



## Exclusive: China's John Bolton

By Colum Lynch ■ Thursday, September 9, 2010 –



**Sha Zukang**, the U.N. undersecretary general for Economic and Social Affairs and the organization's most senior Chinese official, offered U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon a toast last week at a retreat in the Alpine resort town Alpbach that degenerated into an intoxicated rant against the United Nations, the United States, and his boss, *Turtle Bay* has learned.

"I know you never liked me Mr. Secretary-General -- well, I never liked you, either," Sha told Ban at a dinner attended by the U.N.'s top brass, according to a senior U.N. official who attended the event. "I didn't want to come to New York. It was the last thing I wanted to do. But I've come to love the U.N. and I'm coming to admire some things about you."

The blunt dinner remarks -- which came after Sha had a few drinks -- prompted U.N. officials to approach Sha and try to coax him into putting down the microphone, according to a U.N. spokesman and several U.N. sources who were there. It didn't work. Sha continued a lengthy speech, in which he also expressed his antipathy toward the United States. "It was a tribute gone awry," said a second senior U.N. official who was at

the dinner. "It went on for about ten or fifteen minutes but it felt like an hour." Ban was described as having smiled and nodded awkwardly during the Sha rant, but he allowed the dinner to continue.

U.N. officials said that Sha realized that he had gone too far, and that he spent much of the following day out of sight. "Sha Zukang was deeply apologetic when he met the Secretary General in person early the following morning at his own request," said Farhan Haq, the acting deputy U.N. spokesman, in a statement to *Turtle Bay*. "He said that he had risen to speak the previous evening because he felt that recent criticisms of the Secretary General had been unfair and that he wanted to set the record straight. However, Sha told the Secretary General that he realized that the way that he spoke, coming as it did after he had had a few drinks, was inappropriate, as it went too far. He was also aware that his statements had embarrassed and irritated other senior advisors."

Sha did not respond to a request for comment made through his office.

The incident is likely prove to be highly embarrassing for China, which put forward Sha's name in 2007 for the top U.N. post of U.N. undersecretary general for Economic and Social Affairs. China had also played a central role in promoting Ban's selection as secretary-general, and is expected to back him for a second term. Chinese diplomats have privately defended Ban's stewardship of the organization, citing criticism of Ban as unfair.

But the episode can hardly prove helpful to Ban, whose leadership has come under fire from a number of departing top officials, including Inga-Britt Ahlenius, the former Swedish chief of the U.N.'s internal oversight division.

Sha has long had a reputation as a pugnacious diplomat, a Chinese nationalist with a high-pitched voice and a short temper. A diplomatic colleague, Wang Guangya, China's former U.N. ambassador, described Sha to me as the "John Bolton of the Chinese foreign ministry." In a 2006 interview with the BBC, Sha told the United States to "shut up" about China's military buildup.

Sha, 62, began his career in the Chinese foreign service about four decades ago, as a young Chinese diplomat who had escaped the student purges of the cultural revolution, landing a plum assignment in 1960s London. He rose to the top ranks of a foreign ministry that has become increasingly assertive in recent years, serving in Colombo, Sri Lanka, New Delhi, India, and Geneva, Switzerland. He has also served as a head of China's department of arms control, in the Chinese foreign ministry.

Few Chinese officials have been more combative in public than Sha. In that same [2006 interview](#) with the BBC, Sha offered a highly emotional defense of China's military, economic and diplomatic rise. Sha warned that China would not budge on its claim to Taiwan and that it would use military force to defend China's interest. "No force in the world can shake Chinese nations' determination to achieve unification of my great motherland," he said. "For China one inch of the territory is more valuable than the life of our people; we will never concede on that."

Questioned about former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's expressions of concern about China's military buildup, Sha responded: "It is better for [the] U.S. to shut up, keep quiet. China's military build up is not threatening anyone...we are not fighting anywhere, we are not killing the innocent people anywhere in the world today. But look what they are doing today. So we have to be careful, careful to make sure no one in the world can harm China."

