

The UN in Transition: Continuity and Change

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An Interview with Krishna A. Chokshi
New York, NY, 20 November 2006

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: Many say that the UN's recent leadership transition might be the most important in its history. How is Mr. Ban Ki-moon perceived in comparison to his predecessor, and what changes do you feel are anticipated at the UN as a result of this leadership transition?

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Vijay Nambiar: Well, I must say that it is still too early to start making any comparisons, and in any case the comparison is highly asymmetrical; Mr. Kofi Annan has reached virtually the acme of his achievements in the sense of his being at the end of his tenure. He is a person who has grown from within the UN bureaucracy, within the UN hierarchy so in that sense I think Mr. Kofi Annan has had both tremendous advantages and, to a certain extent, a fair number of encumbrances, if you will, because of his being inside the UN bureaucracy. But then I think he has grown in office over the years. The kind of moral authority that he commands is tremendous because I think he is able to get in touch with world leaders from a tremendous vantage point in terms of his personal authority, and the legitimacy and moral authority of the United Nations. Now this will naturally not come straightaway to the new secretary-general. For one thing, Mr. Ban Ki-moon is not a person who has come from within. He, as the foreign minister of a member state, brings a new perspective—though of course there have been earlier secretaries-general who have had that perspective. He therefore

will impart a particular style to his job.

Having said that, I think that the kinds of challenges the UN faces today are quite different from the ones it faced even ten years ago: there has been an almost exponential growth in the activities of the UN in spheres like peacekeeping and conflict prevention. The ambit of the UN's involvement has grown from being just a forum of member states to a much larger kind of platform. The UN is now the pillar of development, security, human rights, and other new issues which I think the new secretary-general will have to embrace and promote. I think that will require a radically reoriented vision. While we may talk about charisma, or the absence of charisma, or what may be called the routinization of charisma in a particular office when a person takes over, there is in the United Nations itself a global expectation of legitimacy. The person who holds the top office of the United Nations will naturally be invested with a certain authority and legitimacy. Now, that has to be accompanied by a vision, and I think one will see that vision over time, and one cannot judge yet. I think the new secretary-general brings with him an Asian perspective, an Asian style, and an Asian capacity for looking at issues from a consensus-seeking approach, which he has talked about. I think that will probably stand him in good stead. At the same time, he will have to grow into his office; there is no doubt in that.

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Journal: The secretary-general selection process is known to be very loosely defined, as there are no established qualifications for the post. There are no search committees, no interviews, and no background checks. Very little is codified about this process. Is the current process effective or is there a better alternative?

Nambiar: I think that many people tend to justify what is already there, to say that this is the reality and you have to accept it. In many ways, I think the United Nations has changed almost unrecognizably since the 1940s, when the mode of election of the secretary-general was first decided. And yet, that is the manner in which the selection process is conducted even today. That is, the General Assembly appoints the secretary-general, but it is done on the recommendation of the Security Council. And the Security Council has generally suggested just one name. Over the years, there have been suggestions to reexamine this process. As it stands now, the three main criteria for the selection of the secretary-general that can be suggested are competence, regional representation, and gender equality.

There has also been a call for much greater transparency in the process. Currently, the nomination process, or the recommendation by the Security Council, is the result of a whole series of processes that take place within the Security Council. Now, 1981 I think was the first time they suggested the use of what they called "straw polls." These

kinds of straw polls have traditionally been used to provide an informal assessment of the acceptability of individual candidates, so that the selection process can formally take place. There is a certain inherent secretiveness about the process, a lack of transparency. It is questionable, of course, whether that lack of transparency is a good thing or whether it would be better to have an open process. Last year, various national delegations like the Canadians and others had spoken for a much more open kind of process. It takes time to actually put this into effect, but I think to some extent these suggestions have not been accepted because of the realities of power distribution in the world. When you have the selection process done mainly in the Security Council, the control and the power that the P5 have is certainly much greater. At present, it doesn't seem likely that they would be willing to give up their decisive control over the selection process. I don't think that the major powers are as yet ready for any radical changes.

Journal: The regional rotation norm was recently challenged by Ambassador Bolton. How do you feel about this norm?

