

Backroom Deals

The trade in promises for support between member states and candidates for UN Secretary-General



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About 1 for 8 Billion

1 for 8 Billion is a global movement campaigning for a fair, open and inclusive process to appoint the first woman UN Secretary-General. The UN was founded to serve “We the peoples” of the world. We the peoples therefore have a right to have a say over who is chosen, and how. Our steering committee — CIVICUS, GQUAL, UNA-UK, Plataforma CIPÓ, Southern Voice and Woman SG — reflects the diverse strengths of our network, our strong base in the Global South and our ambition to take this process out of the ‘UN bubble’ and into capitals and communities across the world.

We will shine a spotlight on the process, working with the UN, states and civil society to ensure the most transparent and accountable selection possible, and expose any efforts to undermine its integrity or stand in the way of the most talented candidates.



www.1for8billion.org

About Plataforma CIPÓ

Plataforma CIPÓ is a Brazil-based research institute dedicated to promoting international cooperation to advance climate action and sustainable development, with a focus on the needs and priorities of the Global South.

CIPÓ conducts evidence-based research and fosters dialogue and coordination among diverse actors, with the goal of strengthening public policies and promoting inclusive and effective governance models that connect the local and global levels.

The word “cipó,” of Indigenous Tupi origin, refers to woody vines typically found in tropical forests. The term evokes the three core pillars of CIPÓ: practical solutions (cipós are used to produce both handcrafted goods and medicinal inputs); building bridges (cipós connect the canopies of neighboring trees); and action (cipós serve as natural pathways for animals and insects to move through the forest).

Founded in 2020 and headquartered in Rio de Janeiro, our independent, non-profit organization is led by women and consists of a team of research, advocacy and communications experts, operating from various cities and states across Brazil and abroad.



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Executive Summary

So much of the power of the United Nations Secretary-General (SG) depends on their ability to assert their Office's independence from state influence. Secretaries-General work in partnership with states, according to rules and systems established by states, but to be effective and impartial they will, at times, need to take discrete positions from states and speak truth to power.

The UN Charter provides this from two directions. Article 100 (1) states that the Secretary-General and their staff "shall not seek or receive instructions from any government or from any other authority external to the Organization. They shall refrain from any action which might reflect on their position as international officials responsible only to the Organization." By Article 100 (2) each member state "undertakes to respect the exclusively international character of the responsibilities of the Secretary-General and the staff and not to seek to influence them in the discharge of their responsibilities."

These requirements are intended to bestow the unmatched authority and legitimacy on the Secretary-General that makes their good offices invaluable. Indeed this function is arguably the only part of the United Nations which is truly irreplaceable.

And yet the Secretary-General is appointed by member states, and while Article 100 (1) provides that international officials are answerable only to the organisation collectively and not its individual members, the reality is that member states often hold a decisive sway over senior office holders.

Of course, without the confidence of member states, the Secretary-General would not have the same authority. Nevertheless the arrangement sets up a fundamental contradiction: **how can a Secretary-General exercise independence from the states that appoint them?**

It is a challenge that some Secretaries-General have navigated better than others. While some have come out of the selection process able to speak truth to governments of all levels of power; others find themselves compromised before taking office, having entered into deals with member states in exchange for support in ways that critically hamper their independence. Sir Brian Urquhart, a senior UN staff member who served under the UN's first five Secretaries-General, described attempts by states to extract promises from candidates as "undesirable pressures", noting that some Secretaries-General's "yielded to them".¹

Yet, selection processes are not the only lever used by states to exert undue influence. The need to maintain state support once in office — not least to ensure ongoing access and funding — creates competing and conflicting pressures which require active management throughout their term of office. However, this report makes clear that negotiations around the makeup of the Secretary-General's senior leadership team, in particular during selection processes, hand significant and disproportionate power to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5).

In part this is simply a reality of global diplomacy, however, there is much that observers and stakeholders in this process — a group that ultimately includes all of us — can do to mitigate those pressures and increase the Secretary-General's independence. Transparency and scrutiny, regarding what are clearly public and political roles, provides a valuable function:

1. Sir Brian Urquhart, in Brian Urquhart and Erskine Childers, "A World in Need of Leadership: Tomorrow's United Nations", Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Sweden, 1996, p. 30. First published in 1990.

secret backroom deals fatally sap the Secretary-General's credibility while transparency clarifies the pressures and influences the Secretary-General is susceptible to, and allows others to push back.

The 1 for 8 Billion campaign² has spent the past fifteen years pushing for an open, inclusive, and merit-based selection process for Secretary-General. This offers the best conditions for appointing an effective leader, helping to ensure that whoever is selected comes with a strong mandate, owing as few favours as possible. In turn, this gives them the best chance of being able to build a diverse and effective senior leadership team.

To promote candidate independence, this report is shining a light on the world of dealmaking in selection processes. It outlines how candidates campaign for the role of Secretary-General, and provides a historic account of the deals that have been made, or have been floated, between member states and candidates. We situate this within a wider discussion of the relationship between states and candidates, and the levers of influence the former have over the latter, to illuminate the dynamics of that relationship.

The report makes recommendations, including practical advice as to what states, journalists, civil society, other stakeholders, and the general public should watch out for, and policy proposals that would increase the Secretary-General's independence.

In particular, the report finds that the process of nationally restricting, or "ringfencing", certain roles for nationals of certain states or regions — a practice inconsistent with the UN Charter³ and expressly prohibited by the UN General Assembly⁴ — is central to the way in which the P5 influences the Secretary-General. A Secretary-General who ended this disregard for the General Assembly's direction and implemented a more objective, broader selection among their top team would do much to strengthen their legitimacy and impact.

2. See www.1for8billion.org for more information.

3. Article 101 (3) states that "Due regard shall be paid to the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible."

4. See our previous report on this issue: https://bluesmoke.blog/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ringfencing_and_the_general_assembly.pdf.

Table: Tip of the iceberg: credibly alleged attempted trades associated with Secretary-General selection processes⁵

Year	Candidate	State(s)	Offer / request / position	Reputed outcome
1945	Trygve Lie	P5 states	Lie had little to no choice over the selection of his senior team	Accepted by Lie: the P5 installed their preferred senior leaders on the basis of internal negotiations
1961	U Thant	USSR and US	Various proposals were requested as conditions of U Thant's appointment. For example, the USSR requested a troika of Soviet / US / Non Aligned ASGs. The US requested four or five officials.	Thant was ultimately allowed to make his own choice
1961	U Thant	France	France requested a French national be appointed as Thant's Chef de Cabinet (or 'Chief of Staff')	Rejected by Thant: he asserted that he would not be dictated to with respect to appointments and that Paris was free to veto his candidacy if they wished. The French dropped their demand
1971	Kurt Waldheim	China	After the PRC replaced the RoC in China's seat at the UN, they requested that in accordance with prior practice they be given a top job	Presumably accepted by Waldheim. Waldheim created the post of Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Trusteeship, and Decolonisation and gave it to a Chinese national
1981	Kurt Waldheim	United Kingdom	Waldheim offered the UK Ambassador any UN job of their choosing	Rejected by the UK (UK turned against Waldheim)

continues

5. This is a summary of the most clear cut alleged trades-for-support from the material covered in this report. Please refer to relevant sections of the report for further details of each trade along with references to source materials used. As detailed in the report, the relatively high incidence of trades-for-support shown in recent years should not be interpreted necessarily as a sign that the practice has increased over time, rather, it reflects the availability of primary source material. If there has been an increase since 1996, this is primarily a consequence of the fact that during the UN's early decades the expectation of P5 direction on these matters was so dominant as to make specific trades with candidates largely unnecessary. The authors hypothesise what is recorded in the table to be a significant underestimation of the practice throughout the UN's history.

1996	Boutros Boutros-Ghali	United States	US offered to help create a foundation for Boutros Boutros-Ghali to run if he dropped out	Rejected by Boutros Ghali
1996	Kofi Annan	France	France requested that a French national be installed as head of Peacekeeping in return for French support of Annan's candidacy	Accepted by Annan
2006	Ban Ki-moon	France	France requested that a French national be installed as head of Peacekeeping in return for French support of Ban's candidacy	Subsequently accepted by Ban
2006	Ban Ki-moon	United Kingdom	UK requested that a British national be installed as head of Political Affairs in return for British support of Ban's candidacy	Rejected by Ban
2006	Ban Ki-moon	United States	US requested that an American national be installed in a senior political USG role in thanks for US support of Ban's candidacy	Accepted by Ban
2006	Ban Ki-moon	United States	US requested that Ban Ki-moon, if appointed, remove large numbers of senior officials of the rank USG and above in return for US support for his candidacy	Unclear: the tenure of several prominent figures from Kofi Annan's mandate ended in the early period of Ban's term of office, but this may represent standard practice, and other senior officials were retained in post
2016	António Guterres	Russia	Russia requested the instalment in a senior UNHQ role of a Russian in return for Russian support of his candidacy	Accepted: Guterres subsequently created a new UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (OCT) with a Russian appointed to head it
2016	António Guterres	Spain	Spain, at the time an elected member of the Security Council and a supporter of Guterres's candidacy, requested a key policy role in Guterres's top team for a Spanish national	Accepted: Guterres subsequently appointed a Spanish national to be his Senior Adviser on Policy

Methodology

The authors were two freelance researchers, Fred Carver of Strategy for Humanity and Ben Donaldson, commissioned by Plataforma CIPÓ, on behalf of 1 for 8 Billion. The researchers worked in close collaboration with Mariana Rondon, Vice President and Secretary at Plataforma CIPÓ, and Nycolas Candido, Associate Researcher at Plataforma CIPÓ. Research for the report drew on a number of histories of the UN and autobiographies of senior UN officials, and candid interviews and exchanges with over 40 former senior UN staff, former member state and security council diplomats, former Secretary-General candidates — including six of the 2016 candidates — as well as members of former candidates' campaign teams, academics, and journalists.

