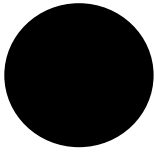


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## Bosom Buddies? Ban and Obama's Curious Relations

*Stephen Schlesinger*

Last summer a remarkable secret memo surfaced that rocked the traditionally calm corridors of the United Nations secretariat, while at the same time highlighting the depths of the problems faced by the UN secretary-general. Spineless, ineffectual, lacking in charisma and above all “conspicuous in [his] absence at critical moments,” the memo from the distinguished deputy chief of mission of Norway only highlighted publicly what many had known for some time: Ban Ki-moon is in deep trouble. At the same time that Obama appears to have his own problems with Congress and America's worsening economic problems, the UN chief is faced with having to find his own way out of a wilderness.

It is now almost axiomatic to say that the election of Barack Obama inspired hopes for a new American relationship with the United Nations. Not only did Obama campaign for the White House on a platform of renewed American multilateralism, but in his first year in office, he pressed for dramatic changes in U.S. policy at the United Nations and sought a deepening American involvement in the world's only universal security organization. But, after the initial engagement period, the close U.S.-UN partnership, which many observers had expected and hoped for

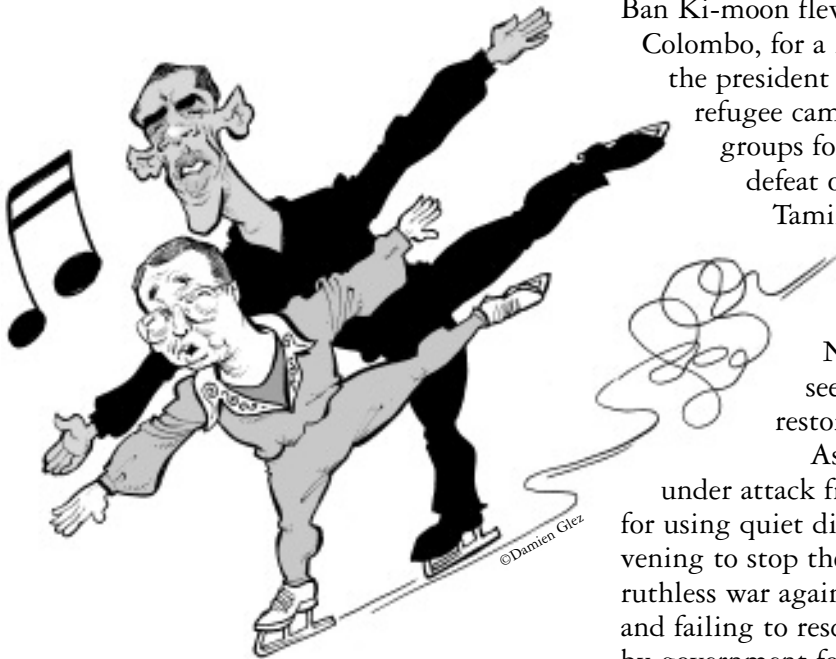
after the contentious relationship of the George W. Bush presidency, has not developed.

In fact, though Washington has arranged its priorities more along the lines of the UN's own agendas, there is now an unacknowledged but discordant note in the Obama administration's dealings with the United Nations. In his recent speeches, Obama rarely mentions the organization. While he has met the secretary-general in a few private get-togethers, the relationship is cordial but not personal. Furthermore, in the White House's pursuit of its overseas policies, especially on the critical issues of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as Iran and North Korea (except for sanctions), and on other matters like global warming and terrorism, the administration has, for the most part, sidelined the United Nations.

Admittedly, President Obama has been preoccupied by a series of domestic issues—above all, the economic crisis and health care reform, not to mention his sagging popularity. But beyond those priorities, American disenchantment with the United Nations seems to stem from a more general feeling that the body is simply not acting as forcefully as it should be in the global arena. Obama clearly desires a UN leadership he can work with, along the lines of President

Clinton's close relationship with the United Nations during the Kofi Annan years.

But, according to some Obama Administration sources, the body has become a very different place under its new leader, Ban Ki-moon. The organization appears to have grown weaker. Like all former UN chief executives, Ban possesses only moral power, not economic, military, or political authority. Still, moral power alone, in the proper hands, can be remarkably persuasive. But Ban's tenure thus far, three years into a five-year term, has been viewed as both lackluster and ineffectual. This may be unfair—and in many ways it is an overdrawn assessment—but it is the prevailing view, especially among leaders in Europe, the United States and Latin America, though less so among Ban's fellow Asians.



