Who Will Lead the United Nations?

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Although few Americans are paying attention, the race to succeed Ban Ki-moon as United Nations secretary-general is well under way. The first Security Council “straw vote” took place in July; the second on Friday. The actual election—involving one of [Barack Obama](http://topics.wsj.com/person/O/Barack-Obama/4328)’s final significant foreign-policy decisions—is approaching rapidly because the new secretary-general’s five-year term begins Jan. 1, 2017. Given the U.N.’s two-term pattern, Mr. Ban’s successor could be in office longer than our next president.

Significant American interests are at stake. Picking the right secretary-general could mean finding, at last, a manager willing to take on the U.N.’s sprawling disorganization, bloated budgets, biased and ineffective bureaucracies, and outright corruption. Or it could mean planting a massive thorn in America’s side, the greatest wish of this country’s adversaries and of the supranational globalists who want to restrain the U.S.

The U.N. Charter provides that the secretary-general “shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.” In practice, the Security Council’s five permanent members, who have veto power, effectively choose the secretary-general.

The globalists’ favorite paradigm is Mr. Ban’s predecessor, Kofi Annan. The Clinton administration pushed Mr. Annan for secretary-general after it came to swords’ points with Egypt’s Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Elected in 1991 under George H.W. Bush, Mr. Boutros-Ghali did little to hide his feelings when Bill Clinton won. His disdain for Washington’s then-ambassador to the U.N., Madeleine Albright, was well known. So out he went in 1996.

Mr. Annan was a career U.N. bureaucrat who believed in multilateralism for its own sake. In 1999 he rebuked the Clinton-NATO air attacks in Yugoslavia, lamenting that “unless the Security Council is restored to its pre-eminent position as the sole source of legitimacy on the use of force, we are on a dangerous path to anarchy.” For Americans, “sole source of legitimacy” is a fire bell in the night.

Mr. Annan’s acolytes touted the secretary-general position as equivalent to a “secular pope,” thus personifying the quasireligious multilateralist ethic. If there is one criterion the U.S. should insist on for secretary-general candidates, it would be to identify the prospect who least embodies the urge to become a secular pope.

Mr. Ban has disagreed with the U.S. on important issues, but he is in significant respects what Washington should want in a secretary-general. A citizen of an American treaty ally, he experienced communism’s depredations following North Korea’s 1950 invasion, and the South’s liberation by U.S.-led, U.N.-authorized troops. Mr. Ban’s diplomatic career has focused on relations with Washington.

There are many other attributes that ought to be on America’s checklist. Not being in the hip pocket of a U.S. international adversary. Eschewing an ideological agenda independent from member-state instructions. Willing to take on the Byzantine system of U.N. agencies, departments, programs and personnel. These don’t sound dramatic, because they’re not. The secretary-general is simply the agent of U.N.-member governments, what the charter calls a “chief administrative officer” and not a figure elevated above the members.

This year’s leading candidates come primarily from Central and Eastern Europe, reflecting the U.N.’s governance culture of rotating key jobs among regions. There is also renewed pressure to elect the first female secretary-general.

These two markers of identity politics made the early favorite Bulgaria’s Irina Bokova, who is currently director-general of the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco). In 1984, Ronald Reagan withdrew America from Unesco because of its contempt for freedom of the press, but the Bush administration rejoined in 2003, a self-inflicted wound.

Ms. Bokova, widely seen as Russian President [Vladimir Putin](http://topics.wsj.com/person/P/Vladimir-Putin/6409)’s preferred candidate, is a rarity in post-Cold War Eastern Europe: She hasn’t recoiled as far from Moscow’s grasp as possible. She also enabled the Palestinian Authority’s successful 2011 campaign to join Unesco as a member state, thus triggering the statutorily required elimination of all U.S. contributions. It was a telling episode. As Unesco’s director-general, Ms. Bokova faced a clear choice: Did she want the U.S. as a full member of the organization, or did she prefer “Palestine”?

Like President Obama and then-Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](http://topics.wsj.com/person/C/Hillary-Clinton/6344), Ms. Bokova showed indecision and cowardice during the Palestinian-provoked crisis. Despite her failures and likely subservience to Russia, her gender and geographic tickets could make her Mr. Obama’s choice.

António Guterres—from Western Europe, which has had three secretary-generals compared with Eastern Europe’s zero—led both of the straw polls, although his support dropped somewhat in the second. Formerly Portugal’s Socialist prime minister, Mr. Guterres was U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees from 2005 to 2015. That probably sounds about right to Mr. Obama.

Several Eastern European candidates, including Slovenia’s former Prime Minister Danilo Turk and Vuk Jeremic, a former foreign minister of Serbia, also finished near the top in both straw polls. In the second poll, Argentine foreign minister Susana Malcorra jumped into third place.

With important American interests on the line, we should welcome a competent manager, rather than an ideologue. But under President Obama, who knows?