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Costa Rica's Successful Campaign For Third Term On UN Security Council

by Mike Leffert

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Costa Rica bested the Dominican Republic in the contest for a nonpermanent seat on the UN Security Council. The two countries stood for election by the 192 nations that make up the UN. It was a hard-fought battle between the two nations in the Latin American group, but Costa Rica's canny foreign policies under President Oscar Arias won the day, giving the Central American nation a perch on the world's most powerful international body for a third two-year period.

Costa Rica has signaled its intent to bring up proposals that will be hard for some members to stomach, among them disarmament and a plan to give aid to countries that spend less on arms. Carefully crafted, sophisticated campaign Costa Rica has made several diplomatic moves that have upset traditional close friends and allies to pave the way to the Security Council.

One such was the decision to move its embassy from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv (see NotiCen, 2007-08-30). Israel was miffed at the diplomatic abandonment of the city it claims as its own, but the change gained the favorable regard of a passel of Middle Eastern nations. Until the change, Costa Rica was one of only two countries to continue to maintain its embassy in the disputed city. The other one was El Salvador (see NotiCen, 2004-03-25), which has moved to Herzliya, but maintains a Jerusalem postal-box address.

The Costa Rica move was no low-key affair. Minister of Foreign Relations Bruno Stagno said at the time, "The Arab-Islamic world represents a billion people. It is an important group of countries, if you consider 22 Arab countries or 57 Islamic countries, they are important blocs in any multilateral forum. We have had very limited opportunities in the Arab-Islamic world. Now new opportunities are being opened to us, even some unexpected ones."

Equally as gratifying to new friends and more disappointing to old was Costa Rica's decision to abandon its diplomatic relationship with Taiwan in favor of permanent Security Council member the People's Republic of China (see NotiCen, 2007-06-14).

Only five of the council's members are permanent. The other four, besides China, are Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and the US. In this gambit, Costa Rica displayed a ruthless discipline, denying to the last moment that any such change was afoot, then all at once breaking relations with the island nation, accusing it of shortchanging Costa Rica on aid despite an extensive history of liberal supping at Taiwan's table. President Arias was particularly frank in explaining his tactics and goals. "China is the one that sits on the Security Council of the UN, and will soon be the second world power, and is going to invest in Costa Rica," he said. "The reasons for which we have relations with China are very evident. Our embassy in Beijing will be the second most important, after that of Washington."

Former Costa Rican diplomat and political scientist Luis Guillermo Solis noted, "The Arias administration has an international strategy that has been publicized and announced since the political campaign and began to take shape from the start. Getting onto the Security Council was always an articulated aspiration of an integral policy." Solis believes that the Israel and Taiwan initiatives brought Costa Rica into line with UN resolutions and were essential to ensuring the seat on the council.

Other helpful initiatives were the Costa Rica Consensus, which proposes funneling more international aid to countries that spend more on education and health and less on war materiel, and the Paz con la naturaleza (Peace with the Environment) proposal to allow countries to spend resources on environmental-protection programs that would otherwise go to debt service. The consensus, which encourages donor countries to provide incentives for developing countries to reduce military spending, is an outgrowth of the political thinking that won Arias the Nobel Peace Prize during his first term as president (1986-1990).

Other tactics in Costa Rica's overall foreign-policy strategy included the planned opening of embassies in Egypt, India, and Singapore and diplomatic outreach to Kuwait, Yemen, Jordan, and Bahrain. Beyond the Middle East, Stagno made a twenty-day diplomatic swing through Africa, with stops in Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, and Mozambique. The payoff for all this outreach was an impressive 116 to 44 win over the Dominican Republic in the Oct. 16 voting. The difference was enough for the Dominican Republic to drop out, leaving Costa Rica to get 179 votes, far more than the needed 126. This was Costa Rica's highest vote count in all four of its Security Council bids.

Now that they are in, the Costa Ricans are seeking to distinguish themselves on the council. Stagno promised that his country would not be just "one more," but comes with an action agenda. Stagno enumerated, in addition to pressing the Costa Rica Consensus, a proposal to create a high commission against terrorism, one for the reform of the council and increasing the number of member countries, one for improvements in human rights activities, and one for coordinating the work of international courts.

Pacifistic Costa Rica with its notions of arms reduction and destruction of nuclear warheads could end up being a pain for the permanent members, which number among them the planet's most prominent purveyors of doomware. But Stagno emphasizes that his little country has no guarantee of success for its views; each of the permanent members is armed with veto power.

Nonetheless, Solis calls Costa Rica's return to the council after a decade (last time was 1997-1998) a diplomatic triumph, gaining the country international visibility. "The Security Council is the UN's most important political organ, it is the one that makes the most delicate decisions," he said. "Any country that reaches this forum is going to gain much international visibility, and it is precisely what the president wants, because it occupies space in what is perhaps the most exclusive club within the UN." While true, these statements can be taken with a bit of humility.

The other countries to have gotten onto the council this time, chosen from their own regions and given first-round wins, were Libya, Vietnam, and Burkina Faso. Going extra innings, Croatia beat

the Czech Republic in a second round. It is also the case that the Dominican Republic has never won a seat on the council, despite having been a UN founding member and, according to mission spokesman Sully Saneaux, having sought a seat on three occasions.

The country accepted defeat gamely. Foreign Relations Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso called his country's candidacy a "great success" from which it gained esteem and respect. "It was a very instructive process for the diplomacy of our country," he said of the three-round contest. The Dominican Republic ran a far less sophisticated campaign than did its competitor, attempting to use its prior losses as a basis for soliciting a sympathy vote. "The Security Council has to have a space for the smallest, therefore we are confident that this time we will have luck," Saneaux said before the voting began.

President Leonel Fernandez spoke to the General Assembly during its regular session some months ago and pleaded for support so that his country could be "a voice in favor of the weak, the unprotected, the condemned." The nonpermanent-member countries serve for two-year periods, five changing each year. Each is chosen from its corresponding region. Costa Rica, from the Latin America and Caribbean region, is replacing Peru this year. Libya is replacing Ghana, Burkina Faso takes over from Congo, and Vietnam from Qatar.

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