

Filling Sisyphus's Shoes

The Annan years and the future of the United Nations



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Thorsten Benner | **After ten eventful years, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan handed over the office to his successor, Ban Ki Moon. Annan's tenure was a roller coaster ride, from the highs of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize to the lows of scandals engulfing the UN bureaucracy. What lessons do the Annan years hold for the future of the United Nations? Can the organization under Ban Ki Moon address the challenges of the twenty-first century?**

“Together we have pushed some big rocks to the top of the mountain, even if others have slipped from our grasp and rolled back....It's been difficult and challenging, but at times also thrillingly rewarding. And while I look forward to resting my shoulder from those stubborn rocks..., I know I shall miss the mountain.” In his farewell address to the General Assembly in September 2006, Kofi Annan presented himself as the world's Sisyphus—working hard, never quite able to complete the toil, but ultimately fulfilled. “The struggle itself is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy,” Camus wrote. While a perfect metaphor for Annan, it is no substitute for a sober analysis of his

record in the key areas of peace and security, human rights, sustainable development, and internal management. Which rocks tumbled back down the hill and why? What are the lessons for his successor?

Peace and Security: Seeking Redemption for Rwanda

The decisive event that informed Annan's peace and security agenda predated his tenure as Secretary General. On January 11, 1994, Annan, then head of the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations, received a fax from the Canadian general Romeo Dallaire, head of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR).¹ In it Dallaire asked for permission to raid

1) Samantha Power, *A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, (New York, 2002), p. 344.

the Hutu militias' arms caches in order to prevent mass murder. Annan's response was swift and forthright: UN troops had no mandate for this kind of operation. Dallaire was ordered to concentrate on securing his own troops and to not jeopardize the mission's neutrality and impartiality—the leitmotif of UN peacekeeping operations. Annan did not relay Dallaire's warnings to the Security Council or the press—and the Hutu militias prepared the subsequent mass murder unhindered.

The failure of the UN Secretariat and Security Council in the case of Rwanda and, later in 1995, Srebrenica were the original sins from which Annan tried to redeem himself and the organization. As Secretary General, Annan started a process of soul-searching with an internal investigation. At the General Assembly in November 1999 he presented the results, which drew attention to serious doctrinal and institutional failings. Annan alerted the United Nations to its “pervasive ambivalence regarding the role of force in the pursuit of peace” and “an institutional ideology of impartiality even when confronted with attempted genocide.”² As a consequence, Annan threw the moral and political weight of his office behind two doctrines that define the legacy of his tenure: the principle of “conditional sovereignty” and the “responsibility to protect.” Annan emphasized that the UN Charter's aim was to “protect individual human beings, not to protect those who abuse them.”³ He wel-

comed “the developing international norm in favor of intervention to protect civilians from wholesale slaughter.” States such as Canada took up this position and helped enshrine the “responsibility to protect” in the final document of the 2005 UN World Summit. This was evidence of Kofi Annan's role as a “norm entrepreneur,” a success explicitly acknowledged when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001.

At the same time, Annan did not shy away from pointing out the vexing questions raised by the new doctrine of humanitarian intervention. He reminded the world that the preamble of the UN Charter stipulates that “armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest.” The “responsibility to protect” raises a number of questions: “But what is

that common interest? Who shall define it? Who shall defend it?

Under whose authority? And with what means of intervention?”⁴ These questions would shake the very foundations of the United Nations' system of collective security—especially in light of the new US security strategy after September 11, 2001.

Kosovo provided the first test case for the new doctrine. Faced with the threat of a Russian veto in the Security Council, NATO decided to wage war against Serbia without a Security Council mandate. Annan commented that there are times “when

Annan underscored the ambiguities of military force in the pursuit of peace.

2) Quoted in Michael Barnett: *Eyewitness to Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda*, (Cornell University Press, 2002) p. 158.

3) Kofi Annan, “Two Concepts of Sovereignty,” *The Economist*, September 16, 1999.

