

THE NEXT UN SECRETARY-GENERAL'S SECURITY AGENDA

Richard Gowan

THE NEXT Secretary-General of the United Nations will face three daunting strategic tasks on taking office on January 1st, 2017. The first will be to navigate the geopolitical tensions between the United States, Russia, and China that have poisoned—and sometimes completely paralyzed—Security Council diplomacy in recent years.

The second will be to redesign the UN's political and peacekeeping missions in the Arab world, which has been strained almost to the breaking point by the crises in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya.

The third will be to chart the future of the UN's peace operations in Africa, which involve over 80,000 soldiers and police officers. These missions have

made a huge contribution to stabilizing the continent, but have lost credibility due to sexual abuse scandals and the failure to handle crises, such as the collapse of South Sudan in 2013.

This is a fearsome “to do” list. UN officials say that they cannot recall a period in which they have had to deal with so many vicious crises at once. As current Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has emphasized, the UN cannot really make progress in the Middle East and Africa while the Security Council remains divided.

Yet before believers in multilateral diplomacy succumb to despair, it is worth remembering that the UN has actually had to deal with similar combinations of crises since its foundation in 1945. While the Organization has

Richard Gowan is Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations and teaches at Columbia University. He was previously at NYU's Center on International Cooperation, where he remains an affiliate. You may follow him on Twitter @RichardGowan1.



UN peacekeepers on the move

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gone through periods of inaction and exhaustion, previous Secretaries-General have also found ways to alleviate great power tensions, manage small wars, and keep the UN going against the odds.

If the next holder of the top UN post is willing to learn from his or her predecessors, take diplomatic risks with Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, and overhaul UN peace operations to confront contemporary threats such as transnational terrorism, the Organization can still have a central role in maintaining global security.

PREVIOUS SUCCESSES

The current mixture of East-West tensions, chaos in the Middle East, and recurrent violence in Africa strikingly echoes the geopolitical tensions that shaped the UN in the first two decades of its history after World War II.

In the later 1940s and 1950s, mounting frictions between the West and the Soviet Union threatened to render the UN useless very quickly. The USSR forced out the first full-time Secretary-General, Norway's Trygve Lie, on the grounds that he was too close to the Americans. Yet Lie's successor, Dag

Hammarskjöld of Sweden, established the UN as an adaptable mechanism for managing Cold War conflicts.

In 1955, he flew to the People's Republic of China (then excluded from the UN) to negotiate the release of American airmen captured during the Korean War. And shortly thereafter, in 1956, he oversaw the launch of the first full-scale UN military peacekeeping operation, the UN Emergency Force (UNEF), to help defuse the Suez Crisis.

The success of UNEF set the stage for further blue helmet missions in the 1950s and early 1960s. Many deployed to countries where the UN still has a presence today—including Lebanon, Yemen, and the newly independent Congo. Managing these operations put Hammarskjöld under great strain, and the USSR, in particular, turned against him, once again feeling the UN was too close to the Americans. By the time Hammarskjöld died in an air crash during shuttle diplomacy over the Congo in 1961, Moscow was calling for the post of Secretary-General to be abolished and replaced by a troika of officials answerable to the great powers.

Nonetheless, the Swede had shown that the UN could help the great powers manage their differences, and

stop major crises such as Suez escalating into full-scale conflicts. The administration of U.S. President John F. Kennedy quietly asked Hammarskjöld's successor, U Thant, to help pass messages to the Soviets during the 1962 Cuban Missile crisis. And both Moscow and Washington regularly turned to UN forces to police ceasefires between Israel and its neighbors during the 1960s and 1970s.

Nobody imagined, however, that the UN could resolve the central crises of the Cold War. The USSR ensured the UN was kept out of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, for example, while the United States was irritated by Thant's efforts to promote peace in Vietnam.

But the UN provided a helpful framework for at least de-escalating crises that would have otherwise upset the overall balance of power.

The UN's role expanded in the last decade of the Cold War, as Moscow and the West turned to it to help clear up the proxy wars that had proliferated across the developing world. In the early 1980s, Secretaries-General Kurt Waldheim and Javier Pérez de Cuéllar undertook delicate diplomatic work with Moscow to discuss the terms for a Soviet withdrawal from Afghani-

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stan. Although these efforts took years to come to fruition, UN observers were ultimately on hand to monitor the Soviet withdrawal in 1988 and 1989.

In the years that followed, UN peacekeepers also helped to wind down Cold War battles such as those in Namibia and Cambodia. The general success of these missions led the Security Council to place too much faith in peacekeeping, paving the way for ill-fated deployments in Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda.

The grotesque failures of those operations eclipsed the UN's role in both managing and ending the Cold War. The Organization recovered in the late 1990s and 2000s, launching a series of ambitious new peace operations in cases ranging from Kosovo and East Timor, to Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. At the same time, high-level crises continued to roil the Security Council, as over Iraq in 2003.

Overall, however, UN diplomacy was far less antagonistic than during the worst years of the Cold War.

WHERE WE STAND

The Organization and its leaders have recently had more time to focus on promoting uplifting global

projects—such as the Millennium Development Goals and the fight against climate change—rather than managing major power frictions.

