

# THE NEXT SECRETARY-GENERAL, SECRETARIAT REFORM, AND THE VEXED QUESTION OF SENIOR APPOINTMENTS

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## CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The appointment of a new United Nations Secretary-General in 2016 will provide special opportunities for the reform and renewal of the UN Secretariat. While an ambitious agenda for reform may be unrealistic, the relationship between the UN bureaucracy and Member States needs to be reevaluated. The way senior staff are recruited must change. Building a merit-based group of top level officials around the incoming Secretary-General should be a priority. Creating a special transitional team to manage their selection process could be one way to achieve this goal.

Efforts to strengthen the Secretariat will face innumerable brick walls if there is no change in the relationship between the Secretariat and the Member States. Many governments state a commitment to the UN and turn to the UN for specific tasks, but few feel any real interest or stake in investing in the best possible UN bureaucracy. A better case needs to be made why a strengthened Secretariat is in the interest of Member States. This should address perceived national interests as well as the bureaucratic interests of the parts of Member State governments determining UN policy.

Secretariat reform means changing its entire approach to personnel: how people are recruited, their career paths and career development, and the place of UN jobs within fast-evolving international markets for people with comparable ambitions, skills, and experience. While the temptation is to discuss structural change, it is more important to focus on having the best possible people to actually do all the work required, finding them, training them and giving them the incentives to join and remain with the UN.

In the fast-evolving global environment, the new Secretary-General may need more than anything else a top team that can help him/her read the world, understand well the politics of key Member State capitals, analyze well the issues themselves, strategize, communicate to the general public as well as governments, and constantly test the limits of his/her office.

The senior Secretariat appointments of the Secretary-General are a fraught political process. Having the best possible top team will be critical if Secretariat renewal is to have any chance of success. It should be regarded as an urgent issue to avoid the unwanted outcome of poor senior appointments determined by the mightier Member States.

A properly managed transition team could be created that was funded by the UN but involve people who will not seek future employment. They could be tasked to look systematically at senior appointments as well as other initial changes to the Secretariat. A managed transition from one Secretary-General to another – with its own temporary structure and clear principles on potential conflicts of interest – seems an obvious thing but it has never been attempted. It could be of immeasurable assistance to the UN's new Secretary-General.

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### United Nations Charter Article 100

In the performance of their duties the Secretary-General and the staff shall not seek or receive instructions from any government or from any other authority external to the Organization. They shall refrain from any action which might reflect on their position as international officials responsible only to the Organization.

Each Member of the United Nations undertakes to respect the exclusively international character of the responsibilities of the Secretary-General and the staff and not to seek to influence them in the discharge of their responsibilities.

### United Nations Charter Article 101

The staff shall be appointed by the Secretary-General under regulations established by the General Assembly.

Appropriate staffs shall be permanently assigned to the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, and, as required, to other organs of the United Nations. These staffs shall form a part of the Secretariat.

The paramount consideration in the employment of the staff and in the determination of the conditions of service shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity. Due regard shall be paid to the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

The appointment of a new United Nations Secretary-General in 2016 will provide special opportunities for the reform and renewal of the UN Secretariat. There is already considerable and well-placed attention on the appointment process itself. Selecting the right person for the job will be far and away the most critical decision Member States will make on the future of the organization.

It will be important, however, at the time to also focus on the opportunities for Secretariat reform. An improved Secretariat will be essential for the success of the new Secretary-General and more broadly for the UN's future as an effective instrument for international peace and security.

There are three inter-related issues: the relationship of Member States to the Secretariat; the nature of Secretariat reform; and – most immediately – the senior Secretariat appointments of the Secretary-General.

The heart of the matter is this: Do Member States see the Secretariat (and with it the office of the Secretary-General) as the Principal Organ of the UN as established by the Charter – a Principal Organ that can think and act independently – or do they see the Secretariat simply as an implementing bureaucracy, which should be micromanaged on issues of budget and personnel to ensure no meaningful agency. Is the relationship between Member State governments and the Secretariat to be primarily one where Member States, for all their stated commitments to the UN, only turn to the organization for a particular action in an area of their concern, or is there any political interest or desire left to invest in a genuine strengthening of the United Nations Organization and with it its Secretariat? If not, what can be done to change this?

The founders in 1945 believed that a key failing of the League of Nations was the absence of a Secretary-Generalship that could act independently. The Preparatory Commission in London 70 years ago listed the functions of the new office (including mediation and the provision of 'expert technical advice' and stated categorically that a capable Secretariat was essential to the success of the UN as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning there has been a tension. Every Secretary-General has tried, with varying degrees of effort and success, to maintain his Charter role. In general, however, the trend has been away from the kind of dynamic independence envisaged in 1945-6. The Secretariat has reformed, changed, adapted, in significant ways, but we are further now than ever from the ideal of an international civil service best articulated by Dag Hammarskjöld.

It is far from clear that the kind of Secretariat and international civil service imagined in the mid-20th century is what will be required in the 21st. And it will not be very helpful to the new Secretary-General to simply recommend a shift in a particular direction.

We need first a far more robust analysis of what the UN Secretariat is and may be good at and what real comparative advantages an international bureaucracy may have over other alternative organizations in meeting tomorrow's security, development and human rights challenges. This is crucial.

