The History, Role and Organization of the “Cabinet” of the United Nations Secretary-General

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I. Introduction
The belief that international organizations can play a role in promoting peace, justice, human welfare and freedom is one which has animated a long line of thinkers and peace strategists. As international organizations began to develop in the second half of the 19th century, they started to develop secretariat services to help them in the performance of their functions. By the time the League of Nations was established, there were some embryonic international secretariats — although experience was still meagre in the organization and running of such an entity. The secretariats of the League of Nations and of the International Labor Organization thus charted new ground in international administration.

During the years of the League of Nations, the Secretary-General came to play an increasingly important political role although, as Sir Eric Drumond observed about his own position as Secretary-General of the League, “It had to be done behind the scenes, but I do not think it was any less effective because of this. To take sides publicly in a political dispute would certainly have lessened my political influence.”

Albert Thomas, the first Director of the International Labor Office, took the view that, to the Director 'fell of necessity the task of leadership, the task of initiative, the task of taking all those measures which might be necessary to defend the Organization'. Mr. Thomas, through his determination and his awareness of the need for exerting public as well as private leadership, lent credence to the view that a Secretary-General can be of great value in bringing political as well as administrative direction to an international organization composed of sovereign states with their multiplicity of interests and policies.

By the time the United Nations was established in 1945, there were thus two clear patterns for the drafters of the Charter to choose from. One of the striking innovations of the Charter, as compared to the Covenant of The League of Nations, was that it gave an explicit political role to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, which is provided for in Article 99 of the Charter. That article reads: “The Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.”

Besides this explicit political role, the Secretary-General is, under Articles 97 and 98 of the Charter of the United Nations, the Chief administrative officer of the

*The views expressed are those of the author in his personal capacity
Organization and acts as Secretary-General in all meeting of the General Assembly, of the Security Council, of the Economic and Social Council and of the Trusteeship Council. He is the administrative head of the Secretariat. All functions of the Secretariat are carried out in his name or on his behalf. Among the Secretary-General’s functions are to:

- Oversee the working of the major units of the Secretariat and provide guidance to them;
- Indicate priorities for the major units;
- Identify matters which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security;
- Exercise, at his discretion, the good offices of the Secretary-General;
- Conduct negotiations;
- Hold consultations with Heads of State or Government;
- Serve as the Chairman of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination.

In a perceptive study of “Creative Leadership in International Organizations”, Professor Robert Cox suggested that there are three ways in which an executive head may seek to control his top staff so as to maintain his political initiative. These are:

1) *Complete domination and centralization of power in his own hands.* This would overcome “feudal” tendencies by making top officials dependent of the executive head.

2) *Presiding over a cabinet of top officials.* This can be a means of keeping top officials informed about important matters outside their own particular sphere and it may help the executive head to smoke out differences among his staff. Collective discussion, he argues, can be used as an instrument favoring a certain conformity of policy. “But it would be an unwise executive head who did not take his major decisions on policy after consultation rather than in consultation with his top officials. The cabinet technique is, at best, an instrument of communication and of limited control over the top-level officials. It has not proven to be an effective instrument of decision-making”.

3) *The “reserved area” of policy.* In this approach the executive head reserves certain types of decisions to himself and equips himself with a personal staff so as to be able to act within this area of policy. Cox suggested that the executive head could thus reserve to himself:
   a) questions relating to the definition of the major goals and policy orientation (including programme priorities) and the development of organizational ideology; and
   b) matters of direct concern to the executive head’s base of political support and his coalition policy for the construction of alliances to support his programme. This, Cox submitted, is the most usual method for executive heads to follow, using it in some combination with the cabinet system for communications and general supervision.