
U.S. Strategic Interests in Caribbean Security

By IVELAW L. GRIFFITH

*USS George Washington
off St. Thomas, U.S.
Virgin Islands.*



USS George Washington (Joe Hennessey)

The Caribbean is strategically important to the United States although it enjoys a low priority in the overall context of Latin American policy. That situation is unlikely to change barring some dramatic event. Continued disinterest will result in further equivocal engagement. The Nation should adopt a more focused, proactive, and nuanced approach in dealing with the Caribbean Basin. Today U.S. interest centers on three aspects of the area: geography, geoeconomics, and geonarcotics.

Geography

The strategic importance of the Caribbean is found in its resources, sea lanes, and security networks. The Caribbean Basin is the source of fuel and nonfuel minerals used in both the defense and civilian sectors. Of particular significance are petroleum and natural gas produced in Barbados, Colombia, Guatemala, Trinidad and Tobago, and Venezuela. Moreover, though several countries and U.S. territories in the area do not have energy resources, they offer invaluable refining and transshipment functions (Aruba, Bahamas, Curaçao, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, St. Lucia, and U.S. Virgin Islands). Other mineral resources from the Caribbean

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include bauxite, gold, nickel, copper, cobalt, emeralds, and diamonds.

The Caribbean Basin has two of the world's major choke points, the Panama Canal and the Caribbean Sea. The former links the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and saves 8,000 miles and up to 30 days of steaming time. The canal has military and civilian value. And while it is less important to the United States than it was two decades ago, other countries remain very dependent on it, and many, like Chile, Ecuador, and Japan, are militarily or politically important to Washington.

Once ships enter the Atlantic from the canal they must transit Caribbean passages en route to ports of call in the United States, Europe, and Africa. The Florida Strait, Mona Passage, Windward Passage, and Yucatan Channel are the principal lanes.

The Caribbean is also our southern flank. Until a decade ago the United States maintained a considerable military presence throughout the Caribbean, mainly in Puerto Rico at the Atlantic threshold, in Panama at

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the southern rim, and in Cuba at Guantánamo on the northern perimeter. In 1990, for instance, there were 4,743 military and civilian personnel in Puerto Rico, 20,709 in Panama, and 3,401 in Cuba.

Much has changed since 1990, requiring strategic redesign and force re-deployment. Today Puerto Rico is home to fewer forces, and U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) relocated from Panama to Miami in September 1997, leaving behind only small components. Guantánamo, long considered to have little strategic value, serves essentially as a political outpost in the hemisphere, with about 1,200 military and civilian personnel.

During the 1980s the Soviet presence in Cuba included modern docks and repair facilities, reconnaissance aircraft, and satellite and surveillance



E-2C supporting counternarcotics operations.

U.S. Navy (Michael Rinaldi)

capabilities. The 28-square mile base located at Lourdes monitored missile tests, intercepted satellite communications, and relayed microwave communications to diplomatic posts in the Western Hemisphere. The facility was reputedly the largest maintained by the Soviet Union abroad. It is still in operation, but not at Cold War levels.

Yet fear of foreign encroachment persists. The United States is concerned about increasing Chinese interest and investment in Panama. Although such strategic affairs may not be crucial to Washington, they affect allies as well as regional stability and security and thus bear watching.

Geoeconomics

The mixture of geography, economics, and national power in the area exercises influence over trade and investment. For example, the Department of Commerce found that for the four-year period prior to 1988 a total of 646 U.S. companies invested over \$1.5 billion in Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) beneficiary countries. Moreover, from 1986 to 1995 U.S. trade surpluses with the area grew from \$297 million to \$2.6 billion. In 1995 exports grew by 15 percent, to \$8 billion, with

the Dominican Republic and Jamaica accounting for 55 percent. That year also saw surpluses with every country except Aruba, Dominican Republic, and Trinidad and Tobago. Last year the U.S. Trade Representative told an Inter-American Development Bank forum, "Taken as a whole, the Caribbean Basin is a larger market for our goods than . . . France, Brazil, or China. Likewise, the United States is the area's natural market, taking 80 percent of its exports and providing nearly \$50 billion in foreign direct investment."