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**This paper will make the following arguments:**

1. Efforts to strengthen the Secretariat will face innumerable brick walls if there is no meaningful change in the relationship between the Secretariat and the Member States. This relationship is increasingly a transactional one, with many governments stating a committing to the UN but few feeling any real interest or stake in investing in the best possible UN bureaucracy. Unless a far better case can be made of why a strengthened Secretariat is actually in the interest of Members States, in addressing their own perceived interests (and the interests of the parts of their governments determining UN policy), an ambitious agenda for reform will be unrealistic.
2. Secretariat reform should first and foremost mean the reform of its approach to personnel, how people are recruited, their career paths and career development, and the place of UN jobs within fast-evolving international markets for people with comparable ambitions, skills, and experience. The temptation is often to change structure. Or to focus on secondary issues of 'human resources' management such as contractual arrangements or 'staff selection timelines'.<sup>2</sup> The central question instead should be: who will actually do all the work required for there to be effective collective global responses to global challenges, where will these people come from, who will train them, and why would they want to work for the UN in the first place?
3. The senior Secretariat appointments of the Secretary-General are a fraught political process that will inevitably accompany the appointment of the Secretary-General him/herself; having the best possible top team will be critical if Secretariat renewal is to have any chance of success. It is an urgent issue. An outcome to be avoided is one where a capable new Secretary-General is appointed but he or she is immediately saddled by poor senior appointments determined by the mightier Member States.

We will start first with a short history of senior appointments (by which I mean Secretariat headquarters appointments at the Under Secretary-General and Assistant Secretary-General levels), outline recent efforts under the present Secretary-General, and then examine the more general issues of Secretariat renewal.

The paper will then turn back to senior appointments as a pressing issue deserving immediate attention. Choosing people for the top jobs will be the first decisions the new Secretary-General will have to make (perhaps even before being formally appointed). These decisions made will shape the Secretariat's next five years.

The paper will conclude with a few observations on the current political environment and a specific suggestion on a more managed post-appointment transition to a new administration.

## **A SHORT HISTORY OF SENIOR APPOINTMENTS**

Senior appointments have vexed every Secretary-General of the United Nations. The founders of the organization understood that a principal failing of the League of Nations was weakness of its Secretary-Generalship. The UN's Secretariat was therefore made a principal organ in its own right with the Secretary-General (under Article 99) enjoying clear autonomy from Member States. While the language itself is quite restrictive ("bring to the attention any matter etc"), in practice it has been interpreted expansively to include fact-finding, good offices and wide discretion in managing peace operations.



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Whereas the League's Secretary-General could only appoint staff with the approval of the Council, the UN Secretary-General was to have independence over staffing.

There remained however in the Charter a tension between the Secretariat as a servicing body of the Member State organs (e.g. the Security Council) and as a entity that could initiate and carry forward action on its own. This is a tension that remains to this day.

The US, UK and Soviet governments had insisted on veto powers over the Security Council's nomination of a Secretary-General and the Preparatory Commission of 1945-6 (which placed flesh on the bones of the Charter) decided that the Council should put forward only a single candidate. In this way a special relationship between the P5 and successive Secretaries-General was set, one that would in turn circumscribe and shape their decisions on senior appointments.<sup>3</sup>

The first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, tried hard to assemble the best possible team (then the eight "Assistant Secretaries-General). Initially he cast his net fairly widely. For example, he reached out to the editor of the Economist to be head of "Economic Affairs", but this failed. There was already a notion that senior appointments would be distributed amongst the P5 and Lie began to turn to Washington, Moscow and others for nominations.

The US received the department of "Administration and Finance", the USSR "Security Council Affairs", China "Trusteeship", France "Social Affairs" and the UK "Economic Affairs". Moscow however rejected explicitly any notion of impartial civil servants heading UN departments and insisted on rotating its Assistant Secretary-General every two years. Washington then insisted on the deputy post, effectively guaranteeing the department's impotence throughout the Cold War (it was later merged into what became today's Department of Political Affairs).

Dag Hammarskjöld replaced nearly all of his predecessor's Assistant Secretaries-General. Alone amongst all eight Secretaries-General, he came into office with a firm conviction that personnel choices mattered more than anything else and that personnel management would be one of his core functions.

He did not however have a free hand. The Soviets naturally insisted on retaining the Security Council Affairs Department and pressurized Hammarskjöld to hire their nominee. Hammarskjöld told the Soviets that he did not want "a cat in a bag" to which the Soviet Permanent Representative replied that Hammarskjöld himself had been a cat in a bag. Hammarskjöld continued to resist, agreeing that a Soviet would fill the role but suggesting Moscow's ambassador in Stockholm, whom he had known. This was accepted.

The US was more willing to provide the Secretary-General some of the latitude he wanted and Hammarskjöld spent much of his first 18 months concentrating on personnel and related budgetary matters. His closest aide and head of "Special Political Affairs", Ralph Bunche, was an American, but an American who was seen as an international civil servant of unimpeachable integrity, not a US nominee.

Under Hammarskjöld a model of senior appointments management developed where those he felt bound to take were made heads of various departments, but his core functions (including "Special Political", the forerunner of today's Department of Peacekeeping Operations) were reserved in what became known as the "Offices of the Secretary-General", staffed by men like Ralph Bunche who were not seen as being in any Member State's pocket.



