

David Kennedy on the UN's new role

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*The following op-ed by Professor David Kennedy, [Recasting UN's Role](#)¹, was published in *The Boston Globe* on July 8, 2006.*

Today's most significant global challenges, whether humanitarian or military, are being addressed by diverse ad hoc coalitions. This new multilateralism will require more from the United Nations, making the selection of the next secretary general more important than at any time in the organization's history. At stake are not only UN reforms, but the shape and future of multilateralism itself.

As different coalitions address Iran's nuclear program, ongoing violence in Afghanistan or Darfur, negotiations with North Korea, and the spread of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, multilateralism has been reawakened and redefined.

Kofi Annan's successor will need the vision, experience, and flexibility to resist outdated models of diplomacy centered in New York or Geneva. It will take a courageous leader to recast the UN's role as one that supports, rather than competes, with this new brand of multilateralism.

For a century, committed internationalists have argued that global institutions require strong leadership, modeled on the charismatic French socialist Albert Thomas, the first director general of the International Labor Organization. By contrast, those who are skeptical of the UN's usefulness or distrustful of the secretary general's politics have defined the job more narrowly and sought an effective administrator to serve in the style of British civil servant Sir Eric Drummond, the first secretary general of the League of Nations.

This is a false choice. The United Nations does need strong and charismatic leadership, both to reform the institution and help address pressing political and humanitarian challenges, from regional conflicts and nuclear proliferation to poverty and preventable disease. However, to function effectively, the UN also requires the confidence of its member states. These two perspectives can be reconciled only by a strong secretary general whose view of the multilateral system and the role of the UN within it is an ecumenical one.

The multilateral order is pluralistic and shifting. Like it or not, fluid coalitions are our future. Today's most pressing policy challenges do not lend themselves to one-size-fits-all solutions and ethical nostrums. We know that global pandemics, climate change, and economic development can be addressed only by a range of different tools. The days of global conferences to articulate universal norms on such issues as labor standards, healthcare, and the environment are over. Even in the area of human rights, those who explore diverse ideas with different audiences will be more effective than a homogeneous, tightly-coordinated movement.

Today, the UN is not the pinnacle of a unified multilateral order, but one player in a complex and evolving world. Multilateralism has become a game played on many boards. The next UN leader will need to experiment and pursue complex, heterogeneous cocktails of policy at national, local, and international levels. This requires an individual with the leadership skills to gain the trust of diverse coalitions and assemble institutional partnerships among those whose interests are unlikely to be harmonized by any single vision. This was difficult enough to accomplish during the Cold War. Since then, the number of interests and participants has grown exponentially. In this new world, the first rule must be "no surprises." The secretary general must be trusted to consult first, and then to act with discretion.

A strong secretary general with this vision could ease the emergence of patchwork coalitions, helping NATO, the European Union, the African Union, various states, and nongovernmental actors find coordinated roles in a crisis like Darfur. Under such leadership, the UN could become a clearinghouse for influential ideas, instructive experiences, and diverse or even conflicting best practices.

This should be particularly important for the United States. As the UN's founder, leading funder, and host, the United States is an indispensable partner for UN action. With economic, military, and humanitarian commitments around the world, America should favor a strong secretary general who will work across multiple institutional frameworks to facilitate diverse solutions. When the United States feels outvoted and unloved at the UN, it is easy to wish for weak leadership. But weakness is a

