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Costa Rica May Not Look At Nicaragua – Or Itself – The Same Way Again

The border dispute with Nicaragua had Costa Ricans rethinking its lack of army, and while the ruling from the International Court of Justice in The Hague provides an institutional solution to the border conflict, many fear the psychological damage has already been done.

When faced with threats of invasion from Nicaragua in the past – in 1948 and 1955 – Costa Rica successfully defended itself with a combination of volunteer militias and diplomatic offensives. But in response to the current conflict, Costa Rica has relied mostly on its diplomatic and legal efforts.

Costa Rica made the historic decision in 1948 to abolish its army and entrust its sovereignty and national defense to the untested guardianship of international law.

Since last October when the dispute over the Isla Calero began with the alleged invasion by Nicaragua's army, Costa Rica faced the greatest challenge to neutrality.

"For our country, the armed invasion is a challenge to our way of life and the defense of our national sovereignty, which is based exclusively in multilateralism," Costa Rican Foreign Minister René Castro told the press during the last couple of months.

"Costa Rica is a civilized and peaceful country," he adds. "But sometimes, those ideals are challenged by reality and our principles are put to test."

The fears mounted as the dispute continued. If Costa Rica had lost (in The Hague), there would have surely been a strong push to militarization.

A CID-Gallup poll at the end of January, three months after the conflict began and a week after The Hague hearings, Costa Ricans were more rattled by the conflict than Nicaraguans.

While 91% of Nicaraguans believed the crisis was caused by unclear border limits, 73% of Costa Ricans believed the crisis was due to Nicaragua's military invasion of their country.

The conflict provoked debate on whether Costa Rica is "neutral" or "pacifist".

"The Swiss are a neutral country but will rally an armed force if invaded. But a pacifist country turns the other cheek or appeals to international entities," says Carlos Denton, president of CID-Gallup.

The CID-Gallup poll also underscored how, for Nicaragua, crisis is a way of life – with the current dispute no exception. More than half of Nicaraguans polled erringly said that Costa Rica has an army. And almost 1 in 2 Nicaraguans fear Costa Rica could invade their country at any moment, according to the CID-Gallup survey, despite it lacking anything by way of military tanks or fighter jets.

Nicaraguans seem constantly on the lookout for foreign meddling and prepared for crisis. Oscar René Vargas, a Nicaraguan sociologist, says his country has been "in a constant political crisis" for more four decades, which has come to define the national identity. Having lost territories in the past to Colombia and Costa Rica, Nicaragua has a longstanding shrinking-country complex.

"Nicaragua is the only country in the world that has lost territory to a smaller and weaker nation," says Nicaragua's Edén Pastora, who is heading Nicaragua's river-dredging operation to "rescue" the San Juan River.

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Costa Rica did send heavily armed police to the border region last November, but that move was seen more as bark than bite – a claim that seemed to be supported by a Jan. 11 report in the Costa Rican daily Diario Extra that said deployed officers suffered from "profound fear of fighting against Nicaraguan soldiers."

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