Many of those the authors spoke to, including a significant number of former P5 diplomats, have asked for their names not to be mentioned in light of the politically sensitive subject matter, while others were happy to go on the record. We'd particularly like to thank Helen Clark, Sam Daws, Jeffrey Feltman, Aditi Gorur, Richard Gowan, Ann Grant, Shamala Kandiah, Mona Ali Khalil, Colin Keating, Colum Lynch, Mogens Lykketoft, Ellen Margrethe Løj, Susana Malcorra, Ian Martin, Bernard Miyet, John Norris, Jenna Russo, Sara Pantuliano, Minh-Thu Pham, Sir Kieran Prendergast, Vesna Pusić, Carne Ross, Natalie Samarasinghe, Jordan Street, Dali Ten Hove, Thant Myint-U and Tom Weiss for various different forms of advice and support they offered.



Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, meets with his senior officials.

Source: UN Photo/Milton Grant

1. Why this matters

Disrupting senior appointments and UN reform

Undermining the independence of the Secretary-General on hiring decisions impacts the effectiveness, fairness, and credibility of the UN. It has created a global organisation run by officials, that, in many cases, were not appointed in a fair, merit-based process, but by dint of their relationships to powerful member states, especially the P5.

Undue influence is exerted both during the Secretary-General selection processes as well as once the successful candidate has entered office. This has given rise to de facto monopolies on top UN jobs for the nationals of certain countries, a (mal)practice known as 'ringfencing'. There are many examples to point to: the UN's top political post (currently Under-Secretary-General (USG) for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs) has been held by a United States (US) national continuously since 2007 and that post or one of its earlier equivalents have been held by a national of a P5 country for all but two of the 74 years since 1952. Five consecutive Frenchmen have held the post of Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations, the top peacekeeping job. Four consecutive Chinese men have headed the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). The last six UN Emergency Relief Coordinators have all been Britons. And there has consistently been a Russian national leading either the UN's office in Vienna or Geneva since 1993.⁶

The need for a Secretary-General candidate to satisfy P5 expectations of top jobs can become a headache for UN reform plans, as proposals need to preserve accommodations made to powerful states. More broadly, P5 states use the selection process to safeguard their status within the UN system, seeking assurances from Secretary-General candidates that they will not shake up the system in a way that could negatively affect their position.

⁶. There are also examples of posts being ringfenced for regions, for example, during the 1970s and early 1980s one of the positions of Under-Secretaries-General for Special Political Affairs was ringfenced for nationals from Latin American. See, for example: Jonah, James O. C. (2006). *What Price the Survival of the United Nations: Memoirs of a Veteran International Civil Servant*. Evans Brothers, pgs. 69–71.

This has a number of negative consequences:

It starves the UN of diverse talent. Powerful countries view key UN roles as their “slots”, to be filled with individuals, usually their own citizens, who share their worldview and, in some cases, serve as a backchannel for information and influence.⁷ With the UN’s most consequential roles inaccessible to those with different backgrounds, the knock on effect is the exclusion of talented leaders from small and mid-sized countries. Since the majority of the UN’s operational footprint is not situated in P5 countries, the resulting imbalance skews leadership away from those most directly affected by the UN’s work.

It risks inappropriate appointments. The power held by certain governments to direct appointments presents national leaders with a potential opportunity to secure jobs for compatriots as a means of solving domestic political situations or to return favours to allies, irrespective of qualifications and suitability.⁸ The practice can also bring an unwelcome partisanship into appointments, with the possibility of senior officials being appointed due to their affiliation with specific administrations instead of their merit – which can both be inherently unhelpful and lead to further complications when there is a change in administration.

It can shield member states from scrutiny. The report shows that at times senior UN officials installed by national governments work to drive the national interests of their own nation, in contravention of the oath they take as international civil servants. Patronage of this kind could affect a UN official’s ability to make impartial decisions or, for example, call out a certain country on human rights violations, while undermining the trust and legitimacy of the UN.

It breaks the UN’s own rules. Compromising the Secretary-General’s independence contravenes Article 100 of the UN Charter and can have a debilitating effect on the UN’s effectiveness and credibility. Additionally, the UN General Assembly has repeatedly addressed the practice of ringfencing, with at least 15 resolutions passed since 1980 stating that monopolies on top UN jobs are impermissible, but these resolutions have been ignored.⁹ The practice also breaks a commitment in the Pact of the Future, adopted by world leaders in September 2024, which states that “there should be no monopoly on senior posts in the United Nations system by nationals of any State or group of States”.¹⁰

It damages the UN’s credibility. Alongside the drain on effectiveness caused by shutting out talent, the unfairness and imbalances in the UN’s senior leadership takes a toll on the UN’s credibility, compounding legitimate grievances around the UN’s unrepresentative Security Council, feeding the sense that the organisation has been captured by the interests of the P5. It also dents staff morale: a survey conducted as part of the UN80 process found “morale is at an all-time low” with multiple comments alleging favoritism and political appointments as being significant contributory reasons.¹¹ Throughout the UN’s history concerns have also been raised by senior UN officials.¹²

7. Shevchenko, Akardy N. (1985). Breaking with Moscow. Alfred A. Knopf, p. 221.

8. See the example of Andrew Lansley in Chapter 3 of this report.

9. https://bluesmoke.blog/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ringfencing_and_the_general_assembly.pdf.

10. Pact of the Future, p. 29. Available at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf.

11. <https://www.ipsnews.net/2025/08/survey-by-staff-federation-expresses-disappointment-over-uns-reform-proces>.

12. Senior UN officials Brian Urquhart and James Jonah both wrote to Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim to warn him that staff morale was suffering due to the high number of political appointees he made, according to James Jonah’s autobiography: “What Price the Survival of the United Nations?”, p. 60.

It stymies UN reform. At times this is linked to the issue of appointments, as Secretaries-General reorganise the UN bureaucracy to accommodate the expectations of P5 states. More fundamentally, candidates can be penalised for offering a bold vision for UN reform as the gatekeepers to the office, the P5, look for guarantees that a status quo that benefits them will remain intact. For the same reasons, P5 nationals are also often less likely to have radical visions for their own departments than non-P5 nationals.

Figure: Current P5 monopolies on senior UN appointments



Adapted from: Blue Smoke (2023). Ringfencing and the General Assembly, p. 11. Available at: https://bluesmoke.blog/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ringfencing_and_the_general_assembly.pdf



Future Secretary-General and current Ambassador to Peru, Perez de Cuellar, is flanked to his left by Secretary-General Waldheim, and to his right by Under-Secretary-General Shevchenko who used his autobiography to expose the extent of the USSR's control over Soviet UN officials.

Source: UN Photo/Yutaka Nagata

2. Why this happens

The motivations behind installing state nationals in top jobs

Beyond motivations around status and competition, it is worth questioning why the right to appoint one's national as a senior official in the UN should be considered a desirable foreign policy objective, given that the UN Charter and the UN oath of office requires all such officials to refuse all instructions from their home government or conduct any actions that might cause anyone to reflect on their position as individuals answerable only to the UN and not to any member state.

Certainly, many senior officials have been scrupulous in their independence. Some have even infuriated their home governments by doing so.¹³ One former UN Under-Secretary-General suggested that P5 states saw the benefit in appointing their nationals to such a position primarily in that they are then able to explain national and domestic political processes and considerations to that Secretary-General, rather than due to any expectation of influence. This point was echoed by a former senior diplomat.¹⁴

However, governments have not always been so scrupulous. One former UN official indicated that they viewed Chinese Under-Secretaries-General as de facto employees of the Chinese Government. They added, "those Under-Secretaries-General's who were in effect agents for their parent governments were correspondingly less effective." This perspective was validated when former Under-Secretary-General for the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA, 2012-2017) and Chinese national Wu Hongbo openly discussed the fact that he considered himself to represent Chinese interests inside the UN Secretariat, and boasted of his ability to exclude critics of the Chinese government from UN processes.¹⁵

¹³. Such as in the case of Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, and British national Kieran Prendergast's opposition to the Iraq war. See: <https://www.thecaioreview.com/the-un-at-75/restoring-some-impartiality-to-un-senior-appointments/>.

¹⁴. Interview with two former USGs and a former senior diplomat.

¹⁵. See: <https://www.thecaioreview.com/the-un-at-75/restoring-some-impartiality-to-un-senior-appointments/>. This was reinforced during an interview with a former UN official.

