
CFR Backgrounders

The Role of the UN Secretary-General

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Introduction

The United Nations' first secretary-general, Trygve Lie, called it the most difficult job in the world—an observation shared by most of his [successors](#). Some of the difficulty lies in the job description itself. Though U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, several years before the UN's creation, saw the secretary-general's role as that of a "world moderator," the UN charter refers to it as the body's "chief administrative officer." Each of the nine secretaries to date has tended to favor one of these roles.

Kofi Annan, for example, considered an activist, "world moderator"-style secretary-general, won a Nobel Prize for encouraging global cooperation on peace, but he was criticized for his management of the UN's Oil for Food program in Iraq and other issues. His successor, Ban Ki-moon, more of an administrator by temperament, faced criticism for weak results in pushing forward his agendas on climate change and ending global poverty. Ban's successor and the incumbent in the role, Antonio Guterres—a former prime minister of Portugal—[won support for the role](#) in part for his work as chief of the UN refugee agency at a time of global crisis on this issue. Despite the challenges that each of the secretaries-general have faced to date, what appears to be constant is the ambiguous nature of the position itself—a role bifurcated between the tasks of "secretary" and "general," and almost always more the former than the latter.

What does the UN secretary-general do?

The [UN Charter](#) described the secretary-general broadly as the international body's "chief administrative officer." Beyond that, the type of leader needed, how to select the candidate, and the person's length of tenure were left [open to interpretation](#), writes Brian Urquhart, a former UN undersecretary-general, in *Foreign Affairs*. The UN website describes the secretary-general's role as ["equal parts diplomat and advocate, civil servant and CEO."](#)

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The secretary-general is required to uphold the values of the UN, even at the risk of challenging member states. For example, Annan, in 1999, during the escalation of tensions between ethnic Serbs and Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo, [famously stated](#), "No government has the right to hide behind national sovereignty in order to violate human rights." Nevertheless, in the book *Secretary or General*, Simon Chesterman and Thomas M. Franck say office holders are sometimes treated as "an errand boy and punching bag," expected to be at once an independent political force and a public servant.

Despite the broad and vague requirements of the job, some informal norms are observed in appointments for the post. **Secretaries-general** usually come from countries considered small- to medium-sized neutral powers, are career diplomats, and customarily serve no more than two five-year terms. Although a national from an Eastern Europe country has yet to hold the seat, regional rotation is observed, with the five permanent members of the Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—customarily avoiding nominations of their nationals.

Does the secretary-general play a political role?

Yes. Article 99 of the UN Charter says the secretary-general "may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security." This provision allows a secretary-general to choose between playing an activist role, in the tradition of Dag Hammarskjöld, a Swedish diplomat who died when his plane crashed on route to cease-fire negotiations in Northern Rhodesia, or more of a bureaucratic role, as did Austria's **Kurt Waldheim**. **Ban called on Annan**, his activist predecessor, to serve as a joint special envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on the Syrian crisis. The secretary-general has the ability to address both the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council to tackle major international challenges or threats. Stephen Schlesinger, a UN expert and former director of the World Policy Institute, says the job can serve as a "perch" used "to rally world public opinion around issues that wouldn't necessarily have been addressed otherwise."

What are the main responsibilities of the secretary-general?

- *Administrative.* The secretary-general oversees the **UN Secretariat**, which handles UN operations, including research, translation, and media relations. The Secretariat—the UN's executive office—has a staff of close to nine thousand people from about 170 countries. Each secretary-general has handled his administrative responsibilities differently. Hammarskjöld established a system of offices in charge of legal, political, personnel, and budgetary aspects of the secretariat. Boutros Boutros-Ghali streamlined the system by adding under secretaries-general to oversee operations and report back. During Annan's administration, the deputy secretary-general position was created to handle day-to-day operations.
- *Human resources.* The secretary-general appoints under-secretaries for approximately fifty UN posts, including the heads of funds such as **UNICEF** and **UNDP**. The hiring process involves lobbying from members to fill posts with their nationals, highlighting the secretary-general's role of negotiating with the Security Council and **General Assembly** to ensure broad regional representation.
- *Peacekeeping.* The secretary-general's office oversees peacekeeping missions and appoints the **under secretary** in charge of that department, involving sixteen operations worldwide as of early 2017. Although the General Assembly or Security Council may initiate a peacekeeping mission, operational control rests with the Secretariat.
- *Mediation.* As part of his "good offices" role, the secretary-general makes use of his independence and impartiality as the head of a global organization to prevent or stop the spread of conflict. Examples of UN leaders taking on mediation roles in the past include Hammarskjöld's promotion of an armistice between Israel and Arab states and Javier Perez de Cuellar's negotiation of a cease-fire to end the Iran-Iraq War. The secretary-general also appoints envoys charged with brokering peace deals. Such envoys report to the Security Council and their appointments can be influenced by the preferences of its powerful members. In February 2017, for example, the United States objected to Secretary-General Guterres's

