

### Secretary or General?



by Jayantha Dhanapala

There are two contrasting job descriptions of the post of Secretary-General (SG) of the United Nations which falls vacant at the end of this year. One is by the first incumbent of this position, Trygve Lie of Norway, who famously called it "the most impossible job in the world". The other is by the first, and so far only, Asian SG - U Thant of Myanmar (formerly Burma) - who wrote, "The Secretary-Generalship is not the most impossible job in the world, although it is certainly one of the most difficult. It is without any question one of the most rewarding."

It would be all too facile and fallacious to draw conclusions from this contrast. It is not a question of hardheaded Western pragmatism versus philosophical Eastern equanimity. Both men worked at the UN during the Cold War era. Trygve Lie was forced to resign because of Soviet antagonism while U Thant declined unanimous offers of a third term. Was it because U Thant was content to be more Secretary than General or was he a more consummate diplomat harmonizing the competing interests of the two super-powers of the time?

Today, times have changed. The Cold war is over. Yet we do have the countervailing imperatives of a unipolar world on the one hand, with one super power possessing an accumulation of military, political, economic and 'soft' power on a global scale that is unprecedented in human history. On the other hand, we have a globalized world of rising expectations in a highly integrated political and economic world order where multilateralism is an indispensable foreign policy option for the mighty and the meek and for the rich and the poor. At the apex of this multilateral system is the 61 year old United Nations politically paralyzed when the Permanent Five of the Security Council (P5) disagree - as in the case of Iraq in 2003 - but remarkably effective when they do agree. Based on universally shared values the UN has set and monitored the implementation of norms in a wide range of fields from human rights to international trade. It has been at the forefront in peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, development policy and many other areas affecting the daily lives of people.

So how important is the choice of the next SG of this world body that everybody wants to reform? Some loudly lament the absence of a formal job description. Do we make the incumbent more effective by spelling out his complex duties? How many incompetent Presidents or unpopular Prime Ministers would have performed better if their written or unwritten constitutions had fleshed out their functions? Do the times determine the job or does the jobholder influence the manner in which the duties are discharged? What qualifications and experience are we looking for or is it, as one veteran UN observer has recently written, mainly a matter of "character and potential"? And if so how do you judge that? By common consent no one has enlarged the scope and stature of the job as much as Dag Hammarskjold (1953-61) did. Was his exemplary character pre-judged? Succeeding him, U Thant (1961-71) brought the UN into calmer waters despite the Vietnam War focussing on what the UN can do rather on what it could not. Was it foreseen that he would be the SG that he turned out to be?

Then there is the procedure for the election on which many views have been expressed. Should it be more transparent and should not the General Assembly have more control? Should the candidates present manicured manifestos and engage in a US Presidential campaign style extravaganza or should they be shrinking violets waiting coyly in the wings

till the call comes?

All pertinent questions. Today, those disillusioned by the sullied reputation of the UN seek a Superman as the next SG. The media speculates wildly about past Presidents and current Prime Ministers forgetting that those elected on national mandates are more likely to be Generals than Secretaries. The UN system has already had many such square pegs in round holes. Perhaps what the UN needs today is what it has always needed - a SG who is a tried and tested diplomat with versatility and gravitas derived from experience, a flexible and modest temperament and the limitless patience of a consensus builder. We need someone who will be more of a steady moral compass than a flamboyant political weathercock. History has proved that the Charter's Article 100 requirement for impartiality is more achievable with the citizens of smaller countries with the least amount of accompanied national baggage of territorial and other disputes in their international relations. We need a strong manager who will delegate and yet be finally the person where the buck stops. And yes - even if it is an oxymoron - we need a practical idealist.

The limitations of the job are well known. 192 sovereign states are unlikely to yield more power or latitude to the office of the SG. Nor will the Security Council be persuaded to act speedily however often and urgently the SG draws their attention to situations threatening international peace and security under Article 99. Resources will remain unpredictable and limited. Smooth relations with the host country and largest contributor to the Budget are a sine qua non. The SG will remain the lightning conductor when things go wrong whether it is because of what the Security Council, General Assembly or some other part of the complex UN system did or did not do.

The choice will be made in a few weeks. Already some transparency in the process is evident as candidates are scrutinized by civil society and the media. And yet doubts remain about the process. Will new candidates enter the race dodging critical appraisal? Will the choice be made on the basis of realpolitik among the P 5? Will bilateral relations and the propensity for building strategic partnerships, enhanced economic investment, aid and trade between the voter country and the voted individual's state be the criteria? Or will it be confined to the record of achievements and proven abilities of the candidates? Only time will tell.

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