Nambiar: Well, in a sense, it is generally accepted that the competence of the candidate should be the prime criterion. Having said that, however, there has always been a sense that there should be regional rotation. This principle has in fact been accepted in the selection of earlier secretaries-general. So in that sense, I think the argument that the Asian group made for the legitimacy of the regional rotation principle found wide resonance among the membership of the United Nations, and most of the other regional groups as well. Nobody could argue that Asia would not be able to locate a person of competence.

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Journal: Mr. Kofi Annan emphasized the need for UN reform during his time as secretary-general. Will the new secretary-general also make UN reform an important part of his agenda?

Nambiar: He has in fact said that he will. Reform has now become a continuing process at the UN, as the latest reform of 2005 has itself been the third part in a series, the first reform being in 1997, the second in 2002. The earlier reforms dealt with management. The 1997 reform package included changes in the secretariat structures, a restructuring of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and the establishment of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. During the second round of reform, there was an overhaul of the Department of Public Information (DPI), and major changes in the ways in which the messages of the UN would be disseminated around the world; many DPI offices in Europe were closed down, and the funds were utilized to open up

a large number of new offices in developing countries. Then of course, in the Department of Peacekeeping there was a major reform in the peacekeeping process. In 2005, the major new executive change was the establishment of the policy committee.

The new incumbent will inevitably be carrying each of these reform initiatives further, and I think there has been some management reform with the policy of the new Ethics Office just set up on 1 February 2006. These are attempts to try to incorporate best practices in terms of ethics and corruption, and to look at better discipline. These are also elements of the secretary-general's management reform package in the final years of his tenure, which we mentioned a while ago. I dare say the new secretary-general is probably going to give a new kind of momentum and impetus to the reforms.

Journal: Which reforms need to be prioritized now?

Nambiar: Better management is always a priority, particularly in the context of better utilization of the funds that are available. Currently, I think that reforms like the Human Rights Council and the proper functioning of the human rights machinery are going to be very important. The original intent of these reforms was to have the human rights concerns of the international community pushed not in the direction of naming countries that violate human rights so much as looking at grave and persistent violations of human rights. In any case, the UN's priorities have moved increasingly towards the protection of human rights. Any new secretaries-general cannot afford to ignore this issue. Then, of course, the question of having mandate review is a major one, which inevitably creates problems between developing and developed countries. The developing countries would like a much greater degree of concentration on development issues, and they find that very often the review of mandates tends to get implemented at the expense of the less powerful countries, so there is some resistance.

In the peace and security field, the UN's preoccupation with peacekeeping will continue for a long time and, as such, better management of peacekeeping operations will be a major priority. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) faces all of the burdens associated with precipitous increases in peacekeeping operations. Major questions surround the implementation of new mandates in the Security Council; increasingly robust peacekeeping mandates are being given to the Security Council but the DPKO faces the recurring difficulty that no peacekeeping operation can really function without the cooperation of the host country. And very often the Security Council's decisions can't actually be implemented without the host or target country's cooperation. There is now increasingly a sense that operations once undertaken unilaterally or by coalitions of the willing are, after some time, handed over to the United Nations. This becomes a very difficult mandate for the UN to handle because the UN

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cannot be identified as working against the interest of the particular country when it is working in a peacekeeping operation. In situations of civil war, the UN's position does get tenuous and there is insecurity, but when there is a functioning government, you have to work with the cooperation of that government. I'm speaking particularly about a situation like Darfur, which is a major dilemma for the United Nations. On the one hand, the logic and rationale for an effective UN operation is there for the whole world to see. But at the same time, if you were to just force yourself onto the government, you're setting them up to be virtually shot at by the national forces, either from the armed forces of that country or even by rebel forces. If there is no peace to keep, but a situation of open challenge from the government itself, how do you get troop-contributing countries to provide troops in this kind of situation? It is just unviable.



Photo Courtesy of Vijay Nambiar

Vijay Nambiar advises Secretary Ban Ki-Moon at one of his early UN meetings.

Journal: You alluded to this earlier, but could you speak about resistance to UN reform, particularly in relation to the group of 77 developing countries?