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By the time of Hammarskjold's death in 1961, governments had woken up to the political significance of the Secretariat. U Thant's appointment was surrounded by many demands by the P5 for key jobs. Moscow actually proposed a 'college' of senior officials each representing different 'international blocs'. The Soviets wanted at the very least that the exact names of senior appointees be decided before giving an Secretary-General candidate the green light.

U Thant rejected any notion that Member States could dictate senior appointees. When France pushed Philippe de Seynes to be Chef of Staff, Thant refused and told the French government they were welcome to veto his appointment. The Soviets finally dropped all demands after long deliberations and gave Thant free hand following 'consultations' with all.

As a sop to Member States, U Thant stated his intention to create a group of 'principal advisers' at the Under Secretary-General level (this level was created under Hammarskjold above the original Assistant Secretary-General rank). Eight names – appointees from the US, USSR, Brazil, Czechoslovakia, France, India, Nigeria and the United Arab Republic – were announced. The group met every month for a while but the practice was allowed to soon die a natural death.

U Thant otherwise kept on board the top people in Hammarskjold's "Offices of the Secretary-General" including Ralph Bunch and adding CV Narasimhan, an Indian civil servant who had been heading the Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific and who became Chef de Cabinet. It should be mentioned that this was an era when top officials were still expected to recuse themselves from issues directly related to their governments. Ralph Bunche for example recused himself from any involvement in the Cuban Missile Crisis as he was a US national.

In 1966 the Soviets said that they would support Thant only if CV Narasimhan's powers were diluted and if he established a new "advisory board" that would include Ralph Bunche but also the Soviet Under Secretary-General Alexsy Nestorenko. Thant first indicated he was uninterested in a second term, and then made sure that his second term was conditional on a strengthened Secretary-Generalship and a free hand over senior appointments.

Kurt Waldheim was the first person to campaign for the job of Secretary-General. In this way he came into office perhaps more encumbered by IOUs than his predecessors.<sup>4</sup> He brought Austrian diplomats into the Secretary-General's Office (Hammarskjold had brought a Swede) and replaced most senior Hammarskjold- and Thant-era senior officials.

Waldheim judged that Ralph Bunche (who had recently died) as a truly international civil servant could not be easily replaced and that it was not in anyone's interest, least of all Washington, to have another American as the head of Special Political Affairs.

Instead he chose long-time UN official Brian Urquhart and Robert Guyer of Argentina both as Under Secretaries-General for Special Political Affairs. He accepted Richard Nixon's nomination of Congressman Bradford Morse to head the "Political and General Assembly Affairs" (and later head of UNDP). Moscow's nominee Arkady Shevchenko became Under Secretary-General for "Political and Security Council Affairs". Despite the "Political" in their titles, the most substantive and sensitive political matters were handled by Urquhart and Guyer. Rafeeuddin Ahmed of Pakistan, who had already worked many years at the UN, was made Chef de Cabinet. Waldheim also appointed the first ever woman in the top ranks: Helvi L Sipila of Finland.

Javier Perez de Cuellar was the first Secretary-General to have also served as an Under Secretary-General (having replaced Guyer's post at Special Political Affairs). He perhaps understood the Secretary-Generalship better than anyone on coming into office. He

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had also insisted on not campaigning for the job when his name first came up and stated that “the first requirement of a successful incumbency” was to be indebted to no one.

He then assembled around him a top team comprised overwhelmingly of career UN officials such as: Virendra Dayal, Jean Claude Aime, James Jonah, and Brian Urquart. The “American post” of head of Political and General Assembly Affairs was given to Joseph Vernon Reed, formerly of Chase Manhattan Bank. It is perhaps not surprising that a top team with a strong international mediation background (including the Secretary-General himself) focused very much on the UN's more quiet and often quite successful mediation efforts.

The next Secretary-General was Boutros Boutros-Ghali. He came into office in 1991 with perhaps a stronger desire to ‘reform’ the Secretariat than any predecessor since Dag Hammarskjold. A key difference though was that whereas Hammarskjold focused on personnel matters and the nurturing of a truly international civil service (more on this below), Boutros-Ghali focused more on structure.

In his memoirs, the former Egyptian minister said that he was deeply ‘shocked’ at the state of the Secretariat and that when he asked how many departments there were he was told “some 35”, “as if no one really knew”. Posts had mushroomed in the final years of Perez de Cueller and the organizational chart one that had grown up very organically and was now very messy.

Boutros-Ghali had no fewer than 28 people of Under Secretary-General rank reporting to him; he immediately abolished 18, including the new “Director-General” position established recently by the General Assembly. He ended the old “Offices of the Secretary-General” and set up the departmental structure more or less intact today. All Under Secretaries-General and Assistant Secretaries-General were placed on one-year contracts. Special Political Affairs became the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and all other ‘political offices’ (e.g. the “Office of Special Political Questions”) merged into a new Department of Political Affairs.

Boutros-Ghali was keen to stress his independence from the big powers. At the same time he disregarded the long standing precedent of regional distribution and gave over half the top posts to the P5 and another four to Europeans. James Jonah was for a while the only Under Secretary-General from a developing country.

