



A Latina Secretary-General

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On July 12, ten of the twelve candidates running for the Secretary-General (SG) position of the United Nations took center stage before the U.N. General Assembly. In an attempt to promote transparency in the Secretary-General election process, the U.N. publicly announced the contestants for the first time in its history, instead of keeping the election confidential within the Security Council itself. Among the candidates were two prominent women from the Western Hemisphere, Christiana Figueres of Costa Rica and Susana Malcorra of Argentina. Although both have enjoyed successful careers in the U.N. over the past decade, their achievements and departments are markedly different. Figueres served as Executive Secretary of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, where she was partially responsible for adopting the groundbreaking Paris Agreement of December 2015. Malcorra served as chief-of-staff to current SG Ban Ki Moon, as well as his chief of logistics for U.N. peacekeeping missions.¹

Having a Latin American woman at the head of the most important international organization in the world would be an important turning point in the role of the international body. Not only has the U.N. never had a female SG, but the organization has only had one Latin American SG, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar of Peru (1982-1991), known for his peace negotiations between Israel and Lebanon, the United Kingdom and Argentina, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, and Iran and Iraq.² Figueres and Malcorra are considered to be very strong candidates for the position, despite general consensus within the General Assembly that the next SG should come from Eastern Europe as there has never been an SG from that region.³ Although both fell short in the preliminary straw poll on July 21, with Malcorra coming in sixth place and Figueres coming twelfth, the veto power of the permanent members of the Security Council has the potential to change everything.⁴ If either were to win, it will signify that the five permanent members of the Security Council recognize the importance of Latin America as a region in world affairs. It would also represent a win for the Campaign to Elect a Woman U.N. Secretary-General, a group founded in early 2015.⁵

Christiana Figueres

Christiana Figueres' most notable achievement in the U.N. bureaucracy is her role in facilitating the Paris Agreement, signed at the Paris Climate Conference (COP21) in December 2015. The Paris Agreement is a legally binding, multilateral policy that sets a

“global action plan” to limit climate change to a global temperature increase of 2°C by 2020.⁶ The Agreement is considered a milestone in the fight against climate change and an important achievement for Figueres, who began her work with the Convention on Climate Change after the failure of the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in 2009. Figueres was able to turn the organization around through strong leadership, an emphasis on teamwork, and an aptitude for facilitating cooperation between different sectors and countries at various stages of development.⁷ Her ability to deliver results through her dedication to the issue and willingness to work multilaterally could well push her ahead of other candidates.

It should be noted, however, that not everyone sees the Paris Agreement as a success. As climate scientist James Hansen contends, “It’s just worthless words. There is no action, just promises”⁸ Other scientists have likened it to the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, originally labeled a major success but later regarded as a failure due to lack of implementation. Scientist Kevin Anderson contends that waiting until 2020 to reduce emissions and implement changes will be too late. Still others see the Paris Agreement as unrealistic due to the magnitude of its proposed changes. As Michael Grubb of University College London claims, “Actually delivering 1.5°C is simply incompatible with democracy.”⁹ Still, even scientists admit that the Agreement was politically successful. Anderson, for instance, acknowledges that now “the bureaucrats have a better grasp of what is politically possible.”¹⁰

Christiana Figueres comes from a prominent political family in Costa Rica. Her father, José “Don Pepe” Figueres Ferrer, served as president of Costa Rica three times and is credited with having instituted democracy in the country in 1948. As a social democrat, he oversaw a number of major reforms including the nationalization of banks and many industries, and the implementation of social security.¹¹ These achievements were tainted by allegations of corruption in 1972, though he was never convicted.¹² Figueres’ brother, José María Figueres, also served as president of the country and was indicted for having received \$900,000 USD from French telecommunications company, Alcatel, in 2004. The charges were eventually dropped due to lack of evidence.

For her part, Figueres has been congratulated on her past work with the U.N. and her ability to foster cooperation among its members. In fact, *Americas Quarterly* journalist, Guy Edwards, posits that, “both the U.S. and France could decide to back her given that both President Barack Obama and President François Hollande hope to secure favorable legacies on climate change.”¹³ During the first U.N. debate, Figueres indicated that she would not be the passive SG that some expect her to be—a trait that actually made current SG Ban Ki Moon so attractive to the Security Council.

Figueres’ outspokenness was evident when *al Jazeera* asked several candidates if, as SG, they would apologize on behalf of the U.N. for the outbreak of cholera in Haiti believed

to have been brought in by UN peacekeepers and responsible for the deaths of over 9,200 people. Figueres was the only candidate to raise her hand in affirmation in what many reporters and observers described as the most dramatic moment of the evening.¹⁴ She proclaimed, “I believe that the integrity of the United Nations [...] has actually been tarnished. That was an unintended consequence of a very important goal of the United Nations—*unintended* consequence. But we have to be responsible even for unintended consequences.”¹⁵ She went on to pledge that, as SG, she would do everything in her power to eliminate cholera in Haiti and improve the country’s health and sanitation programs. Upon further questioning in regard to U.N. responsibility for financial compensation in Haiti, Figueres contended that while the U.N. should not have to pay for the consequences, it should do everything in its power to prevent similar cases in the future from developing.¹⁶ In all, her performance during the debate was among the most dynamic of the ten participants.

