Kofi Annan: A Stellar Legacy Against All Odds

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The following is a “think piece” on the legacy of Mr. Kofi Annan, the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN). The piece reflects my personal thoughts primarily on Mr. Annan’s work in the fields of disarmament and peacekeeping with general commentary on his wider body of work. Having spent a significant part of my own UN career in Disarmament and Peacekeeping, I welcome this opportunity to share my observations on Mr. Annan’s work in these areas.

The United Nations describes the role of Secretary-General “as equal parts diplomat and advocate, civil servant and CEO.” It goes on to state that the Secretary-General “is a symbol of United Nations ideals and a spokesman for the interests of the world’s peoples, in particular the poor and vulnerable among them.”¹ Many diplomatic analysts will agree that the role is also a thankless one as no Secretary-General is immune from the criticisms that inevitably come with a job that calls for one to sometimes accomplish the impossible. Mr. Annan’s challenges included the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica (Bosnia), reform of the UN and its Security Council, to name a few. I will argue, however, that Mr. Annan’s body of work and legacy at the United Nations clearly ensure his place among the most accomplished Secretaries-General of the post-Cold War era.

Mr. Annan’s entire career at the UN, from his early years beginning in 1962 to his tenure as Secretary-General from 1997 to 2006, positively impacted many aspects of international affairs.
From global public health to peacekeeping and United Nations reform, Mr. Annan left his indelible mark. As Secretary-General of the UN, he introduced very significant reforms to the organisation’s unwieldy and often lethargic bureaucracy; galvanised the United Nations system to directly address the HIV/AIDS epidemic, particularly in Africa, and wrestled with new and unprecedented conflicts around the globe.

Mr. Annan’s tenure as Secretary-General was marked by his clear recognition and understanding of the importance of engaging non-state actors in the work of the UN. In 2000, he successfully launched the UN Global Compact, a non-binding pact to encourage business entities around the globe to adopt sustainable and socially responsible policies, and to report on their implementation. The UN Global Compact is based on a framework of principles for businesses, promoting ten principles in the areas of human rights, labour, the environment and anti-corruption. Through Mr. Annan’s flagship initiative, thousands of companies have, so far, been brought together with UN agencies, labour groups and civil society.² Cities around the world have also joined the Global Compact through the Cities Programme. Most importantly, Mr. Annan’s Global Compact signalled a decisive shift from a government-centred approach to addressing global problems to a more inclusive and holistic one embracing a wider range of key stakeholders. Mr. Annan underlined the “need to do better in forging a true global partnership for development.” Such partnerships, he envisaged, would combat “hunger, ignorance, poverty and disease” in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed by Member States of the UN as a “blueprint” for enhanced global well-being.³ As the current Deputy Secretary-General of the UN has recently noted, “in everything he did, he highlighted the role of civil society, stressed the centrality of human rights and underscored the importance of the role of women and youth.”⁴

Mr. Annan has been rather unfairly criticised for not expanding the Security Council. United Nations Secretaries-General are, however, only as effective as member states allow them to be. While each Secretary-General has a rather unique platform from which to exert a certain degree of influence, it is ultimately the member states, in particular, the most powerful states, that will ultimately determine whether or not the UN Security Council is reformed. The sometimes diametrically opposed national and regional interests of the permanent members of the UN Security
Council that had rendered the Council ineffective in its very early years, continue to prevent any progress on Security Council reform.

Mr. Annan commissioned an advisory group with a mandate to produce recommendations for reforming the UN by the close of 2004. This included increasing the number of permanent members by five and adding more seats for non-permanent members. The permanent members, each with the right of veto, subsequently announced their positions on Security Council reform. The United States strongly supported permanent membership for Japan and India (the G4) as well as for a small number of additional non-permanent members. The United Kingdom and France generally supported the expansion of permanent and non-permanent membership that would include the accession of Germany, Brazil, India and Japan as permanent members, and an increase in the number of African countries on the Council. China, while supporting greater representation for developing countries, vigorously opposed Japan’s permanent membership. Two Secretary-Generals later, the UN Security Council is no closer to reform than it was under Kofi Annan. While there is generally strong support for expanding the Security Council to reflect present day realities in international relations, all attempts to reform the UN Security Council, so far, have failed because national and regional rivalries have hindered agreement on the composition and size of a larger Council, and obviously through no fault of Kofi Annan.

