

Nov 04, 2016 by *Colin Alexander*

# **China, Costa Rica, and the Race For U.N. Secretary General** <sup>[1]</sup>

Let me begin by describing a scenario to you.

It's Wednesday night in Costa Rica, about 8.30pm, and people in Costa Rica, as people do in most countries, are watching prime-time television. On this particular night, Costa Rica takes on their neighbors Venezuela in a soccer match and, due to the mass popularity of soccer in Costa Rica, it is drawing a large audience. Costa Rica scores, and after endless replays and analysis of a truly average goal, the action cuts to a "and here's the reaction in China" sequence of pictures.

What occurs next is without doubt the most bizarre 15 seconds of television I have ever seen. It shows four young Chinese men apparently watching the game (we'll never know because the camera is positioned above the television), the goal is scored and it sends the four men into delirium, and when I say delirium I mean DELIRIUM. One man even drops to his knees, clasps his hands and looks to the heavens for divine intervention for a Costa Rican victory. Upon returning to the action the commentators are struggling to stay composed, so bemused are they by what their employers have just broadcast.

However, the message behind this clearly stage-managed celebration is simply 'China loves Costa Rica'. Why? Simply because Costa Rica decided to switch its diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing; Costa Rica has therefore contributed to the diplomatic isolation of Taiwan and now agrees with Beijing's 'One China' policy.

Indeed China's investment into this small Central American Republic since it switched its diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing in 2007 has been remarkable. Beyond the incident during the soccer game China's attempt to promote itself via Public Diplomacy includes – but is not limited to – the following; the provision of 40 scholarships per year to Costa Rican students who want to study in China; a Center for the study of Chinese Language and Culture at the University of Costa Rica (it is currently in a legal dispute with another organization in Costa Rica over the term 'Confucius Institute'. It is a Confucius Institute in all but name.); and a batch of new Chinese-made police cars for the San Jose police each emblazoned with a Chinese flag on either side and the phrase 'Donated by the People's Republic of China' above.

No doubt however, the most visual demonstration of China's gratitude comes in the form of a glistening new national stadium in La Sabana Park, San Jose. The stadium sits next to the main highway out of the city to Escazu, a wealthy suburb popular with professionals, diplomats and the business elite. I feel it is no coincidence that this site was chosen.

The overriding reason for this generosity is Costa Rica's contribution to the diplomatic isolation of Taiwan. Costa Rica is the only country in Central America to recognize China and

by lavishing such gifts on them Beijing is attempting what could be called 'Public Diplomacy by-proxy'; where the other mainly poorer Central American Republics begin to diplomatically salivate after witnessing Costa Rica's special treatment. Whether this works or not remains to be seen as no other Central American Republic has followed suit.

As many of the people I interviewed in Costa Rica stated, it was a commitment to realism and to a 'normalizing' of foreign policy that led President Oscar Arias to recognize China in 2007. While the same people, along with others, attested that 'why should Costa Rica not reap the benefits of this new alliance, even if the ambitions of the Chinese lie in the region as a whole? So long as it is good for Costa Rica – carry on.'

However, in this country rumors spread quickly, and three separate interviewees - none of whom knew each other, and one of whom is a key analyst at the Ministry of National Planning and Political Economy - repeated the same rumor. Namely, they believe that Arias, who left the office of President in 2010 and won the Nobel Peace prize in 1987, wants to be the next Secretary General of the United Nations; and that, with China holding veto power in the Security Council, the recognition of Beijing makes Arias a very popular man amongst Chinese diplomats. Indeed, after Ban Ki Moon the system of rotation employed by the UN will revolve to Latin America, and without a doubt Arias' curriculum vitae makes him the stand-out candidate in this region. In December 2010 Arias spoke at DePauw University, Indiana, and his rhetoric was... well, you can judge for yourself.

Time will tell regarding Oscar Arias. More broadly however, it is increasingly clear that this small and often overlooked region of the world stands at a critical crossroads for the China – Taiwan saga and that public diplomacy has an important role to play in the eventual outcome.

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