Humanity’s Mirror

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Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics

The Horseshoe Table: An Inside View of the UN Security Council

The International Struggle over Iraq: Politics in the UN Security Council 1980–2005

Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone: The Story of UNAMSIL

for war against Iraq, addressed another session of the Council, once again ‘in an atmosphere of real tension’.\(^1\) After presenting evidence intended to show that Iraq had failed to disarm as required by UN Security Council resolutions, Powell insisted that to leave ‘Saddam Hussein in possession of weapons of mass destruction for a few more months or years [was] not an option’.\(^2\) Faced with a deeply divided Council, he offered another warning: the Council was placing ‘itself in danger of irrelevance if it allow[ed] Iraq to continue to defy its will without responding effectively and immediately’\(^3\).

In the end, Powell’s presentation fell well short of another ‘Adlai Stevenson moment’, and the evident skepticism with which it was greeted in many quarters soon proved justified.\(^4\) Not long after leaving the administration, Powell himself would speak of the presentation as a ‘blot on his record’.\(^5\) Powell’s prediction of the United Nation’s looming irrelevance has also turned out to be misplaced. While the Iraq War has affected UN politics in deeply unhelpful ways, it has not diminished the Council’s importance as a ‘nodal forum in the conduct of international diplomacy’\(^6\) – nor, plainly, has it dampened its readiness to take on new responsibilities elsewhere, as the rapid growth of UN operational activity since 2003 has shown.

Four recent books, each in its own way, do much to explain why the UN continues to be regarded by its member states as deeply relevant, whatever its flaws and imperfections. All four benefit from a commendable concern with the unscripted, day-to-day realities of the organisation; the ways in which member states make use, for better and worse, of the services it provides; and the inevitable clash of interests among members that often produces outcomes far removed from the loftier aims of the UN Charter. Of particular interest is the light the authors throw on the evolving role and practices of the Security Council and on the institution of the secretary-general, not only in a broad thematic sense but also in relation to individual conflicts and, not least, to key personalities. There are, however, some subtle differences in the implicit and explicit conclusions the authors reach about the UN’s role, and the future prospects for that role, in the field of international peace and security.

David Malone’s *The International Struggle over Iraq: Politics in the UN Security Council 1980–2005* tells the complex story of Iraq as an item on the
Security Council’s agenda over a period of 25 years. Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone: The Story of UNAMSIL by Funmi Olonisakin provides an equally detailed and surprisingly encouraging tale of the UN’s involvement in war-torn Sierra Leone from the late 1990s through 2005, focusing on the UN Mission to Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). Each of these excellent books covers the UN’s extended and complex engagement in the particular conflicts in question in meticulous and authoritative detail. From their very different vantage points, Malone and Olonisakin also draw compelling and persuasive lessons of a wider kind regarding the UN’s role in the peace and security field. Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics, a collection of essays edited by Simon Chesterman, also stands out for its analytical rigour in dealing with what is a surprisingly neglected subject: the many, partly competing roles of the UN secretary-general in world politics and the ways in which these have evolved over time and been interpreted differently by different incumbents.

In another category altogether, though certainly no less interesting for that, is The Horseshoe Table: An Inside View of the UN Security Council by Chinmaya Gharekhan, a seasoned and respected former Indian diplomat who came to serve as one of Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s closest political advisers. Indeed, for those with an interest in the post-Cold War history of the UN – particularly the tenure of Boutros-Ghali and the great and tragic events that occurred during his period in office – The Horseshoe Table will be read with special anticipation, promising as it does an undorned, behind-the-scenes look at the workings of the Security Council by someone uniquely qualified, on paper at any rate, to provide just such a view.

‘The sixth permanent member’
In January 1993 Boutros-Ghali asked Gharekhan to join his team of senior political advisers. For the previous six years Gharekhan had served as India’s permanent representative to the UN in New York. For two of those
years – from January 1991 to December 1992 – India had held one of the non-permanent seats on the Security Council. Within a few months of Gharekhan joining the Secretariat, Boutros-Ghali made him his ‘personal representative to the Security Council’ and, in that capacity, authorised him ‘to speak in his name and answer questions on his behalf’ (Gharekhan, p. 24). (This was a significant break with established practice, as secretaries-general, since the time of Kurt Waldheim, had regularly attended the informal consultations as well as the more formal meetings of the Council.) Gharekhan held the position for nearly four years and came to be known as the ‘sixth permanent member of the Council’ (Gharekhan, p. 26). He enjoyed a unique working relationship with the secretary-general, the substantive departments of the Secretariat and the Council members (especially the permanent five) at an extraordinarily challenging time in the history of the organisation, one that included many of the UN’s most controversial and complex post-Cold War field operations.

This is the intriguing and highly promising perspective from which *The Horseshoe Table* is written. According to its author, it is ‘the first ever of its kind – an intimate, first-hand account of the functioning of the most important organ of the United Nations’ (p. 4). While acknowledging at the outset that he cannot provide a complete history of the conflicts covered by the book, Gharekhan nonetheless claims to be presenting ‘a definitive history of the handling of those conflicts by the Security Council’ (p. 10). Does the book deliver on these lavish promises?

Gharekhan’s account, though not without its problems, clearly makes an important contribution to the literature on the UN. His privileged position, as an observer and an actor, in relation to key events in the early post-Cold War history of the organisation, and his focus on and continuous involvement in the day-to-day business of the Council in its informal mode – his direct access, as he puts it, to the ‘secret confabulations that go on in the consultations room’ (p. 4) – makes *The Horseshoe Table* particularly helpful in understanding the atmosphere, dynamics and functioning of the Council.
Moreover, given Gharekhan’s job description from 1993 to 1996, the book cannot help but be of interest for what it reveals, or does not reveal, about the famously secretive and controversial first post-Cold War secretary-general, and the crises confronting him. The details he provides about Boutros-Ghali’s tenure also raise larger issues about the role of the secretary-general in world politics – a subject also examined with much authority and in great detail in *Secretary or General*?