Nambiar: I don't see that the group of 77 is per se opposed to reform. Why should a more efficient and more effective United Nations—a better managed United Nations—be against the interests of the G-77? It doesn't stand to reason. However, it is very often that “management reform” is used as a code for cost-cutting exercises, and when programs are cut, they are generally those which are of interest to developing countries. For that reason, people say that management reform should not be a cost-cutting exercise. If anything, it should be directed at having a more effective approach to programs, at having better delivery, and where the G-77 has been convinced that this is the rationale, they generally support this kind of effort. Of course, if you look at the individual programs that are typically affected by such reforms, you do find that the G-77 position is not necessarily unjustified.

Journal: Do you perceive an inadequacy of representation in the Security Council, especially vis-a-vis India's potential bid for a permanent seat on the Security Council?

Nambiar: The reform of the Security Council inevitably will have to be one of the key elements of any reform process, because the Security Council is one of the most important organs of the United Nations system. The structure of the Security Council



Photo Courtesy of Vijay Nambiar

Vijay Nambiar arrives with Secretary Ban Ki-Moon on his first day of work.

is based on a political landscape that is more than half a century old, and the distribution of power in the world today is radically different from what it was half a century ago. The more current political realities depart from conditions in 1945 when the structure was set up, the greater the threat posed to the legitimacy of the organization if the Security Council's structure does not reflect these realities. As such, Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated clearly and publicly, more than once, that no reform process can be complete without reform of the Security

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Council—and that, in particular, the present composition of the permanent membership will have to be changed. Now, it's all very well to say that you need to include more countries. But decisions about which countries to include provoke controversy because the criteria for inclusion are debatable. And here, the size of the international organization makes it difficult to arrive at any clear decision. Any charter change would require a two-thirds majority of the General Assembly.

The four nations that claim permanent membership—Germany, Japan, Brazil, and India—did make efforts, along with South Africa and others, to see whether they could generate a groundswell of support within the General Assembly for expansion of the permanent membership of the Security Council to include four or five more new members. Although over the last two years this process has seen some activity with the involvement of many countries, it has not really been pushed toward a decision in the General Assembly because it is a weighty issue, and the consensus has not been there. Decisions about how many members to add, as well as whether this expansion should be in the permanent or non-permanent category; the length of the tenures of elected members; and whether these tenures should be renewable are all hotly contested issues. Different proposals have checkmated one another, and there is now a bit of a logjam. But that doesn't necessarily mean the rationale for the expansion of the membership of the Security Council isn't accepted anymore.

The fact is that one way or another you will have to eventually face up to the

reality of expanding the Security Council. As it stands, the permanent members are in some ways probably less keen on any change in structure, because any change will naturally mean a dilution of their position. I think in some ways this whole question of permanent membership of the Council is a false argument or a false kind of problem. A country becomes more and more influential in international politics as it asserts itself on the international stage. Influence is not fundamentally determined by a country's membership in the Security Council. The countries that claim to be deserving of a permanent seat in the Security Council need to start actually exerting their power. This will also involve assuming greater responsibility.

Journal: So is that path that you think India will follow?

Nambiar: I think it will be the only path for India to follow. The prime minister of the Indian Congress Party, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi did say that India should give up its hankering for just this kind of leverage, look at some of the problems it has to face, and start solving these problems, whether they are internal or related to India's international standing. I think that is perhaps the only way to start exercising power.

You start doing the things that you must do as a responsible state, both domestically as well as in the international arena. Whether it is in the economic sphere or in the political sphere, I think the impact of the policies of countries like India and China will be felt increasingly around the world. With the growth of their influence, they will begin to identify their interests more directly and forthrightly. They will probably also have to move from being influenced by polemical and ideological factors towards identifying their own interests and the interests of their domestic populations more directly. Eventually, they will also have to take on much greater responsibility for stability, as well as for peace and security in the region if not in the broader world.

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Journal: It has been said by some that the new U.S. nuclear deal with India has accorded India global power status, in some sense. Critics say that this deal is simply a way for the United States to contain China, and that it will set a dangerous precedent of proliferation. What do you think are the implications of the new nuclear deal between India and the United States, and how do you think this nuclear deal will alter India's position on the global stage?