Likewise, in 2005 UN Under-Secretary-General for Management Christopher B. Burnham, while still in post, went on the record to tell the Washington Post that “my primary loyalty is to the United States of America.”¹⁶

Previously Arkady Shevchenko, a Soviet national and a former UN Under-Secretary-General wrote in his autobiography in 1985 that “through an elaborate organisational structure the Soviet Mission maintains full control over Soviet nationals in the Secretariat.”¹⁷ Earlier, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had famously questioned whether an independent international civil service was possible or desirable, saying “while there are neutral countries, there are no neutral men”.¹⁸

A former UN official also suggested that French interests in Francophone North Africa frequently shaped the attitudes of French nationals appointed to head the UN’s peacekeeping work, to the point where the department was jokingly described internally as French occupied territory.¹⁹ However, perspectives varied and it may be that levels of independence have fluctuated. Bernard Miyet (head of peacekeeping between 1997–2000 and a French national) confirmed that the French government always and fully respected his independence, even when he had to quite robustly oppose the French position, as happened regarding the French withdrawal from the United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic (MINURCA). He noted that prior to being nominated for the post he made clear to the French foreign ministry that he did not concur with the policy orientations developed by the British and French authorities according to which no new peacekeeping missions would be created under Chapter VII mandates following the dramatic failures in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda. This affirmation did not prevent his nomination.²⁰

Likewise, when it comes to the United Kingdom (UK), interviewees had conflicting accounts: one former senior official suggested that the UK (alongside the US) had been scrupulous in respecting the independence of UN officials who were their nationals, while another suggested that the extent to which British diplomats felt comfortable in demanding access and/or special consideration of British nationals within the UN Secretariat waxed and waned across the decades, and depended in significant part on the attitude set by the Prime Minister and the approach of the British Permanent Representative to the UN, some of whom viewed British UN officials as “their bag carriers”.²¹

The attitude of specific diplomats notwithstanding, states retain a number of levers to influence their former officials once they have gone to work for the UN, from personal connections to the promise of future employment. This is particularly true when, as is the case with some — but not all — appointments, the UN post is taken during a period of sabbatical leave from a national foreign ministry, meaning that the official is expected to

16. See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2005/07/21/at-the-un-a-growing-republican-presence/d7cad86a-45e3-4908-8f15-838547341f2d/>. Other interviewees indicated that subsequent US administrations had also sought to influence US national UN officials, although one former senior UN official told us that in general in recent years US ambassadors across multiple administrations have respected the independence of UN officials of their nationality and that no favour or backchannel was ever asked for or given.

17. Shevchenko, Arkady N. (1985). *Breaking with Moscow*, p. 222. According to the book, Shevchenko had also spied for the CIA during his time working at the UN, in part because of his frustration at Soviet violations of the UN’s independence. In 1977 he was recalled to Moscow, but instead resigned from the UN and defected to the United States, from where he wrote his autobiography.

18. Lippmann, Walter (1961). Interview with Chairman Nikita Khrushchev. *New York Herald Tribune*.

19. Interview with former UN official.

20. Interview with Bernard Miyet.

21. Interviews with three former UN officials.

return to work for the state after their time at the UN. That foreign ministry may be able to hold their seniority, future employment prospects, and pension as leverage over them.²²

Furthermore, on occasion states have been known to pay the housing costs of their nationals who are senior UN officials, which has the potential to provide another point of leverage over them. There is an established mechanism for doing this, and a number of officials do so in a public and declared manner.²³ However, it has been suggested that states may on occasion provide housing for their nationals within the UN system without making the appropriate declarations. For example, Sir Kieran Prendergast (former Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs 1997–2005) suggested that it was well known during his time at the UN that a number of Russian and Chinese colleagues who worked within the United Nations system were residing within mission grounds.²⁴



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (left) shakes hands with Wu Hongbo, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), following his swearing-in ceremony. Mr. Hongbo openly admitted to driving forward China's interests while serving as an independent UN civil servant.

Source: UN Photo/Evan Schneider

22. Interview with former USG.

23. The UN has an established mechanism for declaring such arrangements, and a salary deduction is made in recognition of the benefit in kind. The most recent variation on the scheme was clarified in an information circular in 2018 (See: <https://docs.un.org/en/st/IC/2018/9>). There is no straightforward way to compile a list of how many senior staff are known to have benefitted from the scheme, one would have to manually check all staff's public disclosure forms (See: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/public-disclosure-2025>). However, there are specific examples of staffers using the scheme. Sir Kieran Prendergast told us that he used a previous version of the scheme while he was in post, and in 2006 the Secretary-General's spokesperson confirmed that there was one senior member of staff in receipt of such a benefit (See: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/highlight/2006-09-12.html>). That member of staff was later confirmed to be Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs Nicolas Michel, a Swiss national (See: <https://press.un.org/en/2008/db080318.doc.htm>).

24. Interview with Sir Kieran Prendergast.



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (third from right) walks with UK politician David Cameron in 2008, two years before Mr. Cameron became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

Source: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

3. Background: how states approach senior appointments

How the practice has evolved

Initially Secretaries-General were given little choice in the selection of their senior officials, with appointments imposed by the P5. Over time some have clawed back some (albeit contested) ability to select their own team, and swerve the appointment of unqualified individuals. P5 states have also been known to support Secretaries-General to push back on candidates proposed by other member states; in some cases this can improve the calibre of appointees. For example, in 2015 UK Prime Minister David Cameron nominated his colleague, former Health Minister Andrew Lansley, for the UN's top humanitarian role.²⁵ With a steer from the US, and under pressure from civil society with respect to his lack of humanitarian credentials, Ban Ki-moon pushed back, requesting a shortlist from the UK from which a more suitable, albeit still British, candidate was chosen.²⁶

In other instances pressure could not be resisted. A former Under Secretary-General told us that Kofi Annan attempted to resist the appointment of a Japanese candidate as Under-Secretary-General he felt was unsuitable, but as the candidate had strong political backing from the Japanese Government, Japan refused to nominate any alternatives, and threatened to delay their payments to the UN system until their candidate was selected. Ultimately they were appointed, but only for a reduced two year term.²⁷

Reforms recommended by the Joint Inspection Unit in 2009 and 2011, aimed at improving transparency and meritocracy in the selection of top posts, have made this process easier to

25. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jan/17/andrew-lansley-united-nations-aid-organisations-anger-ban-ki-moon#:~:text=Andrew%20Lansley%20has%20Cameron's%20support,by%20the%20UK's%20Baroness%20Amos.>

26. Based in part on an interview with a former US diplomat. The successful candidate, Stephen O'Brien, while better qualified, was, like Andrew Lansley, a member of David Cameron's ruling Conservative Party.

27. Interview with a former USG.

scrutinise.²⁸ For example, many senior vacancies are now publicly advertised and open to all in theory.²⁹ However, in practice, recent history suggests that, for a number of senior positions, no matter how talented a candidate is, they stand little chance of success unless they are a national of the state perceived as having ownership of that role.³⁰

António Guterres has tinkered around the edges of this bind. He has challenged powerful states by appointing one of their nationals to roles they stake claim to, but not necessarily appointing the candidate that is that government's first preference. This upholds the unwritten rules on ringfencing, and on paper maintains the status symbol for the country in question that comes with having nationals in senior roles, while claiming some latitude to build a senior management team of his own choosing.³¹

Government approaches vary from state to state, and, within a state, from administration to administration. For example, the location of US decision-making on the UN senior appointments appears, in part, to be based on the approach and personality of the US's Permanent Representative to the UN, who in some administrations has also served as a cabinet minister. One source compared how hands-on Susan Rice and Samantha Power were on this front, leading US policy, in contrast to some more recent ambassadors who would defer to officials in Washington DC. Different administrations also exert more or less influence, with President Obama's administration portrayed by one former diplomat as an outlier in its openness to the UN Secretary-General having more freedom on senior appointments.³²

Current practice

Currently, while opinions differ on the propriety of doing so, it is considered entirely normal for states to lobby the Secretary-General once in post for their nationals to be appointed to specific roles even down to the sub-director P5 and P4 levels. One former UN official indicated they had seen letters written by heads of state and heads of government lobbying for the appointment of such officials.³³ Some P5 states even employ staff for the specific purpose of ensuring their nationals are selected to key roles.³⁴ To take one example, another source suggested that French President Emmanuel Macron called Secretary-General António Guterres three times in 2025 to lobby (unsuccessfully) for the role of Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to be given to a French national.³⁵

28. The reports also recommended practices to improve gender and geographic diversity in senior roles. See: https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_document_files/products/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU_REP_2009_8_English.pdf.

29. <https://una.org.uk/un-human-rights-chief-updates-on-the-selection-process/>.

30. https://bluesmoke.blog/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ringfencing_and_the_general_assembly.pdf.

31. The Blue Smoke campaign (See: <https://plataformacipo.org/en/updates/blue-smoke-highlights-british-monopoly-on-coordinating-humanitarian-assistance/>) has outlined a number of examples of this, particularly with respect to the appointment of Brits to lead UNOCHA. A number of former UN Staff have also indicated that this was the approach followed, both with respect to UNOCHA and OCT.

32. Based on an interview with a former P5 diplomat.

33. Interview with former UN official.

34. The UK has a team dedicated to the implementation of the "UK International Appointment's strategy that supports high-quality leadership at the UN, facilitates appropriate British representation at senior levels and encourages UN leaders with aligned values and priorities". It regularly advertises for staff, as for example, see here: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5399cc0ae4b0705199b37aa3/t/69c53e4761bca80b70a4202a/1774534215428/Vacancy+-+Senior+Policy+Adviser%2C+International+Appointments+-+UK+Mission+to+the+UN.pdf>.

