

## **Assess the role of the UN Secretariat in the UN System**

### **Introduction**

Professionalism and efficiency are imperative to the success of United Nations Secretariat. In that capacity, the Secretariat is the bedrock upon which organisational cohesion is built within the United Nations System. Organisational cohesion is the result of effective, interdepartmental communication, shared principles and values and a universal commitment to the objectives of the United Nations. However, the neorealist character of the contemporary international system has oftentimes sidelined the role of the Secretariat in world affairs. As the UN's focal administrative organ, the Secretariat gathers large volumes of information covering not only the spectrum of activities within UN organs, but also information from diverse international issues. This abundance of information, centralised at the Secretariat, in addition to the recruitment of highly qualified international civil servants, equipped with expert knowledge over the internal and external dynamics of the UN System, has maximized the Secretariat's capacity to evolve into more than an administrative organ. Within recent years, the UN Secretariat has become increasingly important and influential, particularly with respect to the role it plays in advancing, leading and advocating for human rights - amongst other causes - in the UN System. This paper will seek to analyse the origins and evolution of the UN Secretariat in the UN System. Exploring how the relationship between the Secretariat and other UN organs has led to the augmentation of the role of the General Secretary to provide multilateral leadership to the United Nations. Essentially this paper will suggest that the UN Secretariat has four main roles in the UN System, the legislative role, the executive role, the administrative role and the rhetorical role. Headed by the UN Secretary-General, the Secretariat's legislative role lies in its capacity to assert modest influence, as a technocratic, advisory body, over the agendas and priorities of the Security

Council, the General Assembly, and the Economic and Social Council amongst other organs, subsidiary bodies and specialised agencies in the UN System. It plays a central executive role in the UN System leading many of the mandated agendas such as the Millennium Development Goals. Furthermore, the Secretariat manages many of the day-to-day administrative operations of the UN System with dedicated departments responsible for translation, meeting services, budgetary management and research. Finally, the power of rhetoric to shape norms is evident in the office of the Secretary-General as a “bully pulpit” informing, motivating and persuading the global orchestra of nations to act on issues of concern. In yet another scenario, the lines between the apolitical, independent, administrative role of the UN Secretariat, and its role as executive actor promoting, supporting and shaping the global ideals and ideas of the United Nations in a highly politicized international environment, are not always that clear; and to some extent present a paradox.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings and Empirical Repercussions**

This complicated conjunction between the four roles partially stems from the contemporary neorealist character of the international system that prompts dominant UN member states to often use — or rather abuse — the Secretariat as a global platform to legitimize and advance their own national interests, achieve absolute gains and assert their own interpretation thereof of UN values, so that they may become universally ‘normalised’. This overarching influence over the Secretariat and the UN System by powerful states - as the realist view would suggest - makes for a weak and ineffective international entity that merely serves the interests of dominant states - who would be sufficiently powerful even without such complex international institutions (Heywood, A. 2011 Pg. 444).

Furthermore, as a central organ in an international system, constructivists would argue that the UN is an arena of intersubjective values where both the Secretariat's

interpretation and administration of professed 'global ideals and ideas' cannot be so universally defined (Heywood, A. 2011 Pg. 444). The restructuring of the Secretariat's values and interests to conform to the agendas put forward by the General Assembly and the Security Council, attempts to search out universally held beliefs amongst member states, thus only advancing 'shared norms' further than would have been possible had the United Nations not been formed. However, the notion that powerful states constantly dominate the priorities of the UN agenda is mostly evident by the highly contested five permanent positions of the Security Council and their power of the veto. Thus, for such powers, the Secretariat plays an imperative legislative, executive, rhetorical and administrative role in defining 'normative values' in contemporary international relations. The various roles of the UN Secretariat can also further crystallize normative values, mobilising member state coalitions for the prevention of war, for economic and social welfare, and for sovereign trusteeship and emancipation - particularly in favour of smaller states.