His advisors in the new Executive Office were a more mixed lot, with several long-serving UN hands, such as Ismat Kittani of Iraq. Boutros-Ghali loosely accepted the idea of reserving jobs for certain Member States and invited George Bush to nominate an American Under Secretary-General for Administration and Management, agreeing to Richard Thornburgh for the post. He did however later reject Washington’s first nominee for head of UNICEF and wrote that this soured relations with US Permanent Representative Madeleine Albright more than any other issue.

A critical decision made at this time was the division of the political world into two departments – the Department of Political Affairs under Vladimir Petrovsky of Russia and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations under Murrack Goulding of the UK. Goulding was later shifted to DPA and his deputy, Kofi Annan, promoted to take his place.

By April 1994 there were 21 Under Secretaries-General and 19 Assistant Secretaries-General as well as 40 Special Representatives, Envoys, and Advisers, half involved in peacekeeping operations, reporting directly to the Secretary-General.

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In 1995 Kofi Annan became the first career UN civil servant to become Secretary-General. He was clearly the Secretary-General who came to the position with the most knowledge of UN affairs from the start, having served in a variety of positions from P1 up including as head of personnel.

Because his was a particularly hotly contested appointment, with the French supporting for a long while the reappointment of Boutros-Ghali, Annan in a way perhaps had less room to maneuver in terms of senior appointments. The French insisted on the Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping post and this was accepted, with Bernard Miyet as the new head of DPKO (and later Jean-Marie Guehenno). It has remained in 'French hands' ever since.

Nevertheless Annan was able to assemble a top team of high caliber, a mix of career UN officials and outside appointments. Several long-term international civil servants were moved into senior posts, including Iqbal Riza as Chef de Cabinet, Shashi Tharoor as Director for Communications and later head of the Department of Public Information, Yasushi Akashi and then Sergio de Mello at the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (later Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs)". Key outsiders took influential posts as well, such as John Ruggie then Dean of SIPA as advisor with the rank of Assistant-Secretary General and Edward Mortimer, the former foreign affairs editor of the *Financial Times* who became chief speechwriter and a key policy thinker. Kieran Prendergast of the UK headed the Department of Political Affairs (replacing Marrack Goulding) and a new position of Deputy Secretary-General was created and filled by Louise Frechette of Canada. Mark Malloch-Brown, with many years of both UN and World Bank experience was appointed head of UNDP and later succeeded Frechette as Deputy Secretary-General.

In general this was a new team, crafted by Kofi Annan, with a wealth of UN experience amongst them, which included several new recruits from outside the world of government, a team that would lead the UN and the Secretary-General to the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001.

Ban Ki-moon became Secretary-General in 2007 after a selection 'process' that involved far more intense campaigning by many candidates than ever before. He made clear from the start that he intended to put his stamp on senior appointments and quickly brought in new people to top positions. The diplomat Vijay Nambiar (not quite an 'outsider' as he had served as India's Permanent Representative before becoming a "Special Adviser" under Kofi Annan) was made Chef de Cabinet. Lynn Pascoe of the US succeeded Nigerian Ibrahim Gambari as head of the Department of Political Affairs and John Holmes of the UK became head of OCHA. Ban recruited Rosa Migiro as Deputy Secretary-General, the foreign minister of Tanzania.

Several changes have occurred over the past nine years but the Department of Political Affairs, the Department of Peacekeeping, and OCHA have been headed through these changes by US, French, and UK nominees respectively, solidifying an informal practice of particular posts 'belonging' to particular nationalities to a greater extent than any time since the Cold War. In general as well, the top team over the past nine years has tended to be more weighted towards people from outside the United Nations than at any other time since the organization's earliest years, though this has been attenuated to some extent more recently, with the appointments of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the High Commissioner for Refugees both going to people with many years of United Nations service.

Ban has tried as well to add a degree of structure and transparency to his senior appointments. In his 2010 report "Towards an accountability system in the UN Secretariat", he outlined a detailed process for the recruitment of Assistant and Under Secretaries-General. A 2011 report by the Joint Inspection Union "Transparency in the Selection and Appointment of Senior Managers at the

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United Nations Secretariat<sup>75</sup> however questioned how well the process was actually being implemented. According to the Joint Inspection Unit report, the Secretary-General affirms that no position is reserved for any Member State; if he decides that a specific post should be given to a specific nationality, he will request a slate of candidates and will not choose any single nominee. In 2015 he rejected a UK nominee as Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), insisted on a slate of UK candidates instead, and chose an alternative, Stephen O'Brien.

**Looking back at this history of senior appointments, four points may be made:**

1. All Secretaries-General have tried (to differing extents) to push back against P5 influence over the Secretariat through senior appointment.
2. Though there has from the start been a general acceptance that P5 countries will have one or more of their nationals in senior posts, the claim by some P5 countries to specific posts is relatively new.
3. The mix of UN 'insiders' with long experience in the organization and outsiders has shifted considerably from decade to decade. In general, there has been a tendency towards more outsiders being in top jobs in recent times than before.
4. There has never been any explicit statement by any Secretary-General of the qualities needed to be a successful Under or Assistant Secretary-General. (For example, the mix of diplomatic and other experiences, understanding of United Nations processes, etc.)

Senior appointments are related to not only the Secretary-Generalship and its effectiveness but also the broader issue of the relationship between the Secretariat and Member States, the focus of the next section.