The United States is the largest trading partner and source of capital flows for Caribbean Community and Common Market countries. CBI nations are a principal market for U.S. exports, totaling \$21.1 billion in 1998 (9.1 percent over the previous year). Exports to the Caribbean Basin accounted for 3 percent in 1998 (up 2.8 percent over the previous year). An estimated half of each dollar spent in the area is returned to the United States compared with 10 cents from Asia. Further, this trade supports some 400,000 jobs in this country and many more in the Caribbean.

Moreover, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) reported

in 2000 that from 1995 to 1999 it assisted in 38 projects in the area involving \$3.2 billion in investments, which are expected to generate \$1.5 billion in U.S. exports and, in turn, support 4,500 jobs in this country. Moreover, in February 1999, OPIC and Citibank established a \$200 million investment facility for Central America and the

Caribbean to help meet needs for medium- and long-term capital.

Geonarcotics

There are four dimensions in the drug phenomenon: production, consumption, trafficking, and money laundering. These activities threaten the security of states around the world.

Narcotics operations and capital ventures which they spawn precipitate both conflict and cooperation among state and nonstate actors in the international system.

Because of the global dispersion of drug traffic and physical, social, and political features of facilitating countries, power involves securing compliant action. In the drug world, this power is both state and nonstate in origin, and some nonstate sources exercise relatively more power than state entities. Politics revolves around resource allocation through the ability of power brokers to determine who gets what, when, where, and how. Because power in this milieu is not only state in origin, resource allocation is not exclusively a state function.

Drug operations generate complex relationships. Some involve nonmilitary pressures such as political and economic sanctions by the United States against countries it considers not proactive enough in combating drug traffic. Yet the problem entails more than the movement of drugs from and through the area; it involves money laundering, organized crime, corruption, arms dealing, and matters of sovereignty. Such activities are reported in the *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* issued annually by the Department of State and are reflected in the following vignettes:

- Operation *Dinero*, an international money laundering sting conducted out of tiny Anguilla from January 1992 to December 1994, led to the seizure of nine tons of cocaine and \$90 million in assets, including expensive paintings, *Head of a Beggar* by Pablo Picasso among them.

- Cocaine seizures in only five nations—Bahamas, Belize, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Jamaica—totaled 3,300 kilos in 1993. Seizures for those same countries amounted to 6,230 kilos—almost double—during 1999.

- Between 1993 and 1998, over 9,000 deportees were returned to Jamaica, most for drug-related offenses in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

- In November 1998, American-owned Cupid Foundations closed its business in Jamaica after 22 years with a loss of 550 jobs. Cupid could no longer afford the fines incurred with the seizure of its merchandise by U.S. Customs because of attempts to smuggle drugs in its clothing.

Caribbean Community troops in Guyana, Tradewinds '99.



58° Signal Company (Michelle Labriell)

Table 1. Geographic and Economic Statistics

Country	Land Area (sq. km.)	Population	GDP (U.S. \$ million)	GDP Per Capita (U.S. \$)
Antigua and Barbuda	440	66,860	639	9,472
Barbados	430	265,630	2,496	9,789
Belize	2,960	238,550	705	2,949
Dominica	750	73,000	273	3,690
Grenada	340	96,200	360	3,758
Guyana	14,970	849,180	782	998
Haiti	27,800	7,800,000	3,900	460
Jamaica	10,990	2,576,000	7,445	2,893
St. Kitts and Nevis	360	40,820	305	7,193
St. Lucia	620	152,000	639	3,677
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	390	113,220	320	2,874
Suriname	163,270	412,070	1,104	2,474
Trinidad and Tobago	5,130	1,285,140	6,380	4,666

Sources: World Economic Outlook Database (International Monetary Fund) and World Development Indicators Database (World Bank).



