

Obama, the US and the UN

When Will Good Deeds Follow Fine Words?

Ian Williams

English original of an article published in German in: VEREINTE NATIONEN – German Review on the United Nations, Vol. 58, No. 2, 2010, pp. 64–68.

When Barack Obama took office as US president in January 2009, the spirit of international relations changed dramatically. Instead of a general attitude of skepticism toward the UN that had been felt up to that point, the new president and his government share a positive mindset toward multilateralism. However, hindered by a reluctant congress, two ongoing wars and the effects of the economic crisis, the US has yet to demonstrate this new philosophy in binding international obligations. Should it fail to overcome these obstacles, America will not succeed in winning back the faith of the international community or take on a shared leading role in the UN.

One can never rule out the possibility that some future administration in Washington will again try to bully the UN into love and submission, but the administration of President Barack Obama gives no hint of it. Indeed, it has been heartening to see Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon becoming increasingly forthright about UN principles, liberated by the reduction in the sedulously vindictive attention that Washington formerly paid to the UN Secretariat.

Of course, some things never change. The Obama administration still foists American personnel on the UN – as it is doing currently in the case of Anthony Lake, the new head of UNICEF – but at least they are not people hostile to the whole concept of multilateral organizations and, like Lake, actually have some qualifications for the job.

Obama's appointment of Betty King as Permanent Representative in Geneva and Susan Rice as Permanent Representative in New York sent appropriate signals to the diplomatic colleagues and UN officials alike, drawing a line under the era of Bolton, which was a snub for the body, whether calculated or insouciant. Symbolically traditional with Democratic administrations, the New York Permanent Representative became, yet again, a cabinet-level post.

Apart from personnel, the US has re-engaged with the organization on many other levels. Its decision to stand for a seat on the Human Rights Council, and its success in winning one, parallels its various appointments, which have been of people with a track record of support for multilateralism and international law, although sometimes they do appear constrained by the administration's attempts to reconcile its overall ethical positions with domestic realpolitik.

It is hardly surprising Ban Ki-moon recently praised the President to me as “the one who declared his full support for the United Nations strongly and publicly. I am very grateful for his leadership and commitment – and of course he paid the dues, he submitted a supplemental budget request.”¹

Better payment behavior

Financial engagement is almost as important as the political commitment. For organizations, just as for people, financial security is an inestimable boon, allowing them to concentrate on their jobs and on forward planning rather than juggling bills. In the case of the UN those bills were in the billions of dollars because of the US failure to pay.

This year, Ban Ki-moon and the United Nations have reached just such a state. Thanks largely to Barack Obama and the new Democratic majority in Congress Ban is the first Secretary-General for decades who does not have to worry about paying the bills since the US has finally agreed to pay its dues and peacekeeping contributions. In fact payment of the agreed amounts has yet to be made.

Hostile Congress

For decades the US Congress has persistently refused to pay dues and peacekeeping assessments in full, or on time. It forced successive UN Secretary-Generals to be over-solicitous of US views, and more particularly of the prejudices of interest groups in Congress. Once the original decision was taken to reduce contributions in an attempt to force the UN to drop Palestinian programs, the gates were opened for others. The Israel/Palestine issue has been fairly consistent—and it is worth remembering that it involved many Democrats, not only actively, but also in the sense that many more were reluctant to defend the UN strenuously on the issue.

On the Republican side outright hostility to the entire concept of the United Nations has been growing with the influence of the ideological right. While conservatives knew that they did not have a constituency, either in Congress or in the public for the US to quit the organization, they have used every excuse possible to cut funding, whether it was their disagreement with the UN's positions on the Middle East or alleged mismanagement and corruption. Recently, for example, the gun lobby has used the UN Arms Trade Treaty, which

¹ Interview by Ian Williams with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on 23 February 2010 in New York, published in various places, e.g. World Policy Journal, Asia Times. All the following quotes of Ban stem from this interview.

is in the early stages of the negotiation process, to raise funds to fight a perceived global attack on second amendment rights.²

On a more pragmatic level, American politicians realized the power of the purse. For example, the US government immediately dismissed the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme's proposal in 1985 of capping American dues at 15 per cent precisely because it would reduce the influence they had over the organization.³

So, even when administrations like that of Bush senior, which used the UN extensively, tried to reduce the arrears they were frustrated by hostile elements in Congress. Clinton was sympathetic to the UN, but not to the extent of risking conservative hostility to defend it. Indeed Congress even failed to deliver on the bi-partisan deal in 1997 in the Senate, between Republican Senator Jesse Helms and Democratic Senator Joe Biden to pay the arrears. George W. Bush, while his administration was far more engaged with the UN than his churlish rhetoric would indicate, did not use his leverage to deliver results in Washington. His advisors, Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell almost certainly restrained him from indulging his own prejudices.