35. Interview with two former UN officials.

Multiple interviewees, including a former P5 diplomat and former UN official, said that combining advocacy for UN positions with budgetary discussions gives the effort more bite. For this reason, in the case of China, the role of the UN Controller and Assistant Secretary-General in the Office of Programme Planning, Finance and Budget is said to be critical in conveying their expectations and requests around appointments.³⁶

The attempt by states to trade donations for jobs was recently publicly lamented by the UN's Humanitarian Chief, who said almost every Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) donor was "hyper transactional". Regarding member state donations, Fletcher stated that one of OCHA's most principled donor governments said "I'll give you some more money but only if you spend it on jobs in our city"...while another government asked him for certain key jobs, telling him "we could do more [for OCHA] but we want these three jobs; we're not happy that we're not getting enough jobs in your organisation".³⁷



President Emmanuel Macron and Secretary-General António Guterres (left to right) during High-level Meeting on G5 Sahel.
Source: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

³⁶. Interview with a former P5 diplomat.

³⁷. Chatham House (2026, April 20). Aid, conflict and global leadership: UN humanitarian chief Tom Fletcher. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/standard-event/aid-conflict-and-global-leadership-un-humanitarian-chief-tom-fletcher>.

Yvonne Terlingen, William Pace, and Natalie Samarasinghe (left to right) of the 1 for 7 Billion campaign hold a press conference at the UN. Following changes the campaign pushed for states and candidates have to engage as part of a more open and transparent process.

Source: UN Photo/Loey Felipe



4. Campaigning: a window of opportunity

The early years

The campaigning process for Secretary-General has changed a lot in recent years, and will always be dependent upon the political context. Prior to 2015, there was no formal process for nominations, no public shortlist, no vision statements and no candidate debates (or informal dialogues as they are known). The selection process was monopolised by the Security Council, with informal conversations between P5 states playing a decisive role. At times, individuals were considered and even voted on without their own knowledge. Dag Hammarskjöld famously dismissed the prospect as an April Fools Day joke when he awoke to a journalist informing him the Security Council decided he should be the next UN Secretary-General.³⁸

As the Organisation grew, the rhythm and conventions of selection processes became established and competition intensified. “Straw polling” was introduced in 1981 and summarised in the “Wisnumurti guidelines” in 1996.³⁹ Over a series of ballots the Security Council can gauge levels of support by asking its members to vote to “encourage”, “discourage” or express “no opinion” on each candidate. In later rounds permanent

38. Lipsey, Roger (2013). Hammarskjöld: A Life (illustrated ed.). University of Michigan Press, pgs. 117–118.

39. See: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160330183210/http://www.unelections.org/files/WisnumurtiGuidelinesSelectingCandidateSecretary-General.pdf>. This has subsequently been further detailed more recently in the “Bessho letter” of 2017 (S/2017/93, available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2017/93>).

members of the Security Council cast a vote on a different colour of ballot paper (originally blue,⁴⁰ now red) so that everyone is aware of which candidates run a risk of being vetoed.

But active campaigning has still not always been the best approach. In 1981, following a deadlocked election in which neither Kurt Waldheim — seeking a third term — or his challenger Salim Ahmed Salim could overcome the respective vetoes of China and the US,⁴¹ the race was thrown open to nine new challengers. One of those, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, took the view that any campaigning he did would be likely to backfire and so retired to his beach house on the Peruvian coast, only keeping in very distant contact with negotiations through a junior Peruvian national member of the UN Secretariat. This approach proved successful.⁴²

The modern era

Reforms in 2015, championed by the then 1 for 7 Billion campaign, established a formal route for any member state to nominate a candidate and brought transparency to the process through a public list of candidates, vision statements and candidate hearings before the General Assembly. Campaigning became more open, and multi pronged; including visits, organised bilaterally by the candidates themselves to various capitals and events for meetings with heads of state and foreign ministers. In parallel, a campaign is waged at UNHQ in New York to woo the Permanent Representatives of UN Member States. Conversations with members of the campaign teams of former candidates suggest candidates for Secretary-General will typically visit the capitals of all 15 members of the UN Security Council, with leading contenders visiting key capitals such as Washington DC and Moscow up to four or five times — sometimes flying by private plane to avoid their journeys appearing on public manifests.⁴³

Influence is also applied using trusted former colleagues or sometimes even the spouses of senior officials and candidates.⁴⁴ Discussions and negotiations between states and candidates will normally take place between a senior but not leading member of the mission and the candidate's Chef de Cabinet or special assistant, subsequently elevating to conversations between that person and the permanent representative themselves.⁴⁵ On other occasions intermediaries will be used to make requests obliquely. For example, one member of a campaign team suggested that Russia may use Venezuela to convey their wishes and expectations to a candidate in a manner which could, if necessary, be denied later.⁴⁶

40. <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/12/12/world/security-council-elects-a-peruvian-secretary-general.html>.

41. It was suggested to us by a former UN official that the Soviet Union also vetoed Salim alongside the US, although we cannot find evidence of this in written records or memoirs. These votes took place in closed session (as required by rule 48 of the UN Security Council) and so the results do not appear in the UN Security Council's outcome tables or list of vetoes.

42. Interview with Sir Kieran Prendergast. Following his term in office, de Cuéllar's intolerance for wrangling by P5 countries during selection processes led him to campaign strongly for a longer, non-renewable terms of office "to lessen [Secretaries-General's] vulnerability to pressure from Member States". See: *The UN in the 21st century: The role and selection of the Secretary-General of the United Nations*, Delphi Symposium in honour of Javier Pérez de Cuéllar. Athens Development and Governance Institute, 2010, p. 9.

43. Based on two interviews: one with a candidate to be Secretary General in 2016 and another with a senior official within a different candidate's team.

44. For example the first efforts to sound out Kofi Annan's willingness to put himself forth as a candidate were made through his wife Nane. See: Meisler, S. (2008). *Kofi Annan: A Man of Peace in a World of War*. Trade Paper Press, p. 127.

45. Interview with a former senior official within a candidate's campaign to become Secretary-General.

46. Ibid.

Early screening: broad alignment and responsiveness

Before any meetings take place, states will have determined to what extent each candidate's approach is compatible with their interests. Quid pro quos and deals are rarely floated at this stage as states do not want to take the risk or spend the political capital of making such a request until they know which candidates have momentum.

Furthermore, for some countries compatibility on issues of policy and philosophy are prioritised. One former diplomat explained that the choice is usually more about broad orientation than literal quid pro quos. "Diplomats don't need to be vulgar", it was noted, "they can be directional and candidates will understand".⁴⁷ A former 2016 candidate told the authors that this is "high diplomacy" and conditions are rarely presented explicitly, however, "when you listen carefully you can detect the red lines of the party you are talking to".⁴⁸

Russia and China are thought to be particularly motivated by where candidates stand on issues such as the tradeoff between universal recognition of human rights and state sovereignty and these considerations outweigh all others in their choice of candidates to support.

China makes no secret of its requirement that the UN "firmly supports the one-China principle" describing it as "a red line for China that must be respected and not crossed"⁴⁹ – a condition multiple interviewees assumed China would apply to Secretary-General candidates. One serving diplomat with knowledge of recent selection processes noted that China asks every candidate for their views on Taiwan.⁵⁰ China has also in the past made it clear that candidates from certain member states would be impermissible, outlining in 1971 that they could not support any candidate from South Korea, Cambodia, or South Vietnam, and would likely oppose any candidate from Japan.⁵¹ Academic research suggests that in general "China supports candidates from states that conform with its own preferences".⁵²

Likewise, a wikileaks cable⁵³ outlining the US State Department's thinking on the selection of Ban Ki-moon ("he's naturally sympathetic to all things American") suggests that during the earlier stages of the race P5 states operate with broad strokes, checking whether there is sufficient alignment on key areas, rather than floating conditions or deals.

47. Based on an interview with a former P5 diplomat.

48. Based on an interview with a 2016 candidate.

49. https://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202211/t20221116_10976578.htm.

50. Interview with serving diplomat with detailed knowledge of recent selection processes.

51. See: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76vol13/d44>. It should be noted that a candidate from South Korea or South Vietnam would have in any instance been highly unlikely as South Korea did not join the UN until 1991 and South Vietnam was never a member of the UN.

52. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11558-024-09571-2>.

53. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06SEOUL2399_a.html.

Pliable.... but not too pliable

Pliability would have been in P5 minds when it came to the reappointment of Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim in 1976, who was notorious for his “low resistance” to pressures from powerful countries when it came to the installation of their nationals in top jobs.⁵⁴ The optimum appears to be a candidate who is selective, rather than just weak. In Boutros-Ghali’s 1991 candidacy, P5 states saw someone they could work with. Within his first 50 days in office, with a steer from the Security Council, Boutros-Ghali announced deep cuts to the upper echelons of the UN secretariat “moving the focus of the UN’s activities away from the Third World agenda of economic development onto the West’s concern with political and security affairs”.⁵⁵ The move cut fourteen top jobs; the P5 maintained their hold while leaving a senior Sierra Leonean official as “the only remaining Under-Secretary-General from a Third World nation”.⁵⁶

P5 members look for candidates that are pliable to their interests, although a degree of rigidity is also sought-after to give some assurance that they will not acquiesce to all interests. For the US in 2006, following a stormy relationship with Kofi Annan (whom the US viewed as far too independent), they looked to reassert control and find someone they could contain. “No more Kofis” was how former candidate Shashi Tharoor described the US’s approach to the selection.⁵⁷ Helen Clark told us that being perceived as too independent could be fatal, recalling that, as a 2016 candidate, a senior former diplomat remarked “your strength is your weakness”.⁵⁸

Building a relationship the P5 can depend on later

In many instances states feel that in the course of the selection process they develop a strong enough working relationship with the candidate, and the candidate will be sufficiently dependant upon ongoing good relations, that extracting promises in exchange for support is unnecessarily compromising on both sides, and states can instead simply offer support beforehand, and then call in favours afterwards with the expectation of serious consideration.

