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PRC Engagement in Costa Rica

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Summary

Although Costa Rica was the first nation in Latin America to switch relations from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China (PRC), it stands as a lesson to others that the promise of vast economic and other benefits from diplomatically recognizing China, and the reality, are very different. Costa Rica also stands as an example of how the application of transparency and good governance can help insulate a country against some of the more predatory engagements by the PRC and its companies.

Costa Rica, under Rodrigo Chaves, has arguably found a healthy balance between engagement with the PRC, and political and economic policies that preserve the nation's options as a democratic country with a healthy economy and fiscal options for pursuing its long-term development. Nonetheless, the PRC continues to advance in multiple was in the country that merit continued vigilance. This work provides an overview of China's irregular advance in Costa Rica, including its advances, setbacks, and prospects for the future.

Keywords: *Costa Rica, People's Republic of China [nickname, Chinese female], Diplomatic Recognition, Economic Policies, Commercial Relations, Conflicts.*

Political Relations

Costa Rica has consistently worked to conduct its relations with the PRC with friendly pragmatism, seeking to avoid the appearance of making a choice[1] between the PRC and the democratic West. Costa Rica's official recognition off the PRC in May 2007[2] followed a year of secret diplomacy[3] involving widely respected then-President Oscar Arias and a very limited circle of his advisors.

Costa Rica's establishment of relations with the PRC, as the first such change in Central America, was strategically significant in the hemisphere, and was accompanied by a flurry of PRC gits and projects, including PRC purchase of $300 million[4] in Costa Rican bonds, construction of a new $100 million stadium,[5] and proposals to improve Highway 32 from the Capital to the Pacific coast and a new refinery. The way PRC-based companies sought to execute those projects, in the context of Costa Rica's application of its laws and regulations, led to cancellation of the refinery,[6] delays and restructuring

of the highway project, and problems with taking delivery of the stadium, detracting from the initial enthusiasm with which Costa Rica began the relationship.

In 2018, Costa Rica joined China's Belt and Road Initiative[7] (BRI), after Panama's ascension made it clear that the PRC had officially extended participation to countries in the Western Hemisphere[8] not historically part of China's "silk road" upon which the BRI was based.

The current Costa Rican government of Rodrigo Chaves has continued Costa Rica's openness to political and commercial relations with the PRC, reaffirming Costa Rica's commitment to the PRC's "One China" policy[9] rejecting relations with Taiwan, but has done so in the context of market friendly[10] economic policies that preserves Costa Rica's access to Western investment and financing, as well as that from the PRC. At the same time, President Chaves has also demonstrated that he would not overlook questionable PRC behaviors, as some other governments in the region have done, in the in the interests of preserving good relations or not jeopardizing PRC investments.[11]

For its part, the PRC has continued to engage with Costa Rica at all levels, in the commercial, political, security, and other domains. Its Ambassador to Costa Rica, Tang Heng[12] is very active in diplomatic circles, as well as in his outreach to the country, including a presence in the media[13] and social media.[14] As in other part of the world, the PRC has engaged with Costa Rica at the subnational as well as at the national level. It has established "sister city" relationships between Beijing - San José, Qinghai - Cartago, and Fuzhou - Limón.

Trade Relations

Costa Rica's inability to significantly expand exports of its traditional products to the PRC, and the ongoing penetration of its markets by PRC-based goods and service providers, despite its active courtship of the PRC, relatively good governance and functional export promotion organization PROCOMER,[15] is an important reference for other countries contemplating abandonment of Taiwan for the economic lure of relations with the PRC.

In 2006, the year before diplomatic relations with the PRC, Costa Rica had a limited, but balanced trade relationship with the PRC, exporting $558 million[16] in products to the country, and importing $554[17] million from it.

Although in the year following recognition, Costa Rica's exports to the PRC jumped to $848 million,[18] they actually fell steadily thereafter, reaching a low point of $200 million in 2011,[19] reflecting the inability of Costa Rican coffee, fruit and other traditional product exporters to significantly penetrate the PRC market.

In an attempt to broaden its exports to the PRC, Costa Rica also negotiated a free trade agreement with the PRC, becoming the third nation in the region to do so after Chile and Peru. The agreement was signed in August 2010,[20] and entered into force in 2011, contributing to a modest increase in exports to $339 million[21] by 2014.

