The identity of the United Nations resides in its staff. In principle! Member States control the organization; we, its professional staff, are the organization. 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.

The political science literature informs us of the fallacy of the rational actor model of decision making. This is even more true of the United Nations. The organization is not a unitary actor. There is no such thing as the United Nations. Instead, there are several UNs. The Security Council is the geopolitical centre of gravity of the UN system. The General Assembly is the normative centre of gravity. The International Court of Justice is the legal centre of gravity.

The political masters of the UN system are Member States, not its officials, not even the SG. The UN in consequence is first and foremost a political organization. As such, its decisions result from political bargaining and accommodation based on power equations and competing national interests. The hope is that the international interest will somehow emerge from this interplay of hard negotiations among Member States. This is certainly not what the swinish French and the Americans believe.

Against all that, the Secretary-General of the United Nations – not the president or prime minister of any Member State – 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. The Iraq crisis last year – when some American commentators implicitly compared SG Kofi Annan (1997–present) to Neville Chamberlain and his policy of appeasement of dictators – showed how far we still have to go before the concept of a spokesman for the world is firmly established and widely accepted. The UNSG is required to be a politician, diplomat and international civil servant all rolled into one. This is why Trygve Lie, the first UNSG (1946–53), as he met his designated successor Dag Hammarskjöld (1953–61) 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”\(^1\) – certainly one that is impossible to fill to the satisfaction of all in an increasingly fractious community of states at UN headquarters in New York.

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 UNSG.

**Bases of Power and Authority of UNSG**

There is a central paradox at the heart of the office of the SG: s/he is elected to office as 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 192nd Member State of the UN, or the 16th 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. The League’s first SG was Sir Eric Drummond, a product of the British civil service culture: influential on policy issues, but largely from behind the scenes. He viewed his role as a career civil servant, faithful to the wishes of whichever political party was in government, not the representative of any political party. Sir Eric did not address the Assembly, and addressed even the Council in public session solely as secretary. The first Director General of the International Labour Organization (ILO), by contrast, was a leading French politician, Albert Thomas. He became a public leader in a highly political manner, outlining programs like a head of government, often joining in the ILO debates, and constantly cultivating constituencies outside the formal governmental structures (including most notably trade unions).

After the Second World War, the pattern was repeated with the Commonwealth, in the form of Arnold Smith as an efficient but unobtrusive chief administrative head, and Shridath Ramphal as an articulate and dynamic leader in policy formulation that 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.

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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. Serving as the SG of the Secretariat and the other main organs of the UN, his role is to assist and facilitate the principal political organs – the UN Security Council (UNSC), General Assembly (UNGA) and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) – in making informed and sound decisions, not to make decisions himself; and then to faithfully implement their decisions and report to them accordingly.

On the other hand, the UNSG 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 also has greater scope to expand his power and influence through preparing budgets, determining the total budget, allocating it among the departments and activities, appointing senior staff, mediating the pulls and pressures of Member States through creative interpretations that maximize his scope for privileging his own preferences and priorities, and so on. Moreover, as the Security Council and the General Assembly are often split, the SG can sometimes manoeuvre his way through those divisions to advance his own priorities by indicating possible points of agreement. The SG has the right to be present and take part in the debates in the political organs, and often does. He provides the logistical and intellectual basis for many UNSC and UNGA resolutions and may urge particular courses of action.

The SG is also at the nerve centre of a sensitive communications network. He can and generally does speak directly to governments, civil society representatives and business leaders. He is asked to submit reports and analyses on a vast range of topics. 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 and ad hoc. The General Assembly appoints a Secretary-General on the recommendation of the Security Council (Article 97). “Appointment” supposedly stresses the administrative function, while “election” would have suggested a more clearly political role. The Council vote is 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. The P5 do not look with favour on activist candidates for fear of too vigorous a scrutiny of their own actions in world affairs. The selection and reappointment procedure affects the substance of the SG’s conduct: he cannot afford to antagonize a single P5 member. Undue deference to the major powers by an SG is reinforced if the incumbent should be interested in re-election. Even other governments would not generally wish an SG to oppose them publicly.