As indicated earlier, my aim here is primarily to address Mr. Annan’s contribution as a peacemaker and his role and impact on disarmament, a key ingredient in all peacemaking efforts. Before addressing Kofi Annan’s work in the context of peace, security and disarmament, it is first necessary to examine the United Nations’ vision for the disarmament project. The UN, first and foremost, seeks to promote the global norms of disarmament as contained in existing treaties, instruments and other multilateral arrangements. According to the UN, these global norms are vital to the sustainable development, quality of life, and ultimately the very survival of the planet. The need for such norms arose directly from the “legacy of the last century of wars and preparations for wars.” As you can imagine, the costs of these past conflicts have been extraordinarily high with the loss of millions of innocent civilian lives. Weapons of mass destruction, along with excess stocks and illicit transfers of conventional arms, jeopardise international peace and security and work against the other goals of the UN Charter.
The UN believes that the potential effects of the use of weapons of mass destruction – especially nuclear weapons – call for their elimination. The philosophy underpinning such disarmament is that the very possession of weapons of any kind, including weapons of mass destruction, entails the risk of use. The UN, therefore, works to assist its member states and civil society in efforts to eliminate such arms. As you will see from the following discussion, Mr. Annan worked tirelessly before, during and after his assignment as Secretary-General to advance the UN’s mandates on peace and security. It was through Mr. Annan’s initiatives in the 1990s that the United Nations first began to reach out to civil society to form very effective partnerships for disarmament and peace.

As Mr. Annan often acknowledged, disarmament by itself cannot ensure domestic or international peace and security; the root causes of conflict must also be effectively addressed through preventive measures in order for disarmament and peace to be sustainable. The elimination of weapons of mass destruction, illicit arms trafficking and weapons stockpiles would greatly advance both peace and development goals and should always be pursued in parallel with preventive measures addressing the root causes of conflict. Effective disarmament reduces the effects of wars, eliminates some key incentives for new conflicts, and, most importantly, frees resources to improve the lives of all the people and protects their natural environment.9 The basic philosophy behind disarmament is that if you reduce the availability of arms of all kinds, you will also reduce the chances of armed conflict.

Mr. Annan was always a very passionate advocate for disarmament. In a speech delivered at Princeton University in November 2006, he outlined one of the major obstacles to progress on the issue of nuclear weapons. He pointed to “a total lack of any common strategy” among nations who were divided into two camps: those advocating for nonproliferation first (mainly states that possess nuclear weapons) and those promoting disarmament first. “Each side,” he said, “waits for the other to move first.” The result, he said, was that “mutually assured destruction” has been replaced by “mutually assured paralysis.”10

Things have not changed much since that impassioned speech at Princeton. It appears, however, that many nations have listened to his dire warnings. Eleven years after that speech, in July 2017, 122 member states of the UN adopted the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. While none of the nuclear weapons states have signed or ratified the Treaty, it is, nevertheless, a victory
for persistence, a quality that also exemplified Mr. Annan’s career as a peacemaker.

Mr. Annan served at the helm of the UN from 1997 to 2006 as its Secretary-General at a consequential juncture in modern history. During this time, there was an escalation of internal conflicts around the world which demanded new approaches in the way the UN handled such conflicts. In this regard, some analysts have argued that Annan’s focus on guiding the UN in the direction of prevention and resolution of armed conflict within its member states while still trying to maintain peace and security among them was his defining legacy as a global peacemaker.

