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United Nations Issues: Appointing the UN Secretary-General

The 10th United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) is expected to be appointed in late 2026. The UN Security Council and UN General Assembly are considering possible candidates as the second five-year term of current UNSG António Guterres ends on December 31, 2026. The United States has traditionally maintained a significant interest in the UNSG selection process, with the hope that the perspectives and policies of the new UNSG align with U.S. foreign policy and national security priorities. As one of five permanent members of the Security Council (P-5) with veto power, the United States has considerable influence on UNSG candidate selection.

Broadly, the appointment of the UNSG is occurring against the backdrop of a recent U.S. shift away from participation in and funding of certain UN bodies. For example, in January 2026, the Trump Administration announced that the United States would withdraw from 31 UN entities. The Administration has also withheld some U.S. payments to the UN regular budget and UN peacekeeping. Administration officials stated that the United States looks forward to a UNSG that shares the vision of “returning the United Nations to its founding purpose of maintaining international peace and security.”

Role of the Secretary-General

The duties of the UNSG are both administrative and political. Article 97 of the UN Charter describes the UNSG as the “chief administrative officer” of the United Nations and head of the UN Secretariat. The UNSG’s administrative responsibilities include recruiting and hiring staff, coordinating with UN entities, preparing the UN regular budget, and reporting to the General Assembly.

The political functions of the office typically fall under Article 99 of the UN Charter, which authorizes the UNSG to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.” In addition, Article 98 states that the UNSG shall perform “such other functions as are entrusted” to him by the Council, Assembly, and other UN bodies. In practice, these guidelines have provided the UNSG with opportunities to use his influence and “good offices”—which draw on the perceived independence, moral authority, and impartiality of the position—to mediate and/or bring attention to conditions or events that might threaten global peace and security. Over the years, UNSGs have defined and adapted their role to address challenges faced during their tenure.

Appointment Process

Pursuant to Article 97 of the UN Charter, the UNSG “shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.” Since 1946, UN member states have refined the selection process through

precedent and practice, as well as through the adoption of UN General Assembly resolutions—beginning with resolution 11(I) (1946), described in more detail below. Since 2015, the Assembly has adopted other resolutions to add structure and transparency to the process. Most recently, it adopted resolution 79/327 (2025), which outlined certain procedures for appointing the next UNSG.

Candidate Nominations. As outlined in General Assembly resolution 79/327, candidates are nominated by one member state, or a group of member states, and no state may nominate more than one individual. Member states may withdraw a candidate at any time and may subsequently nominate another individual. Each nominee provides a “vision statement,” curriculum vitae, and campaign funding sources, which are posted online. As part of the selection process, the Assembly president convenes an “interactive dialogue” webcast where UN members can interact with the candidates. The current dialogue is scheduled for the week of April 20, 2026.

Status of Nominations

On November 25, 2025, the presidents of the General Assembly and Security Council issued a joint letter initiating the 2026 UNSG selection process and inviting member states to present candidates. To date, nominations have been presented for Rafael Mariano Grossi of Argentina (nominated by Argentina) and Michelle Bachelet of Chile (nominated by Brazil, Chile, and Mexico).

Security Council Role. The 15-member Security Council is the primary UN body responsible for appointing the UNSG. According to Assembly resolution 11(I), it is desirable for the Council to recommend one candidate to the Assembly for consideration. The Council’s deliberations generally occur in private meetings, with a final decision taken by a secret ballot with an affirmative vote from at least seven Council members, including all P-5 members. The Council adopts a resolution recommending a candidate, and the Council president subsequently writes a letter informing the Assembly president of its recommendation.

In years with multiple candidates, the Council has developed the practice of conducting informal straw polls to indicate member states’ initial level of support for individuals. In years when there was one candidate (for example, if a UNSG was being considered for a second term), the Council generally adopted a resolution without prior polling, usually by acclamation.

General Assembly Role. The Assembly’s primary role in UNSG appointment is adopting a resolution appointing the Security Council’s recommended candidate. To date, the

Assembly has not challenged a Council recommendation. Resolution 11(I) provides that the Assembly may adopt the Council's recommendation by secret ballot by a simple majority vote. In practice, the Assembly has held a public meeting to appoint the UNSG by acclamation.