One former diplomat told us that particular value was attached to an SG having a consultatory approach to senior appointments — picking up the phone and talking through upcoming decisions and being open to feedback.⁵⁹ A 2016 candidate explained that rather than it being about any specific request “what the P5 really want is a guarantee that they will not get out of this process with a less important role in the Secretariat in the key positions”.⁶⁰

54. As reported by former senior UN official, James Jonah, in his autobiography: “What Price the Survival of the United Nations?”, p. 60.

55. Bone, James (1992, February 8). Top UN Jobs Go in Pro-Western Move, *The Times newspaper*.

56. As reported by former senior UN official, James Jonah, in his autobiography: “What Price the Survival of the United Nations?”, p. 543 (endnote 78). According to Jonah the reforms “reopened the suspicion of many Third World delegates that Boutros-Ghali had been acceptable to the major Western powers because he was judged to be weak and predisposed to heed their advice and direction” – p. 95.

57. Quote by Shashi Tharoor, a candidate in the 2006 selection process in: “No more Kofis” — How Washington Stymied My Bid to be UN Secretary-General. Available at: <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/no-more-kofis-how-washington-stymied-my-bid-to-be-un-secretary-general/> (According to Tharoor’s article, desire to preserve relations with the Republic of Korea and their sense that India was lukewarm on his candidacy also contributed).

58. Telephone exchange with Helen Clark.

59. Based on an interview with a former P5 diplomat.

60. Based on an interview with a 2016 SG candidate.

Part of the picture: explicit trades

Given the level of expectation of patronage described in the previous section, it is perhaps unsurprising that in many cases, direct trades of promises for support are not required. Indeed a number of former candidates including Helen Clark and Susana Malcorra confirmed to the authors on the record that, as far as their candidacies were concerned, no explicit promises or *quid pro quos* were ever floated by member states, although Malcorra did add “it was evident that some Member States expected the continuation of the established practice of reserving certain departments, offices, or organizations for their preferred candidates.”⁶¹ Several former UN officials, senior diplomats, and longtime UN watchers also said that they had never witnessed or had personal knowledge of explicit deals being made for support, and some expressed skepticism that it would ever happen so explicitly.⁶²

However, while alignment of approach matters enormously, explicit deals where specific favours are traded for support are sometimes made. In a comment to the authors of Guterres’s biography, Malcorra stated, without mentioning names, that she was adamant that similar practices went on in 2016, with candidates selling favours to countries on the Security Council in exchange for votes: “I have absolutely no doubts. The answer is yes.”⁶³ Former Under-Secretary-General James Jonah confirms this practice in his memoir, stating that “there have been instances when specific jobs have been offered to governments in order to secure their votes or avoid their veto”.⁶⁴

Other insights from the 2016 race and earlier selections provide further examples. One campaign team member stated that on several occasions states would openly discuss quid pro quos with the team with varying degrees of bluntness. While most evidence points towards the P5, a 2016 candidate told the authors that some Security Council Elected Members (E10) states “also expect to get something” — more likely middle management, not top positions.⁶⁵ Multiple sources noted the willingness of a country to raise the issue of top jobs depends on the candidate’s personality and the anticipated receptiveness of the nominating state.

The most dangerous moment for such promises is during the straw poll process and in particular towards the end of it when permanent members of the UN Security Council are given their coloured ballot papers. Getting a red ballot paper “discourage” vote from a permanent member of the Security Council is a signal that they are likely to be vetoed, and is frequently fatal to a candidate’s chances, placing significant pressure upon them to make accommodations with the permanent member they suspect may have cast it.⁶⁶

Hampering UN reform

Accommodating P5 expectations on senior appointments can lead to an upside-down logic on reform as institutional changes are configured to ensure that powerful countries retain what they see as their turf within the UN’s organogram.⁶⁷ Candidates championing bold UN

⁶¹. Email / telephone exchange with Susana Malcorra and Helen Clark.

⁶². Interview with two former Security Council diplomats, and former senior UN official.

⁶³. Latoeiro, P., & Domingues, F. (2022). *Honest Broker: A Biography of António Guterres*. C. Hurst & Co, p. 263.

⁶⁴. As reported by former senior UN official, James Jonah, in his autobiography: “What Price the Survival of the United Nations?”, p. 48.

⁶⁵. Interview with 2016 candidate.

⁶⁶. Interview with a former senior official within a candidate’s SG campaign.

⁶⁷. Based on interviews with multiple sources — see OCT example in the following section for more information.

reforms which challenge power dynamics in the UN system will not be seen favourably by the P5, with one former candidate describing the dilemma of candidates advocating reform when “the P5 want exactly the opposite”.⁶⁸

Current head of OCHA, Tom Fletcher, recently spoke of his aspiration for the current selection process to “really bake in some massive reforms” but conceded that “what normally happens is the big powers, classically the P5, stitch things up so that whoever gets it has made so many commitments to them that they can’t really reform things”.⁶⁹



Secretary-General Kofi Annan (right) meets with John R. Bolton, Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations, at UN Headquarters in New York in 2005 – a year after Mr Annan publicly declared the US-led invasion of Iraq to be illegal.

Source: UN Photo/Mark Garten

⁶⁸. Interview with a 2016 candidate.

⁶⁹. Chatham House (2026, April 20). Aid, conflict and global leadership: UN humanitarian chief Tom Fletcher. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/standard-event/aid-conflict-and-global-leadership-un-humanitarian-chief-tom-fletcher>.



5. A history of selection promises

Standard practice

A former UN Under-Secretary-General told us that it was standard for P5 members to make their support for Secretary-General candidates conditional upon being allowed to choose the senior officials in the winning candidate's team.⁷⁰ This practice dates back to the very founding of the UN: as the ink on the UN Charter was drying, the five permanent members of the Security Council contravened the requirement under article 100 (2) "not... to influence [the SG] in the discharge of their responsibilities" and decided that each one of them should be allowed to appoint one of the five senior Under-Secretary-General positions that they established within the UN Secretariat.⁷¹

The mandates of those positions and which position is held by a national of which state has changed over the subsequent 80 years, but the pattern has held with striking continuity: specific posts have been ringfenced for permanent members of the UN Security Council for many decades.

By the 1960s and the appointment of U Thant, the P5's sense of entitlement over their involvement in the SG's top appointments was so well established that Washington and Moscow were publicly sparring for their own preferred configuration of top jobs at the UN.⁷²

As Secretary-General, Kofi Annan attempted to inject some independence into his recruitment. Instead of accepting the recommended individual from a P5 state as a fait accompli, he would request a shortlist of names by the state in question to interview, on the

⁷⁰. Interview with a former USG

⁷¹. Urquhart, B. (1991). *A life in peace and war*. Norton.

⁷². <https://www.nytimes.com/1961/10/06/archives/burmese-un-head-acceptable-to-us-with-2-conditions-4-or-5-aides.html>.

basis of which he would be allowed to pick his preferred candidate.⁷³ This practice continues to the present.⁷⁴

A potted history of *quid quo pros*

Explicit trading of posts for support was redundant for much of the UN's history, since the expectation was that all serious candidates for Secretary-General would have to, for the most part, accept the senior officials foisted upon them. Sir Brian Urquhart describes the situation the first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, found himself in vividly:



"Having put Lie in a new and extremely challenging job, the UN's member governments did little or nothing to provide the qualified, top-level assistance that would have lightened his burden. The eight assistant Secretaries-General were political appointees and, except for Arkady Sobolev of the Soviet Union, they were at best mediocre and at worst grotesque. Outstanding in the latter category was the US appointee 'Potato Jack' Hutson, whom the Department of Agriculture had evidently been delighted to get rid of. Lie, who met with this dismal crew once a week, was increasingly frustrated and disgusted, and he had every right to be."⁷⁵



An example of how entrenched this expectation is can be seen in the case of the appointment of U Thant which was delayed for several weeks as a consequence of furious negotiations between the US and USSR over how many Assistant Secretaries-General he was to have and of what nationality. The USSR in particular was pushing for a "troika" of new Assistant Secretaries-General from West/Soviet/non-aligned states — an arrangement that the US fought against "tooth and nail".⁷⁶ The US's counter-proposal, of "four or five" Assistant Secretaries-General was opposed by Moscow.⁷⁷ This deadlock was only broken when it was agreed that, on an exceptional basis, Thant might be allowed to decide this for himself.⁷⁸

73. Interview with a former USG.

74. The normalisation of this practice is evidenced in the 2011 JIU report (see page 19): https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_document_files/products/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU_REP_2011_2_English.pdf. See also Chapter 3 of this report for evidence of recent usage of this mechanism.

75. <https://news.un.org/en/spotlight/character-sketches-trygve-lie-brian-urquhart>.

76. "Indo-East Pakistan notes (correspondence between the President of Pakistan and the Secretary-General)," UN Archives S-0868-0001-04-00001. Note: the term "troika" was originally used in this context by Nikita Khrushchev, who advocated for the wholesale replacement of the Secretary-General by three persons: one from the East, one from the West and one from the South. (See: Hanley, M.-L., & Melber, H. (2011). *Dag Hammarskjöld remembered: A collection of personal memories*. Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation; Association of Former International Civil Servants New York.). The troika model was then revised and the term subsequently used to refer to the three assistants model with the Secretary-General remaining intact.