### *The Quiet Path*

Ban, who was foreign minister of South Korea from 2004 to 2006, was never regarded as a dynamic chief executive when he was selected in 2007 as the United Nation's eighth secretary-general. He was seen as a studious, polite, hard-working man who

rose, improbably, from an impoverished background to his nation's highest foreign policy post. But he was not known for creating waves or undertaking radical ventures—which is, among other reasons, why he was an attractive candidate to his principal sponsors, the United States and China, both seeking a low-key alternative to his predecessor, Annan.

Since taking office, in his quiet way Ban has now spent more than one-third of his time on the road, and has achieved a certain level of recognition over the past two or so years for organizing a number of unobtrusive UN efforts. But it is a muted and modest record. The crises he has confronted have given a picture of how he operates.

One of the clearest examples may be last year's Sri Lanka crisis. In May 2009, Ban Ki-moon flew to the nation's capital, Colombo, for a 24-hour visit to urge the president to open up that nation's refugee camps to international aid groups following the government's defeat of its long-time foe, the Tamil Tigers. That is standard procedure for the secretary-general—part of his duties as the United Nation's chief representative seeking to uphold peace and restore global comity.

As Ban earlier had been under attack from human-rights groups for using quiet diplomacy rather than intervening to stop the Sri Lankan government's ruthless war against the minority Tamils and failing to rescue Tamil refugees trapped by government forces, in the eyes of UN member-states, this was a welcome attempt to ease horrific conditions in Sri Lanka. Yet Ban, for all of his long experience as a diplomat, failed to budge the government and furthermore, won little respect for his efforts. Instead he earned the further wrath of critics for his lack of success in

freeing the Tamils. While it's not clear that any other secretary-general would have been more successful in this endeavor, Ban shouldered the blame. Certainly he can legitimately be reproached for not using his moral authority more forcefully in this case.

The new secretary-general did manage in his first year in office to get African Union peacekeepers into Sudan's killing zones in Darfur through intensive, hard-fought, behind-the-scenes diplomacy. This political process, though, has since stalled, and his efforts to push for more peacekeepers and helicopters have so far proven futile. Whatever success one might point to by the international community in Darfur has come about more as a result of the indictment of Sudan's president by the International Criminal Court than of any efforts by the secretary-general.

In Kosovo, he was able to lower the temperature that had brought the issue of that province's independence to a near boil. Behind the scenes, he persuaded the European Union and the United States to allow continued UN oversight while gradually permitting a move toward self-governance, enveloping the process in enough legal ambiguity to calm the fears of Serbia and its close ally Russia, which opposed Kosovo's breakaway. But how long this status-quo will remain now that Kosovo has won its independence is anybody's guess.

In Myanmar, despite bitter resistance from the military regime, Ban used his bully pulpit to pressure authorities to admit humanitarian aid after Cyclone Nargis devastated the country in 2008. His public and private entreaties, including dozens of phone calls and meetings, undoubtedly saved some lives—though the exact numbers are still subject to dispute. But, though

he has continued to call for the release of the democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, on his visit, the rulers refused to allow him to meet with her. And his venture into Myanmar has since been overtaken by



American policy-makers, who have sent their own emissaries to meet with the nation's generals.

In Haiti, which still suffers from under-development, political turmoil, and the ongoing effects of its unfortunate geography—a magnet for destructive hurricanes and other convulsions—Ban appointed former President Bill Clinton as his special representative. Clinton has since actively worked with the Haitian government to help rebuild the country. Ban himself made two visits to Haiti over a 24-month period and sponsored a donor's conference in April 2009 that attempted to raise \$300 million in aid and investment. However the recent devastating earthquake that struck Haiti, killing tens of thousands, including many UN aid workers, has drastically set back almost all of Ban's efforts. And Washington

has supplanted Ban's leadership in directing the earthquake relief operations.

Ban did take an active role in the Gaza crisis—his most significant foray to date in the Middle East. In the past, he has defended the Palestinian right to a state, but he also has condemned Hamas's rocket attacks on southern Israel. During the fighting in Gaza, he publicly demanded a halt to the warfare and requested that Israel open the border to allow relief aid. He also visited the UN compound in the center of Gaza to express concern over its destruction and demanded that Israel pay for \$11 million in damage to UN buildings. (Eventually Israel agreed to reimburse the UN \$10.5 million.) But since the publication of the UN's Goldstone report criticizing Israel's conduct in the conflict, he has been swamped by bitter recriminations and protests from Israeli supporters, while the Palestinians and Hamas are still squabbling over how best to respond. Ban has since urged both parties to undertake their own investigations into human rights violations by their forces.

