
SINGAPORE —

Early indications have led to some suggestions that Ban Ki Moon, the newly appointed secretary general of the United Nations, is a modest man with much to be modest about. But then similar observations were made early in the terms of each of his predecessors.

Given the politicized selection process, it is impossible to appoint a strong secretary general. Yet there is some evidence that one can be made.

At once civil servant and the world's diplomat, the secretary general of the United Nations is a unique figure in world politics. He is the lackey of the UN Security Council and commander-in-chief of up to 100,000 peacekeepers.

The tension between these roles — of being secretary or general — has challenged every incumbent. The first, the Norwegian Trygve Lie (1946-1952), memorably welcomed his successor to New York's Idlewild Airport with the words, "You are about to enter the most impossible job on this earth."

The UN Charter defines the position as chief administrative officer of the United Nations Organization. At the same time, the secretary general is granted significant institutional and personal independence: The secretariat he or she leads is itself a principal organ; the secretary general and the staff serve as international officials responsible only to the UN, and the secretary general is given wide discretion to bring threats to international peace and security to the attention of the Security Council.

The manner in which these responsibilities have been fulfilled over the past six decades has depended as much on politics as it has on personality.

The Cold War severely constrained the role of the United Nations in major issues of peace and security, yet created an opportunity for a little-known Swedish cabinet minister, Dag Hammarskjöld (1953- 1961), to carve out an independent space in which the secretary general could conduct what he called "informal diplomatic activity."

The end of superpower rivalry created larger possibilities for the United Nations, but mismanaged expectations and Boutros Boutros- Ghali's (1992-1996) abrasive manner led to a crisis of confidence.

Boutros-Ghali's successor, Kofi Annan (1997-2006), was appointed precisely because he was an insider, a technocrat — and a friend of Washington. The manner in which he found his voice on issues such as humanitarian intervention and development should be a warning against early judgments of Ban.

A central question for each secretary general has been the extent to which he (all have been men) could pursue a path independent of the member states that appointed him. An earlier Russian critic of the secretary general, Nikita Khrushchev, dismissed the very idea of a truly international civil servant embodying "political celibacy." Hammarskjöld, in articulating his vision of precisely such an individual, archly suggested that it was possible to be politically celibate without being politically virgin.

U Thant (1961-1971), who took office after Hammarskjöld was killed in a plane crash over Congo, was more modest in his rhetoric and emphasized the harmonizing function of the office.

Ban is frequently compared to Thant. Yet Kurt Waldheim (1972-1981) was even more reticent in asserting himself. He was once described by an Israeli at a Middle East peace conference as "walking around like a head waiter in a restaurant."

The last Cold War secretary general, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (1982-1991), also espoused a minimalist view of the office while at the same time quietly laying the foundations for a more activist role through his mediation in the Iran-Iraq war.

Ban Ki Moon, though appointed by 192 governments, has no democratic mandate and cannot take decisions for the almost seven billion people embraced in the UN Charter as "we the peoples of the United Nations."

The office is, nevertheless, a unique position from which to promote issues that transcend national interest and to mobilize opinions and resources for crises triggering insufficient political will. Even if he cannot force the right decisions when confronted by reluctant governments, it is Ban's job to make it harder for an international community to make manifestly wrong decisions — or to take no decision at all.

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