## SECRETARIAT REFORM AND THE ESSENTIAL NEED FOR A NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SECRETARIAT AND MEMBER STATES

### United Nations Charter Article 7

There are established as principal organs of the United Nations: a General Assembly, a Security Council, an Economic and Social Council, a Trusteeship Council, an International Court of Justice and a Secretariat.

The incoming Secretary-General will doubtless examine options for Secretariat reform. He will be following a long line of Secretaries-General who have tried to do the same. Only Dag Hammarskjöld's reforms of 1953 may be said to have truly succeeded, and those required the complete focus of the Secretary-General himself over more than a year as well as an encouraging Member State environment in the General Assembly.

Whatever the new Secretary-General's reform priorities, they are more than likely to fail unless he or she is able to make a good case for why a strengthened United Nations Secretariat is actually in the interest of leading Member States (including all the P5) in the years to come. For those already committed to a strong United Nations Organization, this may be self-evident. But there are

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at least two other views: the first is the UN's relevance in addressing international challenges is unclear and often peripheral and that for important specific tasks (e.g. a new political mission) new people can be recruited on an ad hoc basis; the second is that a weak Secretariat is better than a strong Secretariat that remains under the wing of the big powers, especially those that may nurture interventionist agendas.

It will be impossible for even a much more effective Secretariat to be all things to all people, addressing all global challenges in the way envisaged by the Charter. The UN may well have only a very limited role in many peace and security issues as well as in other issues (say related to the global economy) of prime interest to Member States.

**What is absolutely necessary however is for a two-part case to be made:**

- (a) That issues and challenges do exist – perhaps ‘second tier’ peace and security issues (around which there are no core Permanent 5 interests) or ‘new’ challenges such (say related to global migration or the spread of infectious diseases) around which all Member States might welcome strengthened international cooperation – and;
- (b) That for this strengthened international cooperation to be effective and efficient a strengthened Secretariat is essential.

Without a genuine acceptance on the part of leading Member States that there are real life issues for which they need the United Nations and crucially, that a strengthened Secretariat is necessary for the United Nations to adequately perform in these roles, Secretariat reform will be tentative at best.

One obstacle in thinking about a strengthened Secretariat is the absence of a proper assessment of today's Secretariat concerning its actual functions and performance. The Secretariat's real functions and performance are often hidden behind mandates and reports that have little to do with its actual aims and activities. For example, the ‘real’ role of the Secretariat (and the Secretary-General) in some cases might be to take on an ‘impossible’ task (say a protracted civil war) for which Member States have no ready solution, keeping an issue alive as a subject of international attention, without being expected to find a decisive outcome. Or it might be to give powerful Member States a dignified exit from a messy intervention or through a Secretary-General's statement test a position those Member States themselves are unwilling to voice publicly. These actual roles are often never clearly articulated nor reported, leaving objective assessment difficult.

Similarly, there seems to be no good analysis of the Secretariat's comparative advantages over other multilateral or other organizations. In establishing the Secretary-General's 2003-4 “High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change”<sup>6</sup> the initial terms of reference were to (a) examine global threats and challenges, (b) assess the UN's comparative advantage in addressing them, and (c) propose UN reform measures. The final terms of reference emphasized (a) and (c); the arguably critical need to assess comparative advantages was lost. And yet this seems central. Increasingly Member States deal with global or regional issues through bilateral or regional mechanisms other than the UN. In the world of possibilities, there is a need to identify realistically what the tasks are that the UN can or could do better than anyone else (e.g. a type of internal conflict intervention or a type of public advocacy on a global issue such as climate change) – and how being better at tasks would be in Member States' interest.

It is not the purpose of this short paper to provide a rigorous assessment of the Secretariat's comparative advantages. But a couple of points may be made. First, the United Nations is first and foremost a collective security organization. The Economic and Social

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Council was created because the Founders understood that economic and social progress was necessary for the maintenance of international peace and security; it was peace and security that was the UN's focus. And though 'security' may be defined in ways very different than at the organization's founding – including issues for example climate change that were unknown in 1945, it's important to remember that the UN was set up to 'save succeeding generations from the scourge of war'. The Secretariat has many competitors in every field; but it is the only global bureaucracy mandated to prevent war and make peace.

Second is the global character of the Secretariat itself. Despite the heavy politicization of appointments and the decline of the international civil service, the Secretariat remains perhaps the only institution where people from literally every country in the world work together. No other organization comes close. There is thus at least the potential – which I have seen in practice and others may as well – for a truly international perspective on issues of war and peace that will be rare to find elsewhere. Supporting a far more robust analytical capacity may be anathema to some Member States but the potential is there.

Third, looking back 70 years, the Secretariat has had most impact through the direct and personal interventions of the Secretary-General. The ability of the Secretary-General to act depends on the confidence he/she enjoys amongst Member States, but also in the wider realm of public opinion. The Secretary-General enjoys a bully pulpit like none other. We are living in an age of unprecedented information flows, where several billion people may be reached over the Internet.

