

To what extent do you agree that the Secretary-Generals were effective in leading the United Nations during the Cold War?

In the United Nations, the effectiveness of the Secretary-General (Sec-Gen) must be evaluated based on two distinct yardsticks: not only his administrative competency in overseeing the Secretariat and managing budgets, but also his political efficacy in spearheading UN efforts to safeguard international peace and security. While some Sec-Gens — particularly up to the 1960s and from the 1980s — managed to successfully champion peace and security by organising peacekeeping operations, brokering peace deals and sending observers or envoys, the political effectiveness of most Sec-Gens would be significantly constrained by the intransigence of superpowers and local actors. In addition, the administrative efficacy of the Sec-Gens would wane over time, as corruption and bloat became prevalent by the 1980s. Ultimately, while the effectiveness of the Sec-Gens fluctuated depending on their individual abilities, the structural contradictions of the role meant that they were ineffective overall during the Cold War.

Particularly up to the 1960s, Sec-Gens successfully reconceptualised and organised peacekeeping missions, effectively leading UN efforts to safeguard peace and security. This success is most evident during Hammarskjöld's tenure: although the concept of peacekeeping was not articulated in the UN Charter, he conceptualised that peacekeeping could become "Chapter 6½", plugging the gap between the passive negotiation authorised by Chapter 6 and forceful intervention described in Chapter 7. These principles of impartiality and non-use of force would set the precedent for many effective peacekeeping missions in the future. For example, based on this new formulation of peacekeeping, Hammarskjöld organised the UN Emergency Force I in the wake of the 1956 Suez Crisis, successfully preserving the fragile peace between Egypt and Israel for over 11 years until the outbreak of the Six-Day War in 1967. Subsequently, he would also deploy the UN Operations in the Congo in 1960. Under Hammarskjöld and later U Thant's leadership, ONUC would successfully stabilise the country by 1965 even after a Belgian invasion, an insurrection in Katanga and the collapse of the central government. Similarly, U Thant also effectively led several peacekeeping efforts: in response to communal violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots in 1964, he oversaw the deployment of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus which preserved stability until the Turkish invasion 10 years later. Thus, in the first two decades of the Cold War, Sec-Gens managed to reconceptualise and lead successful peacekeeping missions, effectively fulfilling their political role of protecting peace.

Additionally, Sec-Gens also successfully brokered peace deals that ended conflicts and disputes, especially during the first and last decades of the Cold War. For instance, in 1955, Hammarskjold visited Beijing to negotiate the release of 15 US airmen detained by China, effectively defusing tensions between the two great powers. A year later, he would also play an important diplomatic role in the resolution of the Suez Crisis, persuading Egypt to sign the ceasefire agreement and accept the deployment of peacekeepers on the border. As Cold War tensions died down in the 1980s, Perez de Cuellar would also effectively negotiate ceasefires and peace agreements between warring states: he personally brokered the peace deal that ended the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 and negotiated the 1991 Cambodian Peace Accords. Additionally, he managed to end 12 years of fighting between the Salvadoran government and its rebels, brokering the Chapultepec Peace Accords after numerous rounds of negotiation in 1990 and 1991. As such, Sec-Gens effectively safeguarded international peace and security by fostering diplomacy in the early and late stages of the Cold War.

In fact, for the most successful Sec-Gens, they managed to not only react to but also pre-empt threats to peace: they sent observers to monitor international developments, enabling them to prevent the outbreak or escalation of conflicts. This can be seen during Hammarskjold's term: Hammarskjold oversaw the deployment of the UN Observation Group in Lebanon in June 1958, monitoring the local situation to prevent the infiltration of weapons into the country from Syria. This prescient move helped to pre-emptively constrain the scale of possible violence before fighting broke out in July, enabling the swift resolution of the crisis within three months. A similar story played out in Laos: Hammarskjold sent a special envoy to Laos in 1959 to inform him of local developments. This meant that when martial law was declared after a coup in August 1960, Hammarskjold's envoy was already present in the country to broker negotiations, mediating an agreement between the political factions in just 3 weeks to prevent the outbreak of any armed conflict. Hence, proactive and far-sighted Sec-Gens — primarily found in the first decade of the Cold War — were especially effective in protecting international peace and security via the pre-emptive deployment of observer forces and representatives.

