

**Caribbean Basin Security Initiative:**  
Choosing the Right Course

Testimony of

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Stephen C. Johnson served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs from January 10, 2007 until January 20, 2009. After leaving the Department of Defense he has done consulting work for the Project on National Security Reform, a Congressionally mandated program that has received a \$3.9 million grant for FY 2009. During fiscal 2009, Mr. Johnson received \$48,500 from that organization.

Mr. Johnson is testifying as an individual discussing his own independent views. They do not reflect any institutional position of the Project on National Security Reform, or the Department of Defense.

Chairman Engel, ranking member Mack, distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify on this timely subject of supporting the President's new Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI). For the record, I would like to state that the views I express are entirely my own and do not represent the U.S. Government or any entities or individuals with whom I consult.

In my experience as a foreign policy analyst and as a former Defense Department official, I've come to know the Caribbean as a complex region, led by small governments easily overwhelmed by big challenges. Today, those security challenges are local crime, and transnational drug flows. To some degree, the region is also a target of influence for Venezuela's President who is attempting to build an anti-U.S. alliance built on petroleum aid. He will only be successful if we ignore the region.

Our alliances with Caribbean neighbors are key to the security of the southeastern maritime approach to the United States, small but significant trade partnerships, the freedom of sea lanes leading to the Panama Canal, and the safety of the region as a major tourist destination. Friendly ties have evolved against a backdrop of past intervention and questions over genuine interest. To strengthen security cooperation, we must keep promises we have already made, build on relative strengths of each partner, and work smarter. The Obama Administration's Caribbean Basin Security Initiative is a good start. However, it should be a multi-year effort and \$45 million may not be enough.

### **A Diverse Region—**

The Caribbean comprises more than a million square miles of ocean and 13 island nations, 3 territories under colonial rule, all of whose inhabitants may speak any of five dominant languages. Most governments celebrate regular, free elections except Cuba and Haiti. Cuba and the Dominican Republic have the largest populations at about 11 million and 9 million respectively, while Dominica in the Eastern Caribbean has just 72,000. Free economies range from the Dominican Republic with a \$44 billion gross domestic product (GDP) to tiny Dominica with a \$364 million GDP, according to the CIA *World Factbook*. The Bahamas ranks among the top countries of the world in annual GDP per capita (\$30,700). Haiti is the most destitute in the hemisphere with 80 percent of the population under the poverty line.

Capacities vary toward cooperating on mutual interests. On one hand, the region benefits from a 15-member Caribbean Community comprised of most of the English-speaking nations (including South America's Suriname and Guyana), five associates, and seven observers. The eastern Caribbean also hosts a seven-member Regional Security System<sup>1</sup> organized to counter threats that might overwhelm individual states. Its strengths are joint planning, pooling personnel and equipment resources, and taking advantage of the economy of scale.

On the other, politics, economics, or special circumstances impose limits. Totalitarian Cuba does not formally work with neighboring democracies. Eastern Caribbean countries with populations equivalent to small American towns have no tax base to maintain significant security operations.

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<sup>1</sup> Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Surprisingly, Jamaica has the fourth highest per-person debt burden in the world where the GDP to debt ratio stands at 128 percent, imposing both limits and problems.<sup>2</sup> For the last 20 years, Haiti has been a security challenge in itself, lacking governing capacity and a functioning economy. Since 2004, some 8,000 UN peacekeepers have had to maintain public order following the exodus of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the reconstitution of government. Many of its citizens continue to migrate to the Dominican Republic and elsewhere looking for work.

### **The Security Environment—**

The present situation is troubling. Sandwiched between North and South America and consisting of mostly open water, the Caribbean is a smuggler's paradise. Haiti and the Dominican Republic are the most heavily impacted. According to the Joint Interagency Task Force-South, the majority of air tracks coming out of South America for the past three years begin in Venezuela and head straight for those two countries, some turning left to go on to Central America, others returning to South America. The "good" news is that only about 16 percent of the flow is moving through the Caribbean. About 70 percent now moves by boat up the Pacific Coast to Central America, the rest destined for Africa and Europe. But if Mexican and Central American interdiction capabilities improve under the Merida Initiative, routes will shift.