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However, the Arab revolutions—and in particular the Libyan and Syrian crises—have marked a partial return to an older style of great power politics at the UN. It is worth emphasizing that things are

still by no means as bad as they were in the darker days of the Cold War. The media frequently laments the uselessness of the Security Council over Syria, with considerable justification. But the Security Council remains unusually active by historical standards. It passed 64 resolutions in 2015. By contrast, it passed exactly one in all of 1959.

Nonetheless, the diplomatic process of Syria has presented a fundamental challenge to the UN crisis management system, as a series of envoys—Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi, and Staffan de Mistura—have struggled to balance American and Russian interests, both inside and outside the Security Council. Each envoy has had to spend as much, or more, time trying to foster a minimum of consensus between Washington and Moscow (and to some extent Beijing, London, and Paris) as dealing with the Syrian players themselves.

Ban Ki-moon has often seemed ill-prepared for this sort of great power wheeling and dealing, making sincere—if largely hopeless—appeals to all sides to recognize the suffering they are causing. Ban likewise has found himself unable to achieve much to ease the Ukrainian crisis, although he flew to Moscow for consultations with President Vladimir Putin early in the conflict. Partly this is due to a staffing issue: there are no specialists on Russia in the Secretary-General's office and the UN is no longer able to rely on high-powered mediators such as former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, who could draw on an in-depth knowledge of Russia during a crisis.

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FLAWS AND RELEVANCE

If recent crises have demonstrated flaws in the UN's diplomatic setup, they have also highlighted questions about the relevance of its peacekeeping missions to current and future conflicts.

Over the last 15 years, the UN has become reasonably proficient at deploying large—if often poorly-equipped—missions to deal with conflicts in Africa. But it has neither the experience nor the operational doctrines necessary to tackle the sort of wars that are spreading across the Middle East and North

Africa today, involving transnational terrorist groups willing to target peacekeepers with roadside bombs and other asymmetric tactics.

The current UN mission in Mali has lost over 50 troops to such attacks in the last three years, while Islamist extremists based in Syria have taken UN observers hostage in the Golan Heights.

Yet diplomats have seriously considered deploying UN forces to Syria (where a small blue beret mission tried, and failed, to monitor a ceasefire in 2012), Libya, and Yemen.

UN officials repeatedly warn that the Organization is not ready for such challenges. A blue ribbon panel convened by Ban Ki-moon last year concluded that UN missions “lack the specific equipment, intelligence, logistics, capabilities, and specialized military preparation required” to tackle terrorists. Yet it remains possible—or even probable—that the Security Council will mandate UN missions in the Middle East and North Africa over the next few years in the face of terrorist threats, and the Secretary-General and UN Secretariat will have to obey.

FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGE

Indeed, the fundamental strategic challenge for the next Secretary-General will be to combine (i) more effective diplomacy with Russia, Washington, and other major powers to find mutually acceptable answers to crises in the Middle East and North Africa, with (ii) innovative thinking about how UN forces can adapt to operating in that risky region without incurring unsustainable casualties or simply hiding in their bases.

To frame this in terms of UN history, the optimal successor to Ban Ki-moon would have the type of diplomatic skills that Javier Pérez de Cuéllar demonstrated at the end of the Cold War, while also taking the sort of operational risks that Dag Hammarskjöld displayed in launching UN peacekeeping.

This is undeniably a tall order. Nonetheless, the next Secretary-General will only be able to get a serious diplomatic hearing from the big powers if he or she has fresh ideas about stabilizing the Arab world—and will not be able to do very much in that region without strong political backing from the big powers.

THE NEXT SG

How might an incoming Secretary-General address these issues? Diplomatically, a simple step would be to boost the UN's ranks of experts on Russia and China.

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It could, for example, be a smart move to recruit a senior German diplomat with experience of parlaying with Moscow over Ukraine into the UN to manage day-to-day relations with Russia. The new Secretary-General could also form a small planning team specifically tasked with generating fresh approaches to security issues in the Middle East and North Africa—looking beyond the short term work of the UN envoys already in the region—to provide intellectual ammunition for a new round of discussions aimed at bridging divides between the United States, Russia, and regional powers.

Rethinking UN military operations to tackle the challenges of the Middle East and North Africa would require a much bigger institutional effort. Despite their doubts about counterterrorism operations, UN officials have learned some hard lessons from the current missions in Mali and the Middle East about handling asymmetric threats.

The UN has also begun to take seriously intelligence-gathering—long a taboo subject in peacekeeping circles. It has, additionally, started to experiment with technologies like drones, while the United States and other advanced militaries have offered help on basic issues such as dealing with roadside bombs.

These are all small but significant steps towards readying UN operations for potential future mis-

sions in places such as Syria and Libya. Some peacekeeping experts have argued that the UN should draft an explicit stabilization doctrine or strategy based on light-weight, information-driven missions as an alternative to its more traditional and slow-moving missions in places such as South Sudan.

Nobody—as one veteran peacekeeping official jokes—believes that we will ever see UN commandos wearing light blue ski masks leaping out of white helicopters to bump off terrorists in the dead of night. But well-equipped, well-informed, and fast-moving UN operations could do a better job of protecting vulnerable communities from terrorist attacks and make it harder for terrorist networks to set up bases in ungoverned spaces.