- Operation *Conquistador*, conducted March 10–26, 2000, involving the United States and 24 nations in the region, led to the issuance of 7,300 search warrants, arrest of 2,300 people, and seizure of 12,000 pounds of cocaine, 120 pounds of heroin, 150 pounds of hashish oil, 30 pounds of morphine base, 172 vehicles, 13 boats, and 83 guns.

- Between November 24, 1999, and June 6, 2000, 12 freighters were seized in Miami on arrival from Haiti with over 6,000 pounds of cocaine hidden in their cargo.

- Since mid-October 2000 Jamaica has produced a drug-related drama involving high-level police corruption, illegal wire-tapping of government officials, and the attempted assassination of the head of the National Firearms and Drug Intelligence Center.

Traditional and Emerging Issues

Security in the Caribbean has political, military, economic, and environmental implications and includes internal and external threats. Nonstate actors are as important as state actors. Indeed, many nonstate actors can mobilize more economic and military assets than some countries. Thus the security landscape reveals both traditional and nontraditional concerns.

Territorial disputes and geopolitical posturing are core traditional issues. Belize, Colombia, Guatemala, Guyana, Suriname, and Venezuela have serious disagreements, some of which involve multiple disputes. For example, Guyana faces claims by Venezuela for the western five-eighths of its 214,970 square kilometers of territory and by Suriname for 15,000 to the east.

Drugs, political instability, migration, and the environment are major nontraditional issues. There is no uniformity in the importance ascribed to them, but a comparison of the traditional and nontraditional categories reveals a generally higher premium on nontraditional issues. Some states, such as those in the Eastern Caribbean, face no traditional security concerns or overt threats.

The foremost nontraditional threat involves drugs. This multifaceted problem has increased in scope and gravity over the last decade and a half and added security effects. Crime, corruption, and arms dealing dramatically impact on national security and governance in political, military, and economic terms. They also infringe on national sovereignty.

Table 2. U.S. Jobs Dependent on Trade with Caribbean Basin Nations

Year	Jobs Dependent	New Jobs Created Per Year
1986	127,240	8,400
1987	138,120	10,880
1988	153,800	15,680
1989	165,800	12,000
1990	191,380	25,580
1991	200,260	8,880
1992	225,262	25,002
1993	248,552	23,290
1994	268,814	20,292
1995	306,120	37,306
1996	318,060	11,940
1997	368,640	50,580
1998	402,360	33,720

U.S. Department of Commerce formula of \$1 billion in exports equals 20,000 jobs.

Two decades ago most Caribbean leaders were reluctant to acknowledge that their countries faced a drug threat. But the severity of the problem grew until the danger was obvious inside and outside the area. For instance, at a meeting on criminal justice in June 2000, which was attended by officials

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of Europe, Canada, the Caribbean Basin, and the United States, the attorney general of Trinidad and Tobago spoke of “the direct nexus between illegal drugs and crimes of violence, sex crimes, domestic violence, maltreatment of children by parents, and other evils,” and remarked that “aside from the very visible decimation of our societies caused by drug addiction and drug-related violence, there is another insidious evil: money laundering.”

Engagement Challenges

Leaders in the Caribbean and the United States share a common assessment of the principal security concerns in the area: drugs, border disputes, poverty, corruption, natural disasters, illegal migration, insurgen-

cies, and the environment. Consistent with this view, SOUTHCOM is focused on counterdrug operations, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.

One basic challenge in redesigning policy or strategy is determining which instruments and modalities should be changed. Except for Cuba, engagement does not warrant revamping existing practices. Some things work well and should be retained; others do not and should be modified. This discussion addresses both types.