So accustomed had Americans become to such negative attitudes that they probably did not fully appreciate the redemptive power of Obama's declaration to the Nobel awards ceremony on 10 December 2009: "(..) America—in fact, no nation—can insist that others follow the rules of the road if we refuse to follow them ourselves. For when we don't, our actions appear arbitrary and undercut the legitimacy of future interventions, no matter how justified."⁴

New Constellations

Eight years of calculated scorn for global governance, and a previous eight years of evasion and prevarication from Clinton had avoided admitting that. With Obama, we have a President who has declared his support for the UN, with majorities in both chambers of Congress, and whose Middle Eastern policy is, if not identical, closer to agreed United Nations parameters than any of his predecessors. In Congress, a significant pro-Israel faction is tacitly supporting the administration's policy.

² See UN press release, GA/DIS/3396, 21.10.2009, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/gadis3396.doc.htm> and National Rifle Association/Institute for Legislative Action, 25.11.2009, <http://www.nrila.org/Legislation/Federal/Read.aspx?id=5224>

³ http://books.google.com/books?id=kQsAAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA14&lpg=PA14&dq=Olaf+Palme+dues+UN+15%25&source=bl&ots=q0G_5xt632&sig=OYNAZd8jjjVG-orj1AGfdbvddt4&hl=en&ei=tq6sS43FL8Wblgf475yQAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6&ved=OCBoQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=&f=false

⁴ Nobel Lecture by Barack Obama, 10 December 2009, Oslo, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture_en.html

In addition, Ban Ki-moon, although originally the candidate of John Bolton and George W. Bush, has established warm relations with both Congress and the White House. He has been quite insistent on the dues issue and speaks of how he “went to Washington to engage myself with important Congressmen and women, Senators, President, Secretaries of State. I have had House Foreign Relations Committee breakfast meetings, and met the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.” Indeed, he was so outspoken last year that he earned a reprimand from the Obama White House for calling the US a “deadbeat.” Obama’s press spokesman said his “word choice was unfortunate.”⁵

In fact his outspoken-ness follows a pattern of being tough in private and non-committal in public, which is an excellent diplomatic model – but he was dealing with the US Congress, for some members of which diplomacy is an oxymoron – they leaked his comments and then feigned indignation. But he did get the dues paid and the flurry did die down.

Anti-UN Crowd Relatively Silent

The surprising thing is that there has been relative silence from the usual anti-UN crowd. Of course, almost reflexively, the conservative Heritage Foundation accused Obama of selling out the US taxpayer by paying dues and peacekeeping contributions in full, and thirty Republican Senators voted for an amendment diverting all UN funding to military veterans.⁶ However most of them did so in full awareness that it would not pass, they were simply preemptively covering their rears against attack from the tea-party style conservatives. But the latter were too preoccupied with the deficit, Obama’s birth certificate and healthcare to waste over-much attention on the UN.

On a more refined level, the various think tanks from the right whose discourse dominated foreign policy formulation under Bush no longer have any input into the administration which takes its advice from far more liberal, and multilaterally inclined institutions such as the Center for American Progress.

Different Position for the US

With mid-term elections in November 2010, it is possible that there may be a reversion to previous form on the part of the Congress, but in the meantime, apart from the obvious relief of Ban and the UN Secretariat, payment of the dues

⁵ The White House, Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, 12.3.2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/briefing-white-house-press-secretary-robert-gibbs-31209>

⁶ U.S. Senate Rejects False Choice Between Supporting Veterans and UN Funding, UN Dispatch, 20.11.2009, <http://www.undispatch.com/us-senate-rejects-false-choice-between-supporting-veterans-and-un-funding>

also goes a long way to restoring American credibility inside the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council.

