

Costa Rica's Foreign Policy: Can "Right" become "Might"?

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Costa Rica has received considerable attention from the international community. As a small country with few natural resources, a small economy, and relatively little strategic value for the Great Powers, such attention is surprising. Costa Rican's attribute the country's international relatively high profile to: its lack of an army, stable democracy, environmental conservation, and successful human development (Barry, 1991). Policy makers go one step further, and claim that its foreign policy has always being admired by the international community due to its emphasis on human rights and human security (MPNPE, 2006). In other words, the international community finds it amazing that a country can actually do what it preaches.

A foreign policy based on respect for Human Rights, Human Security, sustainable development, and responsible internationalism sounds very similar to the goals enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and related documents (Khong, 2006). Nevertheless, realist scholars and policy makers have always stressed the weakness of a foreign policy guided by those concepts, and considered them to be ideals rather than policy prescriptions (Kolodziej, 2005). The question then is: Is a policy based on internationally accepted norms such as Human Security and respect for human rights inherently "weak"? This questions leads to another related question: Does a country with a foreign policy based on international norms become more vulnerably in the system of independent nation-states? Finally, a third question comes to mind: Can a foreign policy based on international norms lead to greater international influence? The final question can be worded as: Can "Right" become "Might"?

This paper will attempt to provide some tentative answers to the questions raised in the previous paragraphs by using Costa Rica's foreign policy as a case study. Costa Rica is a perfect case study to answer those questions due to

its characteristics. It lacks most of the sources of “power” usually mentioned by realist scholars. Costa Rica does not have a standing army, lacks large reserves of foreign exchange, it has a tiny population of around four million people, a limited territory, and very few natural resources (Barry, 1991; Eakin, 2007; Leonard, 1991; Perez-Brignoli, 1989; Williamson, 1992).¹ Following a realist logic, Costa Rica could never exert any influence in the “anarchic” international arena of independent nation-states. How can it defend itself from the depredation of its neighbors without an army or enough money to buy off its enemies? Furthermore, Costa Rica lacks an authoritarian government that could take decisive policy actions to raise an army to repel an attack or to crush internal dissent fostered by “foreign operatives” attempting to weaken the government, or at least that is what a realist would expect. Then, how can we explain Costa Rica’s democratic history, high level of human development, peaceful coexistence with its neighbors, and influence in international forums?

Joseph Nye’s concept of “soft-power” comes to mind when trying to answer those questions (Kolodziej, 2005). Costa Rica’s efforts to promote important international norms has created some “soft-power” over the years. That “soft-power” can be tentatively understood as “goodwill”. Thus, the international community might hold some goodwill towards that “nice” little country. If one assumes that power is based on dependence and that liking increases the strength of dependence, then it is easy to see how that “goodwill” can be translated into some kind of soft influence at the international level (Hocker, 2007). This “power” is not a power over you but rather a power with (Weeks, 1992). In other words, it is a power very similar to the one a friend exerts towards another. Realists would claim that this “cozy” and “fuzzy” kind of power is not power at all and that it cannot be translated into influence at the international level. It should be granted to them, that Costa Rica’s power based only on “good-will” does not explain all of its international influence.

¹ Costa Rica lacks the natural resources usually mentioned by realist scholars as conducive to power such as oil and minerals but is rich in rain forests and biodiversity.

Let us add an extra layer to our previous explanation of "soft-power" by adding the contribution of constructivist scholars to the one of liberal institutionalists. Constructivists have long noted the influence international norms can exert on decision makers and foreign policy (Kollman, 2008; Rublee, 2008). While most constructivist explanations of this phenomenon concentrate on the constraining effects of international norms, their argument can be taken a step forward to a point in which they empower policy makers who have internalized those norms and who behave consistently with those norms (v. Feigenblatt, 2009). While norm socialization is a complex phenomenon a simple example will illustrate the assertion regarding the positive power of norms. Imagine a group of people sitting in a café. All of them smoke. A few months later they return to the café and they are told that smoking is now illegal. At the beginning most of them disobey and continue to smoke claiming that the rule is illegitimate. After a few more times of being scolded by the manager and the police, some of them grudgingly comply every now and then. Then, they all comply with the rule while they dislike it and continue to consider it illegitimate. Finally, one of them decides to quit smoking because he has been convinced by the rule that smoking is detrimental to his or her health and disrespectful to the people around him or her. If that newly converted individual becomes not only a follower but an active promoter of the rule and the other recalcitrant persons identify this individual with non-smoking, he may harness some of the power of the norm for his own purposes. Even those people who try to quit smoking and fail will look to the successful non-smoker as a leader and role model. While the smoking example is overly simplistic it explains what has happened at the international level with the norms of Human Rights and Human Development.

Costa Rica has not only promoted but also followed the norms of Human Security and Human Rights. It has tried to set an example of the benefits of following an approach to foreign policy based on widely accepted international norms. The combination of a widely accepted internalization of the principles behind those norms and a norm consistent behavior in the part of Costa Rica, has propelled the country to role model status among developing nations. That

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explains part of the influence but what about influence over powerful developed countries? The influence exerted over powerful developed countries by Costa Rica can be illustrated by the relationship between the Italian Mafia and the Catholic Church. Even a powerful Godfather respects a Priest. The Priest has very little power in the realist sense but due to his symbolic significance and the example he sets by his behavior he may exert influence over the powerful but not so pure Godfather. Costa Rica is the village priest while China is the guerilla leader and the United States is the ruthless counterinsurgency general. The village priest sympathizes with some of the social goals of the guerilla leader and some of the goals of the general but not with their methods. Both the guerilla leader and the general hold the principles symbolized by the Priest as the ideal to strive for, which gives the apparently weak village Priest influence over the two.

Finally, we will give a third explanation for Costa Rica's international influence. Gandhi would have had little trouble in explaining the remaining power. He would have reminded us of the concept of *satyagraha*, commitment to truth, and the related concept of *ahimsa*, nonviolence (Ambler, 1990, p. 199). Those are the two basic principles of the Ghadian approach to peace-making. A public and private commitment to truth, in this case the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and a method based on active non-violence, in this case abolishing the army, leads to international peace and development. Thus, Costa Rica's foreign policy fits the Ghadian approach to peace-making and shows that the concepts of *satyagraha* and *ahimsa* can be applied to the international realm.

In conclusion, Costa Rica, as an international *satyagrahi*, has exerted considerable international influence due to three interconnected factors: international good-will created by the "nice guy" factor, the normative power it harnessed through taking the lead in promoting and following widely accepted international norms, and on a more philosophical note, through the power of *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*. Taking into consideration that Costa Rica has not fought a war with an external power for more than a century and that it enjoys a high level of human development, it is safe to conclude that it is possible and

desirable to base foreign policy on the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and related norms. "Right" can and does become "Might".

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