

Book review

Mission impossible?

Kofi Annan's years as UN Secretary-General

Interventions

Kofi Annan with Nader Mousavizadeh

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I. The view from the 38th floor

The Nobel peace prize has eluded neither the UN (2001) nor the EU (2012). But multilateralism is having a tough time. The EURO crisis, the paralysed Security Council in the face of the conflict in Syria as well as longer-term problems such as climate change and poverty lead to the question: do we have the governance the planet needs? The related question at a time when economic power is being redistributed is: can we still get the governance we want? Do 'emerging powers' in particular feel they have a stake in governing the globe?

When I worked at the UN in New York in 2006, my colleagues and I informally discussed whether the successful West Wing series about the White House should have a twin series about the UN. In our very partisan view a winner would have been a TV show called 'The 38th floor', named after the floor of the UN Secretary-General's office. It never happened. But reading the memoirs of Kofi Annan and other books on the Annan era, one finds plenty of material.

Shortly before the annual UN jamboree took place this September in New York, Annan published a must-read for the UN-bound leaders and diplomats. His book *Interventions* appeared just after he stepped down as mediator on Syria, calling Syria a mission impossible after a serious effort worthy of a better result.¹

Being Secretary-General of the UN would according to many qualify as a mission impossible as well, considering the abundance of global issues, the lack of global consensus on many of them as well as the lack of enforcement power in a world of sovereign states. Mark Mazower, professor of history at Columbia University, published the book *Governing the World* this year. It maps a few centuries worth of efforts to come to world governance, if not world government. In the end, Mazower is sceptical on whether we have the multilateral governance we need for the world's problems. "As for the rituals of international life, these are now well-established. --- while a sceptical and alienated public looks on. The idea of governing the world is becoming yesterday's dream."²

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¹ M. Mazower, *Governing the World*, Penguin 2012, p. 427.

² *Ibid.*, p. 427

For a while, *The Best Intentions* by James Traub seemed the last word written about Kofi Annan as Secretary-General. That book, written on the basis of unprecedented access, showed the achievements of this Secretary-General, tried and tested by moving up through the UN ranks. But Traub also showed the problems, especially regarding Iraq and the Oil For Food scandal. He describes Annan as a man of the world: “--- a man of the global South who has spent virtually his entire adult life in the global North. His views were fundamentally those of a high minded and progressive European – a Norwegian, say, or a Dutchman.”³

Others from the Annan era have already published books, in particular Mark Malloch Brown, Deputy Secretary-General to Annan and my boss in 2006. Malloch Brown in *The Unfinished Global Revolution* sang Annan’s praises: “Kofi Annan's apparently easy mastery --- showed personal traits of leadership that work in today's world. A non-authoritarian personality, he expended huge emotional intelligence in trying to understand the people he's dealing with. -- - He made it all seem easy. If he had a fault as SG, it was that he was probably too cautious. -- - his UN career left him convinced that risk-taking was not always possible.”⁴

Interventions is anything but cautious. The book offers a candid view from that 38th floor and is very frank about the most difficult policy choices on war, peace and development. And there were a lot of difficult decisions to be made in the Annan period. As head of UN peacekeeping missions before he became Secretary-General, Annan was involved with Bosnia and Rwanda and led the effort towards a very frank review of these crises in particular and peacekeeping in general (the so-called Brahimi report). And as Secretary-General, he saw UN involvement in Iraq lead to the death of UN envoy and personal friend Sergio Vieira de Mello, often seen as a future UN Secretary-General himself. Afghanistan, the Middle East, Darfur, the ICC and the Millennium Development Goals are also addressed. His mediation in Kenya after his UN time is reflected as well and is a gripping read. Recently Annan took up his work on Kenya again. Annan's efforts with regard to Syria unfortunately will have to wait for his next book.

In view of the current skepticism on multilateralism, it is important to read Annan’s book through the prism of differences made. Where does the former Secretary-General think he was able to influence the world? And where he was not able to influence events, what obstacles prevented him from doing so?

