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Strategic Insights: Caribbean Security Issues

May 16, 2017 | Dr. R. Evan Ellis

INTRODUCTION

Outside of military, law enforcement, and some academic circles, security issues are rarely part of the discourse about the Caribbean. Yet, during the Cold War, the region's contiguity with the United States made its largest island, Cuba, the focal point of the world's closest publicly known approximation to nuclear war.

Today, the Caribbean is at peace and continues to be a strategically important region to the United States and its geopolitical rivals, transnational criminal organizations, and those who live there. Currently, the security environment of the Caribbean is subject to multiple interacting stresses, influences, and potentially transformative events posing significant consequences for the United States and the region.

REGIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

The security environment of the Caribbean is defined by a particularly unique combination of characteristics. The region's proximity to the United States shapes it as a market for illicit, as well as licit flows, including the movement of commercial goods, drugs, and migrants to the United States, and money and tourists from it. In this way, the United States is thus both a principal driver of the region's security challenges, as well as its principal source of trade, investment, and other resources to fight those challenges.

Despite attempts at integration, the region is also defined by fragmentation, only partly surmounted through organizations such as Caricom and the Organization of East Caribbean States. The region's small governments, with limited resources and fragile institutions, make it susceptible to both the corrupting influences of transnational criminal organizations, and the initiatives of larger states with an interest in its affairs, including the United States, China, and Russia, among others.

ENDURING REGIONAL SECURITY THEMES

Even without geopolitical considerations, the security environment of the region is shaped by three persistent, interdependent, albeit evolving, challenges: climate, migration, and criminal flows. It is these challenges that are the focus of the policy documents, doctrine, day-to-day activities, and budgets of the region's security forces.

The principal islands of the region lie in the paths of hurricanes and tropical storms that most typically form to the east of the region during the June 1-November 30 Atlantic hurricane season and move westward. The regular devastation of Caribbean islands by such storms continue to make national emergency response systems, military support for civil authorities in disaster relief efforts,

international coordination, and international relief efforts key components of the security discourse.

As another facet of climate, the tropical geography of the Caribbean makes contagious diseases a serious public health danger. At the same time, the region's dependence on tourism makes disease a strategic economic risk as well. Nonetheless, the hazard is primarily concentrated in the region's poorest countries, including Haiti, with the perceived risk of transmission influencing the attitudes of neighboring states toward immigration.

Trans-Regional criminal flows, and their linkage to and impact on local populations, are arguably the greatest source of violence and threat to governance in the Caribbean. The dynamic is driven by the location of the region between the hemisphere's largest market for drugs and people, the United States; and South America, its largest source of both.

With respect to drugs, the deterioration of governance in Venezuela has complimented efforts by transport groups and overland drug routes in Central America to increase narcotics shipments from Western Venezuelan states, such as Zulia, San Cristobal, and Apure (as well as the north coast of Colombia), to Hispaniola (among other routes), bringing with it money for bribes, as well as lucrative opportunities for criminal activities, which tempt young, underemployed Caribbean populations. Such drug flows also bring criminal cartels from both Mexico and Colombia, which involve local groups in their activities, spawning violence both by generating competition for drug routes, and by encouraging local drug cultures.

With respect to money, the region is home to some of the world's most notorious tax shelter nations, such as the Cayman Islands and the British Virgin Islands. The search for protection from financial accountability attracts significant illicit, as well as licit, financial flows from an increasingly globalized economy to small economies and weakly institutionalized governments transformed by such resources.

With respect to people, the Caribbean is a channel for human trafficking and smuggling for multiple groups moving persons toward the United States, including Chinese triads (organized crime), as well as migration to the United States from the region itself.

To a degree, previous patterns of migration have also created natural criminal links between local groups and the United States. Examples include the previous Jamaica-based organization known as the Shower Posse, which leveraged the Jamaican diaspora in Miami and the greater New York area to export cocaine to the U.S. market. Similarly, the diaspora of people from the Dominican Republic in the United States has contributed to a significant role of Dominican gangs in the smuggling of drugs to the U.S. East Coast and their distribution.

In Jamaica, the role of English as the national language further facilitated the growth of the "lottery scam," often overlooked in discussions of the regional security environment. The scam used Jamaica-based telemarketing operators to rob billions of dollars from foreigners, mostly in the United States, flooding the island with illicit money.

