WHAT SORT OF DIPLOMATIC STRATEGIST IS BAN KI-MOON? SINCE BAN TOOK office as Secretary-General of the United Nations in 2007, there has been a great deal of discussion about his personal diplomatic style. Until the Arab Spring, he was typically characterized as an archetypal (though not always effective) quiet diplomat. In January 2011, Human Rights Watch accused Ban of having an “undue faith in his professed ability to convince by private persuasion” when dealing with repressive governments in cases such as Myanmar, Sudan, and Sri Lanka.1 As I argued in a previous article for Global Governance, Ban’s belief in diplomacy meant that he took too little interest in peacekeeping during his first term leading the UN.2 Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, however, Ban appears to have lost some of his faith in diplomatic niceties. He spoke out early in favor of the protestors in Egypt, became a consistent supporter of military action in Libya, and publicly condemned the Syrian regime’s violence against civilians as early as May 2011.3 As the Syrian crisis deteriorated in 2012, Ban appointed first his predecessor, Kofi Annan, and later the stalwart UN mediator Lakhdar Brahimi as envoys to Damascus but repeatedly escalated his own criticism of President Bashar Al-Assad.

Previous leaders of the UN have experienced similar tensions between the imperatives of quiet diplomacy and the impulse to speak out over certain crises. Indeed, it is standard practice to evaluate each Secretary-General according to how he has balanced the two.4 Given Ban’s change of priorities in 2011 and 2012, it is likely that future biographers will use a similar framework to examine his record.

In judging Ban’s performance as diplomatic strategist, however, it is necessary to look beyond his statements and consider his broader impact on the UN’s diplomatic machinery. Experts on the UN often distinguish between the personal political role of a Secretary-General and his managerial functions.5 This distinction is only partially justifiable. It is equally possible to distinguish between the personal role of a national foreign minister and the ministry that he leads. But to understand the minister’s performance
overall, it is necessary to judge his or her relationship with and impact on the bureaucracy. It is often argued, for example, that Hillary Clinton’s tenure as US secretary of state has been defined not only by her own diplomatic aptitude but also by her widely noted ability to motivate the State Department. An assessment of the Secretary-General’s record must similarly take into account his ability to shape the broader diplomatic performance of the UN during his tenure.

In my earlier contribution to Global Governance, I concluded that, as of mid-2011, “Bann had not transformed the UN’s intellectual agenda, at least as far as peacekeeping is concerned.” If this was, in part, because Ban was more interested in diplomacy than in peace operations, did his leadership make an appreciable difference to the UN’s diplomatic structures, missions, and practices during his first term? It was his stated intention to have such an impact, specifically through boosting the Department of Political Affairs (DPA). In his first two years in office, he emphasized the need to “significantly strengthen” DPA to help it “become more proactive in tackling global crises, especially in the realm of preventive diplomacy.”

This article addresses whether Ban did indeed equip DPA to undertake preventive diplomacy more effectively (it does not cover other aspects of Ban’s diplomacy, such as his interventions at climate change summits). This is meant to complement my article on peacekeeping but is also relevant to analyses of Ban’s personal diplomacy, before or after the Arab Spring, as I place his individual efforts in an institutional context.

To address these issues, the article does three things. First, I review the state of DPA as Ban inherited it in 2007; the department was generally agreed to be in severe need of renewal. Second, I look closely at proposals that Ban and his under-secretary-general for political affairs, B. Lynn Pascoe, set out to strengthen DPA. Overall, their plans appear to be a pragmatic attempt to reinforce and rationalize the UN’s existing diplomatic assets—although they also put forward promising ideas for a network of UN regional offices with preventive mandates, which are still largely unfulfilled. Third, I look briefly at how DPA has evolved during Ban’s tenure so far and how the department has promoted the political missions and the three regional offices that do currently exist under its auspices.

This is only meant to be an initial reckoning of developments at the UN under the current Secretary-General. Indeed, because Ban did not become deeply involved in the practicalities of DPA reform, he is a shadowy figure in much of the narrative that follows, letting others work out what “significantly strengthening” DPA should mean in practice. A fuller account of his diplomacy would give more space to his approach to diverse issues such as the 2010 Sri Lanka crisis, the Middle East peace process, and the Responsibility to Protect. My focus here is narrower and I conclude that the UN’s machinery for preventive diplomacy has improved since 2007—
and that even if Ban’s influence over this process has mainly been indirect, he deserves some credit for it. However, the crises in Libya and Syria have not only affected Ban’s outlook but also revealed deep differences among powerful states at the UN over the tenets of preventive diplomacy. In consequence, I end on a note of uncertainty about the UN’s future diplomatic role and Ban’s ability to shape it.

