

A Memo to Ban Ki-moon

Richard Gowan and Bruce D. Jones, 27 June 2011

Dear Secretary-General,

Congratulations. You have not only won a second five-year term at the United Nations, but you also won with a minimum of fuss. In a month in which the Security Council has been rocked by disputes over Syria, all fifteen members backed you. Last week, the General Assembly gave you unanimous support.

You've had a lot of critics since you took office in 2007. They've called you a poor manager and an uninspiring public figure. Some will doubtless grumble that your success this month reflected your capacity to avoid controversies with all the major powers. But politics is politics and a win is a win. You have also taken a courageous and consistent stance in favor of the Arab Spring, belying your reputation for caution.

You have also chosen to stay on at the U.N. through what threatens to be a particularly turbulent period. Your first four and a half years in the job have been far from easy. You've had to contend with everything from Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence (during which the Russians threatened to force you from office for siding too closely with the U.S.) to the aftermath of Haiti's earthquake.

There have also been the rumblings of fundamental power shifts in the U.N. system. Western countries still wield an outsize amount of power around the U.N., and the U.S. dominates most significant debates. But China's views have proved decisive on issues ranging from Darfur to climate change, and other emerging economies such as Brazil, India, and South Africa have grown increasingly assertive too.

You've spent recent years shuttling between these powers – it was a nice touch that you were in Brazil when the Security Council agreed your renewal – and you say you want to be a global “bridge-builder.”

The fact that the Security Council currently contains all the BRICS countries means that its endorsement of you carries extra weight in this context. Gradually increasing tensions between China and the U.S., over which the U.N. has no influence, could paralyze the organization. Many Indian policy experts think that New Delhi should stop bothering with the U.N. if it's not offered a permanent Security Council seat.

In the meantime, cash-strapped European governments are pushing to keep U.N. costs down while Congressional Republicans in the U.S. still treat the organization as a target of choice. To make matters much worse, there's a good chance that a majority of Security Council members will vote in favor of recognizing a Palestinian state this September – the U.S. would veto that, leaving all sides seething.

What can you do about all this? Your leverage is limited, as you recognize. Your predecessor Kofi Annan took up both Security Council reform and the Middle East peace process as signature issues but could achieve a final deal on neither. It's hard to see how you could tackle either more successfully right now.

One practical way to at least acknowledge the shifting balance of power will be in your decisions about senior appointments for your second term. Your senior management team includes quite a few impressive figures, such as former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, who you recruited to run a new U.N. Women's agency, and Argentina's Susana Malcorra, who you put in charge of peacekeeping logistics. It would be wise to offer further high-level posts to top-flight candidates from emerging powers, even though Western governments like the U.K. and France still demand plum jobs.

But there are a lot of other issues looming on your agenda – not just for your next term, but in the next six months. The top three immediate concerns are Libya, the wider Middle East and Sudan. If you fumble on any one of these, you'll risk being written off as a lame-duck Secretary-General rather fast:

- **Libya:** the anti-Gaddafi coalition has asked you to plan for post-conflict recovery, and this is already underway. There's a high chance that you'll end up having to manage a very messy post-conflict situation, and while nobody wants to turn Libya into another Kosovo a fairly hefty peacekeeping force could be required to restore order. There are good models out there – think of the way the U.N. responded in southern Lebanon in summer 2006, mobilizing a serious force within a week. At a minimum, the U.N. may have to deploy a sizeable civilian political mission to oversee a transition to democracy as it did in Afghanistan. The U.N. is short of good Arabists and deep expertise on Libya. You'll need to invest personally in ensuring that the U.N. deploys a credible mission.
- **The wider Middle East:** beyond Libya, there's potentially huge demand for the U.N.'s services in mediation, electoral assistance and constitutional reforms across the wider Middle East. Six months from now there could be U.N. assistance missions in Yemen and Syria as well as Libya. But again the lack of qualified U.N. personnel is a problem. In most Arab countries, U.N.

development officials worked hand-in-glove with the pre-revolutionary regimes. The sheer speed with which events are unfolding in the region is also difficult for the U.N. bureaucracy to keep up with (although it's hardly unique in that). You need to think about restructuring the organization's presence across the Middle East and North Africa, possibly under some sort of regional presence or a super-envoy mandated with ensuring that the U.N. can respond fast to requests for assistance.

- Sudan:** at the start of the year, the U.N. oversaw a successful independence referendum in South Sudan, which will achieve statehood in July. But violence on the border between North and South Sudan has intensified, the North has launched a separate and vicious campaign against rebels in the Nuba Mountains and South Sudan's infrastructure is in an appalling state. You can take a good chunk of the credit for the successful referendum. But you must now take responsibility for ensuring that the new South Sudanese state gets effective governance assistance and that U.N. troops are sufficiently well-armed to deter further violent flare-ups. It's pretty hard to explain why the international community is spending almost \$1,000,000,000 maintaining troops in Sudan if they can't respond to even small flare-ups, let alone forestall another major round of violence. Sudan is also a test case for your proposed reforms on civilian staffing – seeing those implemented will require you to personally back your chosen SRSB in taking a creative, flexible approach. You can and should challenge the member states to support you on this.

You can't resolve any of these issues single-handed. Ensuring that peacekeepers are properly armed and ready for action in Sudan, for example, comes down to the governments that send them. But you can and must put maximum pressure on civilian U.N. officials to respond creatively and rapidly to the problems now looming in all these trouble-spots. You will need to lobby hard in Western and non-Western capitals for both the funding and the political space required to handle these crises at once. Most important, you'll need to work hard at generating better understandings between the western and emerging powers on the issues that confront the U.N. on human rights, responsibility to protect, and the use of force. You did an impressive job in securing your second term. Now is the time to show why you deserved it.

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