There is a final reason why *The Horseshoe Table* is also of considerable contemporary interest. In his tone, emphasis and reading of events and developments in and around the UN, Gharekhan captures the world view or outlook of the majority of the UN’s membership: the developing countries, also referred to as ‘non-aligned’ or the ‘global south’. These terms, like the ‘global north’ or the ‘West’, are, by any standard, vague and problematic. But that does not diminish their importance to an understanding of politics at the UN.

**Politics and theatre**

A major strength of *The Horseshoe Table* is not simply that it captures the intensely political nature of the UN as an institution but also that it brings out the importance of this fact to how the Council deals, or chooses not to deal, with the specific issues before it. In this it is aided and enlivened by a forthright and, at times, witty and irreverent style. Gharekhan is concerned with reality over appearance, and what some may view as frivolous asides do more than just give life and colour to the subject: they serve to convey a sense of the politics and theatre of the place. Above all, *The Horseshoe Table* draws attention – as indeed does *The Struggle over Iraq* by David Malone – to the vital role played by considerations of prestige, vanity, power and interest among member states. This comes out with particular clarity in Gharekhan’s discussion of individual conflicts on the Council agenda, from the Gulf War in 1991 to the Rwandan genocide in 1994, but even the scene-setting and unpromisingly titled chapter on the ‘Procedures and Practices’ of the Council is informed by a healthy concern
with substance over form.

This concern is well illustrated by the answer offered to the seemingly straightforward – though crucial – question of where and how decisions are reached by the Security Council. These are not – despite the book’s title – made around the horseshoe table, where non-members may be present and where resolutions and statements are meticulously recorded in six languages. Of much greater significance are the informal consultations or ‘informals’. Held in a ‘somewhat oppressive room next to the Council chamber’, this is where ‘all important decisions are arrived at’ (Gharekhan, p. 5). No official records, either summary or verbatim, are kept of these consultations, and ‘one unwritten rule never violated so far’ bars non-members of the Council from attending (p. 31). Governed by practices that have crystallised over time, informals have no official standing under the terms of the Charter or the Council’s Provisional Rules of Procedure. And yet, ‘because of the nature of the issues which the Security Council is called upon to handle, “consultations” have always been an inseparable part of the process of reaching decisions’ (p. 18). While consultations have become more formalised and far more frequent over the years, Gharekhan is careful to stress that something ‘has not changed’, to wit, ‘real decisions are still arrived at outside of the UN building, certainly outside the “room” or the “chamber”’ (p. 18).

This observation clearly suggests that Gharekhan’s concern with providing a ‘feel of the Council’ cannot be separated from his larger aim: to ‘describe how the Council responded to crises’ and, crucially, to demonstrate how the ‘national perspectives of its members, rather than the merits of each case, dominated the thinking, positions, and the action of the members of the Council’ (p. 7). Again, the evidence he advances in support of his case is both overwhelming and persuasive. This does not mean Gharekhan’s version of events is complete or incontestable in all its detail, nor free from factual inaccuracies or blind spots. These caveats undermine the claim that Gharekhan’s account is a ‘definitive history’ of the Council’s handling of
various conflicts in the 1990s; they do not, however, fatally undermine his central argument.

The UN and the Rwandan genocide
Many will take particular interest in Gharekhan’s chapter on the UN’s response to the Rwandan genocide in 1994, since Gharekhan himself, while on the whole successful in keeping out of the public eye during his time in the Secretariat, became the focus of attention in 1996 when the UN’s ‘official’ account of its involvement in Rwanda was published in the secretary-general’s ‘Blue Book’ series. Its publication reignited the debate about the UN’s response to the deteriorating situation in Rwanda before April 1994. The controversy centred on the handling by UN headquarters of the so-called ‘genocide fax’, a cable sent on 11 January 1994 by Roméo Dallaire, commander of the UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda (UNAMIR), to the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) in New York. Gharekhan addresses this controversy head on. His account of it and, even more so, of the Council’s handling of the Rwanda tragedy as a whole, is extraordinarily interesting for the wider issues it raises, and in particular for the light it sheds on the triangular relationship (such as it was) between the Council, the substantive departments of the Secretariat (principally, in this instance, the DPKO) and the secretary-general during Boutros-Ghali’s tenure in office.

Dallaire’s ‘genocide fax’ reported on the details of a meeting held the previous evening between one of Dallaire’s contingent commanders, Colonel Luc Marchal, and an informant: ‘a top level trainer’ for the interahamwe, the notorious Hutu militia organisation that four months later would carry out most of the killings during the genocide. The informant had been ‘put in contact’ with Dallaire by a ‘very very important government politician’. Gharekhan summarises the contents of the cable but leaves out, significantly in context of the wider controversy surrounding the cable, its specificity and level of detail. Gharekhan notes how the informant had reported on efforts by the Rwandan government ‘to provoke a civil war’ by employing the interahamwe militia to ‘target prominent Tutsi parliamentarians as well as Belgian soldiers’ at a recent demonstration in Kigali, and also that the informant had ‘admitted’ to being ‘anti-Tutsi but ... was opposed to killings’
All of this is true. But Dallaire’s cable, or rather the details offered by the informant, were far more specific than that:

[Informant] has been ordered to register all Tutsi in Kigali. He suspects it is for their extermination. Example he gave was that in 20 minutes his personnel could kill up to 1000 Tutsis … [Informant] also stated he is paid RF150,000 per month by the [Hutu-dominated ruling] MRND party to train Interahamwe[.] Direct link is to Chief of Staff RGF and President of MRND … Interahamwe has trained 1700 men in RGF [Rwandese Government Forces] camps outside capital. The 1700 are scattered in groups of 40 throughout the capital.13

