



TurtleLeaks: How Obama learned to stop worrying and love the Ban

Colum Lynch ■ Friday, 29 April 2011



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's unbridled pro-Americanism has helped win over an Obama administration whose top officials once viewed him as weak and uninspiring, thus clearing the way for a likely second five-year term as leader of the United Nations, according to diplomats and previously unpublished U.S. diplomatic cables from WikiLeaks.

The U.S. communications show how Ban has secured the support of the full spectrum of Washington officialdom, from the most conservative Republican critics of the U.N., including John R. Bolton, who famously sneered that the U.N. could lose 10 top floors without missing a thing, to the Democrats' most vocal champion of multilateral diplomacy, Susan E. Rice, by delivering consistently on American priorities.

The confidential cables, obtained by Turtle Bay in partnership with the Washington Post, detail Ban's private exchanges with American diplomats from his 2006 election campaign through late 2009, when he began quietly building support for a second term. They show that if there has been any unifying thread of U.S. attitudes toward the secretary-general, it has been Washington's appreciation for his pro-Americanism.

When Ban first approached the U.S. Embassy in Seoul in 2006 to gauge support for his bid to become secretary general, U.S. officials had clear reservations. While acknowledging Ban was a "consummate diplomat," embassy officials expressed their concern that the South Korean foreign minister had neither held a job outside the Korean Foreign Ministry nor managed a substantial re-structuring of a large institution, according to a July 2006 cable.

But "on one credential we have no doubt," according to that assessment by the U.S. embassy in Seoul, Korea: Ban was unswervingly pro-American and could be counted on to offer a sympathetic ear when the U.S. came looking for something. "When we need something from the South Koreans -- ranging from sending Korean troops to Iraq to resolving bases issue for USFK [U.S. Forces Korea] -- we turn to Ban," according to the cable, classified by then U.S. ambassador to South Korea Alexander Vershbow. "He has always been sympathetic and helpful. We have no doubt Ban's relations with the USG would be the same if he were the UNSYG."

Like any secretary-general, Ban has to balance a broad international coalition of political interests, and he has sought to accommodate the demands of other powerful U.N. players, including China and Russia. And he has not always seen eye to eye with the United States -- including in 2007, when he pressed the Bush administration to withhold a plan to impose sanctions on Sudan while he sought to negotiate the entrance of U.N. peacekeepers into the country.

But he has shown a special affection for the United States, proving himself to be among the most pro-American secretary-generals in the U.N.'s history.

In his first official meeting with one of Bush's U.N. envoys, Zalmay Khalilzad, Ban said that while U.S.-U.N. relations had gone through "a difficult period" in recent years, he believed that "without U.S. support for the U.N., nothing happens," according to a May 2007 cable. Ban went on to offer Khalilzad his services in trying to persuade skeptical countries to back Kosovo's independence drive, an initiative that was also backed by Britain and France. Ban assured that "he was ready 'to assist the effort in any way possible.'"

Ban recognized that his effectiveness could be tempered if he was seen as too close to the Americans. In October 2007, he sought out Chinese support for a visit by his special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, to Burma, a trip the U.S. also favored. But he encouraged Khalilzad at a lunch to "keep a lower profile on pressing for the November 1 date while this plays out. Otherwise, he will be seen as doing the U.S.'s bidding he said," according to the cable.

Obama's national security team was initially cool to Ban. During then Senator Barack Obama's presidential campaign, a top foreign-policy advisor, Samantha Power, spoke disparagingly of Ban, characterizing his handling of the Darfur crisis as "extremely disappointing," in a Frontline interview. Ban 'looks to be adopting the persona of many of his predecessors in that job, which is to be more of a secretary than a general. Darfur needs a general. Not a military general, it needs a diplomatic general, a political general, a moral general. It doesn't need a secretary."

"Is that all there is?" she told the New Statesman, a British magazine, before Obama was elected. "Can we afford to do without a global figure, a global leader?" U.S. officials have insisted that Power's comments do not reflect the views of the current administration, in which Power serves as a White House advisor on multilateral issues.

Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, is said to have initially found Ban uninspiring, but she has been careful not to criticize him publicly. Before her current posting, Rice served in the Clinton administration, which had engaged in a bruising, and politically costly, campaign to block former U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali from serving out a second term. She did not want a repeat, and did not want to do anything to weaken the U.N.

chief at a time the U.S. was seeking to reengage with the United Nations, according to U.N.-based diplomats.

On June 29, 2009, India's U.N. ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri, in a private meeting with Rice, voiced concern about articles in the United States and Britain that sharply criticized Ban's tenure. "Rice said the criticism had not come from the U.S. government; it was not helpful for the function of the U.N. We don't need a lame-duck secretary general, said ambassador Rice; there is too much to get done," according to a July 2009 cable that was previously published by WikiLeaks.

Ban eventually secured Rice's backing as he proved supportive on issues the Obama administration cared about. In May 2009, Ban agreed under prodding from Rice to reject a call (by a U.N. board of inquiry he had commissioned) to carry out a far-ranging investigation into alleged excesses by Israel and Hamas during the 2008-2009 Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip. On Iran, Ban has been equally accommodating, publicly criticizing President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and privately sending tough messages to the Iranian regime.

According to one cable, he even urged the Americans to go it alone in addressing Iran's nuclear threat if efforts by the permanent five members of the Security Council, plus Germany, continued to stall. "The SYG said it is good to continue with the P5-1 structure for now, but if its effectiveness wanes, the U.S. should be prepared to take the reins," according to the confidential June 2009 cable.

Despite the Obama team's initial misgivings about Ban, they have since come around, recognizing a diplomat generally deferential to American demands who sincerely believes in the virtues of U.S. leadership. U.N.-based diplomats say that Obama himself indicated during a White House meeting in March that he would support Ban's bid for a second five-year term at the U.N. when his term expires later this year.

"First of all, he hasn't declared his candidacy nor have we declared our view," Rice told reporters earlier this month. "But I will say that the United States has worked very constructively and effectively with the secretary-general on a range of issues and we have certainly welcomed and supported his strong leadership on Libya, Cote d'Ivoire, and other issues of late -- and we have a good working relationship with him."

Ban is as much a product of the American century as any American national figure. During the Korean War, Ban and his family were displaced by the North Korean invasion of the south, and forced into a life of hunger and destitution, surviving on U.S. food donations. Among his most cherished memories is a student visit to Washington, memorialized in a class photo with John F. Kennedy. As a diplomat, he served three tours in the United States; as foreign minister, Ban vigorously pressed his government to support the United States, including by participating in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 alongside its historic military ally. When U.S. forces killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, it was Ban who sent a personal note to the State Department applauding the act.

"Ban understands completely American people, values and government. More important, he is naturally sympathetic to all things American," according to one July 2006 cable. "This is quite typical of well educated Koreans of his age. Their formative experience was the Korean War, and they remain convinced that the U.S. is a benign power, with shared ideals and goals for the region and the world."

Ban also recognized the importance of the United States in his own professional advancement. As he campaigned for U.N. chief in 2006, Ban informed U.S. diplomats that "all interlocutors assessed that the most important voices were from the United States and China."

But he feared that China would not make an explicit endorsement, instead taking the position that any one of four East Asian candidates "were qualified and acceptable," according to the July 2006 cable. "Ultimately, Ban opined, the race would hinge on the position of the United States and China. In a July 18 conversation, he for the first time voiced concern that, if the U.S. stayed non-committal much longer, his candidacy could falter," according to the cable.

This time around, Ban appears to have locked in support, not only from the United States, but from China, Russia, and other key Security Council members. A phrase the Americans used back in July 2006 to describe Ban's rise rings true today. "A consummate diplomat, Ban finds himself at the top of his chosen career largely because of his ability to get along with others."