The Trouble with DPA

When Ban took office in 2007, UN officials had a general sense of his commitment to diplomacy but little idea of what it would mean in practice. There was a focus on his potential as an administrator, in part because he had promised to strengthen the UN’s ethical culture (an issue on which, he implied, Kofi Annan had failed). His career in South Korea’s foreign service offered few firm clues about how he would lead the UN. In Seoul, he had a reputation for avoiding confrontation and sidestepping tricky questions. His caution was widely believed to make him an appealing Secretary-General in the eyes of the Bush administration after its clashes with Annan over Iraq.

Ban did not set out a specific vision for enhancing the UN’s diplomatic capabilities. But the need to reinforce DPA—which had just over 200 regular staff at the beginning of 2007—had become a standard discussion point at the UN before Ban took office. DPA was set up in 1992 in parallel with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), but it struggled to establish a role. Although intended to be the UN’s focal point for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, it remained marginalized for much of Annan’s tenure.

The 2005 report by the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change argued that DPA suffered from “deliberate under-resourcing” by member states. In 2006, the UN’s Office of Internal Oversight Services questioned the department’s ability to provide serious political analysis. While the General Assembly took steps to aid DPA, authorizing the creation of a specialized Mediation Support Unit, UN officials conceded that preventive diplomacy remained “largely improvised.” In Annan’s last Secretary-General’s report on prevention, published in July 2006, he cast doubt on DPA’s ability to offer strategic leadership or even adequate coordination to other elements of the UN system in conflict prevention, warning that it was “heavily driven by the exigencies of crisis response and unable to engage in depth at the country level in many cases.”

UN officials ascribed these difficulties to a lack of resources (in terms of not only staff but also funds for basic activities such as travel) and the fact that DPA was bogged down in routine diplomatic duties. In a representative if detailed cri de coeur, it was calculated that, in 2006, “six desk officers of the Europe Section prepared 204 talking points for the Office of the Secretary-General and other United Nations senior officials and 147 notes...
of meetings, attended 872 official meetings and drafted 173 analytical and background papers and 54 briefing notes for Security Council and other meetings.”17 The officers had also generated almost 1,000 other types of official documents. By the time Ban arrived in office, therefore, DPA officials had a fairly consistent argument about their position: they needed more personnel and financial resources, and they had to be liberated from the drudgery of day-to-day diplomacy.

While these complaints focused on DPA’s responsibilities at UN headquarters, the department also maintained assets further afield, including special political missions and regional offices. While the phrase “special political missions” covers a wide range of entities, including sanctions committees and some envoys, it primarily applies to civilian UN field presences dealing with conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding.18 At the start of 2007, there were eleven such field-based presences; many of these involved very few staff, but some, such as the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq, employed hundreds. (Although also a political mission, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan was overseen by DPKO.) More missions opened in the course of 2007 in Nepal, Lebanon, and Central Asia.

Some DPA staff believed that the key to the department’s revitalization lay in improving political, technical, and administrative support to these field missions—and potentially promoting them as an alternative to DPKO’s larger and more expensive peacekeeping operations. But there were considerable obstacles to this project. While some political missions, such as that in Iraq, had a significant profile, many others were weakly staffed and of peripheral interest to the Security Council. DPA officials complained that political missions should be funded from a special budget, as were peacekeeping operations, rather than from the UN regular budget. Given these obstacles, a significant faction in the department opposed concentrating on field missions. Instead, they argued, the priority should be to build up DPA’s analytical capacities in New York.

For those favoring an operational future for DPA, however, two small political missions were of particular interest. These were the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA, based in Dakar, Senegal), which had been set up in 2000, and the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA, in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan), inaugurated in December 2007. These two offices had been created to engage in conflict prevention at the regional level, although their mandates were convoluted. UNOWA had been charged with “harmonizing” UN activities across West Africa as well as engaging in direct preventive diplomacy.19 A 2007 review found that it did some good diplomatic work but had “sub-optimal interactions” with New York and was hampered by the “lack of an overall workplan and an unclear sense among some staff of what is expected of them and their Office.”20 UNRCCA was instructed to focus on thematic issues such as
counterterrorism and water sharing among Central Asian states.\textsuperscript{21} The center had taken a great deal of time to launch, having run into opposition from the United States and Russia, and its staff needed time to build trust in the region. Nonetheless, these regional offices seemed to provide a promising alternative to addressing conflicts remotely from New York. Officials from UN development and humanitarian agencies, although concerned about the politicization of their own work, were open to receiving additional help in addressing emerging conflicts. Specific proposals for an office in Central Africa had been debated as early as 2002.\textsuperscript{22}