In that same year, Intel shut down its chip manufacturing operation[22] in Costa Rica, eliminating what had been the country's most significant value-added export[23] to the PRC, and exposing how little it had succeeded in developing markets in the PRC for its other products. By contrast to Costa Rica's exports, its imports from the PRC expanded quickly and steadily in the years following recognition, from the previously noted $554 million[24] in 2006 to $4,133 billion[25] by 2022, an increase of more than seven-fold. Costa Rica eventually made some progress in expanding exports to the PRC, facilitated by the restart of Intel's chip production in 2021, with overall Costa Rican exports to the PRC reaching $402 million[26] by 2022.

Still, the net balance for Costa Rica of 15 years of trade relations following diplomatic recognition of the PRC was a degeneration from balanced trade, to importing more than ten times as many goods from the PRC than it exported to it, as well as a level of exports to the PRC that was actually lower than when it recognized the country in 2007.

Loans and Investments

Beyond trade, loans and investment from the PRC to Costa Rica since recognition have been relatively limited. Costa Rica ranks in twelfth place in the amount of loans received from Chinee policy banks, with only $435 million received. This includes a $40 million loan[27] given by China Development Bank to the National Bank of Costa Rica in 2008 for social projects, and a $395 million loan[28] given in 2015 by China Export-Import bank for the construction of Route 32.

On the other hand, Costa Rica's relatively healthy fiscal situation has enabled it to turn to Western financial institutions for its credit needs. Indeed, under President Chaves, Costa Rica successfully completed its fourth round of reviews with the International Monetary Fund regarding its access to the Extended Facility Fund,[29] as well as securing a loan from the Central American Integration Bank (BCIE),[30] and a $160 million loan from the World Bank,[31] as well successfully bonds on international markets on multiple occasions.

With respect to investments, despite Costa Rica's reputation as a relatively business-friendly country with good governance and juridical security, relatively few PRC-based companies have invested in the country. The China-Latin America network, one of the

most authoritative academic sources on Chinese projects in the region, registered a mere four investments by PRC-based firms in the region, totaling $193 million.[32]

PRC-oriented business networks in Costa Rica are also relatively limited. The China-Costa Rica Chamber of Commerce (CANACECC),[33] for example, had only 53 public members as of May 2023, with virtually all being relatively unknown firms whose titles suggested involvement in gambling or cryptocurrency businesses.

Petroleum

During the initial years of PRC-Costa Rica diplomatic relations, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) explored development of a new refinery with the Costa Rican government petroleum refinery Recope. The proposed SORESCO refinery ran into problems, however, when CNPC sought to use its own subsidiary, HQCEC,[34] for the study justifying the expenditure of money by the Costa Rican government on the project, including an $800 million loan[35] from the PRC. Following a series of appeals and negotiations, the project was officially cancelled in 2016.[36]

Logistics and Construction

PRC-based companies have worked and explored multiple construction and logistics sector projects in Costa Rica, with almost all experiencing some level of problems with the Costa Rican government.

As part of the PRC government reward for Costa Rica's diplomatic recognition, it funded construction of a sports stadium in San Jose, with the work given to PRC-based construction firm AFECC. The project ran into problems when the construction company was caught using the equipment that it had brought into the country under a special tax exempt authorization from the Costa Rican government, to do the project, to make money on the side by working on a commercial housing project.[37]

In addition, completion of the stadium and its acceptance by the Costa Rican government was delayed due to problems including the labeling of critical electrical and other systems in Chinese, making them inaccessible to Costa Rican operators. In 2021, the PRC spent an additional $11 million to upgrade various systems in the Stadium,[38] with work done by Chinese companies including a study by Jianxi international.[39] As of 2023, work was still underway.

China's other high-visibility construction project, the upgrade of a 107 -segment of Costa Rican Route 32 from San Jose to Limon, ran into even more significant problems than the stadium. The project was initially stalled over the failure of the contractor, China Harbor Engineering Corporation (CHEC), to have included critical safety elements such

as side berms and guardrails. The project also experienced multiple construction delays and cost overruns, as well as criticism for not including associated projects like pedestrian bridges over the highway.[40] In August 2021, Costa Rica's Ministry of Transportation and Public Works gave CHEC an additional 2 years and $100M additional funding[41] to complete missing works. In the current stage, one of the biggest obstacles continues to be the inability of CHEC, working with the Costa Rican government, to obtain access to the land that it needs to construct the highway, with 300 cases[42] pending in Costa Rican courts blocking land expropriations connected to the highway.

Pending completion of Route 32, CHEC and other Chinese firms are also interested in a "dry canal,"[43] leveraging a combination of highway improvements, possible rail and pipeline infrastructure using the same right-of-way, as well as other logistics projects to facilitate a connection across Costa Rica from ports on the Atlantic to those on the Pacific.

