

THE NEW FACE OF THE UNITED NATIONS: EXPECTATIONS FOR BAN KI-MOON

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The Fallout

There have certainly been more enthusiastic receptions. “Let’s give him the benefit of the doubt” was the first reaction of a Western diplomat upon learning that Ban Ki-Moon, South Korea’s Foreign Minister, had actually won the race for the post of United Nations (UN) Secretary-General. “Let’s wait and see,” he continued, “maybe it is not going to be as bad as we fear now.” Quite understandably, the diplomat declined to be identified by name. However, his assessment of the next head of the world organization and successor of Kofi Annan was, and for some people still is, a common one.

On October 2nd Ban Ki-Moon was the only candidate for Secretary-General to escape a veto by one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council; he also received 14 out of 15 possible total votes in that body. With that (at this point still informal) vote, the most important committee of the United Nations ended discussions about other possible suitable candidates to come. However, there was general disbelief at UN headquarters in New York that the reticent diplomat from South Korea should really succeed the charismatic Annan, who must finally withdraw from his post at the end of December after ten years in office.

The disbelief was not rooted in fear that Ban would not be technically qualified for the prestigious job or the difficult tasks it carries. This assumption would have been wrong, and it would have been unfair – Ban’s *vitae* proves him to be an experienced career diplomat who has served in several key countries and even at the United Nations itself. During the Republic of Korea’s Presidency of the 56th General Assembly (GA) in 2001, Ban assumed the position of Chef de Cabinet of the President of the GA.

Rather, this disbelief, which bordered on disappointment for some UN diplomats, was due to the feeling that Ban Ki-Moon was the classical so-called “compromise candidate.” He was the candidate that the big powers in the Security Council could agree on, leaving other members of the UN less than thrilled with the decision.

Their assumption is simple: As with all important decisions made by that committee, the veto powers have the ability to turn down or obstruct any movement that does not fit their ideal

conditions and interests. But a candidate who is low-key enough to please the United States, Russia, Great Britain, France, and China all at the same time cannot possibly have an agenda or political ambitions of his own. Again, this certainly appeals to the five veto powers – it allows them to rule undisturbed. This dynamic might be easier to understand if one recalls the events of 2002, when Kofi Annan was strongly opposed to the upcoming war in Iraq, but the Bush administration struggled to persuade the wider Security Council of its policies anyway.

So it is really up to the five veto powers to decide who will lead the UN and who won't. Even if technically the General Assembly must vote him in, it does so only after the Security Council has made its recommendation. And in the history of the UN, the GA has never turned down the Security Council's proposal – as was also the case with Ban. The Assembly appointed him as the next Secretary-General on the 13th of October.

This election system has long been criticized as undemocratic, obscure, and biased. This year, some NGOs acknowledged that at least most of the candidates had been known early and that their campaigns, as well as the early straw polls in the Security Council, were transparent. In fact, when the first straw polls began in the summer months, there was a strong indication that Ban stood in a good position – he won every single one.

In retrospect, it should not have come as such a surprise when Ban Ki-Moon was officially nominated by the Security Council. "It is Asia's turn" was a sentiment that most UN diplomats and staff had agreed on in the month before Ban's election. Also, China's ambassador to the UN had made it very clear that his government would accept a new Secretary-General only from Asia. In an interview this summer, Ambassador Wang made it clear that Beijing would veto any other candidate. And indeed, according to an unwritten rule, the Secretary-General should come from each of the five world regions in turn. Asia has not had a Secretary-General for more than three and a half decades, since 1971, when Burma's Maha Thray Sithu U Thant resigned after his second term of office.

It was clear that the US and China, even if they had no particular reason to be in favor of Ban, certainly had nothing against him. For Beijing it was the candidate from Asia they had requested, and since Ban had been an important player in the six-party talks with North Korea, they also knew him as someone they could rely on and work with. Washington, on the other hand, has expressed repeatedly its discontent with anyone who might want to stress the political autonomy of the world organization. The US, and particularly the current administration, has pushed for a Secretary-General who would act more or less like a CEO, advocating institutional reform of the UN but refraining from additional ambitions. So the clues were on the table from the start, even if nobody was able to read them.

Before the Decision

In September, just a few days before the heads of state of the world were expected to come to New York to convene the 61st General Assembly, a certain slowness had settled over the UN Secretariat tower on First Avenue. The crisis in Lebanon, which had kept most of the UN staff on their feet for the month of August, traditionally a big holiday month, had settled down at least a little. Early September was also a time for UN staff to take a deep breath and relax a bit

before the opening weeks of the General Assembly, which would turn the UN headquarters into a buzzing beehive. And there was also the conviction that the one big question of the year – “Who is going to succeed Kofi Annan?” – would not be solved until late November or even December. This timetable was partly due to wishful thinking that another candidate would surface late in the game – a wild card with the charisma to thrill and charm the organization and their member states alike; up to that point, there had been no one in the race with those qualities.

“They are all very respectable, but in fact most of them are rather boring,” a high-ranking UN employee put it bluntly. Then the diplomat started to analyze each one. The Latvian candidate, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, would have no chance, even if many NGOs had strongly campaigned for a female Secretary-General. Freiberga was not Asian, so she was ruled out, no matter how good her qualifications might have been. In addition, her very strong criticism of Moscow’s policies would have been an obstacle to getting past the Russian vote in the Security Council.

