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Appointing the Next Secretary-General: The Relevance of Geographic Rotation

One World Trust background briefs for the 1 for 7 billion campaign

Loraine Sievers

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This series of background briefs have been written by scholars from around the world who are members of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS). The paper reflects the view of the author, in her or his individual capacity. It has been solicited as a contribution to the 1 for 7 billion campaign to make the appointment process of the United Nations Secretary General more open and inclusive, and thereby more accountable.

The briefs are available at <http://www.1for7billion.org/resources/>. The OWT is grateful for the support provided by ACUNS in this effort.

The author Loraine Sievers is co-author of *The Procedure of the UN Security Council* and Director of the website www.scprocedure.org.

To contact the author please email: scprocedure@earthlink.net.

The editor Sylvia Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen is assistant professor in the Public Administration and Policy group at Wageningen University.

To contact the editor please email: sylvia.karlsson-vinkhuyzen@wur.nl

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Unit 60
Eurolink Business Centre
49 Effra road
London Sw2 1BZ
Tel: +44 (0)20 7733 9696
Email: info@oneworldtrust.org
www.oneworldtrust.org

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At the United Nations and in broad segments of civil society worldwide, there is a groundswell of support for the next Secretary-General to be a candidate of the highest qualifications, and ideally a woman. Therefore, many observers have been puzzled by the prominence being given to the factor of regional rotation in the appointment process. This prominence is apparent not only in statements made by some UN Member States, but even more strikingly, in the fact that as of 12 April 2016, seven of the nine candidates who have been officially nominated are from the region of Eastern Europe.

During the Organization's early decades, regional rotation among States for apportioning key positions at the UN was not a well-developed concept. With respect to the Security Council, the Charter does provide that non-permanent members should be elected with "due regard" to "equitable geographical distribution".¹ However, during the Cold War, rather than regional identity, the majority of UN Member States tended to define their interests within the Organization on the basis of whether they adhered to the Western bloc or the Soviet bloc, or considered themselves non-aligned.

The UN Charter is silent on the question of regional rotation for the post of Secretary-General. And it is clear that for the first Secretaries-General, neutrality from the major Cold War alliances was seen as a more important qualification than the region represented.

Gradually, however, as large numbers of newly independent African and Asian countries joined the United Nations, the Organization's Member States began developing a regional system for distributing positions at the UN. This system became institutionalized for the first time in 1963, when the General Assembly adopted a resolution which created a fixed geographical pattern for allocating seats on the Security Council.² The positions which began to rotate on a regular basis among regional groups came to include the President, Vice-Presidents and Committee Chairs of the General Assembly; the Presidents of ECOSOC and of the Human Rights Commission (now Council); and the Chair of the Disarmament Commission.

This system of geographical rotation generally has ensured that no single region holds a disproportionate number of important positions at the UN at the same time and sequentially, and also has made it more likely that

1. Article 23(1) of the UN Charter.

2. General Assembly resolution 1991 (XVIII) A, adopted on 17 December 1963. [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/1991\(XVIII\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/1991(XVIII)) (accessed 14 April 2016)

smaller States can participate in leadership roles. Croatia's Ambassador Vladimir Drobnyak, speaking at a programme held at the International Peace Institute, stated that regional groups "are not just an auxiliary measure in the system. They are the heart of the system." At the same programme, former Indian Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri affirmed that the regional group system at the UN "is far more important than it appears from the outside".³

At present, all 193 UN Member States are voluntarily affiliated with one of five regional groups: the Asia-Pacific Group (55 members, if the Observer State of Palestine is included); the Africa Group (54 members); the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States (known as "GRULAC" – 33 members); the Western European and Other States Group (known as "WEOG" – 29 members for electoral purposes); and the Eastern European Group (23 members).

As the system of regional rotation coalesced within the UN, it became natural for many States to think that this system should extend also to the position of Secretary-General. And in fact, the nationalities of the seven Secretaries-General evidence an overall pattern of regional rotation: three from WEOG; two from Africa, two from Asia-Pacific, and one from GRULAC. However, the influence of regional rotation as a selection criterion for appointing Secretaries-General was mainly a general concept until 1991. That year, although candidates from other regions were considered, the Africa Group and its supporters made a strong case that the next Secretary-General should come from Africa, because it was the only large regional group which had not yet provided an incumbent for the post. That argument held sway, and ultimately Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Egypt was appointed.

In 1997, the General Assembly adopted a resolution which testified to the fact that by then, the concept of regional rotation had become an established criterion for appointing Secretaries-General. Resolution 51/241 stated that, "In the course of the identification and appointment of the best candidate for the post of Secretary-General, due regard shall continue to be given to regional rotation and shall also be given to gender equality." (emphasis added)⁴

This system of rotation, however, ran into complications which began when it became apparent that, unlike previous Secretaries-General, Boutros-Ghali would be blocked from serving a second term (for more details see brief no 1 in this series). There was consensus at the time that an African candidate should be his successor, so that in total, African incumbents would hold the post for the customary two consecutive terms, and this led to the appointment of Kofi Annan. The general understanding was that Annan would serve only one term, to complete the ten-year cycle.

