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Recommendations for a New Administration: Be a Good Neighbor to the Caribbean

By Anton Edmunds | December 26, 2012

While vacationers think of the Caribbean in terms of sun and beaches, U.S. policymakers tend to think of it in terms of counternarcotics, humanitarian aid, and HIV/AIDS mitigation. It is true that the Caribbean is prone to natural disasters and is dependent on imports for its food and energy, making it vulnerable to outside influences. On the flip side, the region can generate wealth from service industries, help protect U.S. shores, and play a moderating role in the hemispheric politics.

Those are all good reasons why U.S. policymakers should:

- Accompany security assistance with a good neighbor plan,

- Vary programs based on country and island cluster needs,
- Promote education programs for youth, and
- Foster greater energy and food autonomy.

It is useful to recall that the Caribbean is a region of contrasts.¹ Although all the economies are small, they encompass some of the richest and poorest nations on the planet. The gross domestic product per capita of the Bahamas is \$31,400, while that of Haiti is \$1,300. Populations vary from Cuba with about 11 million persons to Dominica with just 73,000. The Bahamas has hardly any resource endowments and depends on banking and tourism, while Trinidad & Tobago relies

¹ The Caribbean comprises 13 island nations and 2 countries located on the northern coast of South America (Guyana and Suriname), whose inhabitants may speak any of five languages. Most governments celebrate regular, free elections except Cuba.

on hydrocarbons and is the 15th-largest natural gas exporter in the world.

However, because the region lies in the middle of major shipping lanes, U.S.-Caribbean relations have long been driven by security concerns. The 1980s-era Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), which still defines the U.S.-Caribbean trade relationship, was a direct response to concerns that the nations of the Caribbean, Central America, and northern South America were susceptible to Cuba's socialist influence as they faced economic challenges that threatened political stability.

While young Caribbean democracies have remained politically stable, the reality is that the region continues to struggle with serious socioeconomic issues. Lagging economies, rising crime, weak border control and judicial systems all contribute to the perception of the region as being insecure, making a security-driven agenda such as the current Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) the major focus of U.S.-Caribbean relations. The impact of initiatives such as Mérida, which is geared toward Central America and Mexico, is also a U.S. policy driver, as strengthening interdiction in Mexico and Central America has the effect of diverting the flow of drugs through a more porous Caribbean region.

Although CBSI has sought to reduce the trafficking of weapons and narcotics, while promoting public safety, security, and justice sector reform, a good neighbor plan for the Caribbean has to be one that recognizes among other things that the Caribbean region is far from homogenous. The limitations of regional institutions such as CARICOM, struggles with governance by individual nations, and regional rifts within the Caribbean are not helpful to the development of comprehensive U.S.-Caribbean engagement.

As a result, there will only be limited success in implementing regional initiatives within a community that is nowhere close to being integrated. A nonhomogenous Caribbean may in fact mean that the development of future U.S.-Caribbean initiatives will need to be varied based on individual country and cluster needs. It may well be better



for the United States to work on certain key issues such as port and border security with the subregional Eastern Caribbean States, who as a cluster have shown a greater willingness to implement similar policies and programs. U.S. government supports for the creation and implementation of common standards at such a cluster level could result in Caribbean best practices for the wider region.

With economic development clearly the key to stability in the Caribbean, U.S. initiatives for the region also need to focus on improving trade links. In the case of the Caribbean, a major trading partner with whom the United States has a surplus, there is a direct benefit to the U.S. economy of further investments. Stronger U.S.-Caribbean links do not require an agreement that characterizes U.S. relations with these neighbors. Rather, support for building trade capacity that focuses on improving the safe and efficient movement of goods to and from the region will be the most helpful.

Long-term social and political stability should be supported with technical training programs for a young Caribbean population that is undereducated and underemployed. Education is key as the region struggles to develop viable competitive industries as it shifts from agriculture to the

services sector. The United States could support loans and grants that provide seed money to agricultural development and diversification for niche products, key areas that might also address food security concerns as the region continues to import the majority of its foodstuff from abroad. The same could be done for the energy sector where U.S.-Caribbean initiatives to promote energy security and diversification could help ease the region's reliance on fossil fuels. Disaster mitigation and initiatives to ensure continuity of business operations are also areas where stronger relationships can be built.

Again, it will be important to partner with individual countries and/or clusters to identify programs that can dovetail with the dominant tourism sector. The future success of U.S.-Caribbean relations will depend on a deeper understanding of the challenges facing the Caribbean and a renewed commitment to direct engagement with the region.

Anton Edmunds heads *The Edmunds Group International, LLC (TEG)*, an advisory services firm that focuses on the Caribbean Basin region and is a senior associate with the CSIS Americas Program.

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