So when Ban Ki-moon stated his intention to strengthen DPA, he was echoing arguments that had already been made in the UN Secretariat—and UN officials had identified potential options for moving forward. In his July 2006 report, Kofi Annan had also set out ideas for boosting “systemic prevention” efforts across the UN. By this he meant “measures to address global risk of conflict that transcend particular states,” such as limiting the flow of small arms and light weapons.\textsuperscript{23} While Annan argued that systemic prevention should embrace a wide range of UN funds and agencies, he argued that DPA should receive extra resources to coordinate their activities. Replacing Annan, Ban had to choose whether to pursue this expansive vision (which was still rather vague) or to promote an alternative diplomatic philosophy and strategy.

Although Ban recognized the importance of transnational drivers of conflict—in particular, climate change—he never embraced “systemic prevention” as a phrase or guiding concept.\textsuperscript{24} An online search of his speeches from 2007 to 2011 does not locate a single use of the term (nor can it be found in the DPA reform proposals from his first term).\textsuperscript{25} But Ban largely left the job of articulating an alternative vision for DPA to Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs B. Lynn Pascoe, a former US ambassador to Indonesia, who started work at DPA in March 2007.

\textbf{Defining a Reform Agenda}

Ban’s choice of Pascoe had stirred up some initial controversy. Although the former head of DPA under Annan was a Nigerian diplomat, Ibrahim Gambari, the post had mainly been headed by British officials. In 2006, the British had indicated that they wanted “their” job back, as the de facto price for supporting Ban. The UK apparently felt that the new Secretary-General would acquiesce, as it put forward a very strong candidate: Sir John Holmes, a former ambassador to Paris and personal adviser to Prime Ministers John Major and Tony Blair. Yet Ban ultimately decided that he would choose an American for DPA, and Holmes took responsibility for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs instead. This ultimately proved serendipitous, as Holmes made good use of his diplomatic skills to explain
humanitarian issues to the Security Council and negotiate over crises with leaders on the ground.

But as of 2007, UN officials were unsure as to how US leadership might affect DPA. Some saw it as a boost to the department’s credibility: Pascoe, they guessed, had a mandate from Washington to strengthen the department. Pessimists asked whether he had a mandate to ensure that the UN followed US dictates. This speculation overlooked the fact that Pascoe was Ban’s personal choice. The two diplomats had worked together on Asian affairs when Ban was serving in South Korea’s embassy in Washington and enjoyed a very high level of mutual trust.

Pascoe himself admitted that he faced a steep learning curve at DPA. “Having spent very little of my career at the United Nations—only a short stint at the UN mission in 1996,” he noted in an interview for DPA’s newsletter, “I didn’t know exactly what the [under-secretary-general] for Political Affairs does.” Insofar as he had a vision of his department’s work, it appeared to be conditioned by his career in the US foreign service. He argued that his experience gained from forty years of bilateral diplomacy was “not that different” from the work of the UN. Although this might sound like common sense, it was liable to unnerve UN officials who distinguished their role as international civil servants from the national interest–driven work of diplomats. Some of Pascoe’s staff noted that he did not use Annan-era phrases such as systemic prevention. Instead, he dwelt on the narrower concept of preventive diplomacy.

There was, in short, a general impression that both Ban and Pascoe shared a fairly traditional view of diplomacy—and that their common vision of a stronger DPA might well look like a smaller version of the US State Department or South Korean foreign ministry. Nonetheless, any effort to overhaul the department would also be influenced by its existing commitments (such as talking points and the management of political missions) and the ideas already circulating among UN officials (such as those about the potential of regional offices). In the summer of 2007, while Ban’s team focused on their initial priority of reforming DPKO, Pascoe’s staff worked on a blueprint for DPA reform. There was a good deal of consultation with the department’s staff, ensuring that preexisting complaints and proposals filtered into the process. There was definitely no diktat from either Ban or Pascoe about the precise future shape of DPA. Indeed, there was arguably too little top-down direction. (This author briefly served as an unpaid consultant on the process, but with a focus on background research.)

When Ban finally presented a consolidated reform proposal to the General Assembly in November 2007, it captured both long-standing concerns within DPA and an attempt to reshape the department along the lines of a traditional foreign service. The stated goal was “to make the Department of Political Affairs more field-oriented and less bound to the desk.” While
the proposal—a lengthy and often unwieldy document that requested the creation of 96 new posts within DPA—covered a number of priorities (such as strengthening the well-respected Electoral Affairs Division), it centered on three main points for changing the department’s focus and culture.