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

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3 Alan James, “The Secretary-General as an Independent Political Actor,” in Rivlin and Gordenker, eds., The Challenging Role of the UN Secretary-General, pp. 22–39 at p. 24.
leadership…. In Dag Hammarskjöld, the five permanent members simply made a mistake of judgment.”⁴ Shirley Hazzard remarked of Kurt Waldheim (1972–81) that he would be “proof against every occasion of a larger kind.”⁵ Of another incumbent it was said he was so self-effacing, he would not make waves even if he fell out of a boat. Perez no doubt… As US Ambassador Max Finger put it, Member States want of their SG “excellence within the parameters of political reality.”⁶

“We the people” would probably prefer excellence within the parameters of human reality. 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. Parochial considerations will always shape the choice of an SG. But political calculations should not dominate the process of selecting someone for the only truly representative office of the world.

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 (Article 7), headed by the SG as its chief administrative officer (Article 97).⁷ 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 (burgeoning) mandates. Moreover, the SG is required by the Charter to submit a report each year to the GA on the work of the organization (Article 98). This is usually submitted towards the beginning of each year’s GA session in September. Thus his single most important annual report has constitutional status and protection.

Another 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 UNSG 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.

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⁷ See James S. Sutterlein, “The UN Secretary-General as Chief Administrator,” in Rivlin and Gordenker, eds., The Challenging Role of the UN Secretary-General, pp. 43–58.
Article 99 is primarily a political, not a technical, innovation and clause. The discretionary authority vested in the SG by it linked the chief executive of the UN constitutionally and symbolically to its central ideal. Throughout 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; the only limit on it is the innate prudence of the SG himself with regard to his major constituencies. 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 reason for the advance from the League to the UN in the form of Article 99 is as simple as its significance is momentous. The League experience in the interwar period had demonstrated a dangerous void in the system of collective security. Major powers base their policies on their respective national interests. When this produces dissent and disarray in the Council because the major powers or groups of Member States are bitterly divided on what to do, there is no one who can stand above the fray and be the champion and voice of the international interest.

**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. International secretariats, more so than national bureaucracies, can be riven by factional jealousies, jurisdictional turf wars, and national loyalties. 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. If a SG fails to do this, his staff are dangerously demoralized and their motivation is seriously weakened. As Inis Claude comments, “A Secretary-General who scorns his responsibilities as chief civil servant in favor of political ambitions neglects his major opportunities for his minor ones.”

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. Across Asia and Africa there is a gathering undercurrent of unease and trepidation that the UN, led by a US-dominated Security Council, is being used as an instrument of Western interests. In general, the industrial countries-dominated UNSC has tended to focus on peace and security, while the developing countries, who control the UNGA by sheer force of numbers, have argued that that is but one of the UN’s goals. Equally important is economic development. They have resented the reallocation of resources and energy to

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8 Inis L. Claude, Reflections on the Role of the UN Secretary-General,” in Rivlin and Gordenker, eds., *The Challenging Role of the UN Secretary-General*, pp. 249–60, at p. 259.
peace and security to suit the West’s agenda at the cost of an attention deficit syndrome to their needs and priorities. Not sure there is much re-allocation…

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. Japan, for example, contributes 19.5 percent of the UN’s total regular budget: more than that of four permanent members combined (China, France, Russia and the UK). The Japanese are beginning to question very seriously indeed what they get in return, they never consider the fact that they are hopeless diplomatically at the UN… and the Finance Ministry wants the Foreign Ministry to answer why the Japanese assessed contribution should not be scaled back to 15 percent, its share of the total world economic product. This increases the demands on the SG to be particularly sensitive to Japanese wishes in order to forestall what would be a very substantial cutback to his overall budget.

Fourth and these days most importantly, the SG must not alienate those who control the Security Council, in particular the five permanent members (P5), and in particular the United States. The UNSC has the primary responsibility for maintaining peace and security (Article 24.1), the UNGA has a residual responsibility (especially under Articles 10, 11), and the UNSG has a discretionary responsibility (Article 99). During the Cold War, deadlock in the Security Council often produced an authority and policy vacuum that only 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 inherently undefined good offices role of the SG.