The informant, who was requesting protection for himself and his family, was not just ‘opposed to killings’ but to ‘anti-Tutsi extermination’. Crucially, he was also ‘prepared to provide [the] location of [a] major arms cache’, indicating that he had already distributed some weapons ‘provided by the RGF’, and could give ‘details of their location’.14

Knowing the fuller contents of the cable is important in part to correct the later attempt, admittedly feeble and eventually abandoned, by some members of the Secretariat to present it as a ‘routine’ piece of communication from the field, the implication being that its importance had been exaggerated post facto by journalists unaware of the ‘stream of daily and often alarmist cables’ reaching UN headquarters.15 This was no ordinary cable and Gharekhan, to be fair, refers to it as a ‘highly significant communication’. Yet, while thus not diminishing the importance of the cable, his slant on it is revealing, and brings us to the controversy in which he became involved in connection with the publication of the Blue Book, a controversy that also raises wider and more fundamental questions about the use of force in UN operations.

The controversy arose from the claim made by Boutros-Ghali in the Blue Book that ‘my Special Advisor briefed the Security Council on the reports which had been received from UNAMIR and on the actions the UN had taken in response’ (Gharekhan, pp. 238–9). According to Gharekhan, ‘this infuriated some members of the Security Council whose alibi for inaction
on Rwanda was destroyed by a single sentence’ (p. 239). He adds that the ‘delegations also claimed that their own records showed absolutely no indication’ that he had briefed the Council (p. 239). He then writes:

I, in all honesty, could neither confirm nor deny the claim in the book …
I checked my own notes which I used to write fairly regularly and which provide the main source for this book, but had no notes at all for the period under question. (Gharekhan, p. 240)16

Gharekhan did not in fact brief the Council on the specifics of Dallaire’s cable, as suggested by the Blue Book. According to Colin Keating, permanent representative of New Zealand on the Council at the time, the 11 January report from Kigali was not revealed to the Council.17 Significantly, Keating adds: ‘According to the Secretariat’s reporting to the Security Council, the situation was an extension of the problem of civil war. The deeper and more dangerous problem of a monumental threat to human life was ignored.’18 Later, when recalling the events of early April when the genocide started and Keating found himself president of the Council for the month, he stresses how ‘the initial reaction was influenced by the repeated advice from the secretary-general’s representative that the situation was being driven by the civil war’.19 This fits with Gharekhan’s summary of the cable and also with the Secretariat’s actual response, not just to Dallaire’s cable but to the stream of corroborative information that continued to be sent from the field to UN headquarters in the months leading up to the genocide.20 To Dallaire, both the content and the tone of the response he received from the DPKO to his cable ‘suggested a total disconnect’ between him and New York; as he puts it, ‘they no longer trusted my judgement’.21

What most clearly shook the Secretariat into its ‘rapid, deliberate and unequivocally negative’22 reaction to Dallaire’s cable was the latter’s firm indication that he intended ‘to take action within the next 36 hours’ against the arms caches. He was, in other words, advocating and indeed planning for a ‘proactive’ option that might involve the use of force by UN peacekeepers. As he notes in his memoirs, ‘I also wanted to make it clear in the cable that I was not asking for permission to raid the caches but was informing New
York of my intentions’. 23 Gharekhan does not discuss the issues raised by Dallaire’s proposed course of action or the fraught relations between New York and the UNAMIR force commander, in part, no doubt, because matters were handled by the DPKO (which raises important questions about the secretary-general’s relations not just to member states but to his substantive departments). Still, Gharekhan’s view on the larger issue of the use of force, not just over the issue of arms caches in January but later, once the genocide acquired its murderous momentum, emerges clearly from his account. ‘Assuming that the necessary mandate and troops with equipment had been found and deployed, would the disaster have been avoided? I doubt it’ (p. 256). This was certainly not Dallaire’s view, and from all we now know about the course of events there is no doubt that the force commander was far better placed to make a judgement on the issue than Gharekhan. 24 Gharekhan spoke only once on the phone with Dallaire during the period of the genocide; Boutros-Ghali did not speak to him at all. 25 Indeed, it is clear from Gharekhan’s account that the secretary-general had no real interest in the views of his force commander. Bizarrely, Boutros-Ghali was ‘personally inclined to agree with the Belgian assessment since he believed that Belgium, as the former colonial power, understood Rwanda better than the special representative or the force commander’ (p. 243).

The source of Gharekhan’s gloomy assessment regarding the possible use of force, then, is not the result of any detailed assessment of the situation and options on the ground. His attitude closely conforms to what David Malone, in one of his many thoughtful observations in The International Struggle over Iraq, singles out as an important feature of ‘the UN’s institutional culture’, that is, opposition to ‘the use of force except as a very last resort (generally to be delayed as much as possible, and beyond)’ (p. 279). Gharekhan’s discussion in The Horseshoe Table of other crises bears out the basic truth of Malone’s conclusion. Yet, at times, the use or threat of force may play an important role in responding to specific challenges. Malone himself notes how it took the ‘credible threat of force … to induce the military regime usurping power in Haiti to depart in 1994’ (p. 279). And ‘Funmi Olonisakin, in her excellent and balanced history of UN peacekeeping in Sierra Leone, acknowledges – though one gets the sense that she does so
with a heavy heart – that but for the credible threat of the use of force during the crisis of May 2000, in response to which the United Kingdom deployed some 1,200 soldiers to the country outside the UN chain of command, the UN mission in Sierra Leone might well have collapsed, possibly in a repeat of the horrors that had engulfed Freetown when the Revolutionary United Front had attacked the capital in January 1999 (Olonisakin, pp. 61–9).26