4) *Ibid.*

the use of force may be legitimate in the pursuit of peace.” Many critics argued that with this declaration Annan opened Pandora’s box. These critics felt vindicated when the United States and the United Kingdom tried to force a Security Council mandate for the Iraq war. Annan was a helpless bystander to the Iraq train wreck at the United Nations.

In October 2003 Annan appealed to UN member states to start picking up the pieces after the Iraq disaster. Annan saw the United Nations at “a fork in the road,” where members had to face fundamental decisions similar to those that led to the founding of the United Nations in 1945. Annan argued that the new US security doctrine “could set precedents that resulted in a proliferation of the unilateral and lawless use of force,

with or without justification.” At the same time, he emphasized that “it is not enough to denounce uni-

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lateralism, unless we also face up squarely to the concerns that make some states feel uniquely vulnerable, since it is those concerns that drive them to take unilateral action. We must show that those concerns can, and will, be addressed effectively through collective action.”

To improve the United Nations’ capacity for effective collective action, Annan presented a number of ambitious proposals for reform in his 2005 report. In the end, UN member states embraced very few of Annan’s ideas. The Human Rights Council and the

Peacebuilding Commission are what is left of Annan’s ambitious agenda.

The Peacebuilding Commission in particular is a lasting legacy of Annan. On his watch, the United Nations’ peacebuilding activities expanded to the degree that concerns arose about dangerously overstretching the United Nations’ resources and capabilities. In early 2007, about 100,000 UN peacekeepers were deployed, a record number. Nevertheless, in yet another case, the United Nations has proven utterly ineffective at confronting genocide. As a consequence of China’s obstruction and European, US and G-77 indifference, the mass killings in Darfur have continued. The “Save Darfur” campaign reports a total of 400,000 people dead and more than 2 million displaced from their homes. Annan emphasized in his parting speech to the General Assembly that the “continued spectacle of men, women, and children driven from their homes by murder, rape, and the burning of their villages makes a mockery of our claim, as an international community, to shield people from the worst abuses.” But, Annan concluded, the lessons of Rwanda seem to have already been forgotten—and this time not by the UN Secretariat. The UN Secretary General and the Secretariat are helpless in the face of political apathy and outright obstruction from UN member states. Humanitarian intervention and the use of force are rocks too heavy for the Secretary General to push up Sisyphus’s mountain alone, without the support of key member states.

Human Rights: A Big Fanfare for Universality

Annan made human rights a key concern of his tenure—very much in contrast to his predecessor. Boutros-Ghali emphasized that human rights are best advanced without “big fanfare.”⁵ Annan chose a different approach. During his first trip to Africa in 1997, he attacked those who saw human rights as a “luxury of the rich for which Africa is not ready” or worse “an imposition, if not a plot, by the industrialized West.” Annan added: “I find these thoughts truly demeaning, demeaning of the yearning for human dignity that resides in every African heart.” With this big fanfare Annan set the tone for his tenure. He tirelessly promoted human rights. This included standing up for religious tolerance and against anti-Semitism, a clear sign in an organization that in the 1970s had passed a resolution equating Zionism with racism. He was equally clear in his condemnation of terrorism while emphasizing that the fight against terrorism could not be a pretext for human rights violations.

Leading Global Governance

In the field of development Annan proved equally ambitious. Together with key collaborators such as John Ruggie (chief advisor for strategic planning) and Georg Kell (head of the Global Compact Office) Annan developed a vision to halt the decline of the United Nations’ development role and to turn the United Nations into an active force for shaping global

governance. Annan put forth three key arguments. First, a fundamental interdependence exists between development, trade, the environment, and security. Investing in “global public goods” is in the enlightened self-interest of all involved parties: “problems without passports” such as pandemics and climate change do not need to apply

for visas. Second, Annan stood up for religious tolerance and against anti-Semitism. unless it is embedded in a shared set of values, globalization remains a fragile process,

threatened by a host of dangerous “isms:” protectionism, populism, nationalism, ethnic chauvinism, fanaticism, and terrorism.” Third, NGOs and business are powerful players in the global arena. The United Nations needs to take advantage of their resources and reach in order to better be able to fulfill its mission.