Peacekeeping requires leadership by the SG precisely because it falls conceptually between war-fighting and diplomatic negotiations, both of which are undertaken primarily by states. It is worth recalling that the institution of peacekeeping was an innovation with no clear basis in the UN Charter. SG Dag Hammarskjöld played a key role in the development of PKO through UNEF I in 1956 in the Middle East. The report produced by him a mere two days after the General Assembly resolution requesting one still stands as a remarkable tribute to the core principles of classical consensual peacekeeping. The division of responsibilities is for the UNSC to establish (and renew or terminate) the PKOs and give them their mandate, for the GA to appropriate funds for them, and for the SG to exercise oversight through directions to the Special Representative and Force Commander. But occasionally circumstances may arise where the SG has to exercise independent judgment with little or no time to seek the guidance of the Council or the Assembly. One of the most intense controversies concerns the decision by SG U Thant (1961–71) to accede to Egypt’s formal request to pull out UNEF in 1967, an act which proved to be the curtain raiser to the Six Day war in the Middle East.

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, including democratization, establishment of criminal justice systems, creation of market economies, and formation of civil society (also known collectively as nation-building). Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992–96) oversaw the gradual incorporation of police and civilian elements into PKOs to the point where the PKOs typically became civilian dominant. 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 peace operations, directing the military and humanitarian operations, engaging in conflict prevention and resolution activities, and supervising elections and post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

The rise in activism and agenda of the UNSC coincided with the decline of the role and influence of the UNGA. 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. Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali accused the Council of “micromanaging” peacekeeping operations at the expense of his authority and that of ground commanders. There is merit to his claim that, in the Balkans, he 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 who bore the primary responsibility for the messy response by the international community. Nevertheless, personality differences also are part of the explanation for Perez de Cuellar’s “easy and confident relationship while Boutros-Ghali had a comparatively difficult one.” (Other elements of the explanation would include the tripling of the number of resolutions being adopted by the UNSC and the vastly expanded number and missions of peace operations during Boutros-Ghali’s term compared to his predecessor’s.)

This produced a commensurate expansion of the SG’s day-to-day operational responsibilities and political judgment calls and decisions. A good example is the decision by the SG last year to withdraw all international UN staff from Baghdad after the tragic bombing in August, and his determined resistance to returning to Iraq until the prior question of the status of governing authority in the country has first been resolved. The proper political balance between the UN’s major Member States and different principal organs proved impossible to strike amidst the passions stirred by the Iraq war last year. Legitimacy is the conceptual rod that connects power to authority. On Iraq, the US and the UN provoked a legitimacy crisis about American power and UN authority. The certainty of moral clarity put the administration on a course that eroded for many its moral authority for the exercise of US military power in the world. The lack of moral clarity – values that it espouses and principles in defence of which it is prepared to stand up and be counted – diminished the UN’s moral authority. Secretary-General Kofi Annan was left to improvise as best he could, seeking to chart a steady course for the organization amidst the trans-Atlantic clash of civilizations between Old Europe and the New World.

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 United Nations.

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Some in civil society say that the Iraq crisis has heightened the need for a global peoples’ assembly to counter the repeated betrayals by an intergovernmental organization. Others look to the Secretary-General as the last line of defence of Charter principles. But this places an impossible burden on the world’s top international civil servant. 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.

**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 UNSG 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. The practical manifestation of this is the appointment of special representatives of the SG for the world’s many long-running (and some new) trouble spots, such as Cyprus, Cambodia, the Great Lakes in Africa, the Korean Peninsula, Myanmar, East Timor and so on. 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. Examples of successful mediation by SGs include Hammarskjöld’s negotiations with China for the release of captured American airmen in 1955, and Thant’s role in easing the control of West New Guinea from the Netherlands to Indonesia in 1962 and of Bahrain to independence from Britain against competing claims from Iran in 1970–71.

As Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (1982–91) has observed, multilateral diplomacy by the UNSG is quite different from traditional diplomacy. Reflecting the UN Charter

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12 Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, “The Role of the UN Secretary-General,” in Adam Roberts and Benedict
principles, it attenuates the disadvantages of the weaker party. It seeks an objective and lasting solution to the dispute based on principles of justice and equity within the parameters of the prevailing power equations but not confined to the expediencies of the day. And it gives all Member States a stake and role in shaping the peace.