Returning to Rwanda, it is essential not to let the controversy surrounding the ‘genocide fax’ – interesting as it is – distract from the bigger picture when it comes to the sources of the UN’s failure in that country. And here Gharekhan, whatever his own views on what could or could not have been done, gets the overall assessment and emphasis absolutely right: ‘genocide fax’ or not, member states were simply not going to get involved on the ground in Rwanda. To start with, as he rightly points out, ‘the major countries … on the Security Council had a pretty good idea, better than the Secretary General, of what was going on in Rwanda’ (p. 240). This is true of the United States and, particularly, of France, whose deeply discreditable actions before, during and after the genocide have by now been thoroughly documented.27 As for the US administration, deeply shaken by recent events in Somalia and Haiti, it was plainly, as became very clear when the killings started in Rwanda, unprepared to support any kind of action aimed at halting the slaughter. Almost as soon as the killings began, the administration pressed, as Warren Christopher instructed Ambassador Madeleine Albright on 15 April 1994, for the ‘full, orderly withdrawal of all UNAMIR personnel as soon as possible’.28 In this the United States was supported by the United Kingdom, whose attention at this stage was firmly fixed on events in eastern Bosnia, where Bosnian Serb forces had launched an attack on the supposedly safe area of Gorazde.29 In the end, the Council decided, in a resolution adopted on 21 April 1994, to scale down the UNAMIR mission to a skeletal force of some 270 personnel from a peak of 2,500 in late March 1994. As Gharekhan is careful to point out, this was not simply a matter of the West turning its back and refusing to act. Though quick to highlight double standards among Council members, he also recognises that ‘not a single African country … responded to the Secretary General’s appeal for troops’ (p. 256).
Gharekhan is scathing, and justly so, about Council deliberations during the Rwandan genocide. In a 14-hour-long debate held on 29 April, the Council finally ‘reached the depths of sterile, absurd, and totally meaningless discussion’. ‘Seldom’, says Gharekhan, ‘had the Council been seen performing at such a low level’ (pp. 244, 245). The date is significant because by this stage there could no longer be any question – for any Council member – about the genocidal intent and scope of the killings by the *interahamwe*.30 Continued references to the ongoing ‘civil war’ in the country only served to obscure the fundamental reality of what was happening and, in so doing, to counteract building pressures for intervention. It is an appalling and shameful story, amounting, in Dallaire’s apt words, to a ‘failure of humanity’.31

**The most impossible job**

One of the more intriguing aspects of Gharekhan’s reflections is the light they throw on Boutros-Ghali’s style and tenure as secretary-general from 1992 to 1996. Boutros-Ghali was the first truly post-Cold War secretary-general, operating in a new and unfamiliar geostrategic environment and presiding over a dramatic expansion of UN peacekeeping operations. He is also the only secretary-general to have been denied a second term, following a very bitter and public falling out with the US administration – though, as Edward Luck quite rightly points out, ‘many delegations and Secretariat officials privately expressed considerable relief when he was gone’.32 Part of the fascination with *The Horseshoe Table* derives from the fact that its author, and here he is clearly in a minority, retains a certain fondness for his boss in spite of the latter’s vanity, arrogance and demonstrable – at times shocking – lack of diplomatic skill. As one journalist reported a mere six months into his tenure as secretary-general, ‘the man supposed to be the world’s top diplomat has managed to alienate practically everyone, including his core constituencies among the Arab world and non-aligned countries, many of his staff, the press and now the Security Council’.33 Matters did not improve over time. Gharekhan adds to the picture by offering an ‘inside view’ of Boutros-Ghali’s mode of operations and its effect on his working relationships with the Security Council, the permanent representatives on and off the Council, and his own staff in the Secretariat. It makes for worrying, at
times disturbing, reading and, on the evidence presented here, Boutros-
Ghali’s approach was probably more damaging to the workings of the UN
at a critical time in its history than has hitherto been acknowledged. The
arguments most often invoked in defence of Boutros-Ghali, notably his
concern with preserving the independence of his office, are – again on the
evidence presented here – frankly, much less convincing than they have
been made out.34

While *The Horseshoe Table* focuses on Boutros-Ghali’s incumbency (and
on part of that of his predecessor, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar), it also raises
larger issues about what the first holder of the job, Trygve Lie, famously
described as ‘the most impossible job on this earth’.35 As the perceptive and
subtle description of the nature of the job drawn up by the UN Preparatory
Commission in 1945 makes clear, it is one that requires ‘the highest qualities
of political judgement, tact and integrity’; qualities needed in part because
even ‘in the exercise of his administrative duties’, the secretary-general
cannot escape ‘decisions which may justly be called political’.36

*Management by ‘stealth and sudden violence’*

A distinguishing feature of Boutros-Ghali’s dealings with staff and member
states was a penchant for secrecy, combined with a reluctance to consult
either widely or systematically. Revealingly, this sometimes extended to
Gharekhan himself, supposedly his ‘eyes and ears on the Council’. At one
point, almost as if in passing, Gharekhan notes, ‘of course, I had no idea of
what Boutros-Ghali really had in mind’.37 Gharekhan provides many other,
equally revealing details of how his boss chose to interact with different
constituencies.

Boutros-Ghali ‘almost never dealt with the permanent representatives
in New York’ (p. 302). His reluctance to do so could be explained, as was
the official line at the time, by the fact that he was too preoccupied with
the UN’s vast and rapidly growing post-Cold War agenda. This was also
the reason given for the controversial appointment of Gharekhan as his
‘personal representative’ on the Council; he was simply too busy to attend
informal consultations given their frequency. While these reasons are valid
to a degree, they are undercut by repeated references to more personal
motivations. Not only did Boutros-Ghali not deal with permanent representatives, ‘he made it evident to them that he did not need them, that he could do quite well without them. Over the years he had got used to dealing with only Presidents, Prime Ministers and Ministers.’ As for the frequency of meetings, Gharekhan himself more than hints at the real reason: for Boutros-Ghali, ‘it was a big relief not to have to put up with the mediocrity, as he saw it, of the ambassadors’ (p. 25). That Boutros-Ghali’s approach was informed to a significant extent by certain personality traits – a haughtiness and arrogance that often came through in the ‘ininfelicity of his language’, which ‘some found offensive and disrespectful’ – rather than by any carefully considered management strategy is reinforced by the manner in which he related to his own staff. Brian Urquhart recalls Boutros-Ghali’s revealing and quite typical remark to the New York Times in which he argued that ‘the only way to run a bureaucracy was “by stealth and sudden violence”’. Gharekhan at one stage muses, ‘perhaps he believed that the subordinates must not be allowed to forget that they were just that – subordinates’ (p. 303). By all accounts, he certainly made sure they did not forget.