Annan did act on the basis of such analysis. His accomplishments include the launch of the UN Global Compact through which companies voluntarily pledge to abide by ten key global norms. Nevertheless, in the meantime it has become clear that voluntary initiatives need to be embedded in a framework of binding rules. Annan also encouraged the United Nations to reach out to business and civil society in public-private partnerships. By proposing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), to which heads of state agreed in 2000, Annan again acted as a “norm entrepreneur.” The MDGs outline clear objectives for the year 2015 and

5) Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *Unvanquished. A U.S.-UN Saga* (New York, 1999), p. 167.

have proven to be an effective advocacy tool even though its accountability mechanisms are still untested and some member states still want to put the MDGs back into the drawer.

Reforming the UN Secretariat: The Road not Taken

As the first UN career official to become Secretary General, Annan was acutely aware of the need to reform the UN Secretariat and its relationship to the UN member states. In 1997 Annan presented an ambitious reform package suggesting greater management flexibility on the part of the Secretariat in exchange for greater effectiveness.

The G-77 saw in reform proposals a US plot to weaken poorer members.

Member states, especially developing countries organized in the G-77, blocked Annan's proposals. Following this early defeat, Annan's interest in internal UN reform decreased. It was only after the "annus horribilis" of 2004 when a deep crisis of confidence and credibility engulfed the UN Secretariat that he renewed his push for UN management reform. Again, his proposals were met with widespread resistance, especially by the G-77. The G-77 countries proved too attached to micro-managing the Secretariat and also attacked the reform proposals because they saw in them a US plot to weaken the influence of vast majority of poorer member countries in the United Nations.

While member states, the Security Council, corrupt companies, and the Secretariat all share the blame for the failures of the Oil-for-Food Program, the investigations of the Volcker Com-

mission brought to light Annan's weakness as a manager. Annan did not push hard enough to improve the Secretariat's management processes and organizational culture. During large parts of his tenure, he did not adequately support the "modernizers" in the Secretariat against the "traditionalists."⁶ Modernizers argue that the UN Secretariat needs to be more transparent and accountable to a broad range of internal and external actors. Modernizers advocate results-based management, an across-the-board application of merit-based principles, and personal accountability for failures and transgressions. Annan's failure to push sufficiently hard for the modernist agenda had severe consequences for the Secretariat, which has become much more than just an administrative unit to an intergovernmental platform for diplomacy. It is an increasingly field-based mechanism performing ever more complex and important tasks in areas such as humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. So it is all the more unfortunate that the Secretariat's resources and management processes, and the prevailing mentality of UN staff and the overall organizational culture, do not yet match the tasks at hand—a mismatch that, if anything, only grew worse during the Annan years. Toward the end of his second term, Annan with the help of Mark Malloch Brown, his Chef de Cabinet and then Deputy Secretary General, did lay out an ambitious vision for modernizing the Secretariat and its relationship with UN member states, but it is his successor Ban Ki Moon who must now carry out this agenda.

6) "Modernists Must Take Over the United Nations," *Financial Times*, January 24, 2005.

Charting the Future

Annan's tenure demonstrates both the potential and the weaknesses of the position of UN Secretary General. In fact, the Secretary General holds three jobs at the same time: the world's top diplomat; CEO of the world's most important and most troubled international bureaucracy; and secular pope entrusted to preach and protect the values of the UN Charter. Annan excelled as a secular pope, greatly increasing the moral standing and clout of the office. Until the very end, despite the many crises, audiences listened when Kofi Annan spoke. Annan championed human rights and development, and he was instrumental in adapting some of the key UN principles in security and development to the challenges of the new century. As the world's top diplomatic trouble-shooter, he was involved in defusing crises all over the world on a daily basis—something for which UN Secretary Generals tend to get little credit since this mainly happens below media's radar. But Annan's failures as a manager hold important lessons for his successor. Following the recent crises, the UN Secretariat is very much in the public spotlight. At no point during his tenure can Ban Ki Moon lose sight of managing and reforming the Secretariat.