Moreover, the tide of neo-liberalism in international affairs has prompted various competing geopolitical powers including the US, Russia, China and EU member states, amongst others, to cooperate together in order to pursue 'absolute gains'. Thus using UN organs and the Secretariat as a considerable instrument of foreign policy. Neoliberal institutionalism, furthermore, particularly favours the role of the UN as a global platform that provides a voice to smaller states on the international arena. It is through the international relations economic theory of absolute gains that states only vest interest in wielding tangible results as they pursue their nationalist interests in UN mandates and resolutions whilst disregarding 'gains' made by others. For instance, of the various executive challenges that have faced the Secretariat's administration of the Millennium Development Goals was persuading powerful states to commit to supporting projects that did not result in direct 'gains' to their own national interests. Eventually, as the Secretariat became in desperate need

of funding for the MDGs, finance ministers of the Group of Eight (now G7 with the suspension of Russia) met in 2005 and agreed to provide enough funds to the IMF, World Bank and the African Development Bank to cancel remaining multilateral debt from Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) to the UN. The estimated debt of the HIPC was estimated to range between \$40 and \$55 billion (Carrasco, McClellan, & Ro, 2007). However, small states would theoretically re-channel debt payments to achieve health and education targets of the MDG. Such cases emphasize the neorealist based policies of larger states.

As a result of the theoretical underpinnings and empirical repercussions of international diplomacy, the international community have clouded the modus operandi of the Secretariat in the UN System. The ambiguity behind defining the Secretariat's role has empowered the Secretariat as an independent actor with an executive, legislative, administrative and rhetorical role and simultaneously exploited the office as a tool for advancing specific domestic and nationalist agendas particularly by dominant actors in the UN system. Despite the ambiguity - further complicated by the various contextual frameworks of international relations - UN member states need to cooperate with, not abuse, the Secretariat's various roles. Only then can the Secretariat successfully advance the cornerstones of the UN's inter-subjective values: the promotion of global peace, human rights and sustainable development.

### **The UN Charter and Evolution of the Secretariat role in the UN System**

The relationship between the UN Secretariat and the UN System has expanded considerably since its foundation. Although the UN Charter does not explicitly detail the role of the Secretariat, many of the administrative, legislative and executive roles of the Secretariat are embedded in the UN Charter as discussed below. However, the lack of any emphasis on the Secretariat's role of 'rhetoric' in the UN Charter suggests that such a position

was merely an organic product of the evolution of the various other roles. As the Secretariat continues to administer various operational roles within the UN, it is important to acknowledge that the reach of the United Nations has also exponentially evolved over the last few decades into more than just the central UN organs and their prescribed functions. As a result, it is more accurate today to refer to the United Nations as a 'System'. Articles 57 and 63 of the UN Charter affirm to the affiliation of various specialised agencies founded by independent international agreements with the UN, plus newly created ones that specialise in responding to particular issues (Mingst, K., & Karns, M. 2012 Pg. 24). Chapter XV of the UN Charter details the capacity, composition, appointment, responsibilities, and the principles of impartiality embedded within the modus operandi of the Secretariat and the office of the Secretary-General. It certainly would have been impractical to establish a United Nations System without the role of the Secretariat. However, in examining the UN Charter it is unclear what specific intentions the founding members had for the UN Secretariat when it comes to leadership within the organisation. One thing was clear, that the General-Secretary should be "the chief administrative officer of the Organization" (UN Charter Art. 97). Responsible for leading, delegating and administering mandated operations through the Secretariat whilst preparing the budget amongst other organisational duties (now a dedicated sub-department within the Secretariat namely the United Nations Department of Management).

In relation to the Secretariat's executive role, Article 97 of the UN Charter gives an inkling of executive leadership assigned to the Secretariat by various organs through the Secretary-General, stating that she/he "shall perform such other functions as are entrusted to him by the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, and the Trusteeship Council" (UN Charter Art. 97). In addition to the apparent ambiguity of the terminology used, the Charter does not go on to define the roles and leaves 'other functions'

open to interpretation. The ambiguity has led to wide flexibility in the way the Secretariat has been able to affect resolutions through executive means.

Although the term legislation is generally used in the context of legal frameworks and jurisdictions governed by constitutional mandates - which of course is not the case in the United Nations - many of the UN resolutions bear immense legal repercussions that reverberate across member states. The Security Council, for example, has adopted a number of resolutions emphasizing the importance of issues in the context of women, peace and security (Security Council Resolution 1820 and 1325), children in armed conflict (Security Council Resolution 1612), and the safeguarding of civilians in armed conflict (Security Council Resolution 1674). In Puchala and Laatikainen (2007) book 'United Nations politics: International organization in a divided world', they suggest that it was specifically the evolution of the political role of the Secretariat today that was not anticipated — despite a glimmering of autonomy, embedded in Article 99 of the UN Charter (Puchala, D., & Laatikainen, K. 2007 Pg. 36). The Secretary-General's legislative role here is certainly emphasised in his capacity to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security” (UN Charter Art. 99).