Nambiar: The India-U.S. nuclear deal is really an element of the bilateral relationship between India and the United States. It marks a recognition by the United States of India's impeccable record as a responsible state possessing nuclear capability; India in a sense had mastered all elements of the nuclear fuel cycle, not by accessing technol-

ogy by clandestine means, but through the sheer human resource capabilities that it developed within the country. In fact, India's nuclear capability was superior to that of even China right into the 1950s. For various reasons, the option of weaponization was self-consciously eschewed. In fact, in 1988 Rajiv Gandhi played an active role during the Special Session on Disarmament when he presented a detailed and time-bound plan for nuclear disarmament. The sense did prevail even then that perhaps India could preserve its commitment to developing only its peaceful capability, and keep away from nuclear weapons. But I think the strategic environment had changed so rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s particularly, and proliferation in the sub-region had spread so fast that the momentum of political developments pushed both India and Pakistan in the other direction, leading eventually to the underground nuclear tests of 1998 and open announcements of weaponization. Now despite that announcement, I think India has continued to act very scrupulously, and avoided any proliferation of technology, or even of supplies.

The latest agreement represents a recognition by the United States both of the reality of India's nuclear status and of the need to leverage the scientific capabilities of the two sides, as well as to lift the restrictions that had affected cooperation between commercial organizations of India and the United States in the field of nuclear power for the production of energy. At the same time, in India there is a continuing sense that we need to safeguard our strategic autonomy. The fact that India has overtly declared its nuclear weapon power status, even though this is not recognized by other nuclear weapon states, means it will insist on maintaining its nuclear weapon capability at a certain level, however minimal that may be. This will have to be in line with preserving its posture of minimum deterrence.

Journal: Do you think that this nuclear deal will affect the relationship between India and Pakistan at all?

Nambiar: I do not know whether this will necessarily affect India's relationship with Pakistan in any particular direction. If there is any linkage, the Pakistanis have announced recently that they are cooperating with China on nuclear energy, and in fact they have announced a bilateral agreement for six new nuclear power reactors of about 300 megawatts each. I am not sure how far this project has progressed and what this means. In leveraging nuclear technology for meeting their energy requirements, the Pakistanis have been proceeding with input from China for some time. So it is not as if this is something new. The question is how far this will go in the future.

You asked whether China is a factor at this point in the India-U.S. relationship. My own sense is that however much you may seek to make these linkages, the relation-

ship between India and China will have to be based on independent factors. Naturally, everything is related. But I don't think there is any indication of such a linkage as is being made out by some public commentators. Even the U.S. government has noted that the relationship between India and the United States—the relationship between the most populous democracy and the most powerful democracy in the world—is based on a set of factors which are quite unrelated to any kind of power balancing vis-à-vis India and China. India has its concerns with China, but also sees the logic of building up a very strong relationship with China. I do not think that relationship will be affected by the developing relationship with the United States. Obviously there are areas where India, China, or the United States will leverage its relationship with the others to maximize whatever advantage it may have. So, it is not unlikely that India will try to leverage its relationship with the United States to maximize any benefit it can get in its bilateral relations with China, and vice versa. I expect that each country is indeed doing this, but there are still independent factors and dynamics in the relationship as well.

Journal: As we've spoken about the UN at this juncture in its history I have wanted to know your thoughts on personal agency. What kind of path do you think is conducive for effecting the greatest positive change possible? Is it through these types of larger organizations, or is it through more grassroots service work?

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Nambiar: We have an old saying in India—*Tyajeta ekam kulasyarthe; gramarthe kulam tyajet. Gramam janapadasyarthe, atmarthe prithivim tyajet*—which illustrates the concept of the individual sacrificing for the family, the family for the village, the village for the larger collectivity, and then the collectivity for the state. However, the final part of the proverb says is that if an individual feels that his personal integrity—the integrity of his soul—is challenged, he has a right to defy all these categories or associations. I think this final transition is very important. The state has to build upon the strength of the individual's assertion of his right as an independent center of value that is good in itself, not only because it is contributing towards a corporate entity. This, I think, is the core of the democratic idea. If this idea can be developed then we will have something. 

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