There were other distinctive aspects to Boutros-Ghali’s approach to senior UN staff that merit attention. A notable – and clearly unhelpful – obsession was his determination to prevent special representatives, let alone force commanders, from briefing the Security Council. ‘He almost always reacted vehemently, negatively, every time someone requested the presence of a special representative in the Council for the purpose of briefing members on a given peacekeeping operation’ (p. 132). Only once, in May 1995, did the secretary-general see the value of having his force commander in the former Yugoslavia, General Bertrand Janvier, appear before the Council in New York.

**Relations with the Security Council**

It could be argued that keeping members of staff firmly in their place and snubbing delegates in New York does not much matter in the grand scheme of things. This must have been what Boutros-Ghali himself felt. It is also probably true, as Gharekhan suggests, that the resentment generated in some quarters by his boss’s autocratic style and aloofness owed partly to the
fact that delegates ‘took it as an affront to their importance’. His working relationship with the Security Council as a whole – the institution entrusted by the Charter with ‘primary responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security’ – is, however, another matter altogether. For the secretary-general to develop such a deeply strained and conflict-ridden relationship with the Council as a whole, to take such an overtly confrontational approach in his dealings with it, was a grave, costly and, on balance, unnecessary error. For if there is one common theme to emerge from Secretary or General?, it is the vital importance of ensuring a close and effective working relationship between the secretary-general and the Council. ‘For the Secretary-General’, as James Cockayne and David Malone rightly stress, ‘little can be more important than active cooperation and support from and with the Security Council, in particular the permanent members and, above all, of course, Washington’.43

Managing and cultivating these relationships has, of course, never been easy. Secretary or General? shows just how difficult it has been, especially so in the immediate post-Cold War period when the early confidence and optimism of member states gave way, within a short period of time, to retrenchment and pessimism following widely publicised peacekeeping failures and paralysis in Rwanda and elsewhere. Yet, while any secretary-general would have found relations with the Council challenging in such circumstances, Boutros-Ghali raised tensions with the Security Council to a new level: ‘such open confrontation had never been seen before’.44 Gharekhan himself, it should be added, is clearly in a delicate position to comment on all of this given that his very appointment as ‘personal representative’ on the Council was much resented at the time and, as several essays in Secretary or General? make clear, was one aspect of the wider problem of Boutros-Ghali’s turbulent relationship with the Council. It is noteworthy how, in commenting on the appointment, many are careful not to question Gharekhan’s personal integrity or competence, all the while arguing, persuasively, that the arrangement itself was detrimental to a good working relationship between the secretary-general and the Council.45

The point at issue here is not merely the obvious desirability of smooth working relationships between the secretary-general, the Secretariat and
the Council. At a time when the UN was deeply involved in a number of conflicts, Boutros-Ghali’s chosen method for dealing both with the Council and senior staff could not but undermine the UN’s performance and ability to handle these crises. It most emphatically did nothing to improve it. As Brian Urquhart, uniquely qualified to comment on the subject, puts it with characteristic politeness: ‘Boutros-Ghali misread the necessity for a close relationship with the Security Council in time of trouble’. In this respect, Colin Keating’s reflections on his time on the Council in 1993 and 1994 are again significant. Throughout those years, he notes, ‘there was constant tension between the Security Council and Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali about the appropriate level of Security Council involvement in decision-making’. As a non-permanent member of the Council, he notes how ‘he and some others [were] in a sustained dispute with the Secretary-General about his policy of seeking to manage operations without any transparency or accountability and his personal inclination to selectively deal with only a few permanent members for discussion of difficult issues’. The suggestion sometimes made that Boutros-Ghali’s ‘activism’ was bound to result in confrontation is belied by the tenure of his predecessor, Pérez de Cuéllar, which showed very clearly that ‘activism did not mean confrontation’. Boutros-Ghali’s often dysfunctional relationship with the Council was, in other words, to a very large degree self-inflicted. It was also deeply counter-productive.

For all this Boutros-Ghali still has his defenders. Two arguments in particular are often advanced and, while not logically connected in a strict sense, often appear in combination. The first is that for all his faults, Boutros-Ghali was a great intellect. Contributors to Secretary or General? speak of him as a ‘scholar-diplomat’, a ‘brilliant academic’ and a ‘figure of high intelligence’. None of them, however, go quite as far as Gharekhan, who describes him as ‘an intellectual giant’ (p. 303). The second argument invoked in his favour is that he was prepared to speak truth to power – that he ‘displayed a fierce and often courageous independence’, refusing to kowtow to the powerful, especially Western, member states of the organisation. This, unsurprisingly, is also the argument he would offer in response to criticism of his style and actions: sometimes, as he put it, ‘certain facts have to be said’. It is certainly
true, as Marrack Goulding has written elsewhere, that Boutros-Ghali had ‘an independent and searching mind’ and that he often felt compelled, not without good reason, to remind Western members of the Security Council of their responsibilities. But there are also two real problems with these arguments in the case of Boutros-Ghali, both of which – unintentionally perhaps – emerge from Gharekhan’s book.

