Research Summary

For the first time in the history of the United Nations, candidates for Secretary-General are running publicly for election. Since the UN’s inception, the permanent five members of the Security Council (China, France, Russian, the United Kingdom and the United States) have chosen the candidate in secrecy and, without exception, the General Assembly has accepted their candidate. However, calls for greater transparency and inclusiveness in the selection process by member states and civil society organizations prevailed. The public campaigns for Secretary-General will begin on April 12 with a series of meetings in which candidates can interact with UN member states and civil society.

Our discussion is based on a recent paper by Simon Chesterman in the Global Governance journal. In it he argues that the world’s diplomat has few powers, minimal staff, and his or her influence is greatest in orphaned conflicts and marginal causes. The first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, welcomed his successor to New York with the words: “You are about to enter the most impossible job on this earth.” Kofi Annan, the seventh Secretary-General, joked that the term SG sometimes might as well stand for “scapegoat.”

But why is this so? Chesterman refers us to Brian Urquhart who writes that the process seems geared toward selecting “a candidate who will not exert any troubling degree of leadership, commitment, originality, or
independence.” The presumed reason is that some prefer to have a Secretary-General who is accustomed to taking orders rather than giving them—someone who will be more “secretary” than “general.”

Chesterman argues that creative leadership is vital to the UN and the right Secretary-General can do great things. Peacekeeping, for example, was essentially invented during Dag Hammarskjöld’s term of office; he mischievously said it could be found in “Chapter VI½” of the Charter. Years later, Kofi Annan reframed a poisonous debate over humanitarian intervention into a constructive discourse about the Responsibility to Protect. Annan also seized on the year 2000 to craft the Millennium Development Goals that eventually energized and focused efforts to help the world’s poorest.

Against this backdrop, the luncheon debate will provide a timely opportunity to reflect on the manner in which the Secretary-General will be chosen, on the changing nature of the office, and on the profile that a successful incumbent at the helm of the world’s most encompassing and most global organization should have.

This Global Governance discussion is a joint project of the One Earth Future Foundation, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and the Academic Council on the UN System. It brings together scholars and policymakers to share information and insights into best practices for addressing global challenges. For more, see http://oneearthfuture.org/research/global-governance