

THE UN AND EUROPE: BAN AND BEYOND



RICHARD GOWAN

After eight years as Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon is not an especially well-known figure in Europe. This low profile may have been a blessing.

The Secretary-General's two immediate predecessors, Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan, were central players in the Balkan wars during the 1990s. Both bore some of the blame for the disastrous peacekeeping failures in Bosnia, although Annan deserves credit for launching the UN administration in Kosovo in 1999. Ban, by contrast, had to navigate the controversy over Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008. Russia backed Serbia's rejection of this claim, and another Balkan war briefly seemed to be a threat. Ban quietly made it possible for the EU to replace the UN as the leading international agency in Kosovo, helping to defuse the stand-off. This was classic Ban. A self-confessed diplomat's diplomat, the

Richard Gowan is Research Director at New York University's Center on International Cooperation and a Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. He also teaches at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and writes a week column for World Politics Review (www.worldpoliticsreview.com).

former South Korean foreign minister has always felt happier with quiet diplomacy than grand gestures. He has been widely criticized for this tendency, and has gradually become more outspoken over challenges such as the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Nonetheless, his soft-spoken style was probably the only feasible approach to Kosovo. Russian diplomats, perceiving Ban as being on the West's side, muttered about driving him from office early.

Ban also felt that the EU was strong enough to manage its own crises. Although the UN still has a few duties in Europe such as mediating in Cyprus, it is far more heavily engaged in Africa and the Middle East. While Ban has visited Europe regularly, he has largely done so to attend summits and conferences, or to drum up funds from donors like the Netherlands and the Nordic countries.

Yet European crises have started to encroach on the UN's agenda once again. Over the last year, the Security

Council has held a series of angry but pointless meetings over Ukraine as Russia has tried to fend off criticisms from the West. Ban visited Moscow to meet with Vladimir Putin early in the Ukrainian crisis, but could get little out of him. A UN envoy was briefly held by armed men in Crimea. Since then, UN officials have played a minor role in tracking the conflict by reporting on the deteriorating human rights situation in Crimea but have had little leverage over Kiev or Moscow.

The UN has a far greater role in handling the multiple crises south of Europe, from peacekeeping in Mali to mediation in Syria and Libya as well as helping the flood of migrants heading to Europe from these warzones across the Mediterranean.

While European governments are groping towards a common approach to the Mediterranean crisis, the UN is likely to play a major humanitarian and political role in the Middle East and North Africa for years to come. Ban, who

was personally moved by the courage of the original young protestors in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, has little choice but to keep trying to help the Arab world for the rest of his time in office. But his term is coming to a close; he will leave the UN at the end of 2016. UN officials speculate that he is eyeing a bid for the presidency back in South Korea.

Whoever replaces Ban will have to offer fresh ideas for how the UN can deal with the crises in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean more effectively. This is especially sensitive because the UN's unwritten rules suggest that the next Secretary-General should come from Eastern Europe. A small host of politicians from the region have signaled an interest in the job, including former Slovene president Danilo Türk, Serbian ex-foreign minister Vuk Jeremic and the widely respected European Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva. But it is hard to identify a politician from the region who will be acceptable to not only the EU and U.S. but also Russia, which could easily block the whole selection process next year.

Some UN observers believe that it will be necessary to find a Secretary-General from elsewhere. Helen Clark, the former prime minister of New Zealand and current chief of the UN Development Programme, is a particularly prominent non-European candidate. Other potential runners from Latin America and Africa are biding their time before entering the fray. Encouraging Clark and

Georgieva, the Obama administration has sent early signals that it wants to support a woman for the post, a historic first that could be one of the President's last significant foreign policy choices. Yet even if Ban Ki-moon is followed by a politician with no real prior knowledge of Europe, she or he will almost certainly end up spending a lot of time on European security issues.

This will mean not only long sessions in Brussels meeting rooms but also more high-stakes trips for tricky talks in Moscow and heart-rending public visits to refugee camps from Syria to the Sahel. One conundrum that Ban has failed to resolve is how to persuade many European countries to increase their spending on aid to the levels necessary to assist the vulnerable in the Arab world. The UN is billions of dollars below its funding targets for Syria. Even well-intentioned EU politicians admit that their voters are growing increasingly skeptical about sending aid outside Europe in a period of domestic austerity. The next Secretary-General will have to push European leaders and citizens to offer more help to their suffering neighbors.

There is a recurrent but extremely suspect rumor around the corridors of the UN that German Chancellor Angela Merkel might put herself for the job. This probably doesn't have any basis in fact; unlike many national leaders who dream of a nice retirement job in New York, Merkel has never shown much interest in UN matters.

Yet whoever replaces Ban Ki-moon could do worse than asking Merkel for advice on the job. The Chancellor has, after all, had to maneuver to keep the EU together in the face of mounting economic and foreign policy challenges. The next UN Secretary-General will have to do something similar, but on a global scale. Like Ban, Merkel is a fan of subtle maneuvers. She is also quite good at them, and has immense contacts and personal power. Perhaps she should consider a move to New York after all.