77. The US also asked for "public assurances that the Acting Secretary General will be free to consult the Assistant Secretaries-General as he sees fit, without the compulsory consultation provided for in the Soviet Union's latest proposal", as reported by the New York Times. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/1961/10/06/archives/burmese-un-head-acceptable-to-us-with-2-conditions-4-or-5-aides.html>.

78. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/1961/10/06/archives/burmese-un-head-acceptable-to-us-with-2-conditions-4-or-5-aides.html>; and Thant Myint-U. (2025). *Peacemaker: U Thant, the United Nations and the untold story of the 1960s*. Atlantic Books.

Thant Myint U's book includes a rich account of this period, revealing that the French also waded in, with a "last-minute effort" to install a French national as U Thant's Chef de Cabinet or Chief of Staff. U Thant rejected the request, insisting that he would not be dictated to with respect to his appointments and that Paris was free to veto his candidacy if they wished. The French dropped their demand.⁷⁹



U Thant takes Oath of Office as Acting UN Secretary-General in March 1961.

Source: UN Photo/Yutaka Nagata

In 1971 the People's Republic of China replaced the Republic of China in the Chinese seat at the United Nations. Only a few months later they were tasked with selecting the next UN Secretary-General, and immediately exercised their authority by vetoing the leading candidate, Kurt Waldheim, in the first two rounds of voting. They had been expected to do so in the third round, but surprisingly abstained, leading to what has been dubbed the "accidental" selection of Waldheim: the US and UK were allegedly under instructions to prevent his selection but did not cast a veto as they felt doing so would be redundant.⁸⁰

It is not clear what, if anything, Waldheim offered China to change their minds, but subsequently it became clear that there was an expectation that China would be able

⁷⁹. Taken from Thant Myint-U. (2025). Peacemaker and "Memorandum from Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon," FRUS 1969-1976, vol. 11, "South Asia Crisis, 1971"; "Notes on Meeting in Secretary-General's Office," August 9, 1971, UN Archives S-0868-0001-03-00001.

⁸⁰. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v05/d247>.

to participate in the “almost inviolate tradition” whereby one of their nationals receive a senior post. Thus Waldheim created the role of Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs and Decolonization and appointed a Chinese national to it.⁸¹ Waldheim also used political appointments early on in his first term to win over his P5 doubters, to the alarm of his own Under-Secretary-General of administration, who saw the number of political appointments being made as excessive.⁸²

Over time Secretaries-General found ways to promote or retain outstanding senior officials while sidelining or rapidly rotating more ineffective choices. In particular the role of Under-Secretary-General for Political and Security Council Affairs was held by a member of staff from the USSR from 1952–1992. While, as Urquhart notes above, not all UN officials from the USSR were obstructive, the need to provide for more independent policies and analysis than many Soviet officials were willing to provide meant that successive Secretaries-General saw fit to maintain the parallel department of “Special Political Affairs”, staffed by two distinguished and long serving Under-Secretaries-General — Ralph Bunche (an American) and Brian Urquhart himself (a Briton) from 1957 to 1986.⁸³ On Urquhart’s retirement Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is alleged to have extensively lobbied then Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuellar to ensure that he would be replaced by a Briton.⁸⁴ Through a number of subsequent reorganizations, Marrack Goulding, who was indeed British, would hold a senior political or peacekeeping role until 1997 when he was replaced by another Briton, Sir Kieran Prendergast.

De Cuellar was named Secretary-General following a selection process in 1981. In the preceding process, Kurt Waldheim was running for an unprecedented third term as UN Secretary-General but his reappointment was being vetoed on principle by China, who felt three terms was excessive, and favoured Salim Ahmed Salim, who had “led the fight for China to be admitted to the UN”,⁸⁵ but whose candidacy was in turn repeatedly vetoed by the US. Over, ultimately, 16 rounds of voting Waldheim’s support started to slip away and, in order to shore up his position, he is alleged to have contacted the UK Permanent Representative to the UN, Sir Anthony Parsons, and offered him any job of his choosing in the United Nations if the UK were to champion his candidacy. This had the opposite of the intended effect and outraged Parsons, who considered it improper, and instructed several of his staff — including Sir Kieran Prendergast who relayed this to the authors — that for this reason the UK would subsequently work to ensure Waldheim did not get a third term.⁸⁶

In 1996 Boutros Boutros-Ghali was the Secretary-General, but the US were opposed to his reappointment, in large part due to the personal animosity of the US Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright.⁸⁷ The US launched “Operation Orient Express”: a concerted

81. <https://time.com/archive/6877575/the-world-job-with-a-needle/>.

82. As reported by former senior UN official, James Jonah, in his autobiography: “What Price the Survival of the United Nations?”, p. 60.

83. Urquhart, B. (1991). A life in peace and war.

84. Goulding, M. (2002). Peacemonger. Murray.

85. As reported by former senior UN official, James Jonah, in his autobiography: “What Price the Survival of the United Nations?”, p. 537 (footnote 41).

86. Interview with Sir Kieran Prendergast. Sir Brian Urquhart has written that by this stage Waldheim’s campaign had become somewhat desperate: “As he buttonholed, cajoled and wheedled everyone in sight, he became a figure of farce. Ministers and diplomats scurried nervously along the corridors, dreading the familiar grasp of the Secretary-General’s hand on their elbow.”. See: <https://news.un.org/en/spotlight/character-sketches-kurt-waldheim-brian-urquhart>.

87. Meisler, S. (2008). Kofi Annan: A Man of Peace in a World of War. Trade Paper Press.

effort to replace Boutros-Ghali without the need to expend political capital by vetoing his reappointment.⁸⁸ The United States threatened to take action against any UN official advocating for Boutros-Ghali to be given a second term⁸⁹ and are alleged to have offered to establish a foundation for Boutros-Ghali to manage if he were to stand down.⁹⁰ Reportedly, both France and the United States also offered Boutros-Ghali the option of a shorter second term.⁹¹ These attempts were unsuccessful and ultimately the US chose to veto Boutros-Ghali's reappointment in a 14-1 vote, leading to an impasse which was only resolved when Boutros-Ghali suspended his candidacy.

Kofi Annan then became the frontrunner but in straw polling repeatedly received one "discourage" vote from a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which was identified as having been cast by France. In Stanley Meisler's biography of Kofi Annan, which was not authorised but was produced with his co-operation,⁹² it is alleged that France ultimately withdrew their discouragement of Annan's candidacy after a deal was done that Annan would name a French national to head up UN Peacekeeping, a role he had previously held himself. This request was allegedly passed from the French mission to Cameron Hulme, an ambassador at the United States Mission in New York, from Hulme to Shashi Tharoor — then Annan's special assistant — and from Tharoor to Annan.⁹³

Bernard Miyet, who was ultimately appointed to that role, suggested to us that France felt it was important to have a French national in a senior role at the UN as they felt it reflected poorly upon them that the only French Under-Secretary-General appointed by Boutros-Ghali was the head of the Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis, which was seen as a lesser role (although another Frenchman, Antoine Blanca, appointed to a role in Geneva by de Cuellar, also continued to serve into Boutros-Ghali's term). Miyet also said that while France was the state pushing for a Frenchman as head of peacekeeping, the fact that it fell to him specifically — someone who was in no way aligned with the French government or the political majority in France — was likely down to other factors. He felt UN and US support certainly contributed to his selection.⁹⁴

Late in his second term Annan came under a period of sustained pressure: on the one side from the US and UK who were incensed by his opposition to the 2003 Iraq war and alleged certain irregularities with respect to the Oil for Food programme as a lever to bring intense public and private pressure to bear on him. On the other side, members of the UN General Assembly felt that the stranglehold P5 nationals on top jobs gave them outsized influence. Annan held a reshuffle which sequentially resulted in both his Chef de Cabinet Iqbal Riza, a Pakistani, and his deputy Louise Fréchette, a Canadian, being replaced by Mark Malloch Brown from the UK, while Sir Kieran Prendergast was replaced by Ibrahim Gambari from

88. <https://undispatch.com/boutros-boutros-ghali-and-the-2016-presidential-elections/>.

89. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/07/23/world/us-warns-un-on-campaigning-for-post.html>. See also: Meisler, S. (2008). *Kofi Annan: A Man of Peace in a World of War*. According to Meisler, some interpreted this as a direct threat to Boutros-Ghali's deputy spokesman Ahmad Fawzi who had infuriated the Americans by relaying prior statements of praise US President Clinton had made about Boutros-Ghali to journalists.

90. <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/05/world/un-leader-halts-bid-for-new-term-but-does-not-quit.html>.

91. Blood, T. (1999). *Madam Secretary: A biography of Madeleine Albright* (Rev. ed). St. Martin's Griffin; and Fasulo, L. M. (2008). *An Insider's Guide to the UN*. Yale University Press.

92. <https://www.accord.org.za/qjcr-issues/kofi-annan-a-man-of-peace-in-a-world-of-war/>.

93. Meisler, S. (2008). *Kofi Annan: A Man of Peace in a World of War*.

94. Interview with Bernard Miyet. Miyet felt it was likely down to the fact that he had long and trust-based working relations with key senior career French diplomats, strong links with high-ranking officials at the UN Office and international organisations in Geneva, as well as warm connections with some US diplomats and ambassadors.

Nigeria. This reshuffle meant that during the next selection process for Secretary-General there was uncertainty around the arrangements for P5 ringfencing.