The first was to expand the DPA’s core group of regional divisions in New York to enable better monitoring and analysis and faster response to crises. The second, harking back to Annan’s emphasis on transnational threats, was to build up the department’s policy section to address “cross-cutting global issues” including “organized crime, corruption, democracy and terrorism.” The proposal suggested that DPA’s policy and mediation staff should be folded into one division, creating a consolidated central hub for the department’s research and thematic expertise. The third main element, and one that would prove especially sensitive for national diplomats, was to “rationalize the Department’s presence in the field through the establishment of a small network of regional offices that would assist Member States and regional organizations with their preventive diplomacy efforts.” These offices, modeled on UNOWA, would provide “a forward and more agile platform to support preventive diplomacy.”

The proposal explained that one immediate priority for 2008 would be to establish a regional office for Central Africa and the Great Lakes. It also raised the possibility of four further offices covering the Horn of Africa, the Balkans, Southeast Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. DPA staff already had some specific locations in mind: the Southeast Asia office would be based in Singapore and that for the Americas in Panama City, already a hub for UN funds and agencies. Overall, the proposal emphasized that DPA would make savings by coordinating the placement of these offices with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and other elements of the UN. In contrast to its emphasis on regional presences, the proposal had relatively little to say about “single-country” political missions such as that in Iraq—a strategic decision had been taken to leave proposals on this score for a later date, for fear of testing member states’ patience—although it did propose that a new unit be set up in DPA to help backstop these operations.

In many ways, this reform proposal simply represented a consolidation and extension of certain ideas that had been present in DPA before Ban took office. As his emphasis on “strengthening” the department indicated, the goal was to expand and improve existing models for preventive diplomacy, rather than anything more radical. The proposal also emphasized that these changes would not undermine existing UN diplomatic tools—the regional offices would support rather than replace the Secretary-General’s special envoys and work closely with UN funds and agencies. But these recommendations also promised to shift the UN toward a traditional diplomatic structure, built around a reinforced central foreign ministry (DPA) and a
nascent network of de facto embassies (the regional offices). This comparison has obvious limitations: the numbers of staff involved, especially in the proposed regional offices, would be a small fraction of the number of diplomats employed by medium-sized foreign ministries. (As of late 2011, UNOWA had 24 international staff and UNRCCA just 8.) Moreover, the regional approach to conflict prevention diverged from national diplomacy’s emphasis on state-to-state relations. Officials involved in drafting the proposal argue that it was actually less beholden to classical diplomacy than earlier suggestions for reforms floated by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Nonetheless, Ban and Pascoe had tabled a proposal that, as UN officials had predicted, implicitly reflected their common experiences in their respective foreign services.

**A Slightly Stronger DPA?**

Unfortunately, Ban’s 2007 report itself broke a fairly basic rule of multilateral diplomacy by containing a number of passages that offended the member states it aimed to impress. Latin American diplomats were especially furious to read that their home countries had “seen episodes of conflict, political volatility, institutional weakness and citizens’ growing disappointment with the dividends of democracy and the effects of globalization.” While this might well be true, it was not likely to win Latin American support. More generally, parts of the reform proposal looked thin. Some passages seemed to suggest that a few extra junior or midlevel staff at DPA would make a decisive difference in the UN’s abilities in some regions—a doubtful proposition.

The report was far from universally unpopular. African governments were persuaded that reforms to DPA would improve their interactions with the Secretariat, in part reflecting frictions with DPKO over the expanding number of peace operations on the continent. Nonetheless, the General Assembly postponed a decision on the proposal until December 2008, when it approved fifty new posts for DPA—half the original request.

There was a widespread impression in the UN Secretariat that DPA had regained some of the ambition it had lost in the Annan years. Pascoe, having initially seemed distant from his staff, developed a positive reputation as a dedicated civil servant who was willing to travel to trouble spots to engage in direct diplomacy. He also proved a good judge of senior staff, typically selecting strong director-level officials. A number of well-regarded younger personnel also took up posts in DPA, dealing with policy and mediation issues. Many of these had experience in political missions and peace operations, reinforcing the impression that DPA was indeed “more field-oriented and less bound to the desk.” The expansion of the department’s policy capacity—merged, as the 2007 report proposed, with the Mediation Support Unit—has also allowed it to grapple with some of
the transnational “global cross-cutting issues” identified in the 2007 reform proposal, including the UN’s responses to coups and organized crime.\(^{39}\)

