

**“The Role of the United Nations Secretary-General:
The Past as Prelude to the Future”**

**by
Anand Panyarachun**

**U Thant Lecture Series
United Nations University
14 October 2005
Tokyo**

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to be with you today to deliver this year’s U Thant Lecture on “The Role of the United Nations Secretary-General: The Past as Prelude to the Future”.

This is a very timely subject as we enter the final year of the present Secretary-General’s tenure, and we begin to think about the next Secretary-General and the challenges that he or she may face. As you know the recent High-Level Event in New York produced an outcome document which looked at a range of issues and many recommendations for reform. But one area it did not mention is the Office of the Secretary-General itself, though I am sure in the coming months and year the nature of this office and its future will become an increasingly hot topic of debate.

When we talk about UN reform, we normally talk about the Security Council, perhaps the General Assembly or ECOSOC, sometimes forgetting that the Secretariat itself is a Principal Organ of the UN, and perhaps the one which has developed, changed, adapted and grown the most since the founding of the UN just over sixty years ago.

We have had seven Secretaries-General, who have each interpreted their jobs in very different ways, responding to an evolving international environment. The Charter gives only a framework, saying that the Secretary-General will be the chief administrative officer of the Secretariat. It uses language similar to what was in the Charter of the League of Nations, with one important difference: Article 99, which says that ‘he may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten maintenance of international peace and security’. It is this article, which implicitly gives the Secretary-General room to act on his own, to monitor world events, identify possible crises, and propose solutions, which gives him space. How this space is used has differed enormously over the past six decades.

Dag Hammarskjold set the standard. Brilliant, innovative, a master strategist as well as tactician, he was able to use his tremendous knowledge with great effect. Under Hammarskjold, two key concepts were born, or at least grew up: the idea of the Secretary-General’s ‘good offices’ and of UN peacekeeping. On many occasions he

demonstrated the value of having the Office of the UN Secretary-General as a neutral focal point, securing for example the release of American hostages in China in the early 1950s. He also demonstrated in 1956 the possibility of the UN fielding a small, lightly armed military force as impartial observers and as a buffer between warring states.

But we must recall that that was a different world. When Hammarskjold was Secretary-General, the UN had only fifty or sixty members, the United States of America easily gained a majority in the General Assembly, Communist China was denied membership, much of the world was still governed by European empires, and the Secretariat was a tiny fraction of its present size. More importantly, the death and destruction caused by World War Two was only a few years past. The idea of the UN was backed by a solid constituency, including by the United States of America and elsewhere.

We must also recall that Dag Hammarskjold's model of a dynamic and creative Secretary-General, pushing the boundaries of the office, also ran him into difficulty. It is a fact that every Secretary-General has had a difficult second term and Dag Hammarskjold was no exception. By the time of his tragic death, he had run afoul of the French and the Soviets were barely on speaking terms with him, hardly a tenable situation for any Secretary-General.

Then we had U Thant, the namesake of this lecture series. U Thant, as all of you know, remains the only Asian to have held the office of UN Secretary-General. His background could not have been more different from that of Hammarskjold. Whereas Hammarskjold was an aristocratic Swede from a well-off political family, U Thant was born a world away in a little town in the Irrawaddy delta, the son of a minor landowner and very much part of a small but prosperous Burmese colonial middle-class.

U Thant spent much of his formative years, in the 1930s and 1940s as the headmaster of a school in his hometown. He then went on to join the first independent government of U Nu, soon becoming Secretary to the Prime Minister and U Nu's right hand man, especially on foreign and press relations. U Thant was part of the Burmese Government when it was a democratic government and struggling for its life against ethnic separatism, communism and outside intervention. This was what shaped his views about the UN and the role of the UN in protecting the security of small states.

By the time Hammarskjold died in November 1961, the notion of a strong independent UN Secretary-General was already under sustained attack. It is to the credit of U Thant that he was able to preserve the Office of the Secretary-General, even strengthen it further, by taking a tact very different from Hammarskjold's, but effective nonetheless.

Hammarskjold was a great Secretary-General by force of intellect as well as courage and creativity. U Thant was a great Secretary-General because he brought to the Office a special moral tone and integrity; because all sides were confident he would take the correct action, no matter how politically risky and dangerous. It was the concept of the Secretary-General as a sort of secular pope, pioneered by Hammarskjold, but further developed under U Thant. When U Thant publicly opposed the American war in Vietnam, he was not thinking of political expediency.

The Soviet Union had proposed a Troika arrangement – to replace the Secretary-General with three Secretaries-General, one from the West, one from the East and one from the Third World. This would have destroyed the Office. It was to the great credit of U Thant that with his election this proposal was put aside and never mentioned again.

When U Thant became Secretary-General there were dozens of new states being created out of old empires. The UN went from being a mainly western club of 50 some odd countries to a global organization of more than a hundred. The Non-Aligned Movement gained an automatic majority in the General Assembly and the needs of these new states became a priority on the UN's agenda.

This was during the height of the Cold War, when the UN's political potential could not easily have been realised. But the UN remained high in people's minds, because it had acquired a new agenda – development – and it was during U Thant's day that much of the UN's development aims and institutions were built. UNDP, UNITAR, UNEP were created in the 1960s under U Thant's watch: as the man from colonial Burma, he believed passionately in decolonization and its natural follow-up – international cooperation for development.

U Thant also continued in the Hammarskjold tradition of offering the Secretary-General's good offices for settling or preventing disputes. During the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and later in 1965 during the Indo-Pakistani War, the Secretary-General assumed an all important role as a neutral focal point for the warring sides and their allies.

