No matter the present political climate, each Secretary-General must overcome any cultural differences, convince the staff of one's leadership, and present oneself as a significant player, particularly to governments who see themselves as the international political elite. The incumbent must convince sceptics of his or her capabilities, and ability to command the confidence and trust of the various governments and organisations across the global political platform.

### 3.2 Understanding the Political Climate

An overview of the past Secretary-Generals shows that this has not been easy. Most scholars cite Hammarskjöld and Annan as the best Secretary-Generals,<sup>21</sup> but had their strong personalities been known before election, it is unlikely that they would have been elected. On the other hand, personalities that are unpalatable to the Security Council face the danger of being blocked from re-election. Boutros Boutros-Ghali's heavy-handed management style and conflicts with the United

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<sup>19</sup> Thakur, Ramesh. "Selecting the Next UN Secretary." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 37 (Sep. 16-22, 2006), pp. 3939. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418698>. 3939

<sup>20</sup> MacAskill, Ewen, and Pilkington, Ed in New York, and Watts, Jon in Beijing. "Despair at UN over selection of 'faceless' Ban Ki-moon as general secretary." *The Guardian*. 7 Oct, 2006. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/07/northkorea>

<sup>21</sup> Thakur, Ramesh. "Next U.N. secretary general." *Japan Times*. 9 Feb, 2015. <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/02/09/commentary/world-commentary/next-u-n-secretary-general/#.VthD1pwrKUn>

States culminated in Washington vetoing his second term, while Lie antagonised the Soviet Union over his opposition to North Korea's attack on South Korea. Although the United States shielded Lie from the Soviet Union's veto, Lie resigned shortly after his re-election, knowing that his confidence with socialist governments could not be restored.<sup>22</sup> In her review for Simon Chesterman's book *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, Margaret E. McGuinness concludes,

Setbacks for the secretary-general's office rarely result from failures to speak or act, but rather arise at the moments that an invisible line is crossed leading to push back from a coordinated group of states, a superpower, or the collective membership itself, all jealously guarding the prerogatives of sovereignty that characterize the UN system. In those instances, whether the secretary-general merely loses his balance or instead falls off the high wire depends on whether any state or group of states is prepared to support him.<sup>23</sup>

The success of the Secretary-General depends largely on his or her competence and work experience, but also leans heavily on personality and ability to network both formally and informally amongst the Member-States. The skill of reading the political climate accurately and adjusting his or her stance to suit current power dynamics is also key. The Secretary-Generals who are generally considered to have underperformed typically had a difficult political context that sharply restricted their freedom of action. Lie is considered not to have achieved any notable political feat, but he had to grapple with setting up a Secretariat from scratch, establish the United Nations Headquarters, and shape the largely un-prescribed role of Secretary-General, all during the Cold War atmosphere.<sup>24</sup> Kurt Waldheim has been criticised as mediocre,<sup>25</sup> but in a political climate that foreshadowed a North-South divide, the alienation of the United States, the rise of the Third World, and numerous successive conflicts including the 1973 Middle East War, the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus and the 1978 Israeli invasion of south Lebanon, his cautious but efficient working style perhaps best suited the uneasy political climate.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Annan's success can be attributed to his successful reading of the United States' rise in unipolarity and learning from his predecessor Boutros-Ghali's experience.

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<sup>22</sup> Skjelsbæk, Kjell. 102.

<sup>23</sup> McGuinness, Margaret E. Reviewed Work: *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* by Simon Chesterman, *The American Journal of International Law*; Vol. 102, No. 4 (Oct., 2008), 935; Published by: American Society of International Law

<sup>24</sup> Urquardt, Brian E. "The Evolution of the Secretary-General." In a *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, edited by Chesterman, Simon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 18.

<sup>25</sup> Musambachime, Mwelwa C. 43.

<sup>26</sup> Urquardt, Brian E. 25-26

Annan has been considered to be unduly accommodative of the United States, and gained ire particularly from African nations. But like an open secret, Annan was appointed and reappointed unanimously knowing that his attitude was apt in the current context.<sup>27</sup> Annan's case is perhaps indicative of the inequality Secretary-Generals face in office, where Member-States demand integrity and courage on the incumbent's part (but to stop short from infringing on their sovereignty), while shirking ownership and responsibility of the United Nations.

#### 4.0 Politics in Administration

Unfortunately, this attitude of placing responsibility for the United Nations squarely on the Secretary-General's shoulders continues firmly into administration. The role of the Secretary-General is as much about administrative operations as it is about diplomacy, and he or she has been tasked with managing, among other things, peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, and human rights initiatives. But with the growth of these responsibilities over the years, the administrative operations have started to displace diplomacy as the Secretary-General's central task, particularly when the operations themselves become politicised.