Susana Malcorra

Argentinian Susana Malcorra, current foreign minister in the administration of Mauricio Macri, entered the race for SG with arguably the most relevant experience of any of the candidates. In fact, some believe that this is exactly what could prevent her from becoming an effective SG. As Ban Ki Moon’s Chief-of-Staff from 2012-2015, Malcorra already has years of experience in the U.N. secretariat she is now intent on leading. Her other experience at the U.N. includes serving as senior administrator at the World Food Program and chief of logistics for U.N. peacekeeping operations. She has received repeated praise from peers and coworkers as well. In reflecting on her time as chief-of-staff, Richard Gowan, U.N. expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations, commented, “She saw her role as getting shit done. She was one of the few adults in Ban’s office, and she has a strong sense of how to use the limited power you have in the U.N. system.”¹⁷ During her time as a U.N. diplomat, Malcorra has gained a reputation as a decisive fixer and bureaucrat and has gained many influential friends including current SG Ban Ki Moon, former U.S. envoy to the U.N., Susan Rice, and Russian ambassador Vitaly Churkin.¹⁸

At the same time, critics point out that Malcorra has gained a reputation for “accommodating” powerful government envoys. They claim that she is too willing to “sacrifice the U.N.’s independence and its core principles, including a commitment to human rights, for the sake of political expediency.”¹⁹ This tendency could well turn many members of the General Assembly, as well as Security Council members China and Russia, against her. In fact, Malcorra has repeatedly accommodated the United States and other influential actors in order to further her bid for SG. This has included accusations of lavishing Rice with VIP treatment and procuring positions within the organization for other U.S. officials.²⁰ Reportedly, at one point, Rice expressed a desire

that the United States have a U.S. diplomat as the No. 2 in the U.N. mission to Afghanistan. U.S. diplomat Peter Galbraith eventually got the job despite the objections of other U.N. officials who saw it as representing a major conflict of interest. Malcorra, however, no favoritism was shown and she had followed all U.N. hiring procedures.²¹

According to Thant Myint-U, a former U.N. political officer, “There is an unfortunate perception, extremely unhelpful, of a secretariat that is in the pocket of the big powers.” As another U.N. source says about Malcorra,

“Susana’s big weakness is she looks at everything through the prism of the member states—she will always make the Russians, the Americans, or anyone else walk away with a feeling that they have a sympathetic ear. I have never seen her in all my time as an observer challenging a powerful member state. Sometimes you have to say no.”²²

In fact, the ability to resist the demands of the Security Council is no easy task. Denying member states, especially the U.S., what they want can destroy a career as evidenced by the fate of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who was blocked by the U.S. from serving a second term as SG after refusing to authorize airstrikes against Bosnian Serbs.

Other worrisome signs regarding Malcorra’s candidacy include her lack of support in Latin America. Recently, she has been accused of ignoring human rights violations committed by President Nicolás Maduro’s administration in Venezuela when she countered efforts to remove Venezuela from the Organization of American States (OAS). Malcorra’s actions were seen as a play for support from Caracas for her U.N. candidacy. In her words,

“Say for a minute that we expel Venezuela. What will that achieve? There is need to decompress the humanitarian crisis. We have spoken about human rights; we have said it loud and clear. But in the end what we need is to have both parties sitting at the table to find a solution. That you will not get by expelling Venezuela from the OAS.”²³

This statement shows an admirable prudence on her part, which could serve to enhance her bid for SG. The decision to promote dialogue rather than voting Venezuela out of the OAS also disproves critics’ allegations of being in the pocket of the Security Council. Instead, it demonstrates how Malcorra is capable of challenging powerful actors in order to maintain institutional principles.

One of the most serious issues that Malcorra will face from the Security Council has to do with her Argentinian heritage. Britain may well veto her nomination in the first round of elimination of candidates due to tensions between Argentina and the U.K. over the ongoing Falkland Islands sovereignty dispute. Russia could also veto her candidacy

(and Figueres' for that matter) due to a strong preference for an Eastern European SG.²⁴ There is speculation, however, that Russia and the U.S. will be unable to agree upon an Eastern European due to bitter diplomatic disagreements with regard to Syria and Ukraine. This opens up the possibility of electing someone from another region such as Latin America.²⁵

One major advantage that Malcorra holds in the race is her strong administrative skills, honed in the private sector when she worked for IBM and Telecom Argentina. With these skills at her disposal, she is said to have increased productivity and bureaucratic efficiency in her U.N. years. She also has experience dealing with major strategic issues including the removal of chemical weapons from Syria, curbing the Ebola outbreak, and negotiating peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

While Malcorra's performance during the U.N. debate was decidedly less impressive than that of Figueres, she still managed to make a positive impression with her thoughtful and knowledgeable responses during questioning.

Conclusion

Despite greater transparency, the SG election process is still largely secretive. In the end, the five members of the Security Council – the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China – will likely have the final say. Still, public opinion could have an impact and, if this is the case, Figueres and Malcorra, being among the most popular candidates in the running, will have a much greater chance of being elected.²⁶ That the majority of the members in the Security Council have few political issues with either Argentina or Costa Rica, further increases those chances.

At this point, the election of a female candidate appears likely. It is widely considered to be the right time for a female SG, and there is strong support in the U.S. and Britain and other members of the Security Council.²⁷ In the words of Croatian candidate Vesna Pusić, the “UN has been for seventy years dominated by the male worldview, but that is only 50 percent of life experience, and now it is time for the other 50 percent.”²⁸

Having a Latin American woman as Secretary-General of the United Nations could have far reaching effects. Not only would it offer a voice to that half of the world, but it would also provide a voice for a region where poverty, displacement and violence are prevalent. In fact, the poverty rate in Latin America is 25.3 percent, while eight of the 10 most violent countries and 40 of the 50 most violent cities are located there. Furthermore, one in four violent killings in the world takes place in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela.²⁹

Both Christiana Figueres and Susana Malcorra are well qualified for the position of Secretary-General. Just as importantly, both are armed with the skills and experience

necessary to address the world's most pressing issues, such as systemic violence and structural inequality, through a uniquely Latin American perspective.

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