It was in this context that Ban Ki-moon, the frontrunner to be Secretary-General in 2006 found himself in almost the same position Annan had found himself a decade before, facing a sequence of mostly encouraging straw polls in the UN Security Council in which he repeatedly received one discourage vote, which he was concerned might be from France (straw polling had not moved to the use of coloured ballot papers at this stage). France appeared to confirm this, their objection being due to the informal convention that the UN Secretary-General should be fluent in French.⁹⁵ Ban Ki-moon had taken some French lessons but his ability to speak French was, and indeed still is, much debated.



John R. Bolton, Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations, extends his congratulations to Ban Ki-moon, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Korea, after the General Assembly endorsed Mr. Ban's appointment as Secretary-General-designate of the United Nations, at UN Headquarters in New York.

Source: UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

In Ban Ki-moon's autobiography he records that as a result he telephoned Philippe Douste-Blazy, the French Foreign Minister, who asked him outright to appoint a French national as Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping. This provides one of the only first hand accounts by a Secretary-General of an explicit request for a position being made in exchange for support. In Ban's own telling of the exchange he did not agree to the French

⁹⁵ All prior Secretaries-General had spoken good French with the possible exception of Trygve Lie, who was initially opposed by France on the basis that he could not speak French (See: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v01/d91>), although other sources indicate that he perhaps could (See: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v01/d70>). As those sources indicate, in either instance it appears France's objections were dropped in exchange for the US dropping its objection to Paul-Henri Spaak, a Belgian native French speaker who could not speak English, being elected as the first ever President of the UN General Assembly — at the time thought to be a more prestigious role still. Sir Kieran Prendergast suggested that Annan's French was also not quite fluent and that this might explain France's original discourage vote. Other former UN officials have also suggested that while Annan completed graduate studies in Geneva he was only comfortable speaking French when restricted to prepared remarks. Prendergast informed the authors that Annan had informed him that he had promised the French that his — Sir Kieran Prendergast's — role would go to a fluent French speaker.

demand outright, but merely said “that they should elect him Secretary-General. Then I would consider his request”. However, this remark may have been interpreted, perhaps intentionally, as a tacit acceptance of the request, particularly as France did subsequently drop their objection and Ban Ki-moon went on to not only retain the incumbent French national in that post but appoint two subsequent French nationals to it.⁹⁶ What Ban Ki-moon’s autobiography does not mention is that he also appointed Philippe Douste-Blazy himself to a post with the rank of Under-Secretary-General, that of Special Adviser on Innovative Financing for Development.⁹⁷

At the same time, according to former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton’s autobiography, Ban Ki-moon told him that the UK had indicated to Ban that they considered the role of Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs to be “theirs” and wanted it back, having only given it up for the two years in which Mark Malloch Brown had the higher position of Deputy Secretary-General. Bolton responded with the US’s own demands, although in his telling he merely laid out “some of our thoughts on changes we wanted once he took office” prior to his election and only turned that into an explicit ask for one of the posts of Under-Secretary-General for either Political or Peacekeeping affairs after Ban had been selected.⁹⁸

Ban Ki-moon thus had three permanent members of the UN Security Council expecting one of two Under-Secretary-General positions. The UK was the one to miss out, with their candidate, John Holmes, being offered the Under-Secretary-General role at the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in consolation, one he reluctantly accepted.⁹⁹ Sir Kieran Prendergast suggested that the reason the UK missed out was because after France came around to Ban’s candidacy they championed him enthusiastically whereas the UK seemed more ambivalent.¹⁰⁰ The UK has held the OCHA post ever since, and while in subsequent appointments the vacancy has been advertised globally, the Secretary-General has always chosen a British candidate.

Another US request to Ban while he was a candidate was that, if appointed, Ban should ask for the resignation of all senior officials from USG upwards, in Bolton’s words, “to clean house, much the way an incoming US president can remove his predecessor’s top appointments”.¹⁰¹ In Bolton’s account, he described the request to Ban as an “absolute prerequisite” which was reinforced during a Presidential meeting the week following Ban’s appointment, in which President Bush insisted Ban “get rid of the [senior] staff”, and specifically “get rid of Malloch Brown,” whom Mr Bush apparently called “anti-American”¹⁰² (as Deputy Secretary-General to Annan, Malloch Brown would have been highly unlikely to stay on in any instance). It is unclear to what extent this suggestion was implemented, several prominent figures from Annan’s tenure did indeed leave office early on in Ban’s term of office, but others remained in post, and a degree of turnover in senior positions generally accompanies the appointment of a new Secretary-General.

96. Ban, K. (2021). *Resolved: Uniting nations in a divided world*. Columbia University Press.

97. <https://media.un.org/photo/en/asset/oun7/oun7693792>.

98. Bolton, J. R. (2008). *Surrender is not an option: Defending America at the United Nations and abroad* (1st Threshold Editions trade pbk. ed). Threshold Editions.

99. Holmes, J. (2013). *The politics of humanity: The reality of relief aid*. Head of Zeus Ltd.

100. It has been suggested that in the final straw poll where Ban received 14 encourage votes and one abstention, the abstention was from the UK and that France relayed this information to Ban souring his relationship with the UK. However, John Bolton’s autobiography indicates that this final abstention was on a white ballot paper, meaning it did not come from a permanent member of the Security Council — he believes it was cast by Japan.

101. Bolton, J. R. (2008). *Surrender is not an option*, Chapter 10.

102. Ibid.

In 2016, António Guterres was identified by early straw polls to be the frontrunner to be Secretary-General. However, as late as October 3,¹⁰³ just two days before the first straw poll during which coloured ballot papers were to be used, Russia was signalling that it was likely to vote to discourage Guterres, outlining its preference for a woman candidate from Eastern Europe — a description that fitted three of Guterres's rivals.

Ultimately, Guterres received no discourage votes during the straw poll with coloured ballot papers on 5 October and was recommended by the Security Council shortly afterwards. Various former UN officials and diplomats have suggested that Russia's support was secured without any explicit promises, but with an understanding that Russia would require a citizen to receive a significant role in Guterres's New York HQ team to ensure their continued cooperation and support.¹⁰⁴ According to one former UN official, Russia also asked Guterres to abandon his flagship policy of appointing a strong Deputy Secretary-General and delegating the leadership of the UN's development work to that Deputy, but Guterres refused to do this — increasing the pressure upon him to shore up his support from Russia.¹⁰⁵ It was in this context that Guterres, now Secretary-General elect, invited Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs (and US Citizen) Jeffrey Feltman to lunch in late 2016. In his own words, Feltman shared the following with the authors:



"At the lunch, he confided that he was facing a problem: the Russians... were insisting on having a Russian national as an Under-Secretary-General in New York. At the time, the Russians had an Under-Secretary-General position as head of the Vienna UN headquarters and head of the UN Office of Drugs and Crime. But they wanted an Under-Secretary-General in New York. Guterres said that he was flummoxed. He wanted me to stay in the Department for Political Affairs (DPA) ... and he knew that the UK, France, and U.S. would never want a Russian leading DPA. As for the Department for Peacekeeping Operations, well, the French helped run his campaign for Secretary-General, so he couldn't throw them under the bus. He didn't think that the Russians would be satisfied with having a Russian citizen in charge of management or humanitarian affairs. The Chinese would insist that a Chinese national remain head of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Did I have any ideas about what he could do?"

"I responded on the spot: DPA, inter alia, has a counter-terror mandate. I was the UN's counter terrorism coordinator and head of the UN's Counter-Terrorism Center (predominantly funded by Saudi Arabia). I was chair of the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF), a coordinating body of all parts of the UN with counter-terrorism interests. These roles had money, staffing, and authority. Spin them off, I counseled, into an independent Office of Counter-Terrorism, headed by an Under-Secretary-General, reporting to the Secretary-General... I did not feel that I was spending sufficient time minding the counter terror portfolio... Moreover, member states (at least at that time) had stand-alone counter terror coordinators whose sole responsibility was counter-terrorism. Why would the UN not want the same?"¹⁰⁶



103. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ben-donaldson-/un-secretary-general_b_12332706.html.

104. Interview with former USG Jeffrey Feltman (see following paragraphs).

105. Interview with former UN Official.

106. Feltman was kind enough to relay what occurred to us at that meeting by email, which we publish with his consent, making minor edits for brevity and to clarify acronyms.



Secretary-General António Guterres (right) with Vladimir Ivanovich Voronkov, newly sworn-in Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Office.

Source: UN Photo/Kim Haughton

This was ultimately done, and Vladimir Voronkov became the first of two-and-counting successive Russian Under-Secretaries-General for the new United Nations Counter-Terrorism Office (OCT). However, while on this occasion the need to accommodate P5 wishes sped up reorganization, on other occasions it has slowed it down. In all cases, it complicates matters. Interviewees suggested Guterres's attempt to reorganise his political and peacekeeping departments was stymied by the political necessity of maintaining two USG posts — one for France and one for the US — with roughly equivalent power. As a result, the eventual reorganization saw a much more modest reshuffling of functions into the new Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs (DPPA).¹⁰⁷

Such accommodations can also have disruptive knock-on effects. Interviewees suggested that the United States only agreed to support the proposal to create OCT on the condition that the Russian USG have an American deputy.¹⁰⁸ Voronkov's first deputy was indeed American, however the role was then given to a Jordanian¹⁰⁹ setting up a merry-go-round of accommodations to P5 members.¹¹⁰ Offsetting the loss of number two in OCT, an American national¹¹¹ was given a role of the equivalent rank at another counter-terrorism related body:

¹⁰⁷. Interviews with former UN official and civil society expert.

