

## MADAME SECRETARY-GENERAL: A MODEST PROPOSAL

In 2008 Hillary Rodham Clinton earned the support of millions by running for President of the United States. In 2009 she surprised the world by going to work for her former rival. In 2016 she could do both, by running a global campaign to become Secretary-General of the United Nations. Seeking the top UN job, and pursuing it in a way that resembles a political campaign, would be good for the United Nations and good for the world.

Implausible? Ms. Clinton's political career has defied conventional wisdom before. Secretaries-General are nominated by the Security Council and approved by the General Assembly for five-year, renewable terms. By convention, the process has unfolded in closed-door meetings where powerful countries agree on a mutually acceptable candidate, whom they then present to a generally passive General Assembly. While the legal elements—nomination by the Security Council and approval by the General Assembly—cannot be changed, nowhere is it written that the selection process must be a backroom bargain between powerful countries.

What if a candidate for Secretary-General actively *campaigned* for the job? What if she earned the support of governments by appealing directly to their people? While citizens cannot vote for the Secretary-General, governments would at least have to consider a candidate who could demonstrate—through public opinion polls, a petition drive, and other means—that she had broad global support.

From Tahrir Square to Wall Street, 2011 has reminded us that people power can move world politics. Combined with a behind-the-scenes lobbying effort that appealed to governments directly, such a global campaign could remake the rules for selecting the world's top diplomat, and redefine both the position of Secretary-General and the United Nations itself in the process. A popular mandate, even a symbolic one, would give the Secretary-General a potent bully pulpit from which to press for peace, macroeconomic stability, development, health, and other global priorities. Given multilateral gridlock on these and other crucial global issues, the world cannot afford a weak UN Secretariat.

Such a strategy would be quixotic for almost any candidate. But Ms. Clinton—with abundant qualifications and experience, global name recognition and popularity, proven campaigning skills, and vast networks of supporters—could just pull it off.

### Power from the People

The world needs a strong, effective United Nations, and the United Nations needs a strong, effective leader. There is now widespread consensus that Ban Ki-moon has not become a forceful advocate for peace, development, human rights, environmental protection, and the other goals of the United Nations. The Secretary-General is, technically, the agent of the very member states he or she must, in reality, lead. Precisely because the Secretary-General has little formal power, it is crucial that the holder of the position be able to persuade and cajole member states to take action on global problems.

A popular mandate, even an informal one, would be an invaluable asset in this role. The Secretary-General can never dictate to countries—and we would not want her to. Instead, the UN leader relies on soft power. She sets the global agenda, she frames the discussion, and she focuses attention on the issues that matter. When necessary, she harnesses the weight of global opprobrium to pressure violators of the UN's goals.

The tools available to the Secretary-General would be considerably strengthened if she could credibly speak not just in the name of the world's governments—who are often part of the problem—but also for its peoples. Consider some recent tasks on the Secretary-General's agenda: persuading Iran to comply with non-proliferation rules; convincing rich nations to relieve the food crisis in the developing world; achieving global agreement in relation to tackling climate change. In each of these cases some countries are working against the interests of their own people or people elsewhere. The Secretary-General can speak for these interests—our interests—far more effectively if he or she has our explicit consent.

There is also a democratic principle at stake. The UN Charter begins with the words, 'We the peoples of the United Nations...', but historically these 'peoples' have been conspicuously absent from the workings of the UN. As the process of globalization has intensified, popular anger has been directed at international organizations that are seen as aloof and unconnected to the people whose lives they affect. Building a stronger link between people and their international public servants, even a symbolic one, would arguably reduce what has been called globalization's democratic deficit.

Not only would a more democratically legitimate Secretary-General find it easier to convince member states to tackle difficult issues, he or she would also give the UN Secretariat greater influence with respect to the sprawling family of UN institutions. Reform-minded governments, such as the United States, have long advocated a stronger UN executive officer, who could improve the efficiency of the global body's operations. A publicly approved Secretary-General would have a stronger mandate to effectively tackle the vested bureaucratic interests that impede the UN's work, and could mould the organization into a more coherent and competent institution.

A United Nations that is reinvigorated with a popular leader would clearly be in the interests of the billions of people in the world suffering from war, poverty, disease, and oppression who depend on the world body for effective solutions and relief. But it would also be good for powerful countries like the United States, which, despite conservatives' fears, needs stronger and more effective multilateral institutions to tackle global problems. A popularly supported Secretary-General could also help in overcoming lingering American doubts about the legitimacy of the UN by giving citizens a greater role in the selection of its leader. That this leader might be an American herself—one for whom millions of Americans have voted in the domestic context—also raise American goodwill towards the post-holder.