Traffickers favor Haiti because of weak law enforcement, plentiful volunteers who will set out in small boats to pick up floating packets in open waters, endemic corruption, and significant consumption habits. The Dominican Republic must deal with illegal Haitian migrants, a difficult coastline, and drug money that sustains corruption. While both governments are cooperative with U.S. counternarcotics efforts, they have limited resources. Haiti has a four-boat coast guard and limited fuel supplies. This year, the Dominican Republic purchased eight Super Tucano interdiction aircraft, but lacks sufficient night vision equipment and properly equipped long-range patrol craft.

To the west, Jamaica has become the region's prime marijuana producer and exporter, according to the U.S. State Department. Its homicide rate hovers close to 50 for every 100,000 persons, rivaling Honduras, Venezuela, and El Salvador. While its culture of violence may have roots in political conflict during the 1970s, territorial disputes over racketeering and drug sales now feed it. According to a 2008 Amnesty International report, "Gang leaders use the vacuum left by the absence of the state to control huge aspects of inner city people's lives—including the collection of 'taxes', allocation of jobs, distribution of food and the punishment of those who transgress gang rules." Trinidad and Tobago seems headed in a similar direction. There, the number of murders has risen from 118 in 2000 to 550 in 2008, or 41.1 per 100,000 persons.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, the symbiotic relationship between smuggling and guns appears to be fueling violence.

Since 9/11, port security in neighboring countries has become a priority for the United States. Caribbean ports feature cargo container storage, petroleum and liquefied natural gas facilities, and cruise ship terminals, as the region is one of the top cruise ship destinations in the world. According to several U.S. government reports, port facilities are generally in compliance with a

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<sup>2</sup> Minh H. Pham, "Why Jamaica needs a 'Kingston Club' - How to break the national debt squeeze," *The Gleaner*, April 5, 2009 at [www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20090405/focus/focus4.html](http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20090405/focus/focus4.html) (December 7, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Source: "1994-2008 Crime Statistics," at [www.ttcrime.com/stats.php](http://www.ttcrime.com/stats.php) (December 8, 2009).

new international port security code that went into effect in 2004. However, there still is no way to inspect all cargo to reduce possible transshipments of weapons, drugs, and humans. And given the volume of Caribbean maritime trade, infrastructure may be attractive targets for a terrorist attack—especially the oil and gas transfer facilities in Trinidad and Tobago.

Finally, all Caribbean states except for Trinidad and Tobago are highly energy dependent, which raises costs for security operations and makes them subject to energy influence. Venezuela's president has persuaded 14 Caribbean nations to join PetroCaribe, an energy aid program that offers petroleum at concessionary rates. Venezuela reportedly supplies 190,000 barrels per day of oil to the region. Countries pay market prices for half of it within 90 days, and pay off the balance over 25 years at a low interest rate.<sup>4</sup> Barbados and Trinidad, which has the majority of oil and natural gas reserves in the Caribbean, did not sign. But those that did are subject to shipment cutoffs if Venezuela's authoritarian president feels they are not loyal enough to him.

### **Record of Assistance—**

For now, trade relations and a legacy of assistance from the United States, through disaster relief, development aid, and security assistance worth some \$3.2 billion since the 1980s, outweigh Venezuelan and other external influences.<sup>5</sup> Significant measures include the Caribbean Basin Initiative in 1984 that instituted a series of trade preferences for many Caribbean and Central American countries. They also include more than \$1 billion in development assistance for Haiti following the 1994 U.S. intervention to restore the Aristide presidency. In 1997, President Bill Clinton participated in the first ever U.S. Caribbean Summit at Bridgetown, Barbados that committed to mutual efforts on fighting crime, corruption, drug trafficking, and weapons smuggling.

In 2001, the Bush Administration's Third Border Initiative tried to put some beef into the Bridgetown declaration. It called for \$20 million to fight HIV/AIDS, teacher training centers to boost skills and develop curricula to help Caribbean youths prepare for a globalized economy, increased funding for disaster preparedness, money to enhance aviation security, and better law enforcement cooperation to aid anti-money laundering operations, professional development of police and prosecutors, and anti-corruption training.

