

Links between the EU and the UN have flourished under Kofi Annan. With his tenure about to expire, **Richard Gowan** looks at the implications for Europe of the search for his successor

A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP?

'While Annan and the EU may have contributed to expanding the UN's role, they have not been able to make it more efficient – perhaps even the reverse'

In a far-right recess of American political debate there exists a genre of polemics against the United Nations notable for their exotic titles. This year's best is *The Global War on Your Guns: inside the UN plan to destroy the Bill of Rights*.

But it can't quite top Jed Babbin's 2004 *Inside the Asylum: why the UN and Old Europe are worse than you think*.

It's the sort of book you can safely judge by its cover. The author (once at the Pentagon under George Bush senior) repeats well-worn charges. The UN is dominated by autocracies, administered by a corrupt mafia, and manipulated by France. A pity, as Babbin fears the French have descended into "decadence unseen since Madame Guillotine".

So he must have felt none too surprised by the international response to the outbreak of fighting between Hezbollah and Israel this July. At the G8 summit, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan joined Tony Blair to call for a multinational peace force in Lebanon. Jacques Chirac concurred. In spite of initial American and Israeli scepticism, Annan visited Brussels to repeat the proposal – while France raised it in the UN Security Council in New York.

Even if it all looked more improvised

than conspiratorial, the UN chief's common front with EU leaders was striking. Yet it simultaneously felt like the start of a long goodbye.

For while almost all analysts expect Blair and Chirac to leave office in 2007, the UN secretary-general's tenure ends on December 31 2006. As the Security Council debated the Middle East, it was also preparing for the first formal discussions of his replacement.

Although there are only four declared candidates at the time of writing – and precedent suggests that the new secretary-general should be from Asia – the selection process is expected to be prolonged and unpredictable. If this succession has received vastly less coverage than those in London and Paris, it may yet have major ramifications for Europe.

In spite (or because) of Iraq, Annan has proved a useful high-profile friend of the EU's early foreign policy efforts. In turn, the EU has sunk funds and political capital into UN initiatives. But it is still to be decided whether this relationship has lasting importance.

When Annan took office in 1997, it seemed unlikely that this question would ever need asking. The UN's stature in

Europe was painfully low after the Bosnian war. Within two years, Annan had to watch as NATO took on Serbia over Kosovo without a UN mandate.

But the secretary-general had a skill for mollifying Europeans. First he implied that it had been right to fight Milosevic. Then the UN proved ready to bow out of the Balkans, passing policing and political responsibilities to the EU in Bosnia. UN officials now fret that they are happier to offload their duties in Kosovo than the EU is to take them on.

In 2004 Annan also won plaudits in Brussels for efforts to promote the reunification of Cyprus before enlargement. Yet the key to his relationship with Europe has been Africa.

This had been another source of friction in the 1990s. The UN had been humiliated by the Rwandan genocide, but also

blamed European players such as France and Belgium for their ambiguous roles there. But by the beginning of the next decade, continuing instability across Africa was pushing both the UN and the EU towards new commitments.

Annan has overseen an increase of more than 1,000 percent in the UN's deployments in Africa to over 50,000 troops. Europe provides two-fifths of these forces' funding, but less than one-twentieth of their personnel. Since the launch of the Union's European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in 2000, however, the secretary-general has pressed for EU forces to reinforce the UN.

In 2003 (with Parisian prompting), he asked the EU to deploy Operation Artemis to back up the UN's beleaguered blue helmets in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Last December, the UN made a further request for European troops

to return to the Congo this summer.

While EU officials insist that they cannot sacrifice the ESDP's autonomy – and the European Council took a full three months to give a positive response to the UN's most recent request – this collaboration has offered some much-needed operational logic and political cover. It has even piqued the attention of NATO, which has since opened a strategic dialogue with the UN.

There has been more systematic convergence on aid policy. In 1999, the EU lobbied Annan to appoint a European to head the UN Development Programme, traditionally an American post. He agreed, although he rejected the EU's choice – Denmark's Poul Nielson – for Mark Malloch Brown, a Briton preferred by the Clinton administration.

Nielson got the consolation prize of becoming Romano Prodi's development commissioner. But since 2000, the Commission and EU members have tied their aid strategies to the UN's Millennium Development Goals, persistently promoted by Annan. While progress on these pledges has faltered, especially in Africa, European governments have repeated their commitments to them, in particular at a much-publicised conference in June 2005.

This common focus on African security and prosperity has allowed both Annan and European governments to minimise their differences elsewhere, most obviously on Iraq.

Such cooperation is hardly down to Annan alone. Politically, he has relied heavily on European friends such as Tony Blair. Operationally, many ascribe the UN's linkage to the ESDP to Jean-Marie Guéhenno, his French under secretary-general for peacekeeping.