Indeed, Washington's re-engagement with the United Nations brings its own problems. It was gauche but accurate of then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to call the USA the "indispensable nation,"⁷ in 1998 but it is less accurate now. With two continuing wars following the economic crisis stretching its military and financial overstretch make the USA more dispensable now. Other members are less tolerant of special treatment for the US than they would have been before and Washington has to work harder to justify its claims to leadership.

Ban himself hastens to qualify the UN/US relationship, not least because he was, at least initially, regarded as an American appointee. "The United States is of course one of the most important states, but please remember that the whole Security Council, all the member states, appointed me. Partnership between UN and US 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."

Climate Change as a Common Issue

One issue where previous indifference and hostility still haunts the Obama agenda is Climate Change. Ban points out that Obama was the first US president to participate in a summit on climate change and contrasts that with his predecessor, "former President Bush came to the summit but he did not take part in the official meeting, just the informal summit dinner and meeting."

Ban made climate change one of his signature issues upon taking office, and he is palpably relieved that the Obama administration is working in the same direction. The two worked together to ensure a high level of participation in the Copenhagen conference in December 2009, and in that they certainly succeeded.

However, the President is still struggling with a recalcitrant Congress where many of his own party represent mining and similar carbon intensive industries, so even if they are not climate-skeptics they have vested interests in thwarting any effective action. That hampered Obama's ability to make the grand gestures that might have helped sway some delegations in Copenhagen. His overall support for action at least deprived countries opposed to action of the opportunity to hide behind Bush's previous scarcely concealed skepticism and indifference. And the United States, battered by financial crisis, which engaged on the issue, is much weaker and less fierce-some than the one that previously opposed it.

⁷ See http://www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/02/19/98021907_tpo.html

Although it was a muted success, the Copenhagen Accord would have been highly unlikely without Ban and Obama working in tandem. Ban's efforts would have been neutralized by the previous administration. Indeed Ban even met the Senate Sub-Committee on Energy and Climate Change. "After that meeting, they passed the bill on Climate Change," he says.

Long List of Unfulfilled Orders

However, understandably pre-occupied as it has been with the economic crisis and health care reform, the Obama administration had a disappointing lack progress on many tangible multilateral issues. While everyone welcomes the change in attitude, there is still a long list of international conventions and treaties that the US needs to join if it is to become a cooperative partner in the global community and fully committed United Nations member.

For example, still awaiting signatures and ratification are the Law of the Sea, wanted by the Pentagon, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, crucial to the administration's non-proliferation policy, the Conventions on Land Mines and the Rights of the Child both popular with Obama's base. The administration is talking benignly about the Arms Trade Treaty and the International Criminal Court but faces strong domestic opposition.

Convention on the Law of the Sea

Some of these, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, supported by the former Republican Chair of the Foreign Affairs Richard Lugar, and crucial for American claims in the rapidly thawing Arctic, are such "low-hanging fruit" that only extreme pre-occupation with local politics can explain the failure to proceed with them.

The Law of the Sea is the canary in the coalmine of whether sanity survives on Capitol Hill in international affairs. The only grounds for opposition are the quasi-theological opposition of some conservatives to "world government," in principle. If the administration cannot secure ratification of an instrument that offers so many benefits to the US, that is wanted by the Pentagon, the navy, business lobbies and most of Congress, then there is little chance of progress on this front, and even less if the Democratic Senate majority is reduced or lost in the mid-term elections this year and as the last rational Republicans retire or are driven from office.

International Criminal Court

In the case of the International Criminal Court, the administration did send an observer delegation to the recent meeting of states parties in November 2009 in The Hague. Both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Stephen Rapp,

Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues, have expressed a general desire to join, but Rapp said, "We are not a ratified state. The question of whether the United States would move forward on that is still, I think, many years away."⁸ The US Senate has not ratified the treaty, but there is still some dubiety about the standing of the Bush administration's reversal of President Bill Clinton's signature.

It has yet to announce any intention of reversing its previous "unsigned" of the treaty, but on the other hand is certainly not going to revert to Bush-era opposition. That is progress of sorts, although from another point of view it simply returns the US to a Clintonian position of benign tolerance for the Court.

