The World Unites and Disunites: Someone Must Try to Keep It Together

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As World War II slowly ground to a close, the allied powers began plotting a new global architecture. A series of key meetings was held. Some were summits involving only the most powerful allies, as at Yalta in 1945 – which brought together for the last time Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin – and others involved all 44 allied states. Yalta stands out as the summit meeting that was entirely Realist and certainly cynical, as the Big Three divided Europe into zones of influence and occupation. All three leaders were comprehensively briefed, but to an extent the division was always going to be largely determined by control of the final battlefields. The race for Berlin and to occupy as much of Germany as possible resulted in what became known as West and East Germany until the fall of communism in 1989. However, the multilateralism of other meetings, although stamped by great power influence, did allow certain smaller power concerns to emerge. The foundation of what became the World Bank and IMF at the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944 could not avoid US economic power, without which there could have been no post-War multilateral financial order; but the 1945 San Francisco Conference to establish the United Nations had some interesting pushback from states that were not great powers – such as Australia.

The Australian ambassador at the San Francisco Conference, later a considerable academic writing on the character (and desirability) of a pluralist multilateral world, was John Burton. It was he who led the pushback against a Security Council originally proposed as having even greater powers than it now has. A Security Council was needed in the light of the often directionless League of Nations – a concert of great powers able to call the tune in times of crisis (assuming those great powers could agree on the tune), or at least a Council that reflected who had won the war, and who could determine among other things how not to lose what they had gained. Their interests would be inserted at the apex of the new organisation. Burton argued for a greater voice to be accorded the General Assembly. The new world architecture could not be so predicated on hegemony that emerging states, destined to grow dramatically in number, would not wish to join it.

In some ways, however, what was outstanding about the new UN was not its political and diplomatic centre-piece but its specialised agencies. UNESCO was in some ways a sop to the intellectual classes that had provided a normative rationale for war against Fascism, and now they had a chance to urge the end to war altogether on the assumption that 'since wars begin in the minds of men', the cultivation of those minds would lessen war.[1] It neatly avoided the power politics and state interests that determined the rationale, nature and extent of war in terms of gains and losses. Agencies to do with world health, world development, the extension of concern for refugees and labour practices all suggested a world architecture that was concerned with functional cooperation. However, it was a functionalism directed for the most part towards the newly developing states and, insofar as it was organised technical and economic assistance from the top down, it was also in the first instance an expression of hegemony.

The debate over the Security Council, its true reflection of a world decided as much if not more at Yalta than San Francisco, the debate over the meaning of the functional agencies, all suggested that no one at the outset supposed that the new position of UN Secretary-General could become a decisive office in international relations.

The Secretary-General and the Arab-Israeli conflicts

The personality and drive of the Secretary-General, especially in the light of imprecise language defining the position, is critical. But such qualities only work if the incumbent has impeccable judgement and secures allies. We have noted how the Commonwealth Secretary-General, later a rival of Perez de Cuellar in the race for the UN post, Shridath Ramphal, was able to be highly instrumental in the case of Zimbabwean independence. But both the Commonwealth and the UN positions are calibrated as senior international civil servants, at high ambassadorial level; and, while certainly free to exercise 'good offices' in acts of persuasion and negotiation, the Secretary-General is not meant to exercise executive, i.e. self-conceived and self-directed functions. The position's role has evolved, depending on how new forms of 'good practice' have become accepted as 'normal', or how far the great powers in the Security Council have consciously rolled them back. A constant tension has accompanied the relationship between UN Secretary-General and Security Council. In terms of extending new forms of 'good practice' until they become normal, the past-master has been Kofi Annan. He also was able to appoint his own Deputy Secretary-General and, in that way, build not only an internal support apparatus but, more importantly, the high Secretariat as a force in its own right, alongside the Security Council and General Assembly. However, the most activist and dynamic Secretary-General was Dag Hammarskjold – but he paid for this with his life.

Hammarskjold was the second of eight Secretaries-General up till 2016. It might be helpful to look at each of them against the backdrop of one of the most problematic parts of the world, the Middle East and particularly the Israeli state and its wars in the region.