On global warming, Ban has taken a leadership position. First, he tackled the issue at the 2007 Bali Conference, and it soon became one of his more passionate crusades. He visited Antarctica, Brazil, Norway, and the Arctic Circle to draw attention to the devastating impact of atmospheric changes. In December 2009, he pressured member-states to produce a new agreement on climate change at the much-ballyhooed UN Conference in Copenhagen. This is now considered by most environmentalists as an abject failure—tarnishing the cause with which Ban is most publicly associated. Only the aggressive intervention of President Obama managed to salvage some minimal agreements from the meeting at the last minute, though the Chinese leadership managed to upstage even the American president and torpedo many of the conference's most vital initiatives.

He has also tried to make poverty a central concern of his tenure. At the 2009 UN General Assembly session, he handed out a report entitled "Voices of the Vulnerable" describing the miserable conditions of 1.3 billion people living below the poverty line, a figure that surged by 100 million in 2009 alone. He asked for increased help from the states of the industrialized north—again, with limited success. Ban now plans on convening a special summit this fall on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), first established in 2000. Under the MDGs, all member-states have pledged to cut world poverty in half by the year 2015. Unfortunately, so far, most states have offered only rhetorical commitments to this policy, not substantive ones. There's little likelihood that this urgent goal will be met within the agreed-upon timeframe.

### *A Cult of Personality*

There is, in short, something unproductive about Ban's efforts, despite his best intentions. The problem for Ban is his diffident manner, which stands in stark contrast to that of his predecessor, Kofi Annan, a larger than life secretary-general who dominated the scene with flair, eloquence, and star power. Ban, by contrast, is neither charismatic nor an inspirational speaker. His English is poor. Above all, he does not convey much moral authority. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, he actually conceded: "I am known as the invisible man."

His strengths undoubtedly have lain in his persistence in pushing projects like global warming and poverty reduction but, even then he has not yet displayed any special knowledge on how to move the UN bureaucracy with the same dexterity exhibited by Annan, a career UN employee. Nor has he figured effectively how to use to his advantage or in pushing his causes what should be the extraordinary power of his position.

Ban is often criticized for not doing enough, not listening enough, or deferring too frequently to the Big Five countries on the Security Council. One of the complaints is that communicating with him can be difficult. He invariably nods his head in polite agreement when somebody talks to him, but does not always give clear guidance on what he wants. Others insist he is not a good manager and doesn't push hard enough for internal reforms. Ban, in his turn, has, on occasion, unleashed his frustrations, chastising member states for not giving him sufficient resources.

He also has a weak staff compared to that of his predecessor. Kofi Annan recruited a number of high-energy and outspoken aides, most notably Shashi Tharoor, who handled public information and later finished second in the race to succeed Annan as secretary-general; Edward Mortimer, a former correspondent for *The Financial Times*, who was a close advisor and a brilliant speechwriter; Annan's spokesman, Fred Eckhard, a seasoned veteran of press relations; and under-secretaries like the head of the Department of Political Affairs, Kieran Prendergast, head of the United Nations Development Program and later Annan's chief of staff, Mark Malloch Brown, and his troubleshooter, Sergio Vieira de Mello, who died tragically in an attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad. All these individuals were well-known in their own right and left notable marks during their time at the United Nations.

By comparison, there is scant information about Ban's staff. He is surrounded by a closed inner circle of South Koreans and an outer cadre of virtually invisible advisors who don't always have regular access to him. The opaqueness of his immediate aides-de-camp, the question of whose in-

structions are paramount and whose are not, sometimes sends confusing signals to the UN bureaucracy. This can be disheartening to the morale of UN employees. And Ban has a temper. He has, on occasion, berated his own aides for mishandling issues.

Yet one could argue that, after the activism of the Kofi Annan years, Ban is consolidating all of Annan's advances and fine-tuning them. For example, he is focusing

“There is something unproductive about Ban Ki-moon's efforts, despite his best intentions.”

on two of Annan's central innovations, the Peacebuilding Commission and the Democracy Fund. These two bodies were created to help failed states rebuild their societies and establish democratic governments. The Peacebuilding Commission, however, is still struggling to find a fully defined role, though the Democracy Fund is faring better as a grant-making institution to support a myriad of civic bodies in fledgling states and societies in transition.