Lastly, though peacekeeping has been a core Secretariat focus since the early 1990s, there is nothing to say that this needs to remain the case. The type of internal conflict and peace settlement for which multidimensional peace operations were created 25 years ago – with a military component, police, civil affairs officers, elections people preparing for elections, etc. – perhaps still exist but there are newer and bigger conflicts or potential conflicts for which peacekeeping operations will not be the answer. The UN does have a comparative advantage at a certain type of peace operation (no else can do it), but its future advantages may be in the mediation field, an area of work that has been relatively neglected the past decade or so.<sup>7</sup>

With a better assessment of the Secretariat's performance and a better sense of its comparative advantages, it may then be possible to make a case for a specific direction for Secretariat reform, with the focus on staffing as discussed above.

"Secretariat reform" has hitherto tended to occupy a very nebulous space. "UN reform" is generally regarded (in many circles) as equivalent to "Security Council reform" (i.e. expansion) or (for a few Member States) to improvements in UN 'management'. 'Secretariat reform' is either conflated with 'management reform' (e.g. setting up the Ethics Office, improved procurement systems, or limited measures to better human resource management) or linked to the perennial issue of whether the Secretariat's peace and security functions should be merged or divided into two, three or more departments.

"UN reform" is rarely linked to the appointment of the Secretary-General, its relationship with Member States, the role of the Secretariat as a Principal Organ of the UN and its relationship to other Principal Organs, and the staffing of the world body itself. With a different relationship however between Member States and the Secretariat, one based on a shared analysis of the actual usefulness of the Secretariat and consensus on functions that should be strengthened, the prospects of meaningful change may improve, not least on that issue that has long vexed Secretaries-General since Trygvie Lie: senior appointments.

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The next section will look more closely at staffing and the need to prioritize people over structures.

## SECRETARIAT REFORM AND THE NEED TO PRIORITIZE PEOPLE OVER STRUCTURES

Identifying the proper role of the United Nations in a world of fast evolving and increasingly complex threats may be arduous enough. Gaining the agreement of nearly 200 Member States or even just the big powers on the Security Council will be more difficult still. But hardest of all may be to find the right people with the mix of relevant skills and experiences to do the things the United Nations should do over the rest of the 21st century.

Cobbling people together at the last minute or assuming the needed skills already exist outside the UN will not be an answer. For almost any task there will need to be a core of people who have both the relevant professional skills but also knowledge of the United Nations system. At the higher levels they will need to be proven managers. All should be independent from national governments.

It's important to remember that the Preparatory Commission of 1945-6 (which placed flesh on the bones of the Charter), not only identified an explicitly political role for the Secretary-General but stated that the Secretary-General was to "stand for the United Nations as a whole" "in the eyes of the world". It further argued that the success of the entire UN depended on there being a "capable" Secretariat. It strongly recommended the establishment of an international civil service. A key focus was to ensure the Secretariat attracted and retained staff of the highest possible caliber. Exams and cutting edge training and genuine testing were to be part of new system.

Dag Hammarskjold believed strongly that creating and nurturing a genuinely international civil service was absolutely essential if the Secretariat and by extension the United Nations was to be able to perform its tasks. For Hammarskjold his first year in office was all about root and branch Secretariat reform. There were changes to structure. But the real focus was on personnel and budgeting. He wanted broad authority to hire and fire and insisted that a "minimum" requirement for him to function as the Secretariat's "Chief Administrative Officer" as stated in the Charter was to be able to fire staff for "lack of integrity" based on his own evaluation. He also rigorously reviewed all Secretariat related mandates and abolished 300 posts.

Since the 1950s, arguably the high mark of the Secretariat as the Charter organ it was meant to be, there has been a long history of failed or at least only partially successful attempts to 'reform' the Secretariat. In general, the problem has not been the absence of good ideas (there have been literally hundreds of reports and papers on UN reform) but of political will, linked to the Member States perceptions and attitudes (discussed more below).

By the 1980s there was a widespread perception that Secretariat posts, then about 12,000 in total, were filled not on merit but by Member State nomination, with a pecking order from the P5 who were guaranteed an Under Secretary-General position, down to the less powerful who would still lobby for director and professional positions. The Secretariat became in part a dumping ground for people not wanted in national foreign services and many permanent missions spent considerable time trying to secure jobs for their nationals. It was Kurt Waldheim who appointed the first Assistant Secretary-General for Personnel, James Jonah, someone who strongly supported the notion of an independent civil service in the Hammarskjold tradition, but who was not able to change much.



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It is important to note that during the Cold War the Secretariat had nearly no civilians deployed in 'the field'. From the early 1990s onwards there was an enormous growth in field missions, primarily peacekeeping operations, with a connected growth in Secretariat posts linked to these operations. More and more, senior Secretariat staff became and likely saw themselves primarily as the 'operational managers' of several dozen missions globally, regularly briefing the Security Council and daily overseeing operation heads 'on the ground'. In the 1980s the top team in the Secretariat including the Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar were mediators, mediating conflicts and potential conflicts. By the mid-1990s, Kofi Annan was heading a top team that ran multi-dimensional peace operations around the world, a very different thing. It was an historic turn but one that took place without the thorough review and reform of staffing that was likely needed.

In almost any organization, staffing is a prime focus: attracting and keeping the right people. Yet this is a discussion practically missing in the Secretariat, where far more discussion revolves around structure (e.g. the relationship of the Departments of Political Affairs and Peacekeeping Operations and whether or not they should merge). Operating the UN system has become, for better or worse, its own and unique area of knowledge: understanding how the UN works and how to use it (say in the context of a peace operation) is an expertise that does not exist elsewhere.