Maintaining domestic peace has always been a difficult task for the UN as it involves more than just the reduction of arms supplies. Prior to Annan’s term of office as Secretary-General, the UN had little by way of norms, and virtually no institutional capacity or political will to prevent deadly conflicts within states while attempting to maintain peace among them. Kofi Annan’s first major initiative as Secretary-General was a plan for UN reform that included an overhaul of peacekeeping operations, which he presented to member states in July 1997. The plan introduced sweeping reforms to address these deficiencies. Shortly before leaving office in 2006, he issued his progress report to the UN General Assembly entitled “In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All” with further recommendations for improving the UN’s approach to addressing the challenges of international and domestic peace and security. A section of that report entitled “Freedom from Fear” called on the nuclear weapons states to reduce their arsenals of non-strategic nuclear weapons and to pursue arms control agreements not only with the aim of dismantlement but also irreversibility.11

Ever the peacemaker, he recommended the establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission, as well as a Peacebuilding Support Office within the UN Secretariat, both of which are now in place and making a difference in domestic and international security globally. Kofi Annan’s impact on international peace and security, however, long predated his ascent to the position of UN Secretary-General. Following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, he was tasked with facilitating the repatriation of more than 900 international staff as well as the release of western hostages.12 He later led the first UN team negotiating with Iraq on the sale of oil to fund purchases of humanitarian aid for that country.
When his predecessor, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, established the Department of Peacekeeping Operations in 1992, he appointed Annan to the new department as Assistant Secretary-General and later as Under-Secretary-General. Mr. Annan took over that Department during a period of unprecedented growth in the UN’s field presence. I participated in several of these field missions in Namibia, South Africa, Liberia, the Central African Republic and Kosovo, to name a few. Mr. Annan was later appointed Special Representative of the Secretary-General to the former Yugoslavia, serving from November 1995 to March 1996.

In 2001, Mr. Annan and the United Nations were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It was an honour he richly deserved. I believe that peacemaking was in Mr. Annan’s DNA and what better place to demonstrate that gift than in the context of the UN and its mandate for peace.

As an African, Kofi Annan was particularly sensitive to armed conflict in that region and the need to aggressively pursue peace and disarmament there. Shortly after becoming UN Secretary-General, Annan addressed the 1997 Summit meeting of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The main thrust of his message at that Summit was that Africa’s peace and development required a greater level of accountability on how leaders managed their domestic affairs, especially the protection of human rights. Since delivering that address, all African countries are required to hold democratic elections and the African Union (AU) is to act as observer of the process. Importantly, his 1997 address to the OAU called for a role for civil society in the governance process. A greater level of civil society inclusion was to become one of Annan’s major innovations as UN Secretary-General.

The Rwanda genocide of 1994 occurred while Kofi Annan was the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping. As the head of United Nations peace operations, Mr. Annan inevitably bore the brunt of much of the criticism levelled at the organisation for its failure to take action to stop the genocide. As every seasoned UN staffer knows too well, the United Nations Organisation becomes a rather convenient scapegoat when its member states fail to act responsibly. In the early weeks of the genocide, world leaders tiptoed around the word “genocide,” and thus avoided the obvious obligation to take urgent action to stop the massacre. Instead, the major players, Belgium, the United States and France focused on a collaborative effort to evacuate their own citizens and expatriate employees, and simply ignored the plight of Rwandan citizens. As
the head of UN Peacekeeping Operations, Mr. Annan’s hands were effectively tied in the face of glaring inaction.

The Rwanda experience was a source of deep disappointment for Mr. Annan and in his memoir, *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace*, he poignantly recounts the extent of the failure of member states to respond appropriately to the Rwanda crisis. In the early weeks of the genocide, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 918 in May 1994 which authorised the deployment of approximately 5,500 troops to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda. Mr. Annan laments, however, that despite a vigorous lobbying effort on his part with about 100 governments and personally reaching out to many governments himself, he received no serious offers of troop contributions for the Rwanda peacekeeping effort.\(^\text{15}\) As earlier observed, the UN is only as effective as the member states permit it to be and it is, therefore, somewhat disingenuous to assign blame to the officials who work for the organisation when critical resources and support are withheld at times of urgent need.