¹⁰⁸. Interview with civil society expert.

¹⁰⁹. <https://jordantimes.com/news/local/omeish-appointed-as-un-deputy-for-counter-terrorism>.

¹¹⁰. The claims that follow are based on interviews with a civil society expert and a former diplomat.

¹¹¹. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/carmen-g-cantor/>.

the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED). But since this role was previously held by a Chinese national, it is claimed that Guterres paved the way for China's displacement at CTED with the appointment of a Chinese official as Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa.¹¹² What the Envoy role lacks in UN New York HQ security policy, it makes up in its elevated rank as Under-Secretary-General.¹¹³

As mentioned, the P5 are not the only Security Council members with ambitions for their nationals. One former diplomat described it as "widely assumed" that, during his candidacy, Guterres promised a key policy role in his top team to a Spanish national.¹¹⁴ At the time of the appointment process, Spain was an elected member of the Security Council whose Government, in its own words: "unreservedly backed the candidature of António Guterres during the whole selection process".¹¹⁵ Six months into his tenure, Mr Guterres appointed Ana Maria Menéndez of Spain to be his Senior Adviser on Policy.¹¹⁶



Secretary-General António Guterres with Masud Bin Momen, Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the UN. On the left of the photo is Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

Source: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

112. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/personnel-appointments/2025-07-17/mr-guang-cong-of-china-special-envoy-for-the-horn-of-africa>.

113. Recounted during an interview from a former diplomat with experience in the UN's security architecture.

114. Based on an interview with a former diplomat.

115. <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/news/Paginas/2016/20161006-antonio-guterres.aspx>.

116. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/personnel-appointments/2017-06-21/ms-ana-maria-menendez-of-spain-senior-adviser-policy>.

Conclusion

From the UN's founding to the present day, member states have sought to influence the Secretary-General across the UN's mandate of work. While a level of advocacy is to be expected, influence — especially when applied by powerful countries — can overstep the mark and undermine the SG's independence, in contravention of the UN Charter.

The SG selection process offers states a prime opportunity to exert such influence, especially for the P5 who hold the keys to the Security Council's recommendation. Our study shows that powerful states frequently apply undue influence to candidates during this vulnerable period: national red lines are communicated, assurances on UN reforms sought and, perhaps most flagrantly, demands on top jobs are made.

This study points to over a dozen credibly alleged quid pro quos spanning the eighty years of the UN's history,¹¹⁷ where attempts have been made to trade the promise of top jobs in return for or in thanks for the candidate receiving the backing of a powerful country. While the power dynamics are clearly in favour of member states, the modality of the trade is not always clear cut: brokering the deal can be subtle, and can be initiated by either party.

Some candidates have managed to navigate the pressure. Others have succumbed to it, arriving in office owing favours and lacking the independence to select a diverse and effective top team around them. Deals-for-support have helped consolidate the expectation that P5 nationals should occupy the most consequential UN jobs, giving rise to effective P5 ownership over top positions, and the harmful and prohibited practice of national "ringfencing", while closing the door for the nationals from the wider UN membership.

Given the clandestine actions and political sensitivities involved, attempts to study and chronicle backroom deals presents significant challenges for researchers. While it is impossible to be certain, the authors believe that the examples chronicled in this report may well represent the tip of the iceberg.

117. Due to the scarcity of written records and primary source interviews, there is significant potential for omissions in these figures meaning the incidence of quid pro quos during Secretary-General selection processes is likely much higher.

Recommendations

Vigilance on the part of member states, journalists, civil society, and other watchers of the United Nations is the best guarantor of the independence of the successful candidate for Secretary-General. This is particularly critical given the opacity that has historically characterised the Secretary-General selection process and the asymmetries between candidates and powerful member states.

For member states

Given the power dynamics involved, and the notoriously difficult pathway to prevail as a Secretary-General candidate, the pressure should first and foremost be on the powerful member states that will be attempting to pressure candidates into inappropriate deals.

All member states should publicly commit to:

-  observing the letter and spirit of Article 100 of the UN Charter, and specifically announce that they will not seek to influence Secretary-General candidates and officeholders with respect to top UN positions;
-  not making or seeking to extract promises of any policy or position from a candidate, in return for supporting their candidacy;
-  supporting transparency in senior appointments in line with best practices highlighted in Joint Investigation Unit reports and across the UN system, including through the publication of clear criteria and publicly communicated selection processes;
-  appointing future Secretaries-General for a non-renewable term of office to reduce their vulnerability to state influence tied to their potential reappointment.

For candidates

Candidates for Secretary-General can be strengthened in their ability to resist pressure from Security Council and powerful member states by other member states, civil society, journalists, and the public, using opportunities to engage with candidates to ask them to put on record:

-  that they are opposed to ringfencing particular roles for nationals of particular member states;
-  that they will resist any attempts by member states to insist on the appointment of particular candidates for particular roles;
-  that they will make no promises to member states in order to secure their support or feel any particular obligation with respect to specific states for support they do receive;
-  that they will voluntarily commit to standing for a single term of office to strengthen their independence.

For Secretaries-General

Once in role, the next Secretary-General should:

-  hold fair, open, inclusive and merit-based selection processes reflecting best practices highlighted in Joint Investigation Unit reports and across the UN system, to build an independent and effective senior leadership team with due regard to regional diversity and gender;
-  reinforce transparency and accountability by disclosing appropriate information with respect to selection criteria used and the nationalities of candidates shortlisted;
-  faithfully apply Article 100 of the UN Charter and the swathe of GA Resolutions rejecting monopolies on top UN positions.

Furthermore, the authors of this report believe the United Nations and the next Secretary-General should consider the following steps to limit the ability of UN member states to curtail their independence, and candidates should consider pledging to implement these steps:

-  a prohibition on member states subsidising or providing the housing for UN officials;
-  a prohibition on UN Under-Secretaries-General from taking up their post while on secondment from the diplomatic service of a member state and a requirement that they fully resign from their home state's diplomatic service before taking up their posts;
-  a commitment to publish all letters the Secretary-General receives from member states that lobby for the appointment of specific individuals to specific roles within the UN Secretariat.

Watch-list for civil society

As well as advocating for the recommendations contained in this report, close scrutiny at key moments of the selection process will help hold states and candidates to account. While in and of themselves there is nothing nefarious about any of the following activities, stakeholders, and journalists in particular, should pay close attention to:

-  visits by a candidate to capitals of UN Security Council member states;
-  public statements candidates make around senior appointments;
-  negotiations around the time straw polling starts and around the time straw polling shifts to "coloured" ballot papers that demonstrate who has the support of the five permanent members;
-  any shifts in "discourage" votes, particularly those cast by permanent members on red ballot papers, and any

discussions and negotiations that may have happened between the candidate and their team and that state immediately prior to the shift;



discussions between the Secretary-General elect and permanent members of the UN Security Council during the period between their appointment and the announcement of their top team and initial agenda.

Further opportunities to strengthen independence



1 for 8 Billion's Principles for Integrity

The 1 for 8 Billion campaign is encouraging all candidates to pledge to uphold five principles to demonstrate their commitment to integrity, transparency and accountability. These include commitments on financial disclosures, civil society engagement, full participation in the process, independence on the recruitment of senior officials and avoidance of conflict of interest in relation to ongoing UN employment (if applicable). We are also encouraging member states to endorse these principles. See at: <https://1for8billion.org/news/2026/4/13/launch-principles-for-integrity-in-un-secretary-general-campaigns>.



An end to ringfencing

The independence of the UN Secretary-General could be strengthened through the enforcement of the General Assembly's prohibition on ringfencing specific roles for the nationals of specific states. 1 for 8 Billion partners published a prior memo with recommendations on this point: https://bluesmoke.blog/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ringfencing_and_the_general_assembly.pdf.



A non-renewable term of office for the SG

A single term would strengthen the independence of future Secretaries-General, giving them the necessary political space to get her or his commitments achieved without the distraction of consideration of re-appointment. 1 for 8 Billion has been long championing this reform: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5399cc0ae4b0705199b37aa3/t/56e9657937013bcf507930c0/1458136443055/1+for+7+Billion+Single+Term+Paper.pdf>.



Comprehensive disclosures on campaign financing and conflicts of interest

Transparency on campaign finance and hospitality would considerably help improve the transparency of the selection process. This is also the subject of a separate memo: <https://passblue.com/2026/03/22/un-secretary-general-race-financial-disclosures-an-explainer/>.



Strengthening nominations reducing patronage in the process

1 for 8 Billion is shining a spotlight on the dynamics of nominations for Secretary-General, how the mechanism has evolved over time and suggestions for further improvement. See at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5399cc0ae4b0705199b37aa3/t/69b963501a76f92dae56d7e7/1773757264356/1+for+8+Billion+Explainer+-+Nominations.pdf>.



Objective criteria to appoint an effective SG

1 for 8 Billion has put together a comprehensive set of resources which bring together (1) the formal qualifications and requirements for the role, drawn from the UN Charter, General Assembly resolutions, UN documents and applicable international frameworks (2) a person specification for the role based on these formal requirements (3) recommendations for the structuring and assessment of vision statements and candidate hearings. See at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5399cc0ae4b0705199b37aa3/t/694532ff83bd8c633066aee6/1766142719643/Briefing_+Enhancing+UN+leadership+-+requirements+for+an+effective+Secretary-General.pdf.

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