Ideally, the Secretariat would be staffed by people with both the required professional abilities and the necessary knowledge of the UN. The Secretariat's default mode however is either (1) to recruit people without UN background to specific posts and simply hope that they will perform well within the UN's arcane system or (2) promote seasoned UN hands without much thought paid to the professional and managerial skills they should be required to develop.

Recent reviews of Secretariat management did not answer the most basic question: what kind of people will the UN need in the future (to manage a peace operation, organize a thematic conference, lead a global advocacy campaign) and where will they come from? Do they exist already in other labour markets or will the UN need to create them, and if so how?

Staff are promoted largely on the basis of seniority and there has been no real consideration of an 'up or out' system or of any kind of management training or competency being required at managerial levels. The Secretariat may be best served by a mix of UN 'insiders' and people coming in from outside, but that mix would surely be better if it was a thought-through mix rather than a random jumble. If people with needed professional skills exist external to the organization, the challenge will be not only to identify and provide them the necessary incentives to join the UN but to ensure that on beginning their service they are provided adequate training on the UN system itself, from budgeting practices to the long history of peace operations.

If there is to be any real improvement in the capacity of the Secretariat to carry out its functions under the Charter and to implement Member State resolutions the focus should be on staffing. Recent reports on the strengthening of the United Nations (for example on the Report of the Independent High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations)<sup>8</sup> contained many important recommendations but virtually nothing on where the people to undertake the various reformed functions would actually come from.

But for a genuine focus on staffing to be possible and for there to be the kind of root and branch review of the Secretariat as undertaken by Hammarskjold in the 1950s there needs first to be a very different relationship between the Secretariat and Member States, as discussed above.

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These two concerns – (a) the overall relationship between Member States and the Secretariat and (b) the future reform of the Secretariat – both come together in what will be the next Secretary-General's first set of decision: choosing his top team.

## CHOOSING THE NEW TOP TEAM – CRITICAL FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE NEXT SECRETARY-GENERAL

### Report of the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations

(The Secretary-General's) choice of staff – more particularly of higher staff – and his leadership will largely determine the character and the efficiency of the Secretariat as a whole.

- **Chapter 2, section B, paragraph 15**

Every member of the staff of the Organization should have an opportunity for such promotion as his or her services and abilities warrant ; all posts, even the highest, should be open for promotion from within.

- **Chapter 2, section D, paragraph 47**

The Organization should establish high standards for all of its posts, The senior officers, such as the Assistant Secretaries-General, Directors, and their immediate assistants, must possess extensive experience and many of the qualifications of character and judgment laid down for the Secretary-General.

- **Chapter 2, section D, paragraph 48**

The appointment of a new Secretary-General in 2016 will provide a special opportunity for strengthening the Secretariat. The most important early decision taken by the new Secretary-General (even before formally taking up office) will be to appoint a new top team.

There is already a growing focus on the appointment of the new Secretary-General but relatively little on the myriad issues and political dynamics that have long surrounded senior appointments. The default scenario will be for the new Secretary-General to be immediately pressured by Member States to accept proposed national candidates without an opportunity for adequate reflection on the kind of top team that might work best, and the way in which the make-up of the top team might link to a more general strengthening of the Secretariat.

Efforts to improve the process of appointing a new Secretary-General may have good results, but it is certain that the P5 will retain the lion's share of power in deciding who gets appointed.. Whilst some key Member States may have an interest in the appointment of a competent and dynamic Secretary-General, there is little to suggest that this will be the aim of all. In a scenario in which a 'compromise' Secretary-General candidate is agreed, especially if he/she is reasonably competent but lacking in UN experience, the selection of the right mix of Under Secretaries-General, including a good portion with UN experience, will be extremely important.

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Senior appointments have become increasingly politicized. Though it may be argued that senior appointments have always been thus, the extent to which Member States now claim key positions and the extent to which career international civil servants are virtually absent from the top ranks of the Secretariat is arguably unprecedented. One may compare the present situation to the situation in 1996-2000.

Going further back in UN history, even during the Cold War when the two sides insisted on specific positions in the Secretariat, the senior posts around the Secretary-General were routinely held by career international civil servants. This is not to argue that the top team should all be career international civil servants, but that the traditional mix of UN 'insiders' and people brought in from outside the Secretariat has been replaced by a senior level far more skewed towards outsiders with little or no UN experience, with mixed results.

Senior appointments at the UN are today given little priority in Member State capitals. Even though some Member States jealously guard specific positions, the constituencies within Member State governments (let alone the general public) that actually give much thought to senior UN appointments is miniscule. Very different sets of Member State dynamics drive Member State policies on senior appointments.

The process leading to the appointment of the new Secretary-General in 2016 will be a welcome opportunity to revive and review key issues related to the future role and future strengthening of the Secretariat. Over the few weeks or months that world capitals and global media are focused on the Secretary-Generalship, it would be good to have easily accessible information and analysis on the real tasks that will face the new Secretary-General and an honest assessment of the bureaucracy he (or she) will inherit.

What should be avoided is the default scenario where key Member States, in the run-up to the Secretary-General appointment, affirm their commitment to the United Nations; then through a messy political and behind-the-scenes process agree on a new Secretary-General, who may, perhaps by accident emerge as a competent figure; but then compel him (or her) to accept an assortment of political appointees to top positions, with no real regard for how these political appointees might impact on the work of the Organization.