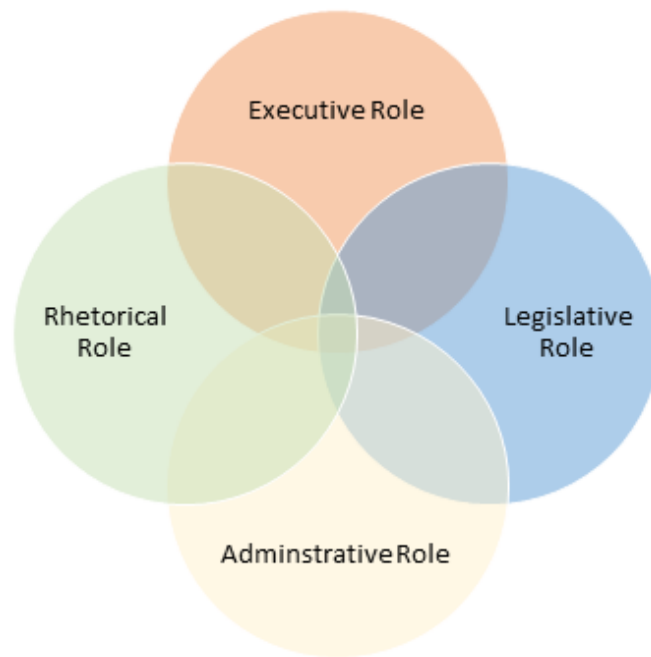


Figure 1.1 *The Four Roles of the UN Secretariat*

Having analysed the contextual frameworks underpinning the origins and the evolution of the UN Secretariat's four roles in the UN System, this section will (using empirical evidence) examine how each distinct role is balanced by the Secretariat to achieve desired ends in the UN System.

### **The Executive Role of the UN Secretariat in the UN System**

Since the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals at the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000, all 189 United Nations member states (now 193), and at least 23 international organisations, have committed to work with the UN Secretariat to support and fund the targets of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. The UN Secretariat had produced considerable results since, and although many of the results were dependent on input from member states, the vision and progress of the project was primarily lead by the Secretariat. The MDGs presented concrete evidence of a largely successful universal agenda put forward by the General Assembly, lead by the UN Secretariat and

administered by various UN member states, subsidiary bodies and specialised agencies. Not all the MDG have materialised, however the Secretariat was determined to accelerate stability, rule of law, poverty eradication and sustainability while concurrently presenting ideas, solutions, funding campaigns and extensive analysis to member states about the progress and the potential challenges ahead of 2015. While the Secretariat leads through over-all management, delegation, research and development of ideas on behalf of member states, the executive role of the Secretariat falls short in compelling member states to ensure the funding and implementation of the goals. Thus, although leading an executive role in an international system, the Secretariat cannot enforce policy. Despite that, the 2015 Millennium Development Goals displayed a dynamic, organic, relationship between the Secretariat and the member states. A balanced legislative-executive relationship between the General Assembly and the Secretary respectively, it is perhaps the delegation of responsibilities back to the Assembly that has created the gap for unachieved MDG results.

Furthermore, the executive role of the Secretariat also falls in the General-Secretaries appointment of special envoys. Special Envoys and Representatives range from public figures, to crisis- specific experts. For much of 2012, Secretary-General Kofi Annan, a notable champion of Human Rights, was the Special Representative for the United Nations for Syria. Special Envoy to UNSMIL, Bernardino Leon to mediate and negotiate a peace treaty for the impending Libyan civil conflict (UN Secretary General). Furthermore, the UN Secretariat also addresses thematic issues; in August 2014 it deployed David Nabarro as the Special Envoy for Ebola. His role, as a health expert, is to provide both policy and strategic direction to boost international response, and harness support for affected regions (Special Envoy on Ebola, 2014). Moreover, there are also Special Envoys of the Secretary-General for Children involved in - and affected by - Armed Conflict and for indigenous peoples amongst



various other crises around the world. Such is the diverse and extensive executive role of the Secretariat and Secretary-General in the UN System.