Meanwhile, from 1999 to 2006, U.S. Southern Command ran a hugely popular program that sent a 50-year-old Coast Guard buoy tender, the *Gentian*, to the Caribbean to perform maintenance and help improve the operational capabilities of local marine services. Members of various Caribbean maritime services augmented the U.S. Coast Guard crew, making it a truly cooperative venture. In 2006, Southcom inaugurated *Operation Enduring Friendship*, a three-phase \$67 million program to help Central American and Caribbean states improve their maritime drug interdiction capabilities through a package of 60 mile-per-hour go-fast boats and maintenance training. The last phase in the Eastern Caribbean was due to begin this year.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark P. Sullivan, "Caribbean Region: Issues in U.S. Relations," *CRS Report for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, updated October 27, 2006, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

In 2008, the Merida Initiative was modified to include \$5 million in counternarcotics assistance for Haiti and the Dominican Republic. As the Bush Administration left office, the State Department was leading an interagency effort to develop a Caribbean Regional Security Initiative as a complement to Merida.

### **Choosing the Right Course**

In sum, U.S. engagement with Caribbean countries seems consistent with the perceived needs at the time but has lacked a comprehensive, long-range focus. During the 1980s, the priority was boosting trade to support friendly democracies. During the 1990s, it was helping to stabilize Haiti—a failed state. By the turn of the millennium, concerns over drug trafficking and security began to take over. Although Haiti is more stable today, it may not be self-governing for many years to come and thus may continue to be a hub of illicit activity. The Dominican Republic has often been affected by trouble next door and, until recently, had not the equipment nor political will to pursue drug traffickers on its side of the border. Jamaica faces high debt and thus has limited resources to reduce criminality and violence. Trinidad and Tobago have experienced similar spikes in violence, but have a better tax base to deal with it. Other islands are less impacted, but have economies too small to meet big challenges—all complex issues.

With that in mind, it only makes sense to keep promises such as those established at the Bridgetown Summit, build on relative strengths, and work smarter toward sustainable goals. Five recommendations come to mind:

First, the United States needs a Caribbean strategy to sort out what objectives are important, identify the best ways to leverage homegrown efforts, all within the context of what strengths we bring to the table and limitations we face in funding. The Obama Administration has suggested 1) assistance for air and maritime assets and command, control, and communications architecture; 2) assistance for social justice and economic development projects, with programs targeted at youth development and training; and 3) assistance for programs to enhance the rule of law and anti-crime efforts. All of this is needed, but there should be some consideration for Haiti's long-term needs and more planning detail to guide the development of legislation so that taxpayer money won't be wasted.

Second, we should not nickel and dime. Some \$3.2 billion over 25 years is insignificant compared to what the United States spends on security assistance in other parts of the world, especially the Middle East. While I don't recommend aid as a solution, the region's micro-budgets can't afford to spend much on counternarcotics, public safety, and port security. Drug trafficking is an estimated \$300 billion to \$400 billion-a-year global enterprise and knocking it down is expensive. Helicopters can run \$15 million apiece. Well-equipped patrol aircraft are substantially more. Aircraft and boats use lots of fuel, and that is costly.

Third, keep what works. While we can't bring back the old *Gentian* buoy tender, the U.S. Navy has an idea for a Global Fleet Station that would do the same thing, but with a faster, more capable vessel. *Operation Enduring Friendship* is already in motion, so completing Phase III for the Eastern Caribbean would be its logical conclusion. And to build on such existing mechanisms as the Eastern Caribbean's Regional Security System, the United States could help establish regional centers in different locations to supply aviation and maritime maintenance,

basic training, and special operations training. For instance, Jamaica has a military aviation school that could train some of the region's pilots.

Fourth, we should streamline funding and reporting requirements. A lesson from Merida is that when funding is cobbled together from various accounts, the strings attached to them get tangled. The biggest frustration for policymakers was how long it took to get approved and then how much time passed before assistance was delivered. While some of that probably cannot be avoided in this initiative, Congress and the White House should work toward developing a seamless national security budget that allows for interagency responses to what might be considered national missions—like helping Caribbean neighbors reduce transnational crime and violence.

Finally, we cannot ignore our neighbors' plight. Just as the United States launched the Caribbean Basin Initiative to spur business growth in the 1980s, a carefully crafted Caribbean Basin Security Initiative can help relieve the onslaught of transnational crime now and protect U.S. shores as well. If Washington were to retreat from such a challenge, considering past commitments and efforts to nurture solidarity, it might create space for others to fill, and make relations with governments like Venezuela more enticing.

### **Conclusion**

Obviously the United States does not have unlimited funds or resources. Challenges beckon at home and far away in the Middle East. But attention is needed in our neighborhood. And without the cooperation of prosperous, secure allies, our own security could be put at risk.

Again Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to testify this distinguished Subcommittee.