Fittingly, Pérez de Cuéllar himself used the inherent authority of the SG under the Charter to begin a process of negotiation on the Iran-Iraq war that culminated in a successful UNSC resolution within six months (January–July 1987). (As the Council was already seized of the war, a formal invocation of Article 99 was not necessary.) And in Central America, he exploited a tiny window of opportunity under a Security Council resolution to insert the SG into a peace process that achieved success over six years in 1989 and greatly enlarged the UN role and presence in the 1990s.13

Sometimes the office of the SG is useful to Member States as a face-saving means of resolving a dispute where they themselves have identified the major points of resolution but need the imprimatur of the United Nations to “sell” it to their separate domestic constituencies. Elevating the dispute to the UNSC risks an unnecessary and unwanted internationalization of the conflict. Seeking the good offices of the SG is an easier process to manage, more expeditious, less susceptible to unpredictable risks. Such an example occurred in New Zealand in the mid-1980s with respect to the sinking of the Greenpeace boat Rainbow Warrior in Auckland. The perpetrators were caught, convicted, sentenced and imprisoned in New Zealand. Unfortunately, they were French intelligence officials carrying engaged in state-sanctioned activity. To secure their release, France imposed a range of de facto sanctions on New Zealand. For “reasons of state” New Zealand effectively decided to release the two convicted agents into French custody and Paris and Wellington worked out the terms of the settlement. But to avoid charges of its justice being for sale, the government referred the dispute to the UNSG (Pérez de Cuellar) and then accepted his recommendations.14

Trygve Lie fell afoul of the Soviet bloc in the context of the Korean War, and Dag Hammarskjöld suffered a similar fate a decade later in the Congo. U Thant is often said to have left no mark at all, whereas the allegations and revelations of Kurt Waldheim’s links to the Nazi regime left a sour aftertaste that survived his departure. Nor was Thant very popular in Washington for his efforts to search for a solution to the Vietnam war, any more than Waldheim was for his vain effort to secure the release of American hostages ion Tehran in 1980.

Pérez de Cuéllar, the UN’s first Latin American SG, had to confront the thorny issue of the Falklands/Malvinas war between the UK and Argentina. Sir Marrack Goulding, who served both him and Boutros-Ghali as Under-Secretary-General, has written that the SG almost succeeded in mediating an interim agreement which, if it had been accepted and signed, would have averted the war.15 Pérez de Cuéllar used his own judgment also to back the advice of his Special Representative Martti Ahtisaari against the counsel of


15 Goulding, “The UN Secretary-General,” p. 271.
his senior advisers in New York to save the day in Namibia during that country’s transition to independence.\textsuperscript{16}

Boutros-Ghali responded with enthusiasm to the request from the UNSC summit meeting of January 1992 – at the very start of his turbulent tenure – on recommendations for strengthening the UN capacity for preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping and peacemaking. But his prickly personality and propensity to censure the rich and the powerful in public for neglecting the needs of the weak and the poor alienated him from the key members of the UNSC, while a marked reluctance to delegate decision-making authority to subordinates meant that his circle of admirers within the Secretariat was not all that large either. In the end the United States blocked his re-election.

By contrast, Kofi Annan has been so successful at cultivating his constituencies and protecting an inherently narrow political base of support that he was reappointed unanimously, and that too six months earlier than necessary. He is often said to rank among the best, if not the best, of all UNSGs. He is a conviction SG who privileges strategic vision, pragmatic caution and almost limitless patience above short term finger pointing, grandstanding and immediate gratification. He is as calm as he is courteous to staff, delegates and visiting prime ministers and presidents alike.

A good example of this in recent times has been the manner in which Kofi Annan has been a norm entrepreneur with regard to the so-called challenge of humanitarian intervention. The interplay of changing norms and shifting state practice on the balance between state and individual rights was recognized surprisingly early by SG Pérez de Cuéllar in 1991.\textsuperscript{17} But the challenge intensified over the course of he decade. In his address to the 54\textsuperscript{th} session of the General Assembly in September 1999, Kofi Annan reflected on “the prospects for human security and intervention in the next century.” He recalled the failures of the Security Council to act in Rwanda and Kosovo, and challenged the Member States to “find common ground in upholding the principles of the Charter, and acting in defence of our common humanity.” Annan warned that “If the collective conscience of humanity … cannot find in the United Nations its greatest tribune, there is a grave danger that it will look elsewhere for peace and for justice.” In his Millennium Report to the General Assembly a year later, he restated the dilemma, and repeated the challenge: “if humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica – to gross and systematic violations of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity?” brilliantly put don’t you think!