The possibility for a better scenario is definitely there. The three more powerful P5 countries – the US, China, and Russia – do not appear wedded to any particular post. Ideally, a large group of Member States including many P5 governments as well would make a public pledge before the appointment of the new Secretary-General not to 'claim' any position for any particular nationality. Candidates for SG should be encouraged to make a similar pledge, i.e. not to promise posts to any Member State. This is not to say that Member States should turn a blind eye from senior appointments, far from it: Member States in selecting the new Secretary-General should be thinking in terms of a new top team, where different qualities and skills could reinforce one another. For example, if the Secretary-General were (and we should hope) an excellent communicator but without much management experience, then his/her deputy could play a stronger management role. But the choice of who that deputy or any other senior official is should be free from considerations over nationality, so long as in the end, the entire top team enjoys a fair geographic (and gender) balance.

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## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS AND A SUGGESTION ON A MORE MANAGED TRANSITION

The ninth Secretary-General of the United Nations will take office in a rapidly changing global environment. The world is likely returning to a kind of multipolar world, with many different centers of power, unseen since well before the founding of the organization itself. New issues such as climate change will dominate the international agenda but the newly multipolar world may also see a return to more traditional security threats rooted in inter-state competition and conflict.

A more multipolar world may mean a world where the United Nations and more specifically the United Nations Secretary-General can make a difference.

In this environment, what the new Secretary-General may need more than anything else is a top team that can help him/her read the world, understand well the politics of key Member State capitals, analyze well the issues themselves, strategize, communicate to the general public as well as governments, and constantly test the limits of his/her office.

He or she will also need to be an excellent communicator. He/she may delegate other crucial responsibilities, even mediation and management, but only the Secretary-General himself/herself can be the UN's face and voice. The new Secretary-General will however need to be supported by a first-rate policy and communications team who can help shape and promote a new agenda.

Getting senior appointments right will be pivotal, as argued throughout this paper. But it's important too that the new Secretary-General should not have to begin his/her tenure on the back of a fight with one or more of the big powers. That is why a more considered and managed approach to this issue early on will be important.

The problem of staffing of course goes far deeper than simply senior appointments and the dynamic between the Secretary-General and the Permanent Five of the Security Council. The P5 do have an outsize influence especially on the higher posts and there is an unfortunate perception, extremely unhelpful, of a Secretariat that is in the pocket of the big powers. This is certainly part of the reason why many other governments see fit both to push for positions of their own, perhaps further down the pecking order, as well as to resist serious measures to increase Secretariat authority. There are long-standing and complex dynamics that have evolved at the UN in New York and do not necessarily represent political realities outside. Change will be difficult but without the right initial appointments it will be impossible.

This will not happen just by luck but only if a significant grouping of Member States see value in a stronger Secretary-Generalship and commit to allowing him or her to select the best possible team.

It is not clear at the time of writing whether the appointment of the next Secretary-General will take place early (say over the summer) or only close to the end of the current Secretary-General's term. It is possible that there will be a few month period before the appointment and the actual taking of office at the beginning of 2017. This is an opportunity.

My suggestion would be for a properly managed transition during this interval, funded by the UN but involving people who will not seek future employment, looking systematically at senior appointments as well as other initial changes to the Secretariat. A managed transition from one Secretary-General to another – with its own temporary structure and clear principles on potential conflicts of interest – seems an obvious thing but it has never been done. It could help steer senior appointments in the right direction and be of immeasurable assistance to the UN's new SG.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=PC/20](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=PC/20)

<sup>2</sup>See for example “Overview of human resources management reform: towards a global, dynamic and adaptable workforce for the United Nations”, 15 August 2014  
[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/69/190](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/69/190)

<sup>3</sup>See for example Thant Myint-U and Amy Scott, *The UN Secretariat: A Brief History (1945-2006)*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007, pp. 24-56; Roger Lipsey Hammaraskjold: A Life, University of Michigan Press, 2013, pp. 150-155; Dag Hammarskjold, “The International Civil Service in Law and in Fact” (Address at Oxford University, 30 May 1961, UN Press Release SG/1035.

<sup>4</sup>Thant Myint-U and Amy Scott, *ibid*, pp. 61-2, James Daniel Ryan, *The United Nations under Kurt Waldheim, 1972-1981*, The Scarecrow Press, 2001, pp. 23.

<sup>5</sup>[https://www.unjui.org/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU\\_REP\\_2011\\_2\\_English.pdf](https://www.unjui.org/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU_REP_2011_2_English.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>[http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pdf/historical/hlp\\_more\\_secure\\_world.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pdf/historical/hlp_more_secure_world.pdf)

<sup>7</sup>On the need to redefine peace operations to include the full spectrum of possible interventions, see Ian Johnstone’s “From Bureaucracy to Adhocracy: Crafting a spectrum of UN Peace Operations” <http://peaceoperationsreview.org/thematic-essays/from-bureaucracy-to-adhocracy-crafting-a-spectrum-of-un-peace-operations/>

<sup>8</sup>[http://www.un.org/sg/pdf/HIPPO\\_Report\\_1\\_June\\_2015.pdf](http://www.un.org/sg/pdf/HIPPO_Report_1_June_2015.pdf)



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