But Annan has played two key political roles. By sanctioning European military and development strategies in Africa, he has warded off accusations that they are repackaged colonialism. And his backing also makes the policies more publicly palatable in Europe.

The UN is currently more widely trusted than the EU among Europeans. Neither is



Photograph: Reuters

Challenges ahead: Kofi Annan's replacement will have to tackle proliferation

wildly popular: a late 2005 poll found a Union-wide 52 percent trust rating for the UN compared to 45 percent for the EU. But the UN's advantage was stronger among leaders in aid and peacekeeping such as the Netherlands (59 percent to 41 percent) and Scandinavia (72 percent to 38 percent).

Jed Babbin would not be surprised to learn that even in France, where majorities distrust both organisations, the UN is ahead. There are no trust ratings for "Madame Guillotine".

But if European support for "a stronger UN" is also high (up to 87 percent in Germany), there is a problem attached. While Annan and the EU may have contributed to expanding the UN's role, they have not been able to make it more efficient – perhaps even the reverse.

In 2003, Annan responded to the Iraq crisis by announcing an effort to overhaul the UN's political and operational systems. Many of those involved in the process hoped that the EU, leveraging its links with Africa under Annan's guidance, could carry this initiative. But complaints were soon circulating that the EU was "punching below its weight".

This was, in part, because it was fiercely split over Germany's desire for a permanent seat on the Security Council. Rather than negotiate en bloc, many EU members resorted to briefing against each other. Last September, world leaders narrowly compromised on a reform package, but chunks of this became bogged down in follow-on negotiations.

While the diplomats have fought over fine print, the UN has had a bad year further afield. East Timor, once cited as a showcase for the UN's state-building skills, collapsed into violence in May. And though the September reforms included recognition of the "responsibility to protect" civilians from slaughter, Annan and the international community have as yet failed to persuade Sudan's government that UN peacekeepers should deploy to Darfur.

If the UN seemed adrift, European leaders appeared unable to give it new impetus. In June, Tony Blair called for new UN reforms in a widely-reported

speech in Washington, but the only observable result was a sense of déjà vu.

While Blair has argued that the secretary-general should have more independence to shape the UN's agenda, the to-do list for Kofi Annan's successor has been filling up fast.

In the months running up to the Lebanon crisis, the Security Council had been seized of Iran's covert nuclear ambitions and North Korea's none too covert

missile tests near Japan. The confluence of these crises indicated the next secretary-general's likely priorities.

First, whatever the state of the Middle East, he (a she is very unlikely) will have to help manage the ongoing tensions between Iran and the West. Second, he will have to pull this off in a way that persuades Washington that the UN is a useful mechanism in fighting nuclear and other proliferation.

Third, his approach to nuclear issues will also have to convince Beijing that the UN can play a role in dialogue with the West on Korea – this might be eased if a strong Asian candidate is installed, but hampered by a weak one.

This doesn't mean that the UN will turn its back on Africa. It is now so deeply invested there for that to be near impossible – but the EU may have to work harder than before to keep African issues to the fore.

And whereas much of Annan's tenure centred on peacekeeping, his successor's term will likewise be defined by proliferation. This will be complicated by the fact that anti-proliferation has been Annan's Achilles Heel, from disputes with Washington over Iraqi weapons inspections to the gradual erosion of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Nuclear weapons were too controversial to get a mention in the 2005 reform package.

And that isn't just a problem for the UN: it is a major concern for Europe too. In addition to working with Annan on Africa,

the EU has thrown its weight behind the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency in managing the Iran crisis. In 2004 the EU won a commitment from Tehran to cooperate fully with the agency; this February, the European members of its board successfully proposed that Iran should be referred to the Security Council.

If these tactics have worked so far, it is not certain that the EU can maintain a common strategy with the US on Iran. If it cannot, and there is another Iraq-type

split at the UN, Annan's successor may as well check all the lights are off and settle down to write his memoirs.

Conversely, if the EU and UN can help steer a successful course on Iran, the case for handling future proliferation threats through UN structures might just gain new credibility. Ultimately, nuclear crises will inevitably be the territory of the major powers, not the UN secretary-general – specifically, both China and the US will want to continue handling the Korean case through the informal six-party talks, which do not include the EU.

But just as Annan unexpectedly helped turn the shrunken UN of the 1990s into a major military deployer, his successor could build its mechanisms to handle unconventional threats (including not only nuclear weapons but biological threats through to avian flu). There are already a clutch of UN resolutions to provide a legal basis for such initiatives.

Legal bases for action are not much use without the money and political will to back them. If European policymakers wish to offer both, they will need to overcome the differences that surfaced in the recent UN reform efforts – Germany will probably need to shelve its Security Council ambitions.

Should such compromises prove possible, the next generation of EU support for the UN may involve not only further ESDP missions but also more counter-proliferation funding. Mr Babbin had better start thinking up a new title soon.

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