As in other parts of the region, PRC-based companies are also interested in Costa Rica's port sector. The 2006 concession[44] for Costa Rica's principal Pacific Coast port, Caldera, currently held by Grupo SAAM,[45] of Chilean logistics magnate Andronico Lucsic,[46] will soon expire and be put up for a new public competitive bidding process. According to experts in Costa Rica consulted for this work, CHEC is interested in such a project. Award of Caldera to a PRC-based company would be strategically significant since the port is currently Costa Rica's maritime gateway to the Pacific.

On the Atlantic side of Costa Rica, although the principal commercial port of Limon is currently operated by APM,[47] a subsidiary of the Norwegian firm Maersk, the older government-operated terminal may be rehabilitated, to include an $800 million project for a new Cruise Ship terminal,[48] with Chinese firms such as CHEC being well positioned to bid on the work.

Beyond maritime logistics, under the prior government of Carlos Alvarado explored the contracting of China Railway Road Corporation (CRRC)[49] for a $32.6 million electric train[50] for San Jose, with the former First Lady playing a significant role as proponent of the project. The initiative evaporated, however, with the departure of the Alvarado government.

Manufacturing Sector

In the manufacturing sector, PRC-based companies have made a very limited number of investments in the country. These include a $180 million acquisition[51] by Shanghai Felio Acoustics Company of Havels Sylvania in 2016, with a facility just adjacent to the U.S. embassy in San Jose.

In 2012, Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla began exploring the establishment of Special Economic Zones,[52] in which PRC-based companies would receive an attractive special tax and regulatory regime, to attract them to invest in operations in the zone. By the end of her term in 2014, the Costa Rican government was discussing the establishment of multiple potential zones with the possible financing of China Development Bank.[53] When the Chinchilla administration ended, however, the initiative was not actively pursued by the subsequent government of Luis Guillermo Solis.

Retail Sector

As noted previously, since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 2007, numerous Chinese brands have established themselves in Costa Rica, generally sold through local distributors. In the automotive sector, multiple Chinese car brands including Haval, Geely, Chery and BYD, are sold in the country. Many of these are distributed by the local concessionaire Veinsa. With respect to electric vehicles (EVs), BYD has held the largest share of the growing EV market in Costa Rica for the last three years in a row.[54] In 2023, in an astute advertising initiative, BYD even donated an EV to Costa Rica's Vice President.
In October 2019 BYD electric busses also entered the country in a limited way, with four in service by 2021[55] Beyond cars and busses, Chinese motorcycles have also become ubiquitous in the country, including brands such as ABT.

At the level of individual stores, as an outgrowth of Costa Rica's significant ethnic Chinese community, Chinese owned restaurants and supermarkets are ubiquitous throughout the country. Costa Rica's ethnic Chinese retail infrastructure also includes a "Chinatown" in San Jose, established by the mayor Jhonny Araya in 2012,[56] which has subsequently become commercially more vibrant.[57]

Electricity and Renewable Energy

Because the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE)[58] controls electricity generation and transmission in the country, investment by both PRC-based and other firms in the sector has been disincentivized. Nonetheless, Costa Rican experts interviewed in San Jose for this work noted that PRC-based companies are interested in future photovoltaic (solar) projects in the north of the country, as well as wind projects in the highland ridges.

Telecommunications

Chinese telecommunications companies play a dominant role in both infrastructure and retail devices such as smartphones. In the retail market, Huawei has a significant presence throughout the country including its own "experience stores."[59]

In the infrastructure sector, Huawei is the number one provider to ICE,[60] as Costa Rica's telecommunications organization, even though Huawei was fined by the Costa Rican government for non-compliance[61] with its contractual obligations to ICE between 2011-2014, flowing out of a 2009 contract in which Huawei's competitors suspiciously dropped out.

Other Digital Activities

In the context of rising levels of crime and violence in Costa Rica, the PRC government has used the donation of Huawei cameras and other surveillance equipment to Costa Rica's public water and sewer organization (*Instituto Costarricense de Acueductos y Alcantarillados*).[62] The PRC government has also provided cameras to local governments in crime-ridden areas as a tool to develop relations with municipalities while deepening the penetration of such Chinese equipment in the country. Other examples of PRC penetration of Costa Rica's digital domains include the use of ZPMC cranes in Costa Rica's principal ports, with scanners capturing data about the cargo in the containers moving through them. Expanding Chinese digital presence also includes PRC-based ride-sharing company Didi Chuxing, which entered Costa Rica in 2019,[63] and has made significant advances in the country against its principal competitor Uber.[64]

Educational Infrastructure

As in most other Latin American countries, shortly after the government's switch in diplomatic relations from Taiwan, the PRC government established a Confucius Institute for the officially sanctioned teaching of Chinese language and culture. Costa Rica's sole Confucius Institute was set up in the University of Costa Rica (UCR)[65] in November 2008.[66] These include a Mandarin language promotion program in 10 Costa Rican secondary schools, which has reached 3,000 students[67] to date.

