

## **Ban's debut is chance for Asia to step into spotlight**

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On January 1 a new secretary-general will move into the big office on the 38th floor of United Nations headquarters in New York. For the first time in three and a half decades, he will be an Asian: Ban Ki-moon, former South Korean foreign minister. Most of the talk has focused on whether it is appropriate that the world's regions should "take turns" in holding such a key post. But the more important issue is what consequences will flow from having an Asian in the top job at the precise moment that Asia emerges into the geopolitical sun.

A certain historical distance has always existed between the Asian region and the international organisation. Most of New York's energy is consumed by the Middle East and Africa, not Asia. The UN is Atlanticist in structure and sometimes in orientation. Certainly, it has contributed to the Asian security order, most notably when the Security Council authorised military intervention on the Korean peninsula in 1950. In the 1970s and 1980s, UN agencies took the lead in resettling 3m or so Indo-Chinese refugees. However for the most part, the UN has operated at Asia's margins.

This is not just due to standard power politics: the strict view of state sovereignty adopted by many Asian capitals has helped keep the UN at arm's length. The colonial history of many Asian states has left behind a strong residual respect for territorial integrity and national sovereignty, a lack of fealty toward international institutions (magnified by the International Monetary Fund's performance in the 1997 financial crisis) and a preference for bilateral resolution of disputes.

There have been several signs in recent years, however, of a quickening of interactions between the UN and Asia. First, the end of the cold war broke the superpower deadlock in the Security Council, conjured up new confidence about the organisation's place in international relations and was followed by the establishment of two of the UN's largest and most complex peace operations, in Cambodia and East Timor. The East Timor operation showed that, for Asian states as for much of the world, Council decisions play a very significant role in conferring legitimacy on the use of force, or denying it – which in turn affects the risks and costs of an operation. How would the Australian-led Interfet force have fared in East Timor in 1999 without the cover of a Council resolution?

Second, the emergence of new and interconnected security threats in the region – including infectious diseases, resource scarcity, environmental catastrophes such as the 2004 tsunami, trafficking in drugs and people, and state failure – has demonstrated the advantages of international co-operation. As these threats escalate, so will the work of the UN and its agencies.

Third, as the locus of international power moves towards them, Asian states are stepping up their engagement with the world body. The top five contributors of peacekeeping personnel are all from the UN's Asian regional group. Both Japan and India remain intent on permanent membership of the Security Council. Most striking of all is China's increasingly savvy behaviour in New York. China was once poorly represented, defensive in the Council and hostile to peacekeeping: now it is ably represented, confident and skilful in the chamber and before the media, and deploys more peacekeeping personnel than most other permanent five members. Beijing even voted for two tough resolutions condemning its ally North Korea's nuclear provocations, which marked the return of a core Asian security issue to the Council agenda sheet.

This is the stage on to which Mr Ban will soon step. His origins will alert him to Asian issues that have not always had the profile in New York they deserve. If negotiations over North Korea's nuclear programme again stall, one can imagine Mr Ban, who has had significant contacts with Pyongyang, involving himself in the issue.

Asia's rise will cause some disquiet, of course, in New York and elsewhere. Other regions and players might feel neglected or threatened. Newly prominent Asian states will come in for some uncomfortable scrutiny. Over time, they will probably be forced to conceive of their interests in much broader ways, because with great power comes great responsibility. Ultimately, however, it will be to the UN's benefit if it strengthens its ties with a region that is not only the world's most populous but also its most dynamic.

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