In all cases, the inflows of illicitly gained resources have empowered local gangs and smuggling groups, expanding corruption and violence in the countries involved, and transforming groups of delinquents (once exploited by local political machines) into powerful criminal entities that hijack the nation's politics.

SOURCES OF INSTABILITY

Compounding the fragility of the region's strategic environment and the persistence of a number of serious security challenges, the Caribbean currently faces multiple, potentially transformative influences and events.

The discovery of significant oil deposits in the Stabroek block off the coast of Guyana is likely to significantly expand the resources of the Guyanese state. In 2015, Guyana experienced a sea change in political dominance from the indo-Guyanese, who had ruled the country since 1992, to the Afro-Guyanese, whose first government was headed by former Guyana Defense Forces Brigadier David Granger. Such opportunity in Guyana, however, will likely bring with it a significant increase in foreign activity in the once isolated country, as well as significant potential for corruption and the possible rekindling of border disputes with neighbors, such as that which re-emerged in 2015 between Guyana and neighboring Venezuela over the Essequibo region.

The future of Cuba will also dynamically affect the region. With Republicans controlling both houses of the U.S. Congress and with U.S. President Donald Trump currently adopting a hardline posture toward the island, the Cuban government could abandon some of the restraint it has shown in recent years. It is very possible that in the face of American belligerence that Cuba could become more receptive to the advances of U.S. adversaries, like Russia and China, in the security realm, to include the possible granting of base access to the militaries of those countries, and to allow access to Cuban signals intelligence facilities, such as Lourdes and Bejucal. In the process, Cuba could return to its historic role as regional leader of anti-U.S. leftism, taking up the mantle from Venezuela in continuing chaos. In the context of the death of Fidel Castro in 2016, the upcoming 7th Congress of the Cuban communist party in 2018 raises the possibility for a range of significant political changes: from a turn toward more democratic governance and reintegration into the economic and political structures of the Caribbean, making the island a competitor for tourism and a leader in regional business; to political and economic chaos, spawning significant migratory flows impacting the economies, social support systems, and politics of the region. Arguably, with a move toward either greater integration with the region, or toward chaos, Cuba is positioned to become more important as a center of regional organized crime flows.

In Haiti, the nation's sub-development and inadequate infrastructure makes its population particularly vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters like the 2004 earthquake and 2016 hurricane that devastated the island, as well as diseases such as cholera. With the pull-out of the United Nations mission MINUSTAH at the end of 2017, the nation could descend more deeply into criminality and disorder, expanding its role as a refuge for criminals, a transit node for illegal flows, and a source of outward immigration, affecting even more adversely its neighbors in the region, and becoming a greater problem for the Dominican Republic, with which it shares Hispaniola.

On the southern border of the Caribbean basin, the ongoing collapse of Venezuela fuels a growing wave of refugees and criminality that is also adversely impacting its Caribbean and South American neighbors. In addition to the previously mentioned drug flows into the Caribbean from Venezuela's interior, the economic desperation and breakdown of law enforcement has fueled the rebirth of piracy on the nation's Caribbean coast, and a new illicit trade in goods and refugees across the seven miles of water that separates Venezuela from Trinidad. Venezuela's disintegration has similarly driven flows of goods and refugees to Aruba and Curacao, off its northwestern coast, and next door, to Colombia's Caribbean coast.

Beyond expanding such criminal activities and migration, the deterioration of Venezuela will further prejudice the Caribbean by effectively ending the remaining flows of subsidized oil to the region under the Petrocaribe program, which subsidizes the energy sector of many countries of the region.

It is also not clear how the destabilization of Venezuela and the outward flow of refugees will affect radical Islamic actors in Venezuela and their relationship with likeminded groups elsewhere in the Caribbean, such as the *Jamaat al Muslimeen* in Trinidad and Tobago.

Finally, as already occurred in 2015, it is possible that the destabilization of Venezuela, in combination with new offshore oil claims, in places like Guyana, may tempt the nation to launch a military conflict against neighboring Colombia or Guyana, further destabilizing the Caribbean basin.

Beyond such possibilities, the security environment in the Caribbean will be impacted by the initiatives of Russia, China, Iran, and the United States as they react to opportunities and events in the region and to each other.