Timing. The timeline of the UNSG appointment is not specified in the UN Charter. For several decades, much of the process was based on custom and practice, leading to what many some viewed as an unpredictable process that lacked transparency. Since 2015, the General Assembly has adopted resolutions specifying that the process should be formally initiated by the Assembly and Security Council in the last quarter of the year preceding the end of the UNSG's term. It also directed that the UNSG-designate should be sworn into office during the last quarter of the year prior to taking office, to allow preparation for the upcoming term.

Term Length. Under General Assembly resolution 11(I), the UNSG shall serve a five-year term, with the possibility of reappointment for a second term. The resolution states that the Council and Assembly are free to modify the term length of future UNSGs. The term's start and end dates (usually January 1 to December 31) are typically included in the Security Council resolution recommending appointment. With the exception of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, whose second term was vetoed by the United States, every UNSG was reappointed for a second term. The length of terms has varied depending on circumstances and events.

Candidate Considerations and Issues

Geographic Balance. The UN Charter does not specify that UNSG selection be based on geographic distribution; however, various resolutions adopted by the Assembly have expressed support for regional rotation or geographic balance when considering candidates. There does not appear to be a clear or consistent practice in this regard: UNSGs have been from Western Europe (eight terms), Africa (three terms), Asia (four terms), and Latin America (two terms) (see **Table 1**). Broadly, a citizen of any UN member may be appointed UNSG; to date, a citizen of a P-5 member has not served in the position. Some observers suggest that this is to avoid the perception of bias both in the selection process and in UN fora.

Female Candidacy. Some governments and UN observers have increasingly suggested that member states should consider appointing a woman as UNSG. Most recently, Assembly resolution 79/327 noted with regret that no woman has ever held the position and encouraged member states to "strongly consider nominating women as candidates." Previous Assembly resolutions and statements by the presidents of the General Assembly and Security Council have echoed this message.

Reform. Some UN member states continue to express concern that UNSG selection procedures—most notably in the Security Council—lack transparency and inclusivity. While acknowledging improvements to the process since 2015, they contend that additional measures are needed. Some have proposed opening Security Council meetings to the public. Others maintain the Security Council should

provide two or more candidates to the Assembly, with the final candidate elected by all countries. The P-5, with its disproportionate role in the appointment process, generally resists these and other similar proposals.

U.S. Policy

As historically one of the largest financial contributors to the United Nations, and as a member of the P-5, the United States has both a substantial interest and role in the appointment of a new UNSG. Generally, U.S. policymakers, including some Members of Congress, have preferred an UNSG who is responsive to U.S. concerns and priorities and does not overstep the responsibilities of the office or take overly political or proactive positions.

Congressional Role and Considerations. Congress's role in appointing the next UNSG is limited under current law. The UN Participation Act of 1945 (22 U.S.C. 287 et seq.) provides that the executive branch is responsible for representing the United States in UN fora. Nevertheless, over the years some in Congress have sought to influence the process by supporting or opposing candidates based on their record and/or other considerations. For example, some Members opposed the reappointment of then-UNSG Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1996 due to his perceived inability to achieve UN reform, and the United States vetoed his reappointment. In March 2016, a group of U.S. Senators reportedly wrote to President Obama urging him to support the consideration of qualified women candidates.

Trump Administration Policy. The Trump Administration has made several public remarks related to UNSG appointment. Specifically, officials stated that the next UNSG should "reject initiatives that fall outside the [UN] Charter's founding purpose, prioritize accountability and transparency, and respect state sovereignty," and "bring the UN back to basics." The Administration also noted that the selection process should be "purely merit-based" with as wide a pool of candidates as possible, including those from all regional groups. To date, the Administration has not publicly commented on a specific candidate.

Table 1. UN Secretaries-General: 1946–Present

	Country	Term
António Guterres	Portugal	Jan. 2017–present
Ban Ki-moon	S. Korea	Jan. 2007–Dec. 2016
Kofi A. Annan	Ghana	Jan. 1997–Dec. 2006
Boutros Boutros-Ghali	Egypt	Jan. 1992–Dec. 1996
Javier Pérez de Cuéllar	Peru	Jan. 1982–Dec. 1991
Kurt Waldheim	Austria	Jan. 1972–Dec. 1981
U Thant	Burma	Nov. 1961–Dec. 1971
Dag Hammarskjöld	Sweden	Apr. 1953–Sept. 1961
Trygve Lie	Norway	Feb. 1946–Nov. 1952

Source: UN Office of the Secretary-General.

Notes: Lie resigned in 1952. Hammarskjöld died in office in 1961.

Luisa Blanchfield, Specialist in International Relations

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