Trygve Lie (Norway) was Secretary-General from 1946-52. His tenure coincided with the UN Mandate over Palestine which was meant to take over the Israeli independence process from the British Mandate. The UN officials complained that the British were far from cooperative and it is clear that, although UN figures worked very hard in a rapidly deteriorating situation, that what was already volatile would become dangerous and incendiary. Israel declared independence in 1948, and war with its Arab neighbours broke out. A comprehensive military victory was won by Israel, which in the process greatly enlarged its UN Mandate borders. The new borders were given the name, the 'green lines', meaning the lines of armistice agreed at the end of the war.

If Lie had been unable to prevent war, or the unilateral enlargement of Israel, Dag Harmmarskjold (Sweden, 1953-61) played a critical role in the diplomatic pressure against the 1956 Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of the Suez Canal. Granted he required strong US backing in the UN for his stand, but his definitive activism was clear. What he did not seek US backing for, or indeed any Security Council backing for, was the insertion of the first UN peacekeeping force in the Sinai, to stand between Egyptian and Israeli lines. He did this through the General Assembly – but no other Secretary-General has been able to bypass the Security Council on matters of peacekeeping. He himself received Security Council authorisation for the peacekeeping force sent to the Congo in 1960, as huge violence broke out on the independence of the former Belgian colony. But it was his work in the Congo, and the superpower conflict that was waged by proxy African parties and forces, that attracted fierce criticism. When his plane blew up over the northern Zambian city of Ndola, just south of the Congolese border, suspicions raged that it was an assassination – but no one has conclusively demonstrated whether it was the US or the Soviet Union that carried out the killing. The Zambians probably spoke for an emerging world that admired him. To this day, the shrine Zambia built to him, directly beneath where the plane exploded in the sky, is maintained – as is a mile of Swedish pines in every direction radiating outwards from the shrine.

His successor, U Thant (Burma, 1961-71), had a tenure that coincided with the 6 day 1967 war, in which Arab forces were again defeated, and the Egyptian military machine categorically demolished. There is much controversy over U Thant's role in the days building up to the war. Egypt's President Nasser had requested the withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping force in the Sinai. That, together with his massing of military might on his borders persuaded the Israelis that an Egyptian attack was imminent, and this led to the devastating Israeli pre-emptive strike. Whether U

Thant could have negotiated more forcefully with Nasser, whether he misunderstood Nasser, whether he could have withdrawn the UN force very slowly, are all questions after the fact. The 1967 war saw Israel once again expand its borders, particularly in Syria; and it conquered Sinai up to the Suez Canal and the West Bank up to the Jordan River. The last year of U Thant's tenure also saw the fierce conflict between Jordanian and Palestinian forces – the so-called 'Black September' war, when the Palestinians felt betrayed by the Jordanians – and the PLO was forced out to new exile headquarters in Beirut. In his entire Secretary-Generalship, when huge stakes were involved in the Middle East, U Thant was able to accomplish no decisive intervention.

Turmoil in the region, but also diplomatic breakthroughs, coincided with the Secretary-Generalship of Kurt Waldhein (Austria, 1972-81). However, none of these primarily involved Waldheim. The surprise attack by Egypt to regain the Sinai in 1973 was followed by a series of intensive negotiations that featured, above all, Henry Kissinger. President Sadat's historic and surprise visit to Jerusalem in 1977, the Jimmy Carter convening of Sadat and Begin at Camp David in 1978, featured no central role for the UN Secretary-General. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1978, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and its diplomatic fallout with the US, and the US-supported Iraqi attack on Iran in 1980 all essentially bypassed the best efforts of the UN Secretary-General. It was not as if Waldheim was idle. He and his office were simply not central to these world events.

Perez de Cuellar (Peru, 1982-91) was Secretary-General during the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982), the prelude to which saw a UN peacekeeping force repeatedly ignored and ineffectual as both Israeli and Palestinian forces transgressed what was meant to be a ceasefire. It was during his tenure that the first *intifada* broke out in 1987, and his term of office concluded as the first Gulf War erupted in 1991. The UN was involved as a site of intense diplomacy over this war, but the huge military coalition that retook Kuwait was led by the US. It was US diplomacy that persuaded even Syria to be part of the military effort to restore Kuwait as a Westphalian state.