### **The Legislative Role of the UN Secretariat in the UN System**

Essentially the United Nations is a member states driven organisation, thus the Secretariat plays a chief role in facilitating the agendas of both the General Assembly and the Security Council who have the final say on the majority of resolutions, instructions and decisions within the Secretariat. Most of the agendas are usually raised from the secretariat and required from the perspective of different major challenges that present themselves both in the short and long term. Furthermore, there is an element of ideas and initiatives instituted from within the Secretariat and presented to the member states at the General Assembly and the Security Council as highlighted in Article 99 of the UN Charter.

This legislative role of the Secretariat partially developed as a result of the large influx of information gathered from across the UN System. The research department, the statistics department, amongst other offices and departments, and the highly qualified international civil servants, have all augmented the legislative role of the Secretariat. These factors have over time envisaged the technocratic, non-partisan, advisory and essentially the (indirect) legislative role of the UN Secretariat at the centre of UN agendas. When the Rwandan Genocide struck in 1994 and the international community failed to foresee the catastrophic genocide of the civil war, it was substantially a “legislative” failure from the part of the UN Secretariat, whose stats, research and deployed personnel on the ground deemed the conflict to be that of a sovereign, domestic nature and that an international response would not be necessary as there was supposedly no inclination of genocide (Weiss, & Forsythe 2014).

Moreover, while Kofi Annan identified Human Rights as one of the key issues of his administration, Ban Ki-moon early on highlighted global warming as a central theme of his tenure. Unlike most Secretary-General's inconspicuous support for human rights, Annan, “systematically, though cautiously, threw the full weight of his office behind human rights protection” (Weiss, & Forsythe, 2014, Pg. 204-207). The personality of the Secretary-General for this ‘legislative’ dimension of the Secretariat specifically (and also for other roles) can be particularly crucial. Although Ban Ki-moon has also spoken out on human rights issues in Libya, Côte d’Ivoire, Darfur and Syria, his non-confrontational character has made him less effective in using his bully-pulpit to campaign against violations of human rights to the same level of his predecessor, usually awaiting public stances by major powers before taking a stance himself. However, Ban Ki-moon continues to be a major advocate of environmental protection and global warming. He has made the issue a central theme of the UN Secretariat since his inauguration (Weiss, & Forsythe, 2014, Pg. 204-207). Speaking before the UN General Assembly in 2007, Ban Ki-moon stressed his concerns about the externalities of global warming, “For my generation”, Ban stated, “the coming of age at the height of the Cold War, fear of nuclear winter seemed the leading existential threat on the horizon. But the danger posed by war to all humanity, and to our planet, is at least matched by climate change” (Lynch, 2007). Ban Ki-moon did not limit his capacity to influence legislation in the UN System alone; he further lobbied individual member states, particularly major powers to adopt reform majors to tackle global warming. In a White House meeting with the US President Bush, Ban urged him to enact measure that would curb greenhouse gas emissions (Ki-moon, B. 2012).

## **The Administrative Role of the UN Secretariat in the UN System**

The UN Secretariat runs the bureaucracy of the UN System. It has nineteen departments and offices (including one in Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi) many of which are dedicated to a variety of administrative services that ensure the smooth day-to-day management of duties, meetings and conferences, translation services, amongst other tasks in the United Nations System. Within such a vast administrative scope, the Secretariat's power lies in its ability to provide administrative reform across the organisational structure of the UN System proposing the addition, removals and creation of entities that serve a variety of purposes within the UN System. The topic of reform dominated much of Kofi Annan's administration.

*Delivering as One* is perhaps of Annan's most remarkable administrative reform initiatives in the UN System. The 2005 UN Secretariat report issued by a UN panel under the guidance of the Secretary-General, explored administrative and operational reforms in the UN System to develop coherent and effective results in areas of development, the environment and humanitarian assistance across the world. The report was released in November 2006, setting out a program that developed a series of reforms in the international humanitarian system. It centered on four main principles: One Programme, One Leader, One Budget and One Office (UNDP, 2014).