Observers of DPA also agree that there has been an improvement in the quality of staff in the department’s regional divisions dealing with specific countries and crises, although this has not been completely consistent.\(^{40}\) A study of the UN’s early warning capabilities in early 2011 concluded that there were still notable gaps in DPA’s analysis of the Middle East and West Africa.\(^{41}\) There have also been questions about how the various parts of the enlarged department fit together. As Elodie Convergne notes, officials in the regional divisions have placed strict limits on the work of the department’s mediation experts, insisting that they should not engage autonomously in the field.\(^{42}\) The demand for talking points and meetings has proved persistent (and, ironically, much of this demand comes from the Secretary-General’s executive office).

More positively, DPA has proved increasingly open to working with external actors, including nongovernmental organizations involved in mediation and conflict prevention. There has also been deepened cooperation between DPA and UNDP, instantiated by their joint support to a growing number of peace and development advisers in countries at risk of conflict.\(^{43}\) UN officials give Ban, Pascoe, and the UNDP administrator, Helen Clark, credit for maintaining good personal relationships that have influenced officials’ readiness to cooperate.\(^{44}\)

DPA’s gradual institutional evolution has also been punctuated and at times overshadowed by its difficulties in responding to individual crises. Like the Secretary-General and the UN as a whole, DPA has been criticized for its halfhearted response to the bloody end of Sri Lanka’s civil war in 2009. It also stumbled in its initial response to the Arab Spring, struggling to find the expert staff and financial resources to respond to events in the Middle East. As the crisis in Libya deteriorated, Ban Ki-moon chose a former Jordanian foreign minister with limited knowledge of both the UN and Libya—Abdel-Elah Al-Khatib—as special envoy to Tripoli.\(^{45}\) He had little impact on the situation. Even so, UN diplomacy regained credibility as the Arab crises progressed: UN officials played a significant role in averting war in Yemen and, as we will note below, DPA provided the platform for developing a political mission for postconflict Libya. It is too early to say what long-term impact the crisis in Syria will have on UN diplomacy. In the meantime, the UN’s ability to make some headway in Yemen and postconflict Libya brings us to the implementation of Ban’s ambitions for a more “field-oriented” DPA.

**Regional Offices and Political Missions: Proving Their Worth?**

It has not proved easy to make DPA “less bound to the desk.” Much of the department’s energy is devoted to dealing with “non-mission settings”
(those where there is no peacekeeping operation or political mission). The 2007 proposal’s concept of “agile” regional offices assisting DPA’s preventive work did not gain significant traction with the UN’s member states. After Ban tabled his reform plans, the Latin American and Southeast Asian states indicated that they wanted no such office in their regions. The case for a new UN office in the Balkans was put to one side because of the debate about the UN’s position in Kosovo after its unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008. The idea of a UN Office in Central Africa, prioritized in the 2007 proposal, took longer to realize than had been hoped.

Although negotiations on the topic took place in the region in 2008, Ban only sent a letter to the Security Council announcing his intention to set up the UN Office in Central Africa (UNOCA) in December 2009. The proposal encountered skepticism, especially from the United Kingdom. UN officials and diplomats from other countries noted that the UK’s opposition appeared to harden after the British general election in May 2010, which ushered in a coalition with a fierce focus on cutting costs. London relented in August 2010, but the new mission (based in Libreville, Gabon) was given a two-year mandate for conflict prevention and liaison with the local subregional organization (the Economic Community of Central African States) and a limited number of staff. The new office encountered a degree of mistrust from UN development staff in the region, who feared that it would interfere in their work, and it has been noted that the mission faces extra scrutiny as a model for further regional offices.

The degree of skepticism toward UNOCA is ironic. It is arguable that the two preexisting regional offices—UNOWA and UNRCCA—proved their worth in this period. Although UNOWA has had to deal with frequent coups and crises across West Africa, its main test came in Guinea. When the country tumbled into a constitutional crisis and experienced severe violence in 2009, the head of UNOWA, Saïd Djinnit, gave great support to mediation efforts led by the Economic Community of West African States. Regional experts have emphasized that Djinnit’s main contribution was to coordinate a complex set of international actors throughout the crisis: his efforts would not have succeeded if France, Britain, and West African states had not engaged. But the fact that he was able to move rapidly around the region from his base in Dakar emphasized the advantages of a regional office.