In 2015, the United Nations was repeatedly dogged by child sexual abuse allegations. Worse, from Anders Kompass to Caroline Hunt-Matthes, the whistle-blowers of these allegations were shown to be ostracised, suspended and placed under disciplinary investigation rather than lauded for their efforts to uphold justice.<sup>28</sup> In its peacekeeping operations, the United Nations thus fails *twice* – abusing the civilians they were supposed to protect, and attempting to cover-up the news when they came to light. Bigger is not necessarily better. The United Nations rears as a behemoth, and it is impossible for the Secretary-General to control all its aspects, in this case, the employed staff within the organisation and the peacekeepers 'lent' from the various Member-States. That this scandal follows quickly in the footsteps of the Oil-for-Food scandal that marred Annan's further proves this lack of control. And yet, peacekeeping troops act in the United Nation's name. When they engage in acts of transgression, it is the United Nations' name with the Secretary-General's, and not their nation's, that is dragged through the mud. Of those involved, countries such as France, Morocco and South

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<sup>27</sup> Thakur, Ramesh. "Selecting the Next UN Secretary General." 3940.

<sup>28</sup> Hamilton-Martin, Roger. "Ostracised, sacked ... and even arrested: the fate of whistleblowers at the UN." *The Guardian*. 14 Sept, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/14/un-united-nations-ostracised-sacked-arrested-whistleblowers>

Africa have reportedly prosecuted their troops, while others have threatened to pull their troops out of peacekeeping if exposed publicly on abuses.<sup>29</sup>

Ban's response so far has been to force the resignation of Babacar Gaye, then-head of UN peacekeeping operations in the Central African Republic,<sup>30</sup> and set up an independent report that allowed for Kompass' exoneration.<sup>31</sup> More significantly, Ban set precedence by explicitly naming countries involved, suspending payments, and moving to initiate and pass measures to prevent and combat sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers.<sup>32</sup> Justice must be seen to be done. With the importance of setting standards to guide future action in mind, Ban's ability to exercise independent judgement and action has proven to be fruitful. More importantly, Ban's successor must continue working on reform to make operations accountable on all fronts, be it on a political, legal, financial or administrative level. More importantly, recalling the Secretary-General's unique disposition to step in as mediator, if diplomacy is seen to be a central, irreplaceable function of the Secretary-General, future incumbents must ensure administrative operations do not distract from this key task.

## 5.0 Subjugation, Mediation, Leadership<sup>33</sup>

The role of the Secretary-General is thus not about choosing between "leader" and "clerk" but perhaps about the ability to shift between these two polarities depending on the context. This essay has stressed the importance of Secretary-General as mediator, which operates at the intersection of the incumbent in service to the concerned parties while evoking the autonomy of the role. On rare occasions, the Secretary-General is called to make independent decisions in the spotlight, as Ban demonstrated in the wake of the sexual abuse allegations. But more often the power dynamics, the relation to the Security Council and General Assembly creates the subjugation of the Secretary-

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<sup>29</sup> McGreal, Chris. "Stop protecting peacekeepers who rape, Ban Ki-moon tells UN member states." *The Guardian*. 17 Sept, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/17/stop-protecting-peacekeepers-who-rape-ban-ki-moon-tells-un-member-states>

<sup>30</sup> Associated Press in New York. "Ban Ki-moon says sexual abuse in UN peacekeeping is 'a cancer in our system'." *The Guardian*. 14 August, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/14/ban-ki-moon-says-sexual-abuse-in-un-peacekeeping-is-a-cancer-in-our-system>

<sup>31</sup> Laville, Sandra. "Anders Compass case; abuse in Central African Republic; UN whistleblower who exposed sexual abuse by peacekeepers is exonerated." *The Guardian*. 18 January, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/18/un-whistleblower-who-exposed-sexual-abuse-by-peacekeepers-is-exonerated>

<sup>32</sup> UN News Centre. "Security Council endorses steps to combat sexual exploitation by UN peacekeepers." 11 March, 2016; <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=53426#.VvZo1vkrKUK>

<sup>33</sup>Original phrase "Subjugation, Interplay, Leadership" taken from, Kjell Skjelsbæk's "The UN Secretary-General and the Mediation of International Disputes." 106-107.

General, where the incumbent may be told to engage in diplomatic tasks that he or she does not want to. The conflict in East Timor during Waldheim's term exemplifies this, where the Security Council requested him to send a Special Representative to the country in anticipation of implementing a resolution. Given the high odds of failure, Waldheim was reportedly reluctant to involve his office, but could not refuse.<sup>34</sup> As such, the ability to cycle through all three key roles is crucial, and demands the incumbent to know when to press for action and when to maintain tactful silence. Either decision requires the Secretary-General's confidence in a greater purpose. Prolonged deference can be misunderstood as weakness, but action risks alienation.