First, a disturbing number of the comments and judgements made by the secretary-general in the context of the individual crises and battles he faced, frankly, do not bear witness to a terribly sophisticated understanding or, indeed, even a readiness to understand, the complexity of the issues at stake. According to Gharekhan, Boutros-Ghali ‘believed that the Hutus and Tutsi would always go through periodic cycles of massacres’ (p. 251). Where is the intellectual rigour in that? Another piece of evidence often adduced in support of his intellectual powers is An Agenda for Peace, the much-vaunted report commissioned by the Security Council at its summit in January 1992 and on which, according to Adekeye Adebajo, ‘in true professorial style, Boutros-Ghali spent forty hours going through countless drafts’. Adebajo goes on to describe the final product as ‘a landmark document on the tools and techniques of peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding for a post-Cold War era’. This, and similar statements, run the risk of confusing the intellectual coherence and rigour of the document with the loftiness of its aspirations and boldness of its vision.

But there is a more fundamental reason for questioning the oft-heard view that, for all his faults, Boutros-Ghali was one of the ‘most intellectually accomplished Secretar[ies]-General in the history of the post’. It flows directly from another of the important conclusions to emerge from Malone’s study of the Security Council’s long history of involvement with Iraq: ‘the success of persons appointed to key UN positions often depends far more on temperament than on intellect’. This, of course, applies to the secretary-general himself and it is clear, often painfully so, that Boutros-Ghali lacked the key qualities of political judgement and tact of which the UN Preparatory Commission had spoken in 1945.

This relates to the second and more serious point regarding the need for the secretary-general to assert and preserve the independence of his office,
and that doing so may involve reminding member states, especially the more powerful ones, of their responsibilities under the Charter. As Secretary or General? brings out, there are ways in which, paradoxically, the exercise of independence by the secretary-general has become more difficult in the post-Cold War era than it was during the period of Cold War bipolarity.\(^58\)

The problem with the argument in Boutros-Ghali’s case, however, is twofold. First, Boutros-Ghali’s indignation in relation to the more powerful member states was in fact quite selective and became increasingly and obsessively so in its focus on the United States. In the words of Adebajo, while he ‘focused much of his venom on the United States ... he often failed to point out in similar detail some of the shortcomings of other powerful members of the UN’, most notably France.\(^59\) Secondly, because Boutros-Ghali’s assertion of independence assumed the form of confrontation, it had the exact opposite effect of what was presumably intended. While it is true that ‘actual responsibility of the Secretary-General for management failings and policy mistakes is not always easy to distinguish from convenient scapegoating’,\(^60\) Boutros-Ghali’s preferred mode of dealing with the Council made it all the easier for member states to ascribe the ‘failures’ of the UN to the secretary-general and his Secretariat. This, as The Horseshoe Table makes clear, is something they were (and will continue to be) only too happy to do, often in a blatantly disingenuous manner. This is also what emerges from the story of the UN’s involvement in the former Yugoslavia, examined in The Horseshoe Table. There is no question that the deep divisions and tensions over policy among key member states crucially determined the character of the UN’s response to the wars in the former Yugoslavia. It is equally true, however, that Boutros-Ghali’s approach to the region and to the UN’s involvement – erratically and inconsistently veering from a curious aloofness (at one point famously describing it as a ‘rich man’s war’) to sudden, ill-prepared and counter-productive interventions – did very little to help.\(^61\)

In the end, what Boutros-Ghali singularly failed to appreciate, indeed seemed quite incapable of appreciating, was a basic truth whose relevance extends beyond his own incumbency as secretary-general. As David Kennedy puts it in his excellent contribution to Secretary or General?: ‘Like any politician working in a complex political system, the secretary-general
will and should respond to the real play of political forces, within the institution and the broad world’.62

Does gloom mean doom?

*The Horseshoe Table* paints an extraordinarily bleak picture of the motivations and impulses that drive the behaviour of states in the international system. Rare indeed, if one accepts Gharekhan’s assessment, are the occasions when the Security Council, in its actions and handling of issues, has been motivated by a genuine desire to address a case on its merits, let alone by nobler aspirations. Yet members of the Council, he assures us (though with little apparent conviction), are not ‘all, or always, total cynics’:

> Once in a while, some of them are genuinely moved by compassion or anger or a sense of frustration. On the whole, however, it is true to say that the representatives of members of the Security Council, or for that matter of the General Assembly, are guided solely by considerations of the national interests they represent.63

The evidence which he provides in support of this is undeniably strong, and it is difficult to overstate the central role played by ‘considerations of the national interest’ to any understanding of politics at the UN. At times, however, the argument can become too crude, not only in its failure to allow for the coexistence of different motives on the part of member states, but also in its tendency to dismiss (or to view with suspicion) the impact of normative developments and wider changes in the international system over time on the behaviour and focus of the Council. But even here, *The Horseshoe Table* is of interest in that it captures attitudes about the state of the organisation that are widespread and have become, if anything, more entrenched in recent years among the developing countries that make up the majority of member states.

In particular, it is evident from Gharekhan’s account that he views the normative causes championed by liberal internationalists after the Cold War – the promotion of human rights, democracy and good governance – with deep suspicion, seeing them as unlikely to improve anyone’s lot but
certain to weaken the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. He notes, for example, that when India was on the Council it had ‘a problem with the very concept of preventive deployment’ as raised during discussions about expanding the UN’s presence in the Balkans to Macedonia, though this was one of Boutros-Ghali’s recommendations in *An Agenda for Peace*. His conclusion about the UN’s involvement in Haiti is similarly telling. ‘The UN’, he maintains, ‘should never have been involved in Haiti. The situation there, while horrible for the long-suffering people, was not one which threatened other countries’ (Gharekhan, p. 235). There is nothing surprising in Gharekhan holding these positions; after all, he had represented India at the UN in New York for six years and was a vigorous defender of non-aligned positions. Moreover, having observed Council politics at close quarters, he had real grounds for skepticism about the sincerity of motives held by some of the member states championing the ‘new humanitarianism’.