In Central Asia, UNRCCA came to the fore during the crises in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, which culminated in attacks on ethnic Uzbeks in the southwestern area of the country. Stemming this violence was another diplomatic coordination challenge, as Russia, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) all had potential leverage. Miroslav Jenča, the head of UNRCCA, played a prominent role among his counterparts from the OSCE and EU in managing the crisis, and DPA worked with UNDP on a plan to assist the affected areas.
Although the final settlement in Kyrgyzstan was flawed (an OSCE police assistance mission was blocked and the crisis was never fully investigated), a worse bout of bloodshed was avoided. DPA points to the Guinean and Kyrgyz cases as highlights of UN diplomacy, and Ban Ki-moon is reported to refer to them as the major successes of his first term.\(^{51}\)

The two cases also suggest that Ban and Pascoe’s original emphasis on “a small network of regional offices” was based on sensible strategic logic. As this author has previously argued, the events of Ban’s first term “suggest that these regional platforms for conflict prevention both offer the best value and are the most politically acceptable mechanisms for preparing for many future conflicts.”\(^{52}\) It is probable that DPA will continue to push to open more such offices—although there are still major political obstacles, and diplomats grumble that DPA cannot base its arguments on the successes in Guinea and Kyrgyzstan indefinitely.

In the meantime, DPA has also focused on its broader range of political missions. Although largely excluded from the 2007 reform proposal, these missions have come to play an increasingly important role in defining the department’s profile. In Ban’s first years in office, two political missions in particular won plaudits for the UN. One was the UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN), which oversaw the end of the country’s civil war and transition from monarchy to democratic rule.\(^{53}\) The other was the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), which had almost been written off after its headquarters was bombed in 2003, leaving the head of mission, Sergio Viera de Mello, and 21 others dead. But as the Bush administration struggled in Iraq, the mission offered the UN an increased political role in 2007. UNAMI played a significant functional role in efforts to ease tensions between the Kurdish and Arab communities.\(^{54}\) The Obama administration made a point of embracing UNAMI as a partner from 2009 onward.

Not all political missions could boast equally successful track records. The UN’s political mission in Guinea-Bissau (one of the longest-running in Africa) looked on helplessly in 2009 as the country’s president was assassinated, the prime minister was arrested, and troops forced their way into the UN compound.\(^{55}\) There was a further coup attempt in 2011 and the military seized power in April 2012. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (overseen, as we have noted, by DPKO) was publicly embarrassed when its top leadership fell out over how to deal with clearly flawed national elections in 2010.\(^{56}\) The mission has been the target of a series of attacks.

Notwithstanding these grim setbacks, DPA has continued to develop its doctrine for managing political missions and promoting their utility (as the 2007 report’s proposal for a DPA unit devoted to backstopping political missions was not approved, this work has fallen to policy planning staff). Some political missions—such as that in the Central African Republic—have been converted into integrated peacebuilding offices, giving them a
coordinating role over other elements of the UN system.57 This has given DPA additional leverage in internal UN debates, although in at least one case (Burundi) a government has insisted on a “normal development partnership” with UN funds and agencies rather than an integrated mission.58

In July 2010, Under-Secretary-General Pascoe told an audience in Washington that political missions were “relatively lean, inexpensive, civilian operations that can achieve impressive results” (he added that UNOWA and UNRCCA were “particularly valuable”).59 DPA’s advocacy for political missions arguably paid off most significantly in 2011, when the UN was tasked with planning for the postconflict reconstruction of Libya. Ban Ki-moon gave this challenge to Ian Martin, the former head of UNMIN, in April 2011.60 Martin set up shop in DPA, although there was also some planning in DPKO. He had nearly six months to plan a mission while the war ground on. Unlike the mediation effort under Al-Khatib, Martin’s planning gained traction and, after Tripoli fell to opponents of Muammar Gaddafi, the UN was authorized to deploy the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) that September.61 Despite great political uncertainty and bouts of violence (including an attack on Martin), the mission facilitated successful elections in 2012. While many commentators had predicted that a blue-helmeted peacekeeping force would be necessary in Libya, it gave DPA a chance to show off the utility of political missions.

DPA officials have, however, continued to be frustrated by the budgetary and administrative systems for mounting political missions. The fact that they are paid from the UN’s regular budget, which is set on a biennial basis, has complicated efforts to react promptly to threats and political development. By contrast, peacekeeping operations’ budgets are set annually, and are supplemented by a support account to cover DPKO’s backstopping of missions. DPKO also has access to a peacekeeping reserve fund and strategic deployment stocks on which it can draw immediately when launching new missions.62 DPA has no such start-up facilities.