There have been many administrative reform efforts through the UN Secretariat, notably the *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peacekeeping* in 2000 (also known as the Brahimi Report) - that sought to review and improve the peace and security activities of the UN - to the 2005 *In Larger Freedoms* presented a five-year progress report on the implementation of the 2000 Millennium Declaration. Annan displayed an exceptional, unprecedented, set of initiatives and a strong dedication to improving the UN's administrative system through the Secretariat's comprehensive review of governance and oversight in the

UN, released in 2006. Annan streamlined all UN Development Agencies and Specialized Programmes working on International development issues, under a single United Nations Development Group, chaired by the Administrator of the UNDP (Annan, 1997). Evident from the activities of Annan that there remains potential for administrative reform through the UN Secretariat and particularly through the leadership of the General-Secretary.

### **The Rhetorical Role of the UN Secretariat in the UN System**

At the onslaught of the War in Iraq in 2003 there had been serious legal debates at the United Nations Security Council surrounding the invasion of Iraq by the US Bush administration specifically, and the Doctrine of pre-emptive war in general. On September 16th, 2004, Kofi Annan stated in an interview that the invasion "was not in conformity with the UN Charter. From our point of view, from the Charter point of view, it was illegal" (BBC News, 2004) This statement using the power of rhetoric at the Secretariat had major diplomatic repercussions with many foreign policy analysts and academics swiftly coming to criticize the General-Secretary for his remarks. "The UN Secretary-General's gratuitous comments were an extraordinarily undiplomatic and inappropriate intervention from a world figure who is supposed to be a neutral servant of the international community (Phillips and Gardiner, 2004). The rhetorical role is foreseen by the General-Secretary's personality and ability to advance his administration's priorities through the UN Secretariat's bully pulpit - precisely it is the General Secretary's institutional capacity to raise concerns directly to member states and influence resolutions and agendas as a result of his or her rhetorical activity and international, institutional leadership. Certainly it does not derive any legitimacy from any articulation of function in the UN Charter, any General Assembly resolution or Security Council mandate. Rather, it comes from the fact that the Secretary-General is the figurehead and chief administrative officer of the United Nations Secretariat. Indeed the independence of

the UN Secretariat is now taken for granted in the UN System and amongst member states as the Secretariat continues to undertake executive, legislative and administrative practices. With the diverse backgrounds of member states, many of the positions taken by the Secretary-General today are regarded as partisan as they align with certain member states and not others (The Bully Pulpit, 2007). Perhaps more important than questioning the stance of the Secretariat on various issues is the question of whether the Secretariat should have any stance at all. However, no member state is prepared to put such a question on the UN agenda, mainly because the repercussions of such a question would reverberate across other executive and legislative roles of the Secretariat but also would involve limiting the potential for administrative reform throughout the UN System (The Bully Pulpit, 2007). Despite the complexity of the issue however, and because of the elaborate theoretical nature of the international system, academics need to incorporate such debates in to the discourses of UN reform initiatives.

### **Conclusion - All together**

Thus the relationship between the UN Secretariat and the UN System is two-way, and presents several challenges in the interpretation, architecture and execution of mandated agendas to - and proposed solutions from - the Secretariat. Decisions from member states presented through the General Assembly always precede or override that of the Secretariat's stance. The Secretariat concurrently has a duty to ensure that the ideals and ideas in the Charter of the United Nations are upheld in all its work. Here the conundrum arises, and paradoxes of the roles are evident as result. The Secretariat's leadership is continually challenged with the interpretation of United Nations ideals. However, this system of checks and balances between the Secretariat, as a firm defender of the ideals and the founding principles entailed in the UN Charter, and its relationship with member states through various

organs, ensures that democratic values remain one of the universal and indivisible core principles of the United Nations. And although the United Nations Charter includes no mention of the word “democracy”, the diverse nature of values and forms of governance within the international system and amongst the 193 member states of the UN continuously challenge each Secretariat's interpretation of democratic values, how it seeks to preserve peace or the frameworks it adopts to establish peace building measures in post-conflict societies. This is akin to a constructivist argument, one that strongly illuminates the challenges and the paradox found within the leadership of the Secretariat and its relationship with member states In the United Nations. Finally by raising questions and offering preliminary observations about how the UN Secretariat interacts with - and shapes the - various dynamics and composition of the United Nations, the paper has attempted to provide an introduction to the conceptual framework upon the which scholars can systematically evaluate the paradoxical roles of the UN Secretariat in the UN System.

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