

# Barack Obama and U.S. Reengagement in the Caribbean Basin

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In the space of two months this year, two high-ranking visits were made to the Caribbean by United States officials: Secretary of Defence Robert Gates in April and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in June. A year earlier, in May 2009, Attorney General Eric Holder visited. These visits and the accompanying top-level talks are evidence of intentional reengagement by the United States with the region, something promised by President Barack Obama while in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009 for the Fifth Summit of the Americas, just three months after his inauguration as the first African-American president of the United States.

Barack Obama's epochal election has raised expectations by citizens and statesmen throughout the Caribbean and around the world, about changes in the substance and tenor of America's global engagement. The exuberance and momentousness were demonstrated in the Caribbean in various ways.

But perhaps they were best symbolized by the action of the government of Antigua and Barbuda, which named Antigua's highest point, popularly known as Boggy Peak, as Mount Obama in August 2009. For all this, we should remember that the global

pursuits of powerful nations, especially one as complex as the United States, are driven not just by the likes and dislikes of individual presidents, no matter how significant their election. The nation's national interests are a key consideration. Of course, the president plays a major role in articulating those national interests.

America's first president, General George Washington, reminded scholars and statesmen of the centrality of "the national interest" in his November 14, 1778 letter to fellow revolutionary Henry Laurens from South Carolina: "It is a maxim founded on the universal experience of mankind that no nation is to be trusted further than it is bound by its interests, and no prudent statesman or politician will venture to depart from it."

Surely, Barack Obama is a prudent statesman and politician. As such, he would be mindful of national interest considerations in his foreign policy forays. Understandably, then, the Caribbean counts in the United States foreign and defense policy calculus not simply because of Barack Obama's election but because of America's interests in the region and because Obama understands the need to recalibrate his nation's engagement with the region to maximize those interests.

The interests revolve around democracy, geopolitics, geoeconomics, and geonarcotics. These are linked, but the *raison d'être* for the visits by Attorney General Holder and Secretaries Gates and Clinton was mostly geonarcotics, which involves drugs, crime and violence, and arms trafficking, among other things.

I originated the concept of geonarcotics in the early 1990s, outlining it first in 1993 in *International Journal*, Canada's premier international affairs journal. Later, I applied it empirically in a study called *Drugs and Security in the Caribbean: Sovereignty Under Siege*, published in 1997 by Penn State University Press.

The concept suggests the dynamic interaction of four factors: narcotics, geography, power, and politics; that the narcotics phenomenon is multidimensional, with four main problem areas (drug production, consumption-abuse, trafficking, and money-laundering); that these problem areas give rise to actual and potential threats to the security of states; and that drug operations and the activities they spawn precipitate both conflict and cooperation among various state and non-state actors. Crucially, as well, the geonarcotics approach does not view the "war on drugs" purely as a military matter.

Geography is a factor in this schema because certain physical, social, and political geography features of countries facilitate drug operations. Power involves the ability of individuals and groups to secure compliant action. This power is both state and non-state in origin, and in some cases non-state power holders command relatively more power than state power holders.

Politics entails the ability of power brokers to determine who gets what, how, and when through the allocation of resources. Since power in this milieu is not only state power, resource allocation is correspondingly not exclusively a function of state power-holders. Moreover, politics becomes perverted, and more perverted where it already was so. Indeed, the saga involving Jamaica and the United States over Shower posse leader Christopher “Dudus” Coke highlights some of the dangers to public security and political perversions involved.

Reflecting the preeminence of geonarcotics interests, the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI), which President Obama had promised in his April 2009 visit to Trinidad and Tobago, topped the agenda of the discussions by Secretaries Gates and Clinton, and crime and arms trafficking were front and center in the talks with Attorney General Holder. CBSI has three key objectives: to substantively reduce drug trafficking, increase public safety and security, and promote social justice.

These are laudable—and necessary—goals. Nevertheless, we should temper expectations about how much CBSI can help reduce drug and arms trafficking and ameliorate Caribbean criminality given the severity of the situation and because of what CBSI entails.

The Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Congress held Hearings in December 2009 on the region’s security situation and the prospects for CBSI making a difference, and they asked me to testify as an expert witness. As I indicated in my testimony, the \$37 million initial appropriation—down from the Administration’s \$45 million request—is insufficient.

Yes, the Administration envisages increasing the second year request to \$79 million. However, considering the scope of the challenges, the overall funding design sets the stage for low-investment—low-results outcomes. Especially because of the small appropriation, I advised that it was essential to minimize spending on administrative overhead and have most of the money channeled into programs in the region.

Further, I cautioned against diverting funds from valuable existing programs such as OPBAT (Operation Bahamas and Turks and Caicos), Tradewinds, and New Horizons to CBSI projects; digging holes to fill holes will not result in appreciable changes.

Crime—particularly murders—is one of the reasons for American reengagement in the Caribbean.

The region has the dubious distinction of having the world's highest per capita homicide rate. For instance, Jamaica, important to the United States because of bauxite, among other things, with 2.6 million people, had 4,881 reported murders during the three years 2007 to 2009, with 1680 murders for the year 2009 alone, the highest ever in any single year in Jamaica.

Trinidad and Tobago, which supplies the United States with 78 percent of its Liquefied Natural Gas, with a population half that of Jamaica, had 1,446 murders during the same time, with 509 in 2009. Comparatively, New York City, with 8.2 million people, had 1,489 homicides that same period, with 412 in 2009.

Most of the murders in the Caribbean are gun-related, and most of the weapons come from the United States. Thus, the visits by the three American top officials must have been awkward considering that, as of October 2010, the United States was yet to ratify the Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials, although it was one of its first signatories over a decade ago. In November 1997 presidents Bill Clinton of the United States and Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico were the lead signers at a grand ceremony in Washington, DC.

This is not to say that the United States does not offer valuable assistance to Caribbean countries in tracing weapons used in crimes within the region and in weapons smuggling from the United States into the region. But the absence of ratification of the Convention restricts America's ability to employ its full range of national powers on this matter, not just regarding Federal legal and policy efforts, but in controlling what individual states may do, especially since some of them have very lax laws regarding the purchase and sale of handguns, rifles, and other small arms.

And so, as the United States pursues reengagement with the Caribbean its policy makers and practitioners must remember two realities. One is the criticality of arms trafficking in the geonarcotics matrix. Therefore, they need to secure Senate ratification

of that vital 1997 Convention while pushing CBSI. In all this, though, American officials must keep in mind a second reality—and it is incumbent on Caribbean officials to remind them of this: that active reengagement must go beyond geonarcotics issues; to trade and investment, education, technology, environment, and other key areas. While reengaging on the geonarcotics front is necessary, it is not sufficient.

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