

India

India's foreign pol

By K Natwar Singh

On the one hand, we want permanent membership of the Security Council, and on the other, we cannot get our candidate elected. What is our UN policy, or do we not have one?

WHOSE decision was it to put up an Indian candidate for the UN Secretary-General's post? Was it the Prime Minister, the Congress president, the national security adviser, the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs? These are legitimate questions and need to be answered. The Prime Minister made two laconic statements. One that our candidate was running strong. That was before the straw polls. The second was after the withdrawal of the Indian candidate: Our man performed "very, very creditably". Then why did he not win?

Countries enter such a high-powered contest after carefully considering the pros and cons. How was such a facile decision taken? The Prime Minister knows how the UN system works. The unwritten ground rules are well known. The Permanent Five — United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom and France — never seek the secretary-generalship. After all, they finally choose the Secretary-General. The other well known unwritten rule is, large and important countries do not enter the fray.

There have been seven Secretaries-General. Each came from a small country — Norway, Sweden, Burma, Austria, Peru, Egypt and Ghana. The Secretary-General-Designate is from South Korea.

Surely the people of India and Parliament are entitled to know whether we had got the green signal from the Permanent Five, and the US in particular. We have a highly professional foreign service. Was the MEA in the loop? As far as is known, the MEA was not. Professionals were out and the parvenus had taken over. At what level were the P5 and 10 non-permanent members of the Security Council approached? Did the Prime Minister personally speak to Presidents Bush, Putin, Chirac, Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Blair? If he did, then we should now be told of their response. If he did not speak to them then how did he assume that they would support us? This is elementary.

Presuming that the individual selected was Dr Manmohan Singh's choice, then the PM owes it to the country to say something more about this major foreign policy failure. It is no use pretending that it was not a setback. Nobody is buying that. This was a self-inflicted wound. On the one hand, we want permanent membership of the Security Council, and on the other, we cannot get our candidate elected. What is our UN policy, or do we not have one?

Rumour has it that India might put up a

candidate for the post of Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. If true, then we must make sure that our superannuated man gets the job. No more foreign policy misadventures, please.

Mr Ban Ki-Moon and I became foreign ministers of South Korea and India within four weeks of each other in early 2004. During my tenure as foreign minister we met many times in Jakarta, Seoul, Laos, New

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York, Brussels, New Delhi. He has a soft corner for India. He began his diplomatic career in New Delhi in 1970. He gave me a lot of time and treated me with uncommon courtesy and consideration. To common friends he made most generous references about me. I was genuinely touched.

At 62, he takes up a hugely challenging job. He comes to it with impeccable credentials — right temperament, vast experience,

Policy misadventures

strong nerves. His personality is pianissimo, rather than fortissimo.

Those who claim that he does not have sufficient fire-power, do him injustice. We must take him at his word when he says, "I may look soft from the outside, but I have inner strength when it is really necessary." "Inner strength" is the key to his character. Velvet glove, iron fist.

He is soft-spoken. His humility is struc-

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ured. Ban Ki-Moon, if I understand him right, believes in the wise dictum, "The unspoken word is your slave, the spoken one is your master." In the age of television one has to choose one's words with utmost care.

Of his seven predecessors, the one who made the greatest impact was Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961). Forty-five years later the international landscape has changed dramatically. Who in 1961 would have said

that the USSR would disappear?

The new Secretary-General will take up his job on January 1, 2007. He has 10 weeks to ponder and reflect on the major issues facing the UN. His first duty, to my mind, should be to define his vision for the future of the UN and how to reform it, and thus make it more relevant for the opening decades of the 21st century. An impression of déjà vu has to be rejected. What will be or should be Mr Ban's priorities? Let me hazard a diplomatic laundry list. Number one, peace and how to ensure it. Next, terrorism of all hues. Disarmament, both nuclear and conventional. Globalisation, for and against. Drug control, HIV-AIDS. Climate change. Degradation of the environment. WTO. Iraq, of course. Iran, most certainly. Afghanistan, may be. UN reform. How to get the reform engine started? At the moment it has run out of steam. The UN's most important and visible instrument is the Security Council. The original five Permanent Members remain untouched. The Council reflects the world of 1945, not 2006. Reform was expected in 1995 and 2005. No worthwhile reform is possible without the concurrence of the US, Russia, China, Britain and France. Among the P-5 the US is top dog. The American disdain for the UN is not a secret. The US has shown no interest in UN reform, specially of the Security Council.

The personality of the Secretary-General is seminal. Institutions are created

and nurtured by human beings. These must be of the highest quality. The UN has an unenviable reputation for catering to the retired and the tired when it comes to filling top UN jobs. The P-5 again ensure that their men or women get the plum jobs. Only to a point can the Secretary-General resist P-5 pressure. The other 187 member states too want to have a piece of the UN administrative or secretarial cake.

Our friend from South Korea is a man of universal comprehension and that is good news. Why? Because the Islamic world feels deeply hurt. This is a more recent addition to the UN's agenda. The Secretary-General will be required to handle this sensitive matter with confidence and understanding. The Secretary-General's vision must include the Muslim world.

The detonation of a nuclear bomb by North Korea will immediately become item number one on Ban Ki-Moon's priorities. He knows North Korea better than any other man in the UN system. The P-5 must be in a quandary. What happened to their satellite technology? The UN Security Council should meet immediately and come out with a plan or policy which should be unanimously approved by the entire Council. COURTESY THE ASIAN AGE

The writer is a former minister for external affairs