Robert Pastor, who served on the National Security Council staff during the Carter administration, noted that Caribbean nations are too small and poor to directly challenge the United States. What really moved Washington was the threat of powerful adversaries from other parts of the world forging relationships in the area that facilitated the harassment of or attack on the United States or its neighbors. “When the threat diminishes,” he remarked, “so does U.S. interest. That accounts for the apparent cycle between preoccupation at moments of intense geopolitical rivalry and neglect at times of geopolitical calm.”

Today’s relative geopolitical calm justifies the concern of scholars and statesmen about the likelihood of a new phase of benign neglect or even worse. Hence it is important to highlight the challenge of staying engaged in both symbolic and substantive terms. Some years ago, the prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines declared: “We have to behave like Grenada or Fiji to get attention, and when we stop misbehaving we are left to languish in blissful *obscure*.”

Engagement demands flexibility and adaptability. For some missions, political expediency may require that nonmilitary personnel take the lead, or perhaps coastguardsmen as opposed to soldiers or marines. And flexibility and adaptability may be compromised by pushing the economy of force envelope too far. Also, engagement programs must not mistake silence for satisfaction. In addition, engagement requires the first team. U.S. leaders must not relegate decisionmaking to uninformed interns, junior staffers, or freshman bureaucrats.

Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, and Venezuela are clearly hot spots that should be watched closely; but so must other countries. Guyana bears scrutiny because of resurgent territorial claims, the impact of that dispute on investment and development (especially because U.S. and Canadian investors are involved), the likelihood of political instability, and the influence of drug trafficking. Another concern is violent crime in Jamaica, some of which affects foreign tourists and investors. In addition, Jamaican organized crime poses transnational dangers to law enforcement and economic interests. Drug trafficking and economic deprivation could also lead to renewed political instability.

The Dominican Republic faces issues of drug traffic, transnational crime, illegal migration, and political instability as that nation strives to translate rapid economic growth into less deprivation. The economy grew by 6.5 percent in 2000, 8.3 percent in 1999, and 7.3 percent in 1998, yet many Dominicans do not benefit from this wealth as some 20 percent of the country’s 8.5 million people live in poverty.



SH-3H during counter-narcotics training.

U.S. Navy (David Rush)



Drilling holes for moorings off Guantánamo Bay.

U.S. Navy (Andrew McKaske)

Puerto Rico also warrants attention. Although a domestic question for the United States, Vieques detracts from U.S. conflict resolution credibility. While Vieques is allegedly indispensable for Navy training, this issue highlights a troubling aspect of relations between the mainland and the island.

Programs must operate on several tracks encompassing broad interagency activities. Multifaceted engagement is especially vital in counter-narcotics efforts. Countermeasures must be multi-level—regional and international as well as national—because drug operations are transnational. Moreover, the measures must be implemented on a multiagency level to grapple with jurisdictional, legal, social, and economic issues precipitated by the drug problem. In addition to government agencies, a range of corporations, non-governmental organizations, and international bodies such as the Organization of American States and the U.N. International Drug Control Program must play critical roles.

Multilateral security measures do not preclude bilateralism. Indeed, such measures may be more politically expedient because they can be designed and executed faster. There may be budget incentives to act quickly. Moreover, in light of resource difficulties, a premium should be put on regulatory and operational aspects of interagency work to guard against turf and prestige battles.

Whether it is an issue of drugs, territorial disputes, migrant flows, or the environment, engagement should be pursued on the basis of mutual interest. This is not always achievable. Sometimes even leaders of comparatively wealthy states, though partners, are unwilling to agree to collective efforts because of concern about their impact. Domestic factors such as political change and public opinion often make it difficult to honor or renew pledges. But despite such complications, leaders must not let the possibility of conflict undermine cooperation.

There are high stakes for the United States in the Caribbean. The stakes are also high for the Caribbean countries. New defense and foreign policy initiatives may encourage effective engagement and investment of the resources to match the national interest in an area that represents a global crossroads and an essential element for regional stability. **JFQ**