David Kennedy alludes to the nuance in the role by redefining our understanding of strong leadership. Rather than equating it with a strong, charismatic personality, Kennedy frames the notion instead in terms of the Secretary-General's ability to navigate the United Nations in an increasingly disaggregated, multilateral political order. Here, the question of charisma is less important than one's willingness to make difficult decisions to redefine our understanding of the United Nations. Kennedy writes, "This will require more ambitious leadership, not less - but leadership of a quite different type than the conventional image of a "strong" Secretary-General."<sup>35</sup>

### **5.1 Moving towards a new political order**

Interestingly, some scholars also believe the role of the Secretary-General should be rethought, but that it should be pared down. Edward C. Luck is one such writer on this side of the fence. Citing the quiet reception the role received during its founding at the Dumbarton Oaks conference, Luck believes the current model of Secretary-General has moved too far away from its origins and that the proper course of action would be to return to the model of modesty as characterised by Sir Eric. Luck does make a compelling case. The expanded duties of the Secretary-General has raised expectations but spread the incumbent thin, particularly in a multilateral political order, leading to questions of effectiveness that could be eased by transferring some of the burden to other positions, such as the President of the General Assembly.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Kennedy, David. 163.

<sup>36</sup> Luck, Edward C. 231.

And yet, Luck's case is made under the impression of the unflappability of United States unipolarity, while scholars today frequently observe the beginnings of a multipolar system.<sup>37</sup> Luck had believed that the presence of an unchallengeable hegemonic power had the influence to discourage global arms races and address localized instability, in turn requiring less of the Secretary-General, particularly in terms of the tendency to champion developing world causes.<sup>38</sup> But the 2008 financial crisis and the deterioration of Syria has revealed the breaking down of this unipolar political climate. And though its multipolar replacement still encompasses the diversity of political opinion Luck wanted the Secretary-General to avoid, the crux lies in that the change in political order comes precisely from the rise of developing countries. The Secretary-General can no longer assume *status quo*, but should instead initiate change in the United Nations to reflect these movements. In a way, Luck's suggestion to refer back to the Dumbarton Oaks conference is useful, but as a reminder of how the global political fabric has transformed since then.

## 5.2 Conclusion - The Call for Reform

The election for the ninth Secretary-General has largely called for a female candidate from Eastern Europe, an overlap of two demographics that the position has not yet represented. More significantly, debates have also been raised not just on *who* should be elected, but *how* they should be elected. Traditionally, the election process was seen as highly opaque, with the Security Council choosing the candidate behind closed doors. With their hold on the veto, no candidate put forth by the Security Council has been rejected by the General Assembly. In contrast, steps have been taken toward greater transparency for the 2016 election with Member-States openly nominating their candidates for the position.

But greater reform should still be pushed for. The emergence of developing countries as political heavyweights suggests that the privilege awarded to the select few Council members should be rethought. Kofi Annan discusses this in terms of, "a dynamic exchange of power [...] to allow for greater cooperation," adding that privileged Council members must consider releasing some amount of power to foster meaningful participation of new countries, or risk challenge to the very primacy of

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<sup>37</sup> Davies, Robert W. *The Era of Global Transition: Crises and Opportunities in the New World*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 82.

<sup>38</sup> Luck, 228.



the Council.<sup>39</sup> This is not an easy message to stomach. And we must not sour the palate by forgetting the value gained from cooperating with existing heavyweights in our clamour to recognise the new. Annan suggests balance: to retain the permanent positions of the Security Council but with limits on their power, shifting some of that power to the General Assembly.<sup>40</sup> Kennedy further adds to this by proposing that the United Nations abandon the ambition of bringing Members into a state of consensus, stating that the disaggregated political system requires multiple and shifting solutions.

These suggestions of reform affect the Secretary-General, but more importantly they require the vested interest of the members of the United Nations. Perhaps this is apt: the question of the proper role of the Secretary-General is ultimately a question of the type of United Nations we want today. The role itself is a paradox. The Secretary-General works to influence the organisation, but has to operate *through* the organisation and contend with its imposed limits to affect change. It is important that he or she secures the fundamental privileges that come with the position and keep the role up-to-date, but to secure success, it is also necessary that members take ownership of the United Nations and avoid viewing it as a tool to serve their own prerogative. But no matter the approach taken by subsequent Secretary-Generals, what we can be sure of is this: the global political fabric is changing. If the United Nations remains at a standstill, it will surely lose relevance to the present international political arena, if only because the rules have become unfamiliar.

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<sup>39</sup> *Kofi Annan: UN security council must expand and reform* – video interview. Grant, Harriet and Payne-Frank, Noah. *The Guardian*. 23 Sept, 2015.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2015/sep/23/kofi-annan-un-security-council-expand-reform-video>

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

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