Even in retirement, Mr. Annan did not simply rest on his laurels. In 2007, he founded the Kofi Annan Foundation to support international peace and development efforts. In 2012, he was appointed the UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria in response to the armed conflict which erupted there in March 2011. In Syria, he negotiated a communiqué that is still the primary basis for resolving the conflict in Syria.\(^\text{16}\) Later, at the request of the Government of Myanmar and in collaboration with the Kofi Annan Foundation, the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State was founded in 2016 with Kofi Annan as its chair. The Commission served as a neutral and impartial body with a mandate to propose measures for improving the welfare of the Rohingya people in Rakhine state. In August 2017, Mr. Annan presented the Commission’s final report “Towards a Peaceful, Fair and Prosperous Future for the People of Rakhine,” which pointed the way to addressing the plight of the Rohingya people. He helped to quell tensions following election-related violence in Kenya and put forward a set of recommendations that pointed the way toward addressing the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar. In keeping with Mr. Annan’s life mission as a messenger of peace, an international peacekeeping training centre bearing his name was fittingly established in his homeland, Ghana.
There is no question that Secretary-General Kofi Annan was a consequential world leader of immeasurable influence, much sought after for his wise counsel in matters of peace. He was, however, like all of his predecessors and successors, severely constrained in what he could do by the very nature of his mandate. Those unschooled in the nuances of international relations and affairs place almost impossible expectations on the shoulders of the UN Secretary-General. The reality is: no Secretary-General has the power to shift the global balance of power or to prevent wars and other forms of conflict. In the final analysis, it is the individual member States, either in concert or unilaterally, who have the power to make war and to end war. The Secretary-General is not exactly the independent arbiter that some so often expect him or her to be. Every Secretary-General has to dance a very delicate dance to a tune performed by a discordant array of musicians from over 193 member States, sometimes led in different directions by the five "conductors" on the UN Security Council, its permanent members.

Kofi Annan’s greatest strength as Secretary-General of the United Nations was his ability to make some sense of the ensuing chaos of a discordant global orchestra. He had the vision to highlight the role of civil society as a key player in world affairs and actively fostered their engagement across a wide range of seminal issues from the Millennium Development Goals to the centrality of human rights. Most importantly, he understood the important role that women and youth could play as underutilised resources in advancing the various mandates of the United Nations. As Secretary-General, Mr. Annan astutely focused the efforts of the UN and its member states on the bigger picture of providing health, education, clean water and good governance. He worked tirelessly to challenge the sovereign immunity claimed by despotic leaders to persecute their subjects by setting up the International Criminal Court and establishing the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and other similar special tribunals. All in all, Secretary-General Kofi Annan made a stellar and rather substantive contribution to world affairs as Secretary-General against all the odds. He richly deserved the Nobel Peace Prize he was awarded jointly with the United Nation in 2001 as well as all the other honours he received throughout his career as a world diplomat.

To conclude on a personal note, I had the opportunity to meet Mr. Annan on a few occasions in the context of my work in disarmament. I was privileged to have prepared some of his talking points for meetings with government officials and as the designated...
note taker at some of Mr. Annan’s meetings with leading world figures, it was always an honour to be in the presence of the “Peacemaker Extraordinaire.” He was truly an endearing inspiration to all international civil servants, especially those staff members from Africa and the African Diaspora.

NOTES

5 The G4 is a group of States consisting of Brazil, Germany, India and Japan that have agreed to support each other’s candidacy for permanent membership of the UN Security Council.
10 UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan delivering speech on nuclear disarmament at Princeton University. AP Archive. YouTube video, November 2006, https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=N3zc8MMMt0
16 Amina J. Mohammed, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General’s remarks.
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