#### How it would work

In order to become Secretary-General, a candidate must receive the support of at least nine of 16 Security Council members, including all five veto-wielding members (Britain, China, France, Russia and, the United States), and 97 of 192 members of the General Assembly.

A successful campaign would need two components. First, a global public campaign involving rallies, public appearances, endorsements, town meetings, advertising, debates, field offices, and all the other hallmarks of a political campaign. The goal would not be to secure votes, but rather to mobilize citizens of all UN member states to declare support for the candidate. This support would be quantified through an independently verified online petition or similar mechanism.

A global election has never been done before. But global campaigns of this type—albeit for causes, not candidates—have proven successful in the past. Transnational networks of activists have persuaded governments to enact real policy changes on issues like such as landmines, the international criminal court, and the situation conflict in Darfur. A political campaign for Secretary-General would be no different.

Second, the campaign would need a sophisticated, behind-the-scenes lobbying effort to persuade key governments—especially China and Russia—to support, or at least not to oppose, the candidate. Without the agreement of such states, no global campaign, no matter how popular, could succeed.

A number of countries and interest groups could likely be counted on to support a global campaign for Secretary-General. First, if the case could be made that a popular Secretary-General would mean a more effective UN—and one that the United States would value more highly—the idea would likely prove attractive to pro-UN governments (e.g. Europe, Japan, Canada). These countries could become powerful advocates for the candidate.

Second, many global NGOs also want a stronger, more effective UN, and their social networks would be invaluable in gaining grassroots support. However, NGOs would surely lobby for issue-specific platform planks that may pull the candidate in different directions. Ms. Clinton would be likely to have a special appeal to women's groups, as she did in her US presidential campaign.

Of course, not everyone would be so enthusiastic. First, governments clearly enjoy being able to select the Secretary-General without democratic interference. This is particularly true of governments that worry that the United Nations may act against their interests. On the Security Council, this means Russia and China. Because these governments are potentially hostile to a popularly empowered Secretary-General, are traditionally suspicious of greater American influence in international institutions and are insulated from levers of popular influence, a candidate for Secretary-General would have to convince them that their core interests would be protected.

Second, the United States is also a potential source of opposition. While Ms. Clinton would no doubt receive support from the Obama administration (if it supported this novel selection process), American conservatives disposed against both the UN and Ms. Clinton would find the combination of the two anathema. While Ms. Clinton's performance as a senator, a presidential candidate, and now Secretary of State appears to have gained her the respect of many Republicans, some elements of the American right would no doubt vociferously protest against a popularly supported Secretary-General by the name of Clinton.

Third, Ms. Clinton would confront two long-established conventions. There has never been a female Secretary-General, and in all too many places in the world female leadership is still considered oxymoronic. Breaking this barrier would be another potent symbol of the organization's revitalization. More problematic is the issue of nationality. Citizens of the permanent members of the Security Council are not usually considered as candidates for Secretary-General. Ms. Clinton would have to make the case—as many have done—that the post should go to the best-qualified candidate, not the least-common denominator to emerge from the system of regional rotation. Moreover, as an American, Ms. Clinton would have to convince skeptical publics that she would work for the interests of the entire world public. Her stance on the Palestinian question, for example, would be the subject of considerable scrutiny. The world would need to know that she seeks to act not only in her nation's service, but in the service of all nations.

### Run, Hilary, Run

None of these obstacles are insurmountable. Of course, much depends on what happens during the remainder of Ms. Clinton's tenure as Secretary of State. If American foreign policy promotes common interests, her reputation as a global superstar will grow. But if the United States falters abroad, or finds itself forced to take unpopular actions, or puts narrow interests over the global good, the path for Ms. Clinton's popular campaign would become more difficult.

One can only speculate about whether running a global campaign for Secretary-General would interest Ms. Clinton, but it certainly would be a fitting capstone to her career. If she tries and succeeds she could redefine the nature of global institutions—a remarkable legacy. Of course, she would also risk failure given the unconventional nature of the endeavor. Ms. Clinton has made similar choices before. For those who think a stronger, more effective United Nations is necessary, let us hope she remains true to form.