PRC-Related Criminal Activities

With the expansion of trade and human contacts between the PRC and Costa Rica, a variety of illicit activities between the countries have also increased. Human smuggling and trafficking involving Costa Rica's ethnic Chinese community has long been a problem. The majority of Chinese Costa Ricans are hardworking, law-abiding citizens. Nonetheless, ethnic Chinese, many arriving from the coastal province of Guangdong, reportedly arrive in Costa Rica in conditions of significant debt bondage to the trafficker networks who have transported them.

As a compliment to debt bondage, members of the Chinese Costa Rican community operate a number of private high-stakes casinos, as well as cryptocurrency operations, both of which are used, in part for money laundering. According to one senior Costa

Rican source consulted for this work, Costa-Rican based Chinese criminal organizations are also involved to some extent in the purchase and sale of drugs transiting the country. Unfortunately, the ability of Costa Rican authorities to combat Chinese organized crime in each of these areas is limited, since those authorities often have little capabilities to penetrate Costa Rican Chinese communities because they are socially relatively closed to outsiders.

It is important to note the protected biodiversity by the CMAR maritime protected area, made up of Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Panama, which has notoriously been victim to the Chinese deepwater fleet which seasonally transits the area. In the Costa Rican case, in the past five years, an estimated 455 metric tons of shark fins[68] worth an estimated $25 million have been illegally harvested from the zone.

PRC Security Engagement

Although Costa Rica abolished its military in 1948, the PRC has regularly donated facilities and equipment to Costa Rica's police institutions, as well as bringing their personnel to the PRC for training and other forms of engagement. Following establishment of diplomatic relations, the PRC government donated 350 vehicles to the country's national police.[69] Because of a lack of maintenance support from the PRC government, the majority of the vehicles quickly became unusable.

In October 2016, the PRC donated 2 Y-12 16-person transport aircraft[70] to Costa Rica's Air Vigilance Service. This time, the PRC sent a "service representative," whose dedication solely to the two aircraft, led him to be seen by many as a Chinese spy in Costa Rica's security establishment. PRC-based companies, using PRC money, were also building a training facility for the national police. The $25 million[71] facility was completed and delivered in 2017,[72] but was only an empty structure. The Costa Rican government was obliged to turn to the US for the equipment necessary to make the building actually usable as a training facility for its police. In February 2021, the PRC further delivered 100 motorcycles[73] to Costa Rica. This time they were accompanied by two shipping containers full of parts, as well as 2,000 helmets and kevlar vests.[74]

Conclusion

In the 15 years since establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC, Costa Rica's engagement with its counterpart government and Chinese companies has been substantial, yet fraught with problems. Many have come from Costa Rica's application of its own laws, which have run afoul of the way some PRC-based companies have tried to do business in the country. On the other hand, Costa Rica's inability to substantially penetrate the PRC market, while exposing itself to penetration by Chinese products, displacing their Costa Rican counterparts, stands as an important lesson to other

countries contemplating a switch in relations from Taiwan to the PRC. The ubiquity of Chinese companies in Costa Rica's digital sectors such as telecommunications, surveillance, and eCommerce is a warning regarding the challenges in protecting their sensitive activities, intellectual property, and other data.

Despite Costa Rica's difficulties with the PRC and its companies, Costa Rica across an array of different governments has arguably done a credible job in advancing the national interest through a policy posture which preserves its access to both PRC and Western financing and investment on politically and market-friendly terms which give the country multiple options, as well as competent institutions that facilitate transparent, intelligent choices to secure the best long term value for the Costa Rican people. In both the positive and negative, Costa Rica has much insight to its neighbors regarding engagement with the PRC.

About the author:

He is a research professor of Latin American Studies in the Strategic Studies Institute of the United States Army War College, focused on relationships between the region and China [nickname, Chinese female] and other non-Western actors, as well as transnational organized crime and populism in the region. Dr. Ellis has published more than 300 works, including the following books: China in Latin America: The What and Wherefores (2009), The Strategic Dimension of Chinese Engagement with Latin America (2013), China on the Ground in Latin America (2014) y Transnational Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean (2018). He has recently published his fifth book, China Engages Latin America: Distorting Development and Democracy? The opinions expressed herein are strictly his.

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