Sha was hired by the United Nations in July 2007, making him the top Chinese official in the U.N. Secretariat. Sha has a reputation as a sometimes charming, smart, and humorous personality, but one with a volatile streak. Frustrated that attendees at a U.N. conference last year refused to take their seats, the exasperated official raised his

hands in the air, repeatedly beat his gavel, and **angrily announced**: "This is really unique; now I'm deeply impressed by this uniqueness. And it is so unique that many of you have to sit and many of you have to stand behind making noises," he complained. "I know...I'm offending everyone, which I do not care at all."

The trouble at Alpbach began when U.N. officials arranged for a cocktail reception for senior officials. The organizers asked the U.N.'s senior male officials to mix drinks for their female counterparts, as a symbol of the greater number of top women in the traditionally male dominated organization. Ban acted as one of the main bartenders.

Following the reception and a dinner, top U.N. officials were offered an opportunity to make some remarks. Sha took the microphone and that said that while the "wine affected me a little...I want to say something that's on my mind," recalled a senior U.N. official.

Sha said that while he had not initially liked Ban or the U.N. all that much, noting that he had been forced to take his job, he had grown to respect him. He said that he appreciated Ban's persistence, his hard work ethic, and his stubbornness. But he also reflected the tense nature of their relationship. "You've been trying to get rid of me. You can fire me anytime, you can fire me today," he said, according to the senior U.N. official.

Sha's colleagues, including Catherine Bragg, a humanitarian relief official, tried to approach Sha to persuade him to calm down. But Shaw continued. At one stage, Sha singled out a senior U.N. official, Bob Orr of the United States, and said "I really don't like him: he's an American and I really don't like Americans," according to the senior official. But he then went on to credit Orr for delivering a commendable speech at the U.N. conference on climate change in Copenhagen, in which Orr praised Ban for taking a courageous stand and laying the groundwork for progress on global warming. "He was right," Sha said, according to the official.

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**UPDATE: Sha Zukang's** highly undiplomatic toast to Ban Ki-moon in the Alps last week raises questions about China's diplomatic commitment to the United Nations, according to senior U.N. officials. Diplomats wonder whether the incident will spur Beijing to take the organization more seriously, and to send its best and brightest to serve at the world body.

"This raises questions about whether China is a mature power," said a senior U.N.-based diplomat. "The Chinese need to think about this."

Three years ago, China put forward Sha for a top post in the U.N. Secretariat, even though the Chinese diplomat had little interest in serving in the international organization and had developed a reputation for creating public controversies.

U.N. officials described Sha as a smart, hard-working colleague. But they said he struggled to make the transition from an ardent Chinese nationalist to an impartial international civil servant. One official recalled an initial meeting with Sha at which he introduced himself by saying, "Please call me Sha: it means King in Chinese."

Sha's tenure at the United Nations has coincided with Chinese attempts to increase its commitment to U.N. affairs. China had once refused to participate in U.N. peacekeeping operations; it is now sending thousands of peacekeepers to serve in missions from Haiti to Lebanon. Chinese diplomats also played a role in prodding Sudan to accept a U.N.-African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur.

In recognition of China's growing importance, Ban agreed to China's request to hire Sha to become the U.N. undersecretary general for Economic and Social Affairs. But Sha has struggled to fit in, and his relations with colleagues seem to have been less

than collegial. Sha claimed in his inebriated toast that he suspected Ban had tried to force him out of his job.

U.N. officials say that it will not be easy for Ban to fire Sha even if he wanted to. Ban needs China's support for his expected bid to serve a second term as U.N. Secretary General. They also say that Sha will resign only if forced to do so by Beijing. A more likely scenario, according to an U.N. based diplomat, is that Sha will serve out the final year of his term as Ban's undersecretary. "We've put up with him for three years; we can put up with him for another one," said one U.N. official.

Asked today if Ban was considering getting rid of Sha, a U.N. official declined to speculate, saying simply: "Mr. Sha has apologized. Beyond that, I don't have any further response to your question."

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