At times, however, he lapses into a more unthinking and simplistic tendency – one admittedly very widespread – that seeks to reduce most or all of what is and goes wrong with the UN to Western, and especially US, machinations. This is related to a tendency to treat the ‘West’ or the ‘affluent north’ as an undifferentiated whole, whether at the UN or as a bloc in world politics. At one stage, for example, Gharekhan speaks of ‘a pernicious practice developed in the 1990s when the peacekeeping operations expanded exponentially. The affluent countries took over the Organisation’ (pp. 34–5). What he has in mind is the use of gratis military personnel, ‘nearly all from ... Western countries’, to help in the office of the military adviser in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations in New York. Many of these did indeed come from Western countries, though mostly from traditional troop-contributing countries. More importantly, making them available to the UN was a response to a very real and serious problem of operational and management overstretch within the DPKO, one that had been painfully and repeatedly exposed in the first half of the decade. To describe this as the ‘affluent countries taking over the Organisation’ is simply wrong, though it is revealing of the instinctive distrust among developing countries about the agenda of the ‘West’, a distrust which has only intensified
since world leaders met in New York to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the organisation in September 2005. Gharekhan expresses well what has become a widespread perception among the non-aligned bloc about the efforts of the West to hijack the UN and impose Western concepts, doctrines and priorities upon the work of the organisation. Deeply revealing in this respect are the comments made, in May 2006, by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi of Malaysia at the Ministerial Meeting of the Nonaligned Movement Coordinating Bureau. According to Badawi:

“New concepts and doctrines have been foisted on us, including such notions as ‘humanitarian intervention’, ‘responsibility to protect’ and ‘pre-emptive war’, among others. All of these pose a challenge to traditional and universally accepted concepts enshrined in the UN charter.”

The lack of subtlety and nuance that characterise views such as these only serve to highlight the importance of Malone’s and Olonisakin’s findings and analysis – two authors who cannot be accused of naivety about the UN’s role in peace and security, though both still find some grounds for optimism.

**Cautious optimism**

Malone’s *The International Struggle for Iraq* complements Gharekhan’s overall message regarding the role of ‘national perspectives’ as the key to unlocking the ‘thinking, positions, and actions of Council members’ (Gharekhan, p. 7). Both authors also emphasise the way in which the positions taken by Council members (or any member state, for that matter) on specific issues, while cloaked in principle and high-sounding rhetoric, are often much better understood in terms of domestic considerations and pressures. A striking example of this, highlighted by Malone, is French policy during the Iraq crisis of 2002–03, a ‘crisis’ which very conveniently provided Chirac ‘with the opportunity to focus French opinion on a foreign policy question on which he was virtually unopposed’ (Malone, p. 270). Gharekhan and Malone also echo each other in drawing attention to the continuing ‘relevance of the concept of spheres of influence’ to an understanding of Council dynamics, showing how, in concrete instances, sphere-of-influence think-
ing among major powers has driven their actions and policies, whether it is Russia in its ‘near-abroad’, the United States in relation to Haiti, or France in relation to its domain réservé in Africa (Malone, p. 270).

Yet, in some important respects, Malone’s account adds greater subtlety and nuance to the picture of Security Council dynamics. In particular – and this is arguably one of the most important overall insights to be gleaned from The International Struggle over Iraq – he stresses how the ‘impulses and behaviour of the P-5 resemble each other much more than is immediately clear’ (p. 212). One consequence of recognising this is that it immediately leads to a much more sophisticated discussion of US attitudes to the UN and the Security Council than that which has typically informed public debate, especially since 2003. Malone does not in any way underplay the growth and force of the unilateralist impulses in US policy, especially after 11 September 2001, nor is he sparing in his criticism of the current administration’s approach to dealing with the UN. But he places US policy in a wider context, both historically and in relation to other permanent members of the Council. While various tendencies and traditions have long ‘vied for dominance of US foreign policy’, he notes that the ‘bottom-line commitment to multilateralism has been clear since [the United States] underwrote the establishment of great global institutions in the last days of the Second World War’ (p. 274). At the same time, he shows clearly that the ‘tendency … to view the value of the Council’ in ‘instrumental’ terms is anything but confined to the United States. Relative power positions explain much better the policies of the P5 than any more or less principled commitment to multilateralism. Using French policies during the crisis in Côte d’Ivoire as an example, Malone concludes ‘it is not so much France’s principles as the now limited extent of its military, economic, and political power that dictate more multilateral strategies’ (pp. 212–13).

In the end, The International Struggle over Iraq, for all its realism, presents a picture of the UN as an evolving institution, one that is capable of adapting to changing circumstances and, if permitted, to make a difference. ‘The Iraq case shows it used for good and ill over the twenty years to 2005 and highlights its unique attributes and value when engaging creatively and meaningfully the key international players’ (p. 303). This more upbeat con-
clusion, which contrasts with the bleakness of *The Horseshoe Table*, is echoed by *Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone*. To many, this will come as a surprise.

Ever since Robert Kaplan’s influential – though hugely controversial – article for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1994, in which, following a brief sojourn in West Africa, he famously foresaw a ‘coming anarchy’, Sierra Leone has for many been a byword for all the perceived ills of the post-Cold War era: endemic state failure, civil war, unspeakable atrocities and human suffering on a grand scale. The source of optimism in Olonisakin’s account does not derive from a starry-eyed assessment of the UN having brought lasting peace and stability to Sierra Leone. Indeed, the gains made since 2000 are, quite plainly, both fragile and reversible. Her qualified optimism stems instead from the manner in which the UN appears to have learnt from past failure and, as a result, assisted in bringing the country to a stage where there is at least the chance of a better future. In May 2000, the UNAMSIL mission was at the point of collapse and, as Olonisakin rightly observes, the very name of the mission was ‘synonymous with humiliation and failure’ (p. 27). Its recovery from the crisis of 2000 to the withdrawal of UNAMSIL in December 2005 – a period that saw the UN developing new and innovative practices and using force and the credible threat of force at a key moment – is, on the whole, an encouraging story. The conclusion to draw from this is not that there are quick fixes or solutions to every challenge faced by the UN in the security field. But, as with so much else in the UN’s post-Cold War history, the story of UNAMSIL suggests that with the right combination of will, competence and resources, real progress, though often likely to prove fragmentary, partial and always susceptible to reversal, does not have to be beyond reach.

