

# Big secret on climate deal

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By Tom Plate



The irrefutable fact of current geopolitics is that Chinese-U.S. concordance offers the greatest potential transnational force for good (or evil) on this planet. When Beijing and Washington can get together — and then can get it together — the effect can be stunning. So for this week, at least, shelve your pessimistic instinct and imagine that the better Sino-U.S. relationship managed to surface. Our story involves the two most powerful members of the UN Security Council working with the UN secretary general in New York.

Start with last week, on the notable occasion of the sweeping and promising Paris climate control protocol — a necessary first step in meeting the daunting global-overheating challenge. Not only did 175-plus nations put pen to the protocol's papyrus, but also — and more to the point — the Beijing and Washington stood at the head of the political march for United Nations Framework Convention of the Climate Change (UNFCCC), which came together in Paris on in December.

These two titanic economies throw down on us 40% of all global greenhouse admissions, for which both Presidents Xi Jinping and Barack Obama should be ashamed. In a sense, thankfully, they are, and so when they signaled their Paris Accord signing intent, they raised the UN-driven effort from the dead after the unsettling climate-control negotiation collapse in Copenhagen in 2009.

It is true the Paris deal is but preliminary in the sense that the teenager is preliminary to the adult: Further time will be needed for commitments to be actually honored to determine whether Paris will grow into a true unique historic achievement, or revert to some horrid teenage sequel (Copenhagen II?).

To add to our story of China-U.S. cooperation, we recount a quiet event ten years ago in New York. At a meeting between Condoleezza Rice and Li Zhaoxing in the U.S. ambassador's suite at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, the two great powers exchanged views on the tricky selection of a successor to Kofi Annan. The outgoing UN secretary general had been media-genic, even charismatic, but he also had been immensely capable of irritating Security Council members, especially Washington and Beijing.

The two foreign ministers agreed they did not want to have to go through any more diva-drama, and when Rice brought up the candidacy of the low-key but well-regarded foreign minister of the Republic of Korea, who had straight-forwardly declared for the job, Li's face brightened even though Ban Ki-moon's South Korea was a key U.S. strategic ally, a place where tens of thousands of U.S. military were stationed, all allegedly because of North Korea. But the often in-an-airplane Foreign Minister Ban had made enough diplomatic trips to the Chinese Foreign Ministry in Beijing to make friends and influence VIP people that he had become a regular, welcome face.

How it works at UN Headquarters in New York is that when China and the U.S. agree on something of this nature — sensitive, difficult — the news tends to whip through UN corridors faster than morning coffee carts. The immediate reaction is usually relief: So when Beijing and Washington shook hands over Ban's ambitious candidacy, that was pretty much the end of the search process.

It is fair to generalize and say that classic Asian diplomatic style does not prioritize flamboyance. And while hammered relentlessly by the charisma-obsessed western media during his first couple of years on the job, in time Ban Ki-moon proved a cunning choice. Careful by nature, discreet to a fault, but relentlessly goal-oriented to the specific and achievable, the South Korean career diplomat committed his entire tenure to climate-harm-reduction as his first priority.

He had other worthy goals — women at the UN, in particular— but the climate issue remained preeminent and he could never get it out of his head. And so after the collapse of the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit, he was dispirited almost to the point of severe depression. Yet his face hid the pain and anguish, and he pushed on, not retreating. Critics of the low-key Asian style can say what they want, but there is no quit in this honorable Korean's DNA.

And so when New York and Paris were conjoined last week, the convergence came about in part because of Ban — and thus because Rice and Li had worked together well in that 2006 quiet meeting to make the solid choice. Said the exultant UN secretary general last week: "Paris will shape the lives of all future generations in a profound way — it is their future that is at stake." Referring to the planet's record of ever-hotter temperatures, he added: "We are in a race against time." If so, no one can say of Ban Ki-moon that, on this issue at least, he has been wasting his.

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