ACHIEVING THE VISION

Given the widespread doubts about moving in this direction inside the UN system, it would take an extremely determined early political push by the next Secretary-General—with the very explicit backing of the Security Council—to make progress towards such an ambitious new vision of stabilization.

Achieving this vision might also mean looking outside the current UN peace-

keeping system for guidance and ideas on high-intensity operations. Dag Hammarskjöld's concept for UNEF during the Suez crisis was, after all, largely worked out by Canadian planners.

A future Secretary-General's thinking on stabilization missions might equally draw on advice from members of the Se-

curity Council and concerned Member States. NATO members—which largely avoided UN missions after the Bosnian fiasco—are gradually deploying more troops under the UN flag in places such as Mali, as they realize that blue helmet operations have a role to play in protecting Europe from terrorist threats emanating from the fragile states around the Mediterranean. A new generation of UN stabilization missions could emerge with their assistance.

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In a best case scenario, a diplomatically talented and operationally innovative UN Secretary-General could thus position him or herself as a trusted channel for diplomatic problem-solving among the big powers—and new UN operations in the Middle East and North Africa could prevent new crises emerging in the region.

The alternative is to consign the UN to irrelevance, at least in terms of great power politics. This would not necessarily mean that the Organization would not continue to be a useful platform for climate change diplomacy or pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals. But the UN's global credibility has already suffered severely due to the Security Council's inaction over Syria.

If the next Secretary-General cannot cajole the main members of the Security Council into greater cooperation over crises in the Arab world, it will also be increasingly difficult for UN humanitarian agencies to care for the growing numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons in the region.

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aging the continuing fallout from the Arab revolutions.

At the same time, he or she will not be able to shrug off the UN's existing security responsibilities elsewhere—especially in sub-Saharan Africa—where peacekeepers try to maintain order in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Darfur, while also supporting the African Union (AU) stabilization

mission in Somalia. It must be stressed that the UN has reasons to be proud of its role in guiding many African countries—such as Sierra Leone and Liberia—from anarchy to stability over the last 15 years. More recently, the UN also played a central part in managing the fight against Ebola in West Africa.

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But many of its remaining missions on the African continent face deep-seated problems. These include repeated revelations of sexual abuse by the blue helmets. This problem appears to be especially deep in Central African Republic, but is sadly much more widespread. Periodic outbursts of violence—such as those that regularly destabilize the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic Congo—often find UN forces unable or unwilling to protect civilians. Officials

from the African Union (AU) and many African governments increasingly see the UN as too passive and slow in dealing with fresh crises.

The UN cannot and should not walk away from Africa. But the next Secretary-General must be ready to ask probing questions about the UN's approach to crisis management and peacebuilding on the continent.

African governments have invested heavily in security in recent years: *The Economist* has calculated that overall military spending on the continent increased by two-thirds in the last decade. AU officials say that they are ready and able to take the lead in more peace operations of their own. They are sometimes overambitious, as the AU's failed threat to intervene in Burundi to halt spiraling violence in late 2015 demonstrated. African forces still need help on planning, logistics, and managing discipline problems of their own.

But a bold UN Secretary-General should see the AU's ambitions as an opportunity to build upon. Rather than insist that the UN should be in the lead in future peace operations on the continent, it could specifically offer to support African-led operations (as it

already does in Somalia) and help build up the AU's capacities as a strategic priority. Ban Ki-moon has already taken steps in this direction—praising the AU as the “UN's key regional partner”—and his successor should similarly look for new ways to boost the AU.

REALISM AND HUMILITY

Doing so could give the Secretary-General and his team additional time and political space to focus on the inter-linked problems of great power tensions and instability in the Middle East.

Realism and humility are necessary here. The best-prepared and best-connected Secretary-General could take all the proposed steps to handle the problems outlined

above and still find it impossible to master geopolitical tensions.

Even the best Secretaries-General often struggle to keep on top of the challenges they face. While Hammarskjöld is rightly lauded for his performance in the Suez crisis, he was initially doubtful that a UN peacekeeping operation would work, and broke down in tears in front of the British ambassador at one especially tense moment. While Pérez de Cuéllar could be effective behind the scenes, he also vented his frustration with the big powers in public, complaining that the

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Security Council's frequent “debate without effective action” threatened to plunge the world into a “new international anarchy” in the early 1980s.

But as we have seen, Hammarskjöld was able to mitigate the dangers of the early Cold War in the mid-1950s, and Pérez de Cuéllar facilitated its end three decades later. In a new period of international tension, a new Secretary-General should take inspiration from these distant predecessors and look to play a central role in containing global crises through personal diplomacy,

fresh UN operations, and all other means available.

This is likely to be an exhausting, and only an ever partially and intermittently successful, endeavor.

But as the Secretaries-General who navigated the Cold War knew, half-decent international cooperation and crisis diplomacy is better than none; and for all its limitations, the UN has a unique capacity and inherent duty to help keep big power tensions in check—however daunting they may appear. ●