Nonproliferation

One signature issue for the Obama administration in which it certainly needs the UN's support is non-proliferation and disarmament, both as a general application and in particular cases, notably Iran and Korea, where Ban Ki-moon has sent his Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Lynn Pascoe, in preparation for a possible visit by himself later this year. Of course, success is unpredictable with Pyongyang, but Ban's background suggests that at least he will understand what is going on—which eludes many other interlocutors.

On a larger scale, May 2010 sees the review of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) at the UN in New York, and here the international community will be testing the sincerity of the "allowed" nuclear powers, above all the US. Last year the Obama administration balked at inspections under the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, which suggests that despite the definite improvement, the Pentagon might still have too much influence over policy.

Any implication that the Obama policy is of the "Do as we say, don't do as we do," nature of the previous administration will certainly harden resistance from nuclear states. In particular, the administration is reconsidering American nuclear doctrine, which, under Bush, had not precluded first use of nuclear weapons, for example to respond to a chemical or biological attack. One suggested compromise is to declare no first use—but only against implementing NPT members.

However, the change in tone is completely reversed from the Bush administration whose ideological opposition to multilateral instruments led it to sabotage the previous NPT review conference and kept the US from ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty even as it tried to apply their terms to other states—some states that is.

⁸ U.S. to Attend Hague Court Meeting as Observer, Reuters, 16.11.2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLG395050>

Middle East

That returns us to the tiresomely nagging Middle Eastern thread through the US/UN relationship. The almost guaranteed American tolerance for Israel's nuclear weaponry will challenge its attempts to win support, even though the administration's declared policy of universal adherence to the NPT has caught the attention of some Israeli politicians—and of course caused some frissons in India as well.

It is indeed is over just such Israeli issues that the most likely questions will arise in the US/UN relationship, just as they were the original cause of the breach. For example, it was not edifying to see Obama appointees eating—even if they did not entirely swallow—their previous words on international justice when it came to the “Goldstone Report” on the Gaza conflict, even though their relatively mild comments about “balance” were far from the hysterical and ad-hominem abuse with which some quarters greeted the revered jurist. In fact, the US joined the UK and France in endorsing what is after all the main finding of the report, that the Israelis and Palestinians should conduct credibly independent investigations.

In this context, it is noticeable that Obama has not used previous UN resolutions, and even less so the possibility of future Security Council decisions, to prod the maverick Benjamin Netanyahu back onto the trail laid down by the Road Map. In fact, his team has been very careful only to call on the Prime Minister to implement previous Israeli promises particularly on the Road Map. Congress is, to say the least, ambivalent about any UN resolution on Israel, regardless of what the State Department says.

On the other hand the Obama administration has not “punished” the UN Secretary-General for his increasing forthright statements about Gaza, because his officials have been saying similar things, albeit less strenuously. Of course, it also helps add pressure on Netanyahu to deliver on Obama's signature project of a Middle East settlement.

The administration has endorsed the Arab League plan⁹ with its references to the UN-sanctioned borders from 1967, but it has hardly been assiduous in pressuring Israel to accept them, let alone fulfill its pledges the Road Map. Until it does, the world's jury will remain out on whether the US has truly re-subscribed to the principles of the organization it founded.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it would be hopelessly optimistic, and indeed unrealistic, to expect the US to begin behaving in a European way in relation to the United Nations,

⁹ Interview with Barack Obama, Al Arabiya, 27.1.2009, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/01/27/65087.html#004=Al-Arabiya>

but on any objective measure, this administration has moved a long way in that direction. Attitude does count, and replacing the grudging cooperation of the Bush years with the present open attitude makes a big difference for the United Nations and the world.

Domestic constraints will almost certainly prevent the administration from actually going much farther in terms of ratifications and accessions to the framework of multilateral conventions, but at least it will not be consciously flouting and sabotaging them. Clearly there will be much more cooperation with the UN Secretariat and Agencies than before, but it will take some considerable time before the US is in an uninhibited position to exercise leadership with other member states of the organization. The memories of previous unilateralism, compounded with a distinct revanchist element of schadenfreude at the present relative American weakness, are likely to make many of them resistant to Obama's multilateral charm offensive.

Obama has at most two terms to woo them, and to consummate the relationship to make it more durable.