

## THE CHALLENGES FACING THE NEXT UN SECRETARY GENERAL

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The first United Nations Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, knew what he was talking about when he described it as “the most impossible job on this earth”. He faced the daunting challenge of building the UN during the early years of the Cold War when divisions between the Soviet bloc and the West left the organization teetering between paralysis and open conflict. His reward was to be assailed by the Soviet Union for opposing its position on the Korean War and by Senator Joseph McCarthy for being soft on communism. Lie resigned in frustration barely a year into his second term.

### Biography

► **Joël Ruet**, President of The Bridge Tank and Economist in the CNRS

Born in 1972, Joel Ruet is a Specialist of Emerging Economies; He was Alumni of Ecole des mines, Paris & London School of Economics. Joel Ruet has lived in Paris, Cairo, New Delhi, Bombay, London, Beijing and Dakar. For a decade he has advised Fortune 500 companies and Private equity Funds in energy & nuclear, automotive, agriculture and mining industries at CEO/CFO level on India, China, Africa.

He is joint-coordinator of the “Global Vision Program” for Electric Vehicles initiative between Fondation Renault & ParisTech “Grandes Ecoles”. Joel Ruet served as expert for the 2012 revision of “Stratégie Nationale de Développement économique et Social”, Senegal and in 2014 served as Special Adviser to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Equipment, Govt of Senegal.

Joel Ruet is now the president of The Bridge Tank, a “link-and-think” tank dedicated to the growing role of emerging countries in global change.





The inherent difficulty of the Secretary-General's job is the result of tensions built into the United Nations system, especially the gap between the high ideals set out in the UN Charter and the hard reality of great power diplomacy on which it depends. The organisation embodies the aspiration for a world order managed in the common interest, yet it is based on the authority of national governments acting primarily in their own self-interest. Because the UN has limited financial resources and no military assets of its own, meeting development goals or launching peacekeeping missions requires material support that only member countries can provide. Any major proposal can be vetoed by any of the five permanent members of the Security Council.

All of this leaves the office of Secretary-General vested with moral expectations that are not matched by equivalent levels of executive power. To remain confined within these limits is to risk being accused of inaction and complacency in the face of urgent global problems. To push the boundaries in the search for workable solutions invites blockage and the inevitable criticism that the Secretary-General has overreached. Consensus has to be built through a painstaking process of diplomacy that balances competing interests; large and small countries, the Security Council and the General Assembly, established and emerging powers. This is to say nothing of tensions between regions and within in them or the changing dynamic of relations among the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5). In having to satisfy everyone, the Secretary-General runs the risk of satisfying no one.

The incoming Secretary-General appointed next year will take office at a unique moment in the UN's history, and one throws up its own challenges. The first of these is the rising tension within the Security Council evident in the conflict over Ukraine and the sharp disagreements over Syria. Russia's ambitions now include a clearly stated desire to revise the post-Cold War settlement in its favour and a

willingness to use armed force in support of that goal. It is an exaggeration to describe this as a new Cold War, but the struggle between Russia and the West goes beyond routine a clash of national interests and reflects divergent ideas about the values and structure of the international system itself. It has the potential to create political stalemate within the UN machinery if it isn't managed properly.

A second challenge comes with the shift in global wealth and power to the East and the South. This raises obvious questions about China's role and whether its traditionally cautious approach within the international community is about to give way to a more assertive stance. China's willingness to provide limited diplomatic support to Russia during the Ukraine crisis, by agreeing a strategic energy deal, for example, is a notable contrast to the more neutral stance it adopted over Georgia eight years ago. Emerging regional powers like India, Brazil and Turkey also becoming impatient for change that reflects the emerging power realities of the twenty-first century. How much longer can these pressures be contained within a UN structure designed by the victorious allies of 1945? A UN that cannot reform is in danger of becoming irrelevant.

Increasingly the role of the Secretary-General is no longer just one of mediating between states. A third challenge is the need to acknowledge and harness the growing power of civil society at a global level in furthering the UN's work. The digital age makes it easier for civil society organisations to operate across borders, mobilise global opinion and subject decision-makers to direct scrutiny. Kofi Annan did much to improve the UN's working relations with civil society, but CSOs are becoming more demanding at a time when Russia and some other countries see them as vehicles for Western interference in their internal affairs. Groups like 1 For 7 Billion and SheUNited are also seeking to influence the process of selecting the next Secretary-General by calling for more transparency and urging the UN promote the goal of gender equality by giving the job to a woman for the first time.

One area where an incoming Secretary-General will hope to benefit from continued improvement is in relations with the United States. Since the Iraq War, when the Bush administration deliberately sidelined the UN, the attitude of the White House has become notably warmer. The passing of the 'unipolar moment' has made policy-makers in Washington more aware of UN's uses in legitimizing diplomatic initiatives and mediating relations with other countries. That rapprochement is likely to continue if President Obama is succeeded by another Democrat in

2017, shortly after the next Secretary-General takes office. A Republican President, on the other hand, could be a major headache. At least one Republican hopeful, Rand Paul, has called for the UN to be dissolved.

Russia's revisionist challenge, the rise of China, the emergence of new regional powers, the growth of civil society and uncertainty about America's future attitude all call for a Secretary-General with a unique combination of qualifications and talents. They will need to be a skilled diplomat and have the ability to maintain the trust and respect of all of the P5. Good relations with the United States, Russia and China in particular would be a major advantage, as would experience of working within the UN system. What the organisation probably needs right now is a leader who already understands its unique institutional dynamics rather than one that has to learn on the job. Someone with experience of working collaboratively with civil society would show a UN willing to move with the times, especially if they also happened to be a woman. It is a formidable job description, but exceptional times call for a Secretary-General with exceptional qualities.