Despite the publicity opportunities offered by the creation of UNSMIL, Ban Ki-moon failed to persuade the General Assembly to make a more general investment in political missions in 2011. Since the completion of the initial DPA reform discussions in 2008, the department had gradually promoted debate about improving support to political missions. In October 2011, Ban tabled a report that argued that “given the evolution of the role of these missions over the past decade, the funding arrangements for such missions and their associated requirements for backstopping [i.e., support from UN headquarters] are not adequate in three important respects.”63 These were the missions’ reliance on the regular budget; the lack of financing mechanisms for mission start-ups; and complications arising when political missions needed to call for assistance from DPKO and the Department of Field Support (DFS) in New York, creating more budgetary confusion. The report, compiled under the leadership of DFS, coyly promised “a
number of options that could address these challenges to one degree or another.” It suggested that “the General Assembly may wish to consider the alternative of establishing a special and separate account for the funding of special political missions.” It also proposed that DPA should have access to the peacekeeping reserve fund and strategic stocks.

This remained a modest proposal in many ways. Even if enacted in full, it would have left DPA with less well-developed funding mechanisms than those available for peacekeeping. DFS and DPA officials decided to avoid more radical proposals that would, at a minimum, have put large-scale political missions including those in Afghanistan and Iraq on a completely equal footing with standard peace operations (although, in private, even DPKO officials argue that this distinction is mistaken). Despite the qualifications, the report did promise to raise the status of DPA-led political missions and consolidate their claim to be a distinct and important part of the UN’s contribution to international security. This arguably represented the logical end point of Ban and Pascoe’s efforts to shake up UN diplomacy. The relative successes of political missions in cases from Nepal to Guinea to Libya justified the arguments of those in DPA who had focused on field operations before 2007. Ban’s original proposal for strengthening DPA, emphasizing regional offices, had given extra impetus to these arguments despite saying little about political missions. The 2011 proposal filled some gaps that had been left in 2007, rounding out a vision for DPA’s future role. But it was a vision that some important governments rejected.

The main objections to the proposal came from the permanent five members of the Security Council. They pay a higher percentage of the peacekeeping budget than the regular budget—and they foresaw that they would also pay a larger part of the proposed budget for political missions. Discussions of Ban’s report went nowhere. In the words of a UN press release, member states “agreed that the current funding and backstopping arrangements for the missions were inadequate, but they differed greatly over how to rectify that situation and over the Secretary-General’s proposals for doing so.” It was decided to postpone a decision until the next General Assembly session. At the time of writing, it is unclear whether Ban’s proposal will make any further progress, although broader debates over major powers’ financial commitments to the UN will shape the final outcome.

Conclusions

Just as Ban Ki-moon’s initial proposals to strengthen DPA were delayed early in his tenure, therefore, his first term ended with uncertainty over his plans for political missions. Nonetheless, the Secretary-General could claim that his emphasis on preventive diplomacy had made a difference to DPA and had garnered support among member states. Whatever DPA’s current
faults, it is no longer the byword for incompetence that it seemed to have become when Ban took office. And while many of the ideas put forward for unbinding DPA from its desk remain unfulfilled, the department has begun to develop a robust narrative about its role in the field. Meanwhile, the Security Council and General Assembly have repeatedly stated their support for preventive diplomacy and mediation, which gives DPA political capital.

To what extent can these developments be attributed to Ban’s influence? He was the originator of very few—indeed probably none—of the specific proposals for strengthening DPA that he has advocated. It is in fact notable that Ban’s own quiet diplomatic style is quite distant from the more rough-and-ready field operations that play an important part in DPA’s narrative about its renewal. In his 2010 speech in Washington, Pascoe cheerfully described how the head of the political mission in Sierra Leone “literally scampered to the roof of a building in Freetown to defuse a situation that could have triggered a relapse into conflict.”66 DPA officials with field experience do not necessarily believe that Ban understands this sort of diplomacy.

But the Secretary-General’s commitment to diplomacy, channeled by Under-Secretary-General Pascoe and his staff, opened up the political space for DPA to expand its operational horizons. Without Ban’s own interest in diplomacy, resolving DPA’s woes would not have been a priority. This is why he deserves a degree of credit for DPA’s gradual process of renewal, even if his role was indirect. Whether he would have had any impact without Pascoe’s support and the preexisting ideas of DPA officials about how to proceed is unclear (Pascoe stood down in mid-2012, handing over to another senior US official, Jeffrey Feltman). Ban’s role in this story is arguably less about leadership than simply about letting others get on with their work.