appointment of former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad as envoy to Libya, raising the question of whether such appointments must be approved by the Security Council even though the UN Charter gives the secretary-general the authority to make them, says Megan Roberts, associate director of CFR's International Institutions and Global Governance program.

How is the secretary-general appointed?

The Security Council recommends a candidate for the General Assembly's 193 members to appoint. Although all UN members get a voice in the secretary-general's selection, the five permanent members of the Security Council hold the most influence. Any one of them can eliminate a nominee with a veto. China vetoed a third term for the UN's fourth secretary-general, Austria's Kurt Waldheim, while the United States vetoed a second term for the fifth, Egypt's Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Although the ten elected members of the Security Council do not have veto power, their votes can prove crucial, as a candidate needs at least nine votes in the Security Council to be recommended as secretary-general.

Critics of the [appointment process](#) say it lacks transparency and falls prey to cronyism due to the permanent members' veto power and negotiations over secret candidates. The selection of Antonio Guterres was possibly the most open, with a [town hall meeting](#) and [informal dialogues](#) between the candidates and the General Assembly, all of which were televised.

What is the secretary-general's relationship with the Security Council?

The secretary-general is tasked with standing for the interests of underrepresented states and balancing the demands of the Security Council with those of General Assembly members. The relationship between the Security Council's five permanent members and the secretary-general is similar to one between constituents and their elected representative. Critics say the structure of this relationship has made the secretary-general beholden to Security Council members, particularly the United States.

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With the United States serving as the [UN's largest funder](#) as of 2015, "no secretary-general can afford to alienate the United States if they want to have success in the job," says Schlesinger. The United States' position as both founder and host to the United Nations has at times complicated Washington's relationship with the secretary-general. The secretary-general must often consider the interests of other large funders in terms of the needs of UN operations. In 2016, threatened with the substantial defunding of certain humanitarian operations, Ban acquiesced to Saudi Arabia's demands to remove a Saudi-led coalition in Yemen from a list of groups that hurt children, published in [a report](#) by his special representative for children and armed conflict. And despite repeated calls by Ban on the Security Council to intervene in the civil war in Syria, his inability to induce a unified multilateral response prompted Ban to say at the end of his tenure that "[the Syrian tragedy shames us all](#)," and that he regretted "[the lack of empathy and lack of compassion of world leaders](#)."

What is likely to be the future focus of the UN secretary-general?

The most pressing global issues, whether climate change or civil wars, will continue to play a role. Guterres stood out during the selection process with [his platform](#) of channeling UN resources into conflict prevention rather than mitigation. Still, he may play an influential role in addressing the

migration crisis, drawing from his tenure as UN high commissioner for refugees. Like Annan and Ban, Guterres is expected to make reform of the UN management structure a priority. "One might think some of them were designed to prevent, rather than enable, the effective delivery of our mandates," he said about UN rules and regulations in a [speech to the General Assembly](#) in December 2016. Nonproliferation, Ban's [sustainable development goals](#), and human rights are also included on the secretary-general's agenda, though he leaves the implementation of these programs up to agencies such as the UN Development Program and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Each secretary-general interprets the role differently, however. [Discussing the organization's future](#), former CFR Senior Fellow Lee Feinstein said, "A secretary-general is like a Supreme Court justice—you never know what you're going to get."

Francesca Regalado and Lauren Vriens contributed to this report.

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