Problem with 1999 speech was that the above approach wasn’t taken with G-77.

Responding to his challenge, the Canadian government established the independent International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, of which I had the privilege and honour to be a Commissioner. We redefined humanitarian intervention as the responsibility to protect, and entitled our report accordingly. A seminar was organized in New York by the International Peace Academy on 15 February 2002 to discuss the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
conclusions of the report. In his opening address, Annan put the authority of his office behind the ICISS Report. He described it as an “extraordinary and eloquent Report,” “a remarkable accomplishment,” and the “most comprehensive and carefully thought out response to date” to his challenge of humanitarian intervention. He said it takes away the last remaining excuses for the international community to sit back and do nothing when confronted with atrocities again.

The point of this is not to praise the quality of The Responsibility to Protect, although of course I remain immensely proud of that achievement. Rather, the point is to show how Kofi Annan is an especially skilled norm entrepreneur in seeking to forge a new consensus on a particularly vexed issue where international consensus has broken down almost completely. And the same sense of timing and urgency was shown last year with the still more portentous breakdown of international consensus over Iraq.

Kofi Annan’s legacy will include a series of reforms of the Secretariat in his capacity as chief administrative officer of the United Nations. The more lasting political legacy will his unsuspected but 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.

Leadership

As will be clear by now, the single most important political role of the UNSG is to provide leadership. But: what is leadership, and why is it important?

Leadership is the ability to make others connect emotionally and intellectually to a larger cause that transcends their immediate self-interest. It 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. And in the case of military leaders, soldiers are inspired enough to kill complete strangers and to sacrifice their very life as they follow their officers into battle.

“Leadership” conjures up images of prime ministers, presidents and CEOs, including chief executives of universities. But in fact leadership skills are just as important, if not more vital, to the mother, the kindergarten teacher and the humanitarian NGO in the field. For while managing affairs of state and giant multinational companies is one side of leadership, the more constant challenge of leadership on an everyday basis places a premium on qualities of initiative, multi-tasking and responsibility. Probably the

profession in which leadership is the most critical, in that it involves literally the lives of large numbers of people, is the military. Qualities of leadership have always been integral to the fate of armies and the outcome of wars. But in the case of the UNSG, he is more a secretary than a general.

Granted that the case for leadership skills is compelling, the next question is: what might these be? This is not the place to provide a comprehensive answer. An indicative list would include, alongside the “hard” leadership skills of the cut-throat business and political worlds (analytical skills, marketing, finance, ruthlessness, strategic vision, etc), such practical “soft” leadership skills as:

- Teamwork and team-building skills;
- Facilitation and mediation skills;
- Oral, written and interpersonal skills;
- Coaching, role playing and mentoring skills;
- Emotional intelligence and bonding skills;
- Self-awareness and self-evaluation – these after all were key to the Buddha’s self-enlightenment;
- Moral integrity and public probity – a criterion on which US business leaders (and some Japanese politicians) have been found gravely and critically wanting in recent times;
- Patience, perseverance and commitment;
- Humility in order to listen to the opinion of others – the accoutrements and other outward trappings of humility were as important to Mahatma Gandhi’s style of leadership in the last century as to that of Jesus Christ in the first century AD;
- Flexibility in order to heed good advice and reach compromise and mutual accommodation;
- Courage to be able to stick to one’s convictions, speak up for one’s beliefs, work for what is right; and
- The wisdom to be able to tell the difference between resolution born of conviction and stubbornness born of pride and vanity.

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. His example is all the more striking for the sad rarity of the combination among most national “leaders.” Of all the UNSGs to date, 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 UNSGs 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


20 Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 53/35 (1998) (New
record and accepted personal responsibility for some of those failures.

As Kofi Annan reminded the world often enough during the Iraq controversy, the United Nations is a unique font of international legitimacy. And no person is in a better position to reflect that international legitimacy in his public statements than the SG. Nevertheless, just as the legitimacy of the organization can be enhanced or eroded by a combination of factors, so too can the legitimacy of the SG’s pronouncements. It is worth distinguishing three types of legitimacy underpinning the SG’s political role in world affairs: constitutional, performance, and representational.

