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# Tackling Socio-Political Fragility in the Caribbean

The Caribbean is the Western Hemisphere's most fragile and diverse region. Torn between the geostrategic and economic interests of the US and an emerging group of South American and Asian countries, the region has to assert itself through deeper and stronger intra-Caribbean cooperation and integration.

By Markus Schultze-Kraft for ISN

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Any discussion on the prospects for enhanced political and economic integration within the Caribbean needs to acknowledge the region's immense cultural, ethnic, linguistic, economic and political diversity - as well as its troubled history, deep-seated fragility and challenging future. What has aptly been called the 'Mediterranean of the New World' the Caribbean today comprises thirteen sovereign states and seventeen dependent territories (not including the riparian states of the larger Caribbean Basin). Since Haiti's remarkable independence from France in 1804, the region has been the stage for numerous episodes of big power politics, foreign military intervention, homegrown despotism and socio-political revolution. As a result, many Caribbean states have not only faced enormous political and economic pressures, they have also struggled to build substantive national identities.

## **The 'colossus of the north'**

The Caribbean's close geographical proximity to the 'colossus of the north', the United States, has inevitably impacted upon the region's development. For almost two hundred years, the US has played a variety of roles across the Caribbean, from self-appointed regional policeman to, on occasions, a less than well-meaning hegemon. Since the invocation of the 'Monroe Doctrine' (1823), successive US governments have considered the region as a 'backyard' where they alone have a 'right' to intervene, exercise authority, and shape political agendas.

While the end of the Cold War ushered in a more constructive US policy toward the Caribbean, in many respects the specter of the 'Monroe Doctrine' still remains. Cuba, the Caribbean's largest island state, helps demonstrate this point. Following the revolution in 1959 opposition movements based in the US have attempted to weaken and/or unseat the Communist governments of Fidel and, since 2008, Raúl Castro. Despite the end of the Cold War, the Caribbean remains one of few world regions where the erstwhile 'East-West confrontation' continues. Yet Cuba may, nevertheless, be integral to regional attempts to build governance mechanisms needed to tackle a range of social, economic and environmental problems.

## **Regional initiative**

Indeed, Cuba has already made attempts to join other Caribbean leaders in taking more control of their shared destiny. Havana has sought rapprochement with the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), dispatched teams of medical personnel across the region and actively supports other social policy interventions. Today, Cuba maintains normal and for the most part constructive relations with its neighbors in the Caribbean Basin. The Dominican Republic, the region's second-largest island nation, has also become a more assertive regional player. In 2010, for example, the country was a major donor of humanitarian aid to the victims of the earthquake in Haiti.

At the same time, the role of the US is still seen as pivotal to the region. Despite the emergence of China as a major donor and trading partner, the US remains by far the largest and closest external market for the Caribbean (closed only to Cuba, for the time being). However, another of Haiti's more recent political crises prompted some Caribbean states to criticize some of Washington's regional policies. The overthrow in 2004 of President Jean Bertrand Aristide, who had reestablished diplomatic relations with Cuba, and the purported US role in the event did not go down well in capitals across the region. Subsequently, the dispatch of a large contingent of US troops to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake was also not well received in some quarters as it brought back bad memories of previous American military intervention. However, perhaps most importantly these sentiments are nurtured by the fact that the US is today not the only significant external player in the Caribbean.

## **New kids on the block**

Caribbean leaders today have more of a choice who they engage with and whose aid and support they accept than fifteen or twenty years ago. Under Hugo Chávez, Venezuela has become a seemingly hyperactive new kid on the block. Working closely with Cuba, the Chávez administration has poured billions of petro-dollars and millions of barrels of crude oil into the Caribbean Basin, setting up oil refineries and power plants and financing reconstruction and social development programs in Haiti and beyond. Next to Cuba, three CARICOM member states (Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) are part of Venezuela's regional cooperation and integration scheme, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA). Two others have recently acquired 'guest status' (Saint Lucia and Suriname).

While it remains to be seen how effective and sustainable Venezuela's interventions in the Caribbean will be – and, indeed, how long the Chávez regime will survive given its leader's illness – Caracas's contributions have been well received by some cash and oil-strapped Caribbean nations. Other Latin American countries also have a stronger presence in the region today, particularly through their role in the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). Since the mission's deployment in 2004, Brazil has been both the largest troop contributor and key political actor working closely with Argentina, Chile and Uruguay and a handful of other Latin America countries.

MINUSTAH is the first integrated UN peace-keeping and stabilization mission in which a group of Latin American countries have taken a lead role. This is a significant development, which is related to Brasilia's aspirations to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council and also the increased foreign policy capacity that many Latin American states have built up in the past few years. Although the jury is still out on how successful MINUSTAH's contributions to helping overcome Haiti's myriad problems will be, it must not be forgotten that multilateral stabilization and peace-building missions around the world are facing similar problems as in Haiti. However, under Brazil's tutelage, those Latin American countries that contribute to MINUSTAH have enhanced their interaction with the region and gained recognition from their Caribbean counterparts.

## **The challenge of transnational organized crime**

The need for wider collaboration is all the more pressing as one of the most daunting current challenges facing the area is the spread of transnational organized crime and illegal drug-trafficking. The Caribbean Basin is in a highly vulnerable spot as it sits on the doorstep of the world's single-largest illicit drug consumer market and is also used by traffickers supplying the growing European market. Ironically, neither the US nor the South American countries that play an increasingly prominent role in the Caribbean, especially Venezuela, are willing to work together on improving global drug policy.

Washington has identified the Caribbean as the weak link in its 'southern approach' for protecting the American mainland and, consequently, is seeking to expand its 'defense-in-depth' capability through military and law enforcement means. Yet in recent years, Venezuela has become one of the most significant transshipment points for Colombian cocaine bound for the US market. There is no convincing evidence that the Chávez administration is taking robust counter-measures to remedy this situation. In practice this means that many fragile Caribbean states are serving as staging posts in the hemispheric drug-trafficking chain and are involuntarily recruited into playing a role in US homeland defense.

### **The way forward: regional sovereignty through more cooperation and deepened integration**

In spite of advances in intra-regional cooperation – coupled with the emergence of more assertive and self-confident voices from within the region – the Caribbean remains the most fragile region of the Western Hemisphere. Accordingly, the key to tackling the many challenges ahead is most likely a deepening of regional cooperation and integration. It is likely that efforts will need to be capable of supporting a gradual democratic transition in Cuba. Of equal importance will be the effective management of (often competing) relations with North and South America and other parts of the world. Successful joint management of a host of problems may eventually lead to the Caribbean achieving a more promising and stable insertion into the globalizing world order. Indeed, if the Caribbean can find its place in the international system, this may provide impetus for even broader hemispheric integration.

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