The other four candidates, all male and all Asian, seemed to be more or less equally qualified. Ban Ki-Moon from South Korea, Jayantha Dhanapala from Sri Lanka, Surakiart Sathirathai from Thailand, and Shashi Tharoor from India had campaigned openly for the job during the course of 2006. By September, nobody at the UN or at the various embassies even considered Ban Ki-Moon to be a frontrunner.

When asked why none of the current candidates would make it, several diplomats were certain that all of the current Asian candidates were either too weak, like Surakiart Sathirathai from Thailand, or did not have a relevant background, like Sri Lanka’s Jayantha Dhanapala. From 1998 to 2003, Dhanapala had served as UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs and had recently touted disarmament as his number one priority. This would not make him a favorable candidate for the United States, for instance. Even if some observers saw the Indian candidate, Shashi Tharoor, as a safe bet, this assumption was fuelled primarily by his own immense and successful PR machinery as UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications. His good looks and his great power of self-promotion may have played a part as well. Tharoor, who published his latest book around that time, was certainly a candidate for the media, but maybe not so much for the United Nations. One UN employee offered a sobering analysis: “If Shashi would get into the office of the Secretary-General, his first action would be to put up mirrors around all walls. So he could see the one thing he values most all the time – himself.”

So with the exception of Tharoor, who despite opposition managed to come in second place during the straw polls, all candidates were blamed for being colourless – especially Ban Ki-Moon. In fact, another Western diplomat, when asked whether Ban might be a good Secretary-General, produced an ironic grin and said: “All the occasions I met him so far, he did not persuade me at all. He’s tense, he’s formal, and when he talks about his ideas for the future of the United Nations, he has no exciting plans at all. In fact, he even only manages to read them from a paper.”

So only a few weeks before Ban Ki-Moon was officially elected, diplomats, UN staff, and the NGO community were convinced that another candidate would pop up, and a lot of guesswork ensued.

Several names were being mentioned, and when the Jordanian Ambassador to the UN, Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid Al-Hussein, was announced as his country's official candidate on September 5th, many felt his nomination would give new momentum to the search, even if they doubted his chances for the post. And of course the off-the-record rumor mill began around several other candidates whose impending nominations could prove to be "very successful." Among those mentioned most frequently was Singapore's Ambassador to the United Nations, Chan Heng Chee. A woman, Asian, and very friendly to the US – all strengths her supporters highlighted. Some believed that the Pakistani Prime Minister, Shaukat Aziz, would follow Kofi Annan. The idea spread from some European UN embassies that since the US pursued a nuclear deal with India but denied New Delhi's neighbor and archrival Pakistan the same deal, Washington would attempt to appease Islamabad – one of the most important allies in the war against terror – by giving the prestigious job to Aziz. The Pakistanis themselves made a lot of jokes about how they would be more than happy to get rid of their prime minister. In the end, the only last-minute candidate to be nominated was the former Afghan finance minister, Ashraf Ghani, who stood little chance.

However, even if the particular line of argument concerning Shaukat Aziz seemed a bit over-determined or exaggerated, it underscored again the basic principle of how the Secretary-General is elected: through a decision process essentially governed by the five veto powers of the Security Council, in a way that does not shake their political goals.

New Expectations

Oddly enough, after Ban was appointed, even some diplomats at the US mission to the UN sounded a bit apologetic about their previous lack of enthusiasm for his profile. One of the employees, who also refused to be quoted by name, even suggested that "you never know what happens to a person once he is elected. ... Ban Ki-Moon has an extremely good reputation and you never know what he will make out of this office." This is something that former colleagues of Ban agree with. Most of them strongly warn against underestimating his leadership qualities and maintain that his ability to assert himself should not be gauged by his restrained appearance.

At the United Nations, one of the diplomats who had formerly found all the candidates too boring had a change of opinion after it was clear that Ban would assume the post. "Maybe it is not so bad for us, after all," the high-ranking diplomat said. "At the United Nations we don't need a particularly colourful or self-willed boss right now. It would completely destroy the already-devastated relationship with the US and would bring the whole organization into a very difficult position." Therefore a classical candidate of consensus like Ban Ki-Moon may be, paradoxically, more capable of regrouping and rebuilding confidence in the UN and its work than a leader who would have stepped into the arena with his own complete and coherent agenda. And in New York another more technical and administrative advantage to Ban's appointment was being felt: Since he was appointed so early – almost three months before he will officially start his first term as Secretary-General on January 1st – there is ample time to organize a smooth transition. Ban is already choosing his personnel for important political postings, and at the same time the different sections are preparing themselves for new leadership. That this is not something to be taken for granted is evidenced by what happened ten years ago, when Kofi Annan was finally elected in December.

Annan himself is a good example of things turning out differently than expected, one US diplomat pointed out. Another UN employee who has worked for the organization for more than two decades stressed this point as well: “Who would think now, after Iraq and all that, that Kofi Annan was once the candidate the US brought into office?” he said. He then recalled Dag Hammarskjold, a Swede and Secretary-General from 1953 to 1961, who died in a plane crash. “He has been a consensus candidate if you ask for one,” the diplomat said. “He was considered to be a bureaucrat and nothing more. And what did he do? He became the most esteemed Secretary-General we’ve had so far.”

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