**Notes**


3 Ibid.


12 The politician, whose name was not given in the cable, was Faustin Twagiramungu, a ‘Hutu moderate’ who in July 1994 went on to become the first prime minister of Rwanda after the genocide.

13 ‘UN Cable, 11 January 1994’. MRND stands for *Mouvement révolutionnaire national pour la démocratie et le développement*. The party, then led by Juvénal Habyarimana, had ruled the country since 1975.

14 ‘UN Cable, 11 January 1994’.


16 Boutros-Ghali, it turns out, was upset with Gharekhan because the latter failed to ‘corroborate the statement in the Blue Book unreservedly’ in front of the Czech Ambassador.

own sources in the Secretariat – one of whom was centrally placed at the time and whose information I have no reason to distrust – made it quite clear that the Blue Book was simply wrong. The decision that was taken internally, as Gharekhan also notes in his account, was to inform the French, Belgian and US ambassadors in Kigali. Confidential interviews, UN Headquarters, New York, May 1997, June 1998 and May 2008.

19 Ibid., p. 505.
20 Barnett, Eye Witness to a Genocide, pp. 89–90.
21 Dallaire, Shake Hands with the Devil, p. 147.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 146.
25 Dallaire, Shake Hands with the Devil, p. 293.
26 It should be added here that the weakening of Revolutionary United Front’s military position was due as much, if not more, to the attacks launched against it from neighbouring Guinea. See Adekeye Adebajo and David Keen, ‘Sierra Leone’, in Mats Berdal and Spyros Economides (eds), United Nations Interventionism, 1991–2004 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 261–7.
30 The CIA’s National Intelligence Daily for 23 April 1994 – partially declassified and available at the National Security Archive – notes in passing that the Rwanda Patriotic Front ‘may be willing to meet with military officers and political party leaders … in an effort to stop the genocide, which relief workers say is spreading south’. See William Ferroggiaro, ‘The U.S. and the Genocide in Rwanda 1994: Information, Intelligence and the US Response’, 24 March 2004, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB117/index.htm#intelligence. For a discussion of when it became clear to the United States and United Kingdom that the violence in Rwanda was not just an extension of civil war, see Melvern, Conspiracy to Murder, pp.

31 Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil*.

32 Edward Luck, ‘The Secretary-General in a Unipolar World’, in Simon Chesterman (ed.), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 221.


34 In reaching this conclusion, I am partially revising, if not the specifics, then at least the general thrust of my own position as expressed in these pages in 1999. Mats Berdal, ‘Boutros-Ghali’s Ambiguous Legacy’, *Survival*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1999, pp. 172–81.

35 Quoted in Shashi Tharoor, “‘The Most Impossible Job’ Description”, in *Secretary or General?*, p. 33.

36 The relevant extract from the Report of the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations, 23 December 1945, is included as an appendix to *Secretary or General?*, pp. 243–5.

37 Gharekhan, *The Horseshoe Table*, p. 285. Gharekhan also notes that the first and only time Boutros-Ghali met with ‘all his senior advisors together’ was on 19 December 1996, at his leaving-party after having just been denied a second term. Gharekhan, *The Horseshoe Table*, p. 305.

38 Gharekhan, *The Horseshoe Table*, p. 302. As if to confirm the point, Adekeye Adebajo notes how Boutros-Ghali, when he deigned to meet with permanent representatives, often cut ‘them off in mid-sentence to inform them that he had previously talked to their foreign ministers or presidents’. Adekeye Adebajo, ‘Pope, Pharaoh, or Prophet?’, in *Secretary or General?*, p. 145.


41 Confidential interviews with former members of UN staff in New York, May 2008.

42 According to Gharekhan, Boutros-Ghali ‘was against his Under Secretaries General wasting their time sitting on the Council’. Gharekhan, *The Horseshoe Table*, p. 25.

43 James Cockayne and David M. Malone, ‘Relations with the Security Council’, in *Secretary or General?*, p. 85.


45 Cockayne and Malone, ‘Relations with the Security Council’, in *Secretary or General?*, p. 79; Urquhart, ‘The Evolution of the Secretary-General’, p. 27. See also Goulding, ‘The UN Secretary-General’, pp. 272, 276.

46 Urquhart, ‘The Evolution of the Secretary-General’, p. 27.


48 Ibid.

49 Luck, ‘The Secretary-General in a Unipolar World’, p. 207.

50 Urquhart, ‘The Evolution of the Secretary-General’, p. 26; James Traub, ‘The Secretary-General’s Political Space’, in *Secretary or General?*, p. 191.
Adebajo, ‘Pope, Pharaoh, or Prophet?’, p. 146.


Adebajo, ‘Pope, Pharaoh, or Prophet?’, p. 143.

Ibid.


Shashi Tharoor, ‘“The Most Impossible Job” Description’, in *Secretary or General?*, p. 39.

Adebajo, ‘Pope, Pharaoh, or Prophet?’, p. 147.

Cockayne and Malone, ‘Relations with the Security Council’, p. 84.


David Kennedy, ‘Leader, Clerk, or Policy Entrepreneur?’, *Secretary or General?*, p. 171.

Gharekhan, *The Horseshoe Table*, p. 310.