We have already discussed the constitutional basis of the power of legitimacy vesting in the SG (Articles 7, 97–100 of the Charter). Clearly, if the SG exceeds expectations in his actual performance, he will greatly expand the scope for independent initiatives. Conversely, perceptions of poor performance will eat away at his authority to function as the chief spokesman for the international interest and the chief administrative officer of the United Nations. His representational legitimacy is twofold. On the one hand, the election of the SG has rotated among the world’s major regional groupings. To the extent that the principle of equitable geographical representation pervades the entire UN system, such a rotational principle is essential to preserving the legitimacy of the office. On the other hand, the SG represents the international community as a whole, and not any particular continent, region or constellation. Therefore, if the SG is seen to favour the interests of any one particular group at the UN, his ability to sway the others will be correspondingly diminished. The SG must simultaneously avoid alienating and being captured by the only remaining superpower.

Kofi Annan has been astonishingly skilled at playing this particular game. 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 uniquely skilled among all the UNSGs in the realm of norm generation and entrepreneurship. Ideas matter, which is why intellectuals are always the second set of targets for elimination by tyrants (the first being political rivals). Ideas impart vitality to a society. The success of the West over many other groups for several centuries is due in no small measure to the dynamism and vibrancy of its ideas and their steady ascendancy over competing visions of a good life. A society in intellectual ferment is fertile ground for progress and advancement, provided the clash of ideas is given free play. Conversely, a society that is bereft of and represses new ideas is a society doomed to stagnation.

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

York: UN Secretariat, November 1999).
order to convert their contested ideas into public policy, there is no world government at the international level. The United Nations is not run by world parliamentarians elected by the people on the basis of competing policy platforms.

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. The Brundtland Commission ushered the concept – the new norm – of sustainable development. ICISS tried to strike a balance between the impulse to intervention and the commitment to sovereignty in the innovative formulation of the responsibility to protect. Japan is trying to promote human security as a foreign policy goal with the help of a world commission that was co-chaired by Sadako Ogata and Amartya Sen. The Swedes have established a new commission, chaired by Hans Blix, on weapons of mass destruction. And the SG has used the same technique to record changed ideas about familiar institutions and practices, as with the Brahimi Panel on Peace Operations, or to call for fresh thinking on how the UN can remain the centre of collective action to respond to changing circumstances and threats. The SG cannot fill the void directly on his own. Instead, Kofi Annan once again appointed a 16-member high-level panel (including Mrs. Sadako Ogata of Japan) to reflect on the new threats and identify the appropriate collective responses to them. The Swedes are also running the Helsinki process.

Conclusion

The temper of the times condition expectations of the role of the office of Secretary-General of the United Nations. 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. A disaster...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 channeling 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 virtually of a head of state.

The exercise of international leadership by the UNSG 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 UNSG, 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.

When the major powers and groups at the United Nations are bitterly and irreparably divided, the SG must strive to forge a fragile agreement by identifying common elements, reminding member states of the Charter principles, nudging them towards face-saving formulations that can recreate a sense of common purpose, and appealing for calm and unity. He cannot direct and order: he is the company secretary to the P5’s permanent board of directors. In such circumstances, the most important requirement is for the SG to exercise the skills of soft leadership.

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 widely 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

24 Cited in Alan James, “The Secretary-General as an Independent Political Actor,” in Rivlin and Gordenker, eds., The Challenging Role of the UN Secretary-General, pp. 22–39 at p. 28.
establishment and conduct of PKOs, as also the innumerable requests by the other principal organs for special reports of the SG, provide him with an additional source of political leverage. The annual report on the work of the organization and the many special reports have been important instruments in the progressive universalization of the human rights norm and the construction of national and international human rights machinery.

It is often, indeed typically, the case that dissatisfaction with US capture of the agenda 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 international statecraft can damage his credentials as the vital core of conciliatory diplomacy. And, potentially, the pacific settlement of disputes under Chapter 6 of the Charter 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.

The romantics of the world, their eye firmly on the prized UN ideal of a just and humane world without borders, fail to see the sordid wheeling and dealing driven by personal ambition, venality and naked power politics. The cynical, overwhelmed by the reality of waste, corruption and inefficiency that pervades much of the UN system, fail to raise their eye to the prize of a better world that beckons over the horizon. The United Nations must meet the challenge of a balance between the desirable and the possible. In Hammarskjöld’s words, “the constant struggle to close the gap between aspiration and performance...makes the difference between civilization and chaos.”

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