Despite the limitations of the office, throughout his tenure Ban has displayed humanitarian instincts for the dispossessed and ill, for human rights and climate change—ironic, since his candidacy was originally championed both by the authoritarian Chinese government and the right-wing, UN-bashing American envoy to the organization, John Bolton. And, in his own way, he remains an engaging, polite man, even one hip to contemporary cultural icons. Yet, in the end, the issue boils down to execution. Indeed, he may best be measured by the policy grounds he has gained rather than by his personal reticence or his shortcomings of style. Unfortunately such gains on policy have been meager, short-lived or non-existent.

### *Casting a Shadow*

President Obama's presence at the United Nations has already far overshadowed Ban's reign. Obama promised throughout his presidential campaign to re-engage the organization. Indeed he has done so, and in an electrifying fashion. First, he appointed an American ambassador to the body in his opening days, which his predecessor, George W. Bush, waited months to do. His choice was Rhodes scholar and UN advocate Susan Rice, who has forcefully advanced Obama's policies at the organization. Obama also held an early get-together with Ban Ki-moon at the White House in his seventh week of his presidency, symbolically and publicly reconnecting with the organization.

Then came his tangible changes at the United Nations. He quickly sought to rectify discredited Bush-era policies on peacekeeping, human rights and women rights, climate change, nuclear disarmament, and arms trade. Many of these changes also happened to coincide with Ban's own agenda.

For example, Obama agreed within months of taking office to pay U.S. annual dues and peacekeeping arrears, estimated to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and to switch payment schedules to mesh with the United Nation's own budgetary calendar rather than with Washington's legislative timetable. He also chose to increase American military and civilian support to UN peacekeeping missions. In addition, to highlight his backing of these endeavors, on his first visit to the United Nations in the fall of 2009, he expressed his personal gratitude to leaders of a dozen nations who constitute the top contributors of troops to UN peacekeeping operations.

Obama also directed the United States to join the newly minted but still flawed Human Rights Council, an abrupt reversal of the prior Bush administration stance. He renewed funding support for family planning programs and reproductive health services at the UN's Population Fund, repudiating another of Bush's ideological totems. He backed the UN General Assembly statement

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**World Policy Journal:** How has the accession of Barack Obama changed things for the UN?

**Ban Ki-moon:** He was the first U.S. president to participate in a summit on climate change. Of course former President Bush came to the summit but he did not take part in the official meeting, just the informal summit dinner and meeting. But President Obama was the one who declared his full support for the United Nations strongly and publicly. I am really counting on working closely with him. He helped a great deal in the Haitian crisis. I talked with him twice immediately after the earthquake [in Haiti]. And I often talk with him on the phone. I have often met him in multilateral meetings in the White House. I am very grateful for his leadership and commitment. And, of course, he paid the dues.

**WPJ:** You are now the first secretary-general in decades who does not have to worry about making ends meet. How difficult was that?

**Ban:** You may not know how often I went to Washington to engage with important congressmen and women, senators, presidents, secretaries of state. So many times. I have had House Foreign Relations Committee breakfast meetings, met the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and I even met with the Senate Sub-Committee on Energy and Climate Change. After that meeting, they passed the bill on Climate Change.

opposing violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation. He openly sided with the International Criminal Court and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, and endorsed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Lastly, he dispatched Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the end of September 2009 to lead a UN meeting to press for the implementation of a previous UN resolution condemning sexual violence against women.

Obama also has publicly endorsed such UN-inspired treaties as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. In addition, he pushed for a pact to end the production of fissile nuclear materials and pledged a vigorous U.S. participation in the 2010 UN five-year review conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—a review session which the Bush State Department had ignored in 2005. In his fall visit to the United Nations, Obama chaired a special UN Security Council meeting on non-proliferation and disarmament—something no American president had done before. Finally, tossing aside another passionate Bush article of faith, he agreed to participate in talks at the United Nations leading to a treaty to regulate the world’s \$55 billion arms trade by 2012.

In a formal address to the General Assembly in September 2009, Obama made

“Ban talks a good game, but what can he really accomplish?”

these key points: “Cooperative effort of the whole world—those words ring even more true today.... No one nation can or should try to dominate other nations. No world order that elevates one nation or group over another will succeed. No balance of power among nations will hold.” A month later, Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize. The Nobel committee spokesman, Thorbjorn

**WPJ:** It’s difficult to envisage the UN functioning without U.S. cooperation, but can you achieve that without other states worrying about U.S. dominance of the UN?

**Ban:** Partnership between the UN and U.S. is vital. Without such support it is very difficult. However, my role as secretary-general requires me to have an equally strong relationship with other powers, and I think I have been able to get support and trust from all important members. Please remember that the whole Security Council, all the member states, appointed me. Of course the support of the U.S. is vital for the UN, but at the same time, I need the support of other member states.