II. Achievements and obstacles

Firstly, Annan rightly feels he was able to set the international agenda on development with the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The fact that the book has a chapter on these goals aimed at fundamentally reducing poverty, hunger, disease and gender inequality shows Annan’s sense of pride and also that political crisis management was not his only preoccupation. As Annan says himself: “The MDGs – putting people irrevocably at the center of development – created an unprecedented enthusiasm, momentum, and collaboration on a worldwide scale.”⁵

Secondly, on peace and security, the picture is less clear, also of course since many specific crises are involved. Iraq looms large. First of all because of the war itself: “A war I had tried to stop with every fiber of my being ---.”⁶ Secondly because of the enormous price the UN would pay for its reluctant involvement, with 22 of the best and brightest UN staff being killed in the bomb attack on the UN’s Bagdad headquarters, including Vieira de Mello:

³ J. Traub, *The Best Intentions*, Bloomsbury 2006, p. 145.

⁴ M. Malloch Brown, *The Unfinished Revolution*, Penguin Books 2011, p. 229.

⁵ K. Annan, *Interventions*, Penguin 2012, p. 228.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

“None of them had believed in the war itself.”⁷ Annan feels the attack forever changed the UN’s sense of risk and vulnerability.⁸ The UN’s innocence was lost as was the sense that the UN flag provided protection.

In addition to Iraq, Annan devotes attention mostly to the Middle East and clearly shows frustration that efforts of the so-called Quartet (US, Russia, EU and UN) and the roadmap it produced did not pay off. While showing frustration with all parties involved, he clearly blames the US for “--- unhealthy possessiveness that Washington has over the Arab-Israeli peace process ---”⁹, leading to diminished potential for a UN role. He also blames Israel for “--- the daily creation of facts on the ground ---.”¹⁰

Annan also discusses the rapid evolution of peacekeeping in the 1990s, when political support by member states did not translate to boots on the ground. When it comes to the Rwandan genocide, a trauma to the international community, he is very open about the allegations that not enough was done, including by him as head of peacekeeping. He describes how even after a new mandate for peacekeeping, the Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) called on “more than a hundred governments” without “a single serious offer.”¹¹ With respect to Bosnia and the Srebrenica massacre, he describes how none of the countries pushing for UN safe areas offered to increase their troop contingents. Based on the evaluations he commissioned, Annan draws the sobering conclusion that mandating a peacekeeping operation alone is not enough: “peacekeeping can only be a secondary instrument of peace, not a primary one.”¹²

Thirdly, Annan notes various achievements regarding human rights. Key among them is the acceptance of the doctrine of responsibility to protect by the UN summit of 2005. Annan says that following the traumas of Rwanda and Bosnia, “my greatest challenge as secretary-general” was “creating a new understanding of the legitimacy, and necessity, of intervention in the face of gross violations of human rights.”¹³ The doctrine of responsibility to protect fits within this picture, as it focuses on the responsibility of countries to protect their own people but also on the responsibility of the international community to raise its voice and act if necessary.

Another step in terms of human rights was the establishment of the UN Human Rights Council. While the jury is still out on whether it is a success, governments’ preparedness to submit to a peer review process in the Council of their human rights record is definitely a great achievement.

A very interesting section of the book deals with Africa, Sudan, Kenya and the ICC. On Darfur, Annan agrees with those who say that the discussion in whether or not the massacres there constituted genocide made little sense. “The label genocide was irrelevant to the fact that hundreds of thousands were suffering in Darfur. But as a result of the obsession with the word genocide --- the debate about what action should be taken was delayed further.”¹⁴ Annan advocates a stronger focus on institutions rather than leaders for Africa and more emphasis on agriculture and infrastructure. He strongly argues against the view that the

⁷ Ibid., p. 316.

⁸ Ibid., p. 317.

⁹ Ibid., p. 290.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 309.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 59.

¹² Ibid., p. 77.

¹³ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 131.