Boutros Boutros Ghali (Egypt, 1992-6, apart from Trygve Lie and Dag Hammarskjold the only non two-term Secretary-General, largely because of his difficulties with the US) was in charge of the UN during the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995, but although the Accords were based on UN Security Council resolutions, Boutros Ghali was not a principal in those negotiations. Nor was Kofi Annan (Ghana, 1997-2006) a principal at the Clinton-brokered Camp David talks between Chairman Arafat and Prime Minister Barak, in an effort to salvage the Oslo Accords. The second *intifada* broke out in 2000 as a response to the failure of Camp David. Ban Ki Moon (Korea, 2006-16) coincided with the 2006 Lebanon war, and all three Gaza wars, 2008-9, 2012, 2014, without being able to influence the course of events in any of these.

The Security Council is the centre

None of this is necessarily to diminish the efforts of successive Secretaries-General – although some efforts and some Secretaries-General were better than others. But, despite the best efforts of probably the two greatest office-holders, Dag Hammarskjod and Kofi Annan, to enlarge the capacities and freedom of movement of their position, with a degree of success, neither could finally act as a free or executive agent, and both were beholden to the Security Council. The best a Secretary-General can hope for is to create and sustain an office that is, in some way – a nuanced way – able to help shape Security Council resolutions, and help drive their implementation.

Despite the apparent inabilities of the UN to solve all world problems, the Security Council has passed a huge number of resolutions addressing them. The Israeli-Palestine issue, and the principles that should shape any negotiated outcome – followed by the Oslo process – were prefigured in Resolution 242. However, having been passed in the Security Council with unanimity, it has hardly been the case that a Security Council member like the US has applied sustained or successful pressure on Israel to observe the principles of 242. So the derivative problem is not that the Security Council fails to act as a star-chamber multilateral body, but that bilateral diplomatic and political interests constrain or determine its members over and above multilateral agreements. Lip service is paid to the Resolution, without determination that it be the compulsory cornerstone of a Middle Eastern 'solution'.

The other problem of Security Council resolutions can lie in the wording. Resolution 1973 over Libya was just imprecise enough to permit NATO forces a free-rein in missile and aerial attacks on Gaddafi's regime. China and

Russia, as members of the Security Council, were furious over the licence the US and its allies extracted from the resolution – but perhaps should also have recalled, disciplined and sacked their ambassadors to the UN who let such imprecision and its possibilities slip through.

If the five permanent members with their veto rights find it hard (a) to police the world in an agreed manner and (b) find it hard to police one another – as in the case of Libya – what is to be made of the pressing question of whether to enlarge the permanent membership of the Security Council. After all, a star-chamber of the five victors of World War II, even with China now properly represented, is hardly representative of the full power structure of the world, and certainly not of its emerging configurations of power. Should there be a seat for a Middle Eastern state? If that is Saudi Arabia, what does that mean for the Saudi 'double game' of being simultaneously Westphalian and supportive of Islamic insurgencies against Westphalian states? If it is Saudi Arabia, what does that mean in terms of the Sunni-Shi'a divide in its grossest terms? What does it mean in terms of Iranian participation in international affairs? Should Africa have a permanent member? Who should it be? Until recently, the economically most powerful state was South Africa. In one year, it has slipped behind Nigeria and Egypt. But this slippage is based on terms of calculation. Basically, change the equations and you change the result. But, with such available imprecision, how is a choice made? And, if the permanent membership is enlarged, do all the new permanent members have the veto? The 'club' would be unwieldy and prone to paralysis then. But can you have a star-chamber with some permanent members enjoying greater powers than other permanent members? The new UN Secretary-General will have to advance possible ways forward on this issue – to the Security Council in the first instance.

The specialist agencies and high commissioners

Some of the deepest value of the post-War UN is the work of its specialised agencies. The work of the World Health Organisation (WHO), the UN Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the UN Development programme (UNDP), and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees accomplish huge good, and would have to be invented if they did not exist. If anything, these four agencies require considerable expansion and support.