In the 1970s and 1980s the UN entered a more quiet phase, but then with the end of the Cold War suddenly burst into entirely new spheres of activity. The collapse of the Soviet Union allowed for the Security Council to intervene much more directly in civil wars, and a new generation of peacekeeping operations helped bring peace to Cambodia, Mozambique and elsewhere. Under both Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General again took centre stage in developing new policy ideas, with the present Secretary-General successfully championing arguments for new ideas about state sovereignty and the need to act, forcefully if necessary, against genocide, ethnic cleansing and severe human rights abuses.

But all this clouded a different track the UN was taking – a slow tract towards increasing bureaucratic complexity and mismanagement. Except perhaps Hammarskjold, no Secretary-General has excelled as a manager. The bureaucracy remains in some ways a relic of the 1950s, designed to write reports and organize conferences, but now saddled with huge field operations, with little change in people or culture. It comes as a surprise to many that the average staff age in the UN is something like 55, with more than 50% slated for retirement in the next few years. The UN is run by a generation hired in the quiet days and it is perhaps no surprise that it sometimes must strain itself to keep up with present day demands.

There is also the relationship with Washington. Washington as the sole superpower is the UN's indispensable partner. In the 1960s the UN was able to maneuver between the US and USSR and build a solid foundation of support amongst the Non-Aligned Movement through its development activities. That option no longer exists. The Secretary-General

must at once be independent of Washington but at the same time be seen by Washington as a useful friend and partner. It is an almost impossible balancing act and it is to the credit of Kofi Annan that he has managed to do what he has for so long.

The Iraq war exposed new difficulties, new conflicts amongst the Membership, new problems with how the UN worked or didn't work in the early 21st century. It was in this context that I was asked to chair the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. We were asked to provide a coherent analysis of today's threats, evaluate critically existing policies and institutions, and recommend change at the UN.

We did not, amongst our 101 recommendations, make any on the Office of the Secretary-General. We were even hesitant to make recommendations on change in the Secretariat, though now I believe this was a mistake and that change in the Secretariat should have taken a more prominent place in our deliberations and our recommendations.

The week our report was presented to the Secretary-General was the very same week the scandal over the Oil-for-Food Programme broke out. The need for Secretariat reform is all too evident, whatever value one places on specific allegations or analysis of blame. The Secretariat is riddled with dated and cumbersome rules and regulations which cripple its flexibility and make impossible any genuine system of accountability. People are seldom rewarded for good work and rarely is anyone punished for incompetence. It is only against great odds and with the dedication of some of the excellent staff the UN does have, that it is able, for example, to mount peacekeeping operations in the field. It is no wonder that in trying to manage tens of billions of dollars in oil-for-food that there were problems of mismanagement if not outright corruption.

And so what next?

As we all know, Secretary-General Kofi Annan's term will come to an end next year. A new Secretary-General will be elected by December 2006, perhaps a little before, and we may expect discussion of the succession to begin in earnest in a few months time.

There is some acceptance of the principle of geographic rotation, which would mean a Secretary-General from Asia, the first since U Thant retired in 1971. And the Asian region in UN terms means everything from the eastern Mediterranean all the way to the South Pacific. What sort of Secretary-General do we need? What challenges would he or she face? And what lessons are there to be learned from the past?

I'm afraid to say that any future Secretary-General will face an environment more challenging, more difficult, more filled with possible traps and pitfalls than any of his predecessors. Even with Kofi Annan, a Nobel Laureate and hailed as the best Secretary-General since Dag Hammarskjold, we have seen what attacks he has had to face, and the scrutiny and the pressure.

The next Secretary-General will almost certainly inherit a portfolio where he will be in charge of huge field operations. The UN now has over 100,000 soldiers in the field in incredibly complex political environments. We sometimes take for granted the fact that Kofi Annan, as a former head of the UN Peacekeeping Department, knows these

operations inside out and is able to master the intricacies of everything from staff deployment, to logistics to mandates to the politics of peace implementation. It is unlikely any successor will come so well versed in these things.

A new Secretary-General will also face a big management crisis. The recent September Summit has asked for a complete review of all mandates older than five years as well as all rules and regulations related to the budget and human resources. This is an Herculean task and may not be completed until well after the new Secretary-General has taken over. A big part of the job will be to manage the reform of the bureaucracy, or enhance systems of accountability and oversight, and promote the concept of meritocracy among Secretariat staff. All these are necessary to rebuild Member States' confidence in the ability of the Secretariat to fulfill its mandate with integrity and effectiveness.

A new Secretary-General will also face a world and a UN where differences in perception, of the threats we face, are unprecedented. Should the UN prioritize development? Or are terrorism and nuclear proliferation the key threats? Or civil wars and genocide? One cannot compare the Secretary-General to the CEO of a company. A company has one goal – to make money. In the UN there are 191 bottom lines.

Can we have a Secretary-General like Dag Hammarskjold or U Thant? It's hard to imagine. It's also hard to compare today's environment to any in the past. I suppose if there is one thing in common with both men, it's that they had to reinvent the role of Secretary-General, taking the organisation in a new direction. More importantly, both were men of unquestioned integrity, courage and principle, all necessary qualities for the new Secretary-General.

Will it be unrealistic to believe that the next Secretary-General can in every respect be the world's top diplomat and a moral authority in his or her own right; one who understands the management challenge and is able to oversee if not direct a radical reform of the Secretariat; one who is a master tactician, able to balance the needs and perceptions of the entire Membership without compromising the core values in which the United Nations was founded? If we can find such a man or woman, the UN will have a good chance to remake itself. But without such a person, the future of the United Nations will be under threat and the world will indeed be a less secure one for our future generations.

Let us hope that the best man or woman gets the job.

Thank you.