International Criminal Court (ICC) is biased against Africa: “--- it is not Africa that is hostile to the court, only certain leaders. When I meet Africans from all walks of life, they want justice.” He ends this section with the message that leaves no room for complacency: “We Africans still have much to do.”¹⁵

Finally, concerning UN reform, Annan’s achievements include stronger coordination on development, the establishment of the abovementioned institutions and the lessons learned on peacekeeping that the investigations he commissioned produced. Also, it was under his leadership that the steps towards UN coherence were made that eventually led to the establishment of UN Women. He regrets that his proposals from 2005 did not lead to a Security Council with a more legitimate composition.

Annan emerges from the book as a driven Secretary-General who saw an important role for the UN in the crises of his time. What prevented him from achieving more? The short answer in Annan’s view: member states. He is critical of states that, to say the least, did not encourage a stronger multilateralism, especially of the US in the Bush-era.

Both Annan and Malloch Brown in discussing their time at the UN show disappointment with the US, acknowledging the leading role the US played in establishing the UN system. The Iraq war that followed the consensus post-September 11, 2001 was a major trauma and the UN Summit of 2005 a missed opportunity on issues such as Security Council reform. Malloch Brown does note bigger interest on the part of the Obama administration. Obama is after all the first US president ever to chair a UN Security Council session.

While it is clear that the UN Secretary-General cannot do much more than the membership will allow him to do, responsibility does of course come with the job. The real question is whether the leadership of the Secretary-General can make a difference. On many occasions Annan demonstrated that he could. And sometimes a UN Secretary-General, as guardian of the conscience of humanity, must take a stance, not knowing in advance whether success is achievable.

III. The importance of effective multilateralism

Interventions is a must-read, partly because the issues Annan addresses are still being discussed: Responsibility to Protect, the follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals; the future of the ICC and various regional crises. But it is also required reading as it shows where and how multilateralism worked and where it faced an uphill battle.

Are Davos and the G20 an alternative to the UN? Malloch Brown seems particularly well-placed to answer this question, having played an important role in the British government in getting the London G20 meeting of 2009 together. His idea: the G-20 is losing steam and not focusing on structural solutions. Malloch Brown also raises the issue of the legitimacy of the G20. Constituencies such as those at the Bretton Woods institutions could make a difference and increase the G20’s legitimacy (in line with a proposal made by Kemal Dervis, formerly administrator of the UN Development Programme and vice-president at the World Bank, for the Security Council).^{16 17} And that of course is the trump card of the UN: every country is represented. In Annan’s view, it is about even more than that: he reminds us that the UN charter’s first words are written in the voice of “we the peoples”, not governments.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 208.

¹⁶ Malloch Brown 2011, supra note 4, pp. 211 – 214;

¹⁷ K.Dervis, *A Better Globalization*, Center for Global Development 2005, p. 67.

In the end, we are not looking for "well-intentioned woolliness" as a review of Mr Mazower's book labelled some of the thinking on world government.¹⁷ Multilateralism is not a goal in itself. Annan demonstrates the achievements and the failures. And with multilateral failure, many are to blame. But what level of global governance is both needed and realistic? Malloch Brown is pessimistic: "The true globalist remains an unlikely candidate anywhere."¹⁸

Powerful multilateral action on crucial issues is clearly needed. This requires both leadership from the Secretary-General and from member states working with the UN. And as the Syria crisis shows, it would be wrong to only focus on the US. And sometimes, the UN Secretary-General must stand alone and say what has to be said, hoping he can rally the world. Annan did this several times. Effective multilateralism belongs in our toolbox. As former US Secretary of State and UN ambassador Madeleine Albright recently mentioned in *Foreign Policy*: "If we start thinking that the United Nations doesn't work --- we are leaving out an indispensable tool."¹⁹

¹⁸ C. Kidd, 'The EU and Other Peace Movements', *The Guardian*, 21 October 2012.

¹⁹ Malloch Brown 2011, *supra* note 4, p. 233.

²⁰ "Who Broke the U.N.?", *Foreign Policy*, October 2012, p. 51.