More controversially, the work of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is valuable, not just as a defence of human rights *per se*, but because of the readiness of the High Commissioner even to criticise Security Council members. It is a key watchdog within the UN system of even the most powerful UN members. The High Commissioner's mandate derives from the General Assembly – and, if anything vindicates the stand taken by John Burton at the foundation San Francisco Conference of the UN, it is this.

The slow creep of 'normal' new powers

Dag Hammarskjold, under the so-called 'Peking Formula', a term derived from his work in securing the release of 17 US airmen held by China as a non-UN member, allowed the Secretary-General a free hand in the implementation of a peace and security mandate – although that mandate could not be created by himself for himself. Generally, it had to come from the Security Council. But this allowed an operational freedom, and creativity. In addition, Kofi Annan secured the right to appoint his own Deputy Secretary-General which, as noted above, allows the Secretary-General a degree of guaranteed support in his (or her) operational freedom and creativity. The Secretary-General is constrained by the demeanour of world politics, especially as it is developed by great power interests and veto rights. But sufficient room in which to manoeuvre becomes for the Secretary-General perhaps his (or her) greatest asset. The next Secretary-General, to be chosen in the second part of 2016, may come down to a nomination by the Security Council, for voting by the General Assembly, either of a candidate who is able and prepared to exercise creativity – or, as very often in the past – a candidate who can be trusted to make the right noises but not actually get in the way of the Security Council.

A meditation

It might be thought that the specialised agencies, like the predecessor organisations to the European Community and Union, concerned with functional and technical cooperation, could pave the way to closer political union in the United Nations. This cannot be the case. Firstly, the agencies are specialised outgrowths of a UN diplomatic and political

arrangement which is circumscribed. Some room for manoeuvre might be carved out, perhaps a lot of room from time to time, but only within this circumscription. Secondly, the agencies did not come first – even though some are carry-overs from the time before World War II, but they were suborned to, firstly the League of Nations, and then given their role in post-War life very much as instruments of the UN. They cannot develop a later political union out of coal and steel, as in the case of Europe. They are co-terminal with the parent body and will live and die as it lives and dies, or be subsumed into yet another successor organisation. Thirdly, the functional cooperation largely concerns actions and programmes to help the deprived world, or the disaster-hit world. It is not as if UNICEF has huge programmes to help homeless children in the US or UK. However, the US and UK contribute much money to UNICEF to help others. In short, there is no functional cooperation as such between rich and poor states. The agencies exist in a hierarchical 'functionalism', just as the Security Council exists in a hierarchical relationship to the General Assembly.

Having said that, the popularisation of the UN is such – including a plenitude of honorary 'Goodwill Ambassadors' for specialist causes, e.g. Angelina Jolie, David Beckham, Shakira, Jet Li – means that the UN has entered a public consciousness that cannot easily be eradicated or its functions and causes minimised. If Angelina Jolie speaks for refugees, even the most hard-hearted government must at least appear to listen to her on her visits, and echo at least her sentiments even if they do not create the programmes of assistance she espouses. When Barcelona Football Club wears UNICEF as a label on the first team shirts, and every fan's facsimile shirt – whether legal or rip-off – carries the same UNICEF label, that specialised agency and its work will become an international element of general knowledge. A curious populist horizontality has come to accompany the political hierarchy of the UN. We thus enter a curious moment in the organisation's history. The new Secretary-General may have greater constituency in his or her support than those who went before.

Note

[1] Richard Hoggart, *An Idea and its Servants: UNESCO from within*, Piscataway NJ: Transaction, 2011.

About the author:

Stephen Chan OBE was Foundation Dean of Law and Social Sciences at SOAS University of London, where he remains as Professor of World Politics. He has occupied many named chairs around the world, most recently the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Chair of Academic Excellence at Bir Zeit University in 2015, and the George Soros Chair of Public Policy at the Central European University in 2016. He was the 2010 International Studies Association Eminent Scholar in Global Development. As an international civil servant he helped pioneer modern electoral observation in Zimbabwe in 1980, worked in many post-conflict zones – where 'post' was a largely fictional if politic appellation – and continues to be seconded to many diplomatic initiatives around the world today. He is the author of *Meditations on Diplomacy: Comparative Cases in Diplomatic Practice and Foreign Policy* (2017).