Kofi Annan's tenure also clearly demonstrated the limits of what a UN Secretary General can do. If there are fundamental disagreements between key member states, especially in the areas of peace and security, the UN chief can do little to break the gridlock. At the same time, the Security Council often pushes the UN Secretary General to accept ill-defined man-

dates for UN peacekeeping missions. The new UN Secretary General should learn to say "no" when resources are overstretched and mandates remain unclear.

The bad news for the new UN Secretary General is that there is no indication that the 192 member states will behave any more responsibly than they did during Annan's tenure. There is a widening gap between the United States, other rich countries and the G-77, which could lead to a new cold war and leave the United Nations paralyzed once again.

During Annan's terms, both the United States and the G-77 countries often behaved irresponsibly, with the European Union mostly standing on the sidelines, unable to exert collective leadership. The divisions within the West that became apparent in the run-up to the Iraq war are here to stay. And the divisions between the West and the rest, let alone the in-fighting within the rest, are set to grow.

Furthermore, the challenges facing the United Nations are likely to increase in number and magnitude. Many of the current challenges that are here to stay, if not grow in importance, are proliferation, state failure, poverty, terrorism, pandemics, human rights abuses, and environmental degradation. The United Nations will be called upon to deal with these pressing global challenges—often without being given the proper resources, thus rendering references to the "international community" ever more hollow. The mass murder in Darfur provides a sad illustration of this.

The United Nations will confront another critical challenge in the coming decades: managing a peaceful transition to a multipolar world. A recent Annan biography is subtitled “The United Nations in the era of American world power.” Perhaps Ban Ki Moon’s biography ten years from now will be subtitled: “The United Nations in the era of emerging multipolarity.”

The UN faces the challenge of managing the transition to a multipolar world.

In this respect, China presents a key challenge. It will be crucial for the United Nations to get China to assume greater responsibilities in the provision of global public goods while mediating its relations with the present sole superpower.

In all this, the United Nations will remain an indispensable if highly imperfect world organization. Even though US conservatives are tempted to look at the United Nations as a mere “competitor in the marketplace for global problem-solving” (in the words of the then US Ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton) it is hard to identify other providers willing to take on the world’s most intractable problems—especially in peace and security. There is, however, a real danger that rich countries providing the bulk of the budget will reduce their contributions if the G-77 continues its obstructionist policies. This obstruction practiced by mostly illiberal UN members has led some to argue that

a new world organization made up exclusively of democracies should supplant the United Nations. While a caucus of democracies within the United Nations is a good idea, a world organization of just democracies could not supplant the United Nations. This would amount to the same as restricting diplomacy to friendly and like-minded countries—missing the very essence of the business of diplomacy. At the same time, the United Nations stands very much to profit from regional organizations serving as effective complements.

The United Nations will not run out of problems to tackle but it might well continue to lose credibility as an effective and accountable problem-solver—without there being any alternatives in sight. Ban Ki Moon would benefit from heeding Annan’s advice to develop “thick skin.” Ban Ki Moon will also do well to remain optimistic despite the enormous obstacles, as Annan did in fulfilling his duty as the world’s Sisyphus. Following in Annan’s footsteps, Ban Ki Moon expressed his hope “that the best days for our world organization have yet to come.” It remains to be seen whether member states will help to fulfill the new Secretary General’s hopes. Whenever member states get carried away wrangling over power, prestige, and pork, Ban should gently remind them that the UN Charter starts with “We the peoples” not “We the parochial power holders.”