Because by then Eastern Europe was the only region which had not yet produced a Secretary-General, that group anticipated that at the completion of Annan's five-year tenure, an Eastern European would be appointed the next Secretary-General in 2001. However, Annan's stewardship of the United Nations was so widely regarded as successful that he was appointed for a second term.

In 2004, two years before the end of Annan's second term, the Eastern Europe group conveyed to UN Member States its position that the next Secretary-General should be from its region. In the selection process of 2006, however, once again Eastern Europe was bypassed, this time in favour of the appointment of candidate from the Asia-Pacific group, Ban Ki-moon. This outcome, according to United States Ambassador John Bolton, was the result of "a 2001 political deal between the African and Asian groups for Asia to support Annan for a second term (Africa's

3. Programme hosted on 24 April 2015 by the International Peace Institute entitled "To Choose the Next UN Secretary-General, First Create a Procedure". <http://www.ipinst.org/2015/04/un-reform-selecting-the-next-secretary-general#13>, (accessed 14 April 2016).

4. http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/51/241, (accessed 14 April 2016).

third consecutive term), in exchange for Africa's committing to vote for an Asian in 2006".⁵ Ban was subsequently appointed to serve a second term ending in 2017.

Thus, after waiting fifteen years, from 2001 to 2016, today the Eastern European group holds the firm conviction that it is clearly time for the next Secretary-General to be from its region. At a press conference on 2 September 2015, Russian Ambassador Vitaly I. Churkin noted that the Eastern European group had written a letter to the General Assembly President in which it "reiterates that we strongly believe that this is our turn".⁶ To those who argue that the system of regional rotation has become outmoded, Eastern Europeans have responded that most States now making that argument have adhered closely to the criteria of regional rotation in the selection of all recent Secretaries-General.

In the official documents bearing on the 2016 appointment process, there has been a gradual displacement of the concept of regional rotation in favour of greater emphasis on the personal qualifications desirable in a Secretary-General, and on the preferability of appointing a woman. This trajectory can be traced from the adoption of resolution 69/321 by the General Assembly in late 2015 to the subsequent joint letter from the Assembly and Security Council Presidents on the process for selecting the next Secretary-General.⁷ Whereas the resolution gave equal stress to "gender and geographical balance", the letter gives more emphasis to gender, while it merely "note[s] the regional diversity in the selection of previous Secretaries-General".

Nonetheless, so far, the concept of regional rotation has been largely respected in actual practice. The first six candidates to be officially nominated by their governments are all from Eastern Europe – three women and three men. As of 12 April 2016, Portugal and New Zealand (both members of WEOG) are the only States from outside Eastern Europe which have nominated a candidate. Interestingly, New Zealand's Prime Minister, referring to the prospects of his country's nominee, Helen Clark, alluded to the factor of regional rotation when he said that, "there has to be a degree of realism because with all of these jobs, it can be very much who they think someone's turn is".⁸

Of the permanent members of the Security Council, only the United Kingdom has publicly stated that the appointment process should not be limited by regional rotation. As for the other four, it seems likely that they may adhere to geographical rotation for so long as at least one Eastern European candidate shows viability. The positions of most of the ten elected Council members are thought to be similar.

However, as the process proceeds, if none of the Eastern European candidates appears able to amass the necessary support, it is expected that more nominations will be received from States outside Eastern Europe. Under this scenario, the region likely to be considered next in line, in terms of geographic rotation, is Latin America and the Caribbean. That is because overall, WEOG incumbents have served as Secretary-General for six terms, Asia-Pacific for four, Africa for three, and GRULAC for only for two.

The stakes in the present appointment process are high. It is not expected that there will be any change to the standard five year term of office during the 2016 appointment process. And if a decision is subsequently made to change the term length, it is likely to apply only after the new incumbent would have the same opportunity as previous Secretaries-General to serve a second five-year term. Thus, if a candidate from Eastern Europe is appointed as the next Secretary-General, this will effectively lock out candidates from other regions until 2027. And if a male

5. John Bolton. 2008. *Surrender is Not an Option*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 276.

6. See <http://webtv.un.org/media/watch/sc-president-vitaly-i.-churkin-russian-federation-on-the-security-council-programme-of-work-in-september-2015-press-conference/4459405043001>, (accessed 14 April 2016).

7. See <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/435/55/pdf/N1543555.pdf?OpenElement>, (accessed 14 April 2016).

8. http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11616414, (accessed 14 April 2016).

candidate from Eastern Europe is given precedence over female candidates, it also will not be until 2027 that a woman will have the chance to be appointed.

If the concept of regional rotation proves to be decisive in the present appointment process and an Eastern European becomes the next Secretary-General, this will complete the cycle whereby each regional group has been represented in the office at least once. This may, in turn, open the way for a broader discussion of the criteria to be considered in selecting subsequent Secretaries-General.

The One World Trust promotes education, training and research into the changes required within global organisations in order to make them answerable to the people they affect and ensure that international laws are strengthened and applied equally to all. Its guiding vision is a world where all peoples live in peace and security and have equal access to opportunity and participation.

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