How far DPA’s renewal process can go is, meanwhile, open to question. It will continue to face significant budgetary limitations such as those it encountered in 2007 and 2011 (and, more narrowly, over the creation of UNOCA). In both political and operational terms, the department still faces the reality that much of its work is overshadowed by DPKO-led operations. But these are not the greatest threats to the UN’s role in preventive diplomacy. Instead, it is growing increasingly clear that divisions among major powers could increasingly distort and undermine the UN’s efforts at preventive diplomacy in the years ahead. In September 2011, the Security Council met at the ministerial level to discuss preventive diplomacy. Although Ban had presented a report on the UN’s role in the area, the participants bickered about the Libyan war, Palestine, and the worsening crisis in Syria.67 Soon after that, the Security Council entered an extended period of much more vicious debates over Syria, resulting in a series of vetoes and diplomatic breakdowns, while Ban became increasingly critical of the regime in Damascus, as I noted earlier.
It would be a mistake to argue that the Syrian crisis has marked the end of UN diplomacy. Russia was willing to cooperate with the West and UN officials over Yemen while disagreeing over Libya and Syria. China and the United States have collaborated closely in trying to keep the peace between Sudan and South Sudan, both on the ground and in the Security Council. Yet it is possible to imagine clashes such as those over Syria growing increasingly common in a period of international power shifts. The gradual strengthening of DPA has, arguably, left the department equipped to manage crises that it could not have handled effectively in 2006. But as Ban looks forward to the end of his second term in 2016, he should ask himself how to prepare the UN for potentially much more serious crises ahead.

Notes

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3. See, for example, Ban Ki-moon, address to the Sofia Platform, 12 May 2011, http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_ban_ki_moons_address_to_the_sofia_platform.

4. This is a recurrent theme in the essays in Simon Chesterman, ed., Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Note especially Kofi Annan’s foreword to the volume, pp. xi–xiii.

5. See Shashi Tharoor, “‘The Most Impossible Job’ Description” in Simon Chesterman, ed., Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 43.


7. For a useful guide to how each Secretary-General prior to Ban related to the organization, see Thant Myint-U and Amy Scott, The UN Secretariat: A Brief History (1945–2006) (New York: International Peace Academy, 2007).


12. Ibid., p. 100.


25. This is based on a search of Ban’s speeches at www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches.

26. “‘The UN Gets Dealt All of the Toughest Issues’: An Interview with B. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs,” Politically Speaking (Summer 2007): 3. Politically Speaking is the DPA newsletter.

27. Ibid., p. 4.

28. Revised Estimates, p. 3.

29. Ibid., p. 6.

30. Ibid., pp. 6–7.

31. Ibid., p. 7.

32. Ibid., p. 77.

33. Ibid., pp. 78–79.

34. Sherman, Review of Political Missions 2011, pp. 41 and 121. Three of UNOWA’s international staff were military personnel.

35. E-mail exchange with UN official, 12 August 2012, on file with the author.

36. Revised Estimates, p. 53.

37. See, for example, the paragraphs on the Balkans on pages 60–61 of Revised Estimates.

38. The General Assembly had only recently approved Ban’s peacekeeping reforms and acknowledged that it may have been a mistake to raise DPA expansion
so soon afterward. See, for example, Gowan, “Floating Down the River of History,” pp. 405–406.


40. This statement is based on discussions with a number of officials and external experts in July and August 2012, but is inherently a subjective assessment.


42. This observation is based on a draft article by Elodie Convergne, “The Mediation Support Unit and the Production of Expert Knowledge at the UN.” The author is grateful for the chance to see the text in advance.

43. For more details on this cooperation, see www.un.org/wcm/content/site/undpa/conflict_prevention.

44. Email exchange with former UN official, 16 August 2012, on file with the author.

45. Al-Khatib admitted during the conflict that “I cannot claim that I was an expert on Libya, but I knew Libyan politics to some extent.” He gained a reputation for diligence in pursuing efforts to mediate, although he was also said to be distracted by domestic Jordanian politics. See “‘The Solution Must Be Political’: Interview with the UN Special Envoy for Libya,” Politically Speaking (Summer–Fall 2011): 4.

46. Letter dated December 2009 addressed from the Secretary-General to the president of the Security Council, UN Doc. S/2009/697 (31 August 2010). The discrepancy in the dates of the letter’s dispatch and release reflects the length of the debate over the proposals for UNOCA.


56. Sherman, Review of Political Missions 2011, p. 79.


64. Ibid., pp. 2 and 9.