**WPJ:** The Middle East has been an issue that has driven a wedge between the U.S. and the UN. Is that still the case today?

**Ban:** I am working closely with the Americans. Senator George Mitchell [U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace] and I have met and talked several times. I have been trying to help the U.S. effort work, and I think it may have a chance now.

**WPJ:** The U.S. is still struggling with Pyongyang. As former foreign minister of South Korea, could you assist?

**Ban:** I think we need to have stronger and better relations with North Korea. That is why I dispatched Lynn Pasco, my under secretary-general for political affairs, to Pyongyang to open a high-level dialogue. They touched upon all aspects of UN/DPRK relations. The last visit from any of my predecessors to Pyongyang was in 1993—Boutros Ghali. Before him, 1979. This is not desirable. If I am invited, I am prepared to go, whenever I feel that there is a role I can play.

Jagland, said that one of the main reasons the committee gave Obama the award was his emphasis on the primacy of the United Nations.

### *The Flip Side*

However, in other ways, Obama has not embraced Ban's agenda. Whether for domestic political reasons or because of substantive policy disagreements, Obama has brushed aside a number of Ban's priorities. He ducked out of the Durban conference on racism, citing its anti-Semitic overtones; he has failed to push for Security Council enlargement; he has still refused to submit the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to the Senate; he has not yet joined the International Criminal Court; he has so far taken a hands-off attitude toward the Darfur crisis; and he has recently postponed consideration of the Goldstone report on Gaza, which Israel has condemned. He has not openly slighted Ban so much as passed him by.

This is not to say, though, that the United States has not developed a competent operational relationship with the United Nations. There is a professional association between the U.S. Mission and the UN Secretariat, which works adequately—though sometimes Ban's camp complains it does not know with whom it should be communicating in the Obama administration. But the two leaders still don't connect on a chummy intimate level, especially in contrast to the Clinton-Annan alliance of the 1990s.

Further, among some Obama aides, there remains a profound uneasiness as to whether Ban can really fulfill his gauzy vision of change, given his checkered track-record and his retiring personality. He talks a good game, but what can he really accomplish? And while Obama has certainly placed his own stamp on the United Nations, what if he were to wish to offload other responsibilities on Ban? Would

Washington rest its national interests on so slender a reed? That seems unlikely. Plus there is the mark of Cain on Ban for having been chosen for his post by the notorious John Bolton.

All these factors have combined to cause enough concern among America's foreign policy officialdom that they have privately contemplated opposing Ban's expected bid for a second term. This could prove to be a politically costly decision, however. The administration would be derailing one of the heroes of South Korean history and damaging relations with a close Asian ally. More important is the question of whether Washington really needs or wants a strong chieftain in the spirit of Kofi Annan or the UN's greatest leader, Dag Hammarskjöld. It is true that charismatic overseers can help rally the United Nations behind America's policies far more reliably than weak ones. But the downside is that these same individuals can sometimes act as more independent operatives who challenge U.S. interests and stymie American aims.

In any case, from Ban's point of view, staying on good terms with America—still the most powerful country on the planet, the UN's largest donor, and home to the world's most popular leader—is a given, not just for his re-election prospects, but to assure that the United Nations continues to play a central role in matters of war and peace. In this sense, his weakness may also be his strength. Still, Ban must tread carefully in his efforts to reach out to Washington. He cannot afford to alienate many of the Third World nations and especially the G-77 group, many of whose members already regard the United States as too overweening a power within the organization.

For all the strains and stresses of UN-U.S. ties, there remains enough of a conjunction of views between Ban and Obama that one could anticipate some progress on global warming, the Millennium Develop-



ment Goals, disarmament, in dealings with Iran, North Korea, and Myanmar, and alleviating the strife of conflict and fundamentalism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Indeed, even Obama's predecessor in office, George W. Bush, who at least initially distrusted the United Nations, by his second term, turned back to it for help, realizing that a UN endorsement gave his policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, and Iran at least a veneer of legitimacy that he could never obtain by going it alone.

But, beyond a continuing civil exchange on issues, there is not likely to be any real, substantive partnership for Obama and Ban. At best, they will continue a pragmatic, businesslike interchange—enough to keep the United States active at the United Nations, but short of marking a new era of American engagement with the organization. This may be the best outcome for both parties, given the stylistic and occasionally substantive differences between Obama and Ban. ●