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978-0-521-87615-5 - Secretary or General?: The UN Secretary-General in World Politics

Edited by Simon Chesterman

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SECRETARY OR GENERAL?

The Secretary-General of the United Nations is a unique figure in world politics. At once civil servant, the world's diplomat, lackey of the UN Security Council, and commander-in-chief of up to a hundred thousand peacekeepers, he or she depends on states for both the legitimacy and resources that enable the United Nations to function. The tension between these roles – of being secretary or general – has challenged every incumbent. This book brings together the insights of senior UN staff, diplomats, and scholars to examine the normative and political factors that shape this unique office, with particular emphasis on how it has evolved in response to changing circumstances such as globalization and the onset of the “war on terror”. The difficulties experienced by each Secretary-General reflect the profound ambivalence of states towards entrusting their security, interests, or resources to an intergovernmental body.

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FOREWORD

While the Charter of the United Nations describes the Secretary-General, in Article 97, as “the chief administrative officer of the Organization” it also empowers him, in Article 99, to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.” This article is seldom formally invoked – I myself have never found it necessary to use it – but it gives the Secretary-General a political responsibility, which makes him clearly more than a mere administrator. From its very origins, therefore, the office has had this dual character. And in more recent times the Secretary-General has come to be viewed by almost everyone as the organization’s chief diplomatic and political agent.

The editor of the present volume should therefore be excused for an omission which he acknowledges in his introduction – the absence of any chapter focusing solely on the administrative responsibilities of the office. For better or worse, the role of the Secretary-General has come to be seen as primarily political. But even within that definition, distinct types of activity are expected of today’s Secretary-General.

On the one hand there is his diplomatic role in the traditional sense, generally referred to as his “good offices”. In this role he acts as an impartial mediator, seeking to resolve disputes and prevent deadly conflict, which makes it essential that he maintain a good working relationship with all parties – and this in turn often obliges him to maintain complete discretion and avoid public comment, even when this involves resisting pressure, and perhaps his own inclination, to “take a stand”.

On the other hand there is what this book calls the “bully pulpit” – the public role, in which the Secretary-General is expected to act as spokesman for universal values and for the interests of humanity as a whole. And in this role, impartiality cannot be taken as implying neutrality. The Secretary-General must unswervingly uphold the purposes and principles of the organization, thereby at least implicitly supporting those who do likewise, and condemning those who do not. He must

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speak out in favour of universal human rights and in defence of the victims of aggression or abuse. He must champion the cause of development, and the right of the poor to achieve “better standards of life in larger freedom”.

These two roles can often be in tension with each other. But they come together in the concept – as Dag Hammarskjöld put it, in the introduction to his last Annual Report – of “an international community, for which the Organization is an instrument and an expression”. Whether the Secretary-General is acting discreetly or speaking out publicly, he must always seek to advance the interests of all states, and be careful never to appear to be serving the narrow interests of any one state or group of states. His particular concern should be to protect the weak against the strong, yet he must understand that it is often only by winning and preserving the confidence of the strong that he can hope to do that.

A third role, described in this book as that of “norm entrepreneur”, falls somewhere between the first two. It is the role of making proposals to member states in their collective persona as deliberative and legislative organs of the United Nations – proposals for action to deal with issues that affect the global interest, and proposals to adapt the United Nations itself to changing times, making it more efficient and effective.

Such proposals are not always welcome. They are almost never accepted without change. Yet time and again member states look to the Secretary-General for a suggestion or a text which can form the basis of discussion. When he performs this function, the Secretary-General must be guided by the general principles he has enunciated in his “bully pulpit” mode, but also by a sense, derived largely from private soundings, of what the traffic will bear. He has to challenge member states to aim high, yet also convince them that what he is suggesting is within their reach.

It is with this in view that, on a number of occasions during my own term of office, I have appointed high-level panels, composed of men and women of great experience and international repute, representing different countries and regions, to consider specific topics and to advance the agenda. Such people often find it easier to agree when working together as individuals, in a small group, than they would in their official capacities. And once they have done so, their names lend credibility to an idea which might otherwise have appeared utopian or fanciful. The Secretary-General can then put it before member states with greater authority and confidence than if it had been simply his own. This procedure by no means guarantees success – indeed, the book mentions several instances where it has failed. But it can help.

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The authors and editor of this book are in any case to be commended for the valuable insights and critical judgement they have brought to their chosen topic. I will not claim to agree with every word in every chapter. But I believe the book as a whole will give the public a better understanding of the dilemmas that any Secretary-General must confront, and a clearer idea of what he or she can reasonably be expected to achieve. It is an important contribution to public debate about an office that has evolved over the decades, and will continue to do so, reflecting both the character of the men or women who hold it and the changing circumstances to which they will have to respond.

Kofi A. Annan

Secretary-General of the United Nations (1997–2006)

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Many of the key ideas developed in this book were discussed at a meeting convened at New York University School of Law in February 2006. Particular thanks are due to those who provided their time and experience without writing papers; though no chapter bears their name, the volume surely bears their influence. These individuals include Paulette A. Bethel, Elizabeth Cousens, Gareth Evans, Shepard Forman, Sir Emyr Jones Parry, Edward Mortimer, and John Sexton. Many others provided informal suggestions and advice on a confidential basis. Various chapters benefited from close readings by, among others, James Cockayne, Sebastian von Einsiedel, Chia Lehnardt, Surabhi Ranganathan, Ming Tan, and Quang Trinh.

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