For its part, the United States will impact the security region through its immigration and other homeland security policies, as well as through possible changes to security and economic assistance programs, such as the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, or to trade accords such as CAFTA-DR. Changes to immigration policies such as the elimination of the “wet foot-dry foot” policy toward Cuba have already had ripple effects on immigration flows throughout the Caribbean basin.

With respect to Islamic groups, the region contains multiple important communities, including those in Guyana, Suriname, the Caribbean coast of Colombia (Barranquilla and Maicao), and Trinidad and Tobago—country of origin of the largest per capita outflow of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria, with over 125 believed to have left the island nation to fight for the Islamic State. In terms of Iran, in 2016, its President Hassan Rouhani made the Caribbean the focus of the first trip to the region, with stops in Margarita Island, Venezuela, for the summit of Non-Aligned Nations, as well as in Cuba. It is possible that the Iranian regime, with \$150 billion in new capital from the lifting of economic sanctions and incensed by confrontational policies from the Trump administration, might expand its presence in the Caribbean basin.

With respect to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), expanding loans and equity investments by Chinese companies in Caribbean nations such Jamaica, the Bahamas, Dominica, Barbados, Guyana, and Suriname, will give the PRC increasing leverage in the region on critical issues. Such leverage will be reinforced by ongoing training of the region’s military officers in PRC institutions and People’s Liberation Army (PLA) military diplomacy that has focused notably on the region. Examples include the 2011 and 2015 visits to the region by the PLA hospital ship *Peace Arc*, the 2015 visit to Cuba by the PLA 20th Naval Task Force, the deployment of PLA military police to Haiti from 2004 to 2012, and Chinese gifts of equipment to the region’s armed forces.

At the same time, a possible breakdown of the diplomatic truce between the PRC and Taiwan would also have transformative effects on the region’s security environment, possibly bringing an influx of new loans and PRC political engagement, not only with the six Caribbean nations that currently recognize Taiwan, but also with the Central American states that bound the Caribbean to the West: Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Belize.

A return to diplomatic recognition of the PRC by Nicaragua could be particularly impactful, insofar as it could motivate the Chinese government to formally back the long-delayed Nicaragua Canal Project, transforming shipping flows and commercial patterns throughout the Caribbean. The new canal, in turn, would likely unleash a new wave of competition for infrastructure projects throughout the region, including port projects such as that proposed in Goat Island, Jamaica, as key countries in the region seek to position themselves as logistics hubs to accommodate expanding traffic, including larger ships passing through the canal, in turn generating changes in the patterns of both licit and illicit commerce.

With respect to Russia, deepening disillusionment in Cuba or the consolidation of power by supporters of the Fidel Castro line, following the 2018 Congress, could lead the nation's leadership to expand security or other engagements with their former Cold War ally. Worsening U.S. relations with Central America could similarly embolden Russian security engagement with Nicaragua. Such engagement, in the context of the construction of the Nicaragua Canal, could precipitate an expanded Russian presence in the Caribbean (including the Nicaraguan waters around the Colombian island of San Andres) in fulfillment of Russian commitments to provide security for the canal.

CONCLUSION

The strategic importance of the Caribbean to the United States, combined with the potential for dramatic change in its security environment, makes it imperative for the United States to closely monitor developments in the region, and for the United States to maintain engagement with the region in the security as well as economic domains.

Such engagement should include:

1. Continuing to work closely with the region on matters of disaster relief;
2. Using incentives and trade agreements to encourage trade with and investment in the region;
3. Expanding, not cutting, programs to strengthen the Caribbean's institutions, with an emphasis on fighting corruption and negotiating the best possible deals with (rather than excluding) economic engagement by partners such as China;
4. Tailoring any changes to U.S. immigration or port security policies to minimize the effects on the region;
5. Sending strong signals regarding engagement with Iran, Russia, and China in the security domain;
6. Expanding intelligence and security cooperation against criminal and terrorist groups in the region, to include radical Islamic actors; and,
7. Preparing to support and participate in a multilateral response to the disintegration of Venezuela or other high-impact events affecting the region.

The Caribbean basin is connected to the United States in geographic, economic, and human terms. Its prosperity and security directly impacts that of the United States. Accordingly, the choices that the United States makes with regard to furthering the region's security and prosperity will be felt in the United States as well.

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