That said, the political effectiveness of Sec-Gens in safeguarding peace was increasingly constrained by superpower interests in the 1960s and 70s, since they vetoed the re-appointments of these proactive Sec-Gens and replaced them with comparatively unimpressive ones. Given that the Sec-Gen was appointed by the Security Council, P5 members could use their veto to obstruct the appointment of any candidate that they felt would compromise their interests. After Lie proactively invoked Article 99 of the UN Charter to convene the Security Council and lobby for a UN intervention in the Korean War against

Soviet forces, the USSR vetoed his re-appointment in 1952, preventing him from serving a second term. Similarly, Hammarskjöld offended the USSR in 1960 by refusing to place ONUC peacekeepers in service of the Soviet-backed Lumumba. In retaliation, the Soviets lobbied to replace the Sec-Gen with a troika of appointees from each of the Three Worlds in the Cold War, and they voiced their vehement opposition to the re-appointment of Hammarskjöld before he died in a plane crash. As such, subsequent Sec-Gens pandered to superpower interests in order to secure their re-appointments, making them much more passive in Cold War issues: for example, U Thant and Waldheim did not respectively advocate for action in the Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979). Thus, as superpower interests started to constrain Sec-Gens' actions, their effectiveness in protecting peace waned in the 1960s and 70s.

Additionally, the effectiveness of Sec-Gens was also hampered by local actors, who often resisted their efforts to preserve security. Given the overarching Principle of Sovereign Equality that the UN abides by, Sec-Gens could only organise observer forces and peacekeeping missions if local governments consented to them. This was often not the case: Hammarskjöld's attempt to send an observation commission to Hungary in the wake of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution failed as the government refused the observers entry. Similarly, Egypt's president Nasser ordered UNEF I peacekeepers to leave in 1967, leading to the outbreak of the Six-Day War that same year. As such, the Sec-Gens were only as successful as local actors allowed them to be: their effectiveness was limited when these actors refused to cooperate with their efforts for peace.

Finally, the administrative effectiveness of the Sec-Gens would also decline by the 1980s, as they failed to limit the nepotism and bloat of various UN agencies. UNESCO is a prominent example: due to severe administrative inefficiencies under Perez de Cuellar, its proposed budget ballooned 10% in 1984-85 compared to the previous biennium. Additionally, instead of effectively deploying its employees to oversee activities and programmes across the world, 70% of its 3400 employees were stationed in its Paris headquarters, indicating a bloated bureaucracy. Its efficiency was further limited by the nepotistic appointment of key personnel that were well-connected but not necessarily well-qualified: the important post of personnel director went to Serge Vieux, the cousin of the UNESCO Director-General's wife. In fact, the Sec-Gen's administrative incompetence would also constrain the Sec-Gen's political effectiveness in safeguarding peace as states cut funding to UN operation funds: from 1985 onwards, the US refused to pay its full contribution on the grounds that the UN is wasteful and inefficient, reducing the UN's budget for peacekeeping and other security-related operations. Therefore, the overall effectiveness of the Sec-Gens was severely compromised by their administrative ineptitude in the 1980s.

It is clear that the Sec-Gens' effectiveness varied significantly depending on how competent the individual was: Hammarskjöld's proactive deployment of observers, reconceptualisation of peacekeeping and outstanding diplomatic work made him remarkably effective, while the more placid styles of U Thant and Waldheim made them less effective. That said, we can observe that Sec-Gens were generally more effective in their *political* role when and where there was less superpower opposition: up to the 1960s before superpowers began to substantially interfere in appointments, from the 1980s onwards as Cold War tensions died down, and in minor conflicts like Cyprus with limited relevance to superpowers. Sec-Gens were also generally more effective in their *administrative* role up to the 1980s, when inefficiencies in UN agencies grew.

Ultimately, the role of the Sec-Gen suffered from inherent contradictions that made them ineffective overall. The structural limitations of UNSC appointment and the Principle of Sovereign Equality meant that Sec-Gens were beholden to the interests of superpowers and local actors, who were often the same threats to international peace and security that Sec-Gens needed to respond to. Thus, Sec-Gens were only as effective as members allowed them to be, and during the Cold War, members often did not allow them to be very effective at all.