

The US Coast Guard's Western Hemisphere Strategy

Written by W. Alejandro Sanchez Nieto and Erica Illingworth

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On September 2014, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) published its *Western Hemisphere Strategy* (WHS), a document explaining the vision, objectives, priorities, and initiatives that the USCG plans to take in the immediate future, in order to protect the US and support regional partners in the Western Hemisphere, notably in the Greater Caribbean. The WHS is an important document that requires in-depth research, since the USCG is greatly involved in the day-to-day counter-narcotic operations taking place in the Greater Caribbean. In this analysis, we aim to discuss the *Western Hemisphere Strategy*, primarily focusing on the USCG's current and future security-related operations.

Security Operations

One factor which aids the increased USCG involvement in the Greater Caribbean is that regional nations generally have cordial relations with the US (Cuba and Venezuela are two notable exceptions). Moreover, Caribbean governments and security forces are also carrying out security-strategies of their own to combat illicit drug trade and actually desire Washington's support to combat transnational crime. Hence a more comprehensive, joint-multinational approach is welcomed.

Nevertheless, in spite of more robust security initiatives, including the controversial *Mano Dura* initiatives in various Central American countries, drug trafficking continues to expand, and the Greater Caribbean constitutes a series of corridors through which drugs from South America travel to the US and Mexico. The term *Mano Dura* (loosely translated to "iron fist") refers to policies aimed at broadening police powers, utilizing the military for internal security operations, and instituting longer prison sentences to target individuals and organizations involved in the drug trade. Critics of *Mano Dura* initiatives argue that its aggressive targeting, in the name of citizen security, leads to human rights abuses by the police and military. It now takes the effort of international actors working together to battle the highly-profitable drug trade. According to the Coast Guard Compass, drug trafficking is an astonishing multi-billion dollar industry, which destabilizes countries in the Western Hemisphere; undermining the rule of law, and bringing violence to local communities.

It is in this scenario that the WHS comes to life as it delineates the service's goals for the near future. Admiral Paul F. Zukunft, Commandant of the USCG, explains that the strategy for the Coast Guard in the Western Hemisphere is comprised of three main points: combatting networks, securing borders, and safeguarding commerce. Each point is its own separate issue, but each is interconnected in how the U.S. Coast Guard will tackle transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). The WHS correctly states that "these challenges are converging as [TCOs] strengthen. If left unchecked, they could fuel a cycle of compounding loss that threatens economic growth and regional stability."

Throughout its 60 pages, the report highlights the importance of the Greater Caribbean to U.S. homeland security. For example the WHS explains that "from 2009 to 2010, the National Drug Intelligence Center reported that cocaine along maritime routes between Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands tripled, and officials have estimated 75 percent of the homicides in Puerto Rico are drug and weapons trade related." These statistics highlight how special attention needs to be taken in the Greater Caribbean waters to combat the drug trade.

Allies: Regional and Others

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In a speech given at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in mid-January 2015, Admiral Zukunft stressed the importance of international cooperation. Similarly the WHS highlights the importance of the U.S. Coast Guard cooperating not only with other US security agencies, but also with Washington's partners in the Greater Caribbean, as well as extra-hemispheric nations operating in the region.

Case in point is the United Kingdom, the other half of the "special relationship," which continues to maintain overseas territories in the Caribbean and has close ties with members of the Commonwealth (e.g. Belize and Jamaica). Despite significant defense-related budget cuts, the United Kingdom has arguably maintained a strong presence in the Caribbean in recent years. In July 2014, two British Type 23 frigates, the *HMS Argyll* and *HMS Portland*, made port calls to Puerto Rico. The Royal Navy is actively working with the U.S. Coast Guard to combat the TCOs and when tensions arise in the Caribbean, British presence helps maintain stability by reassuring the powers involved.

The combined efforts of the U.S. Coast Guard and the British Royal Navy in the Caribbean have already proved effective. One recent example took place on January 22, 2015, when the Royal Navy seized a 1.25 ton cargo of cocaine, which held a wholesale value of over £60 million pounds. Additionally, successful teamwork between the USCG and the Royal Navy was demonstrated, when the British naval support ship, *RFA Wave Knight*, and a USCG patrol aircraft forced a speedboat to stop south of the Dominican Republic. The drug traffickers were handed over to the U.S. authorities off the coast of Puerto Rico. These two examples illustrate why the USCG must continue to take advantage of the assets its allies are providing in order to crackdown on drug-trafficking.

Since *transnational* crime inherently occurs across borders, multinational cooperation is key to addressing such security concerns, particularly one as complex as drug trafficking. Given this premise, and given the fact that the Greater Caribbean security forces generally remain in less than optimal conditions to crack down on drug trafficking off their coasts (which will be discussed later), the USCG should continue seeking cooperation with friendly extra-hemispheric actors, such as the Royal Navy. Fortunately, Admiral Zukunft recognizes this, and made a point to stress the need for cooperation in his speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The US is also working with forces within the Western Hemisphere, such as the Colombian Navy. According to the U.S. Defense Department, from January to June 2007, an estimated 70 percent of the cocaine in Colombia was smuggled out of the country by way of maritime segues. The drugs leave Colombia via go-fast vessels, fishing boats, the infamous narco-sub, and other forms of maritime transport. The U.S. Coast Guard has framed its strategy around supporting the Colombian Navy in improving its capacity to stop drug traffickers from using Colombia's Caribbean and Pacific coasts for drug transportation. Given the history of strong US-Colombian security relations, it is no surprise that the Colombian Navy has constantly turned to the U.S. Coast Guard as an important ally. Moreover, the Colombian Navy is doing its part to promote Caribbean security. In December 2014, it carried out the 12th "International Course on Coast Guards," in Cartagena de Indias. The course brought together naval officers from 18 countries, to learn about maritime interdictions, search and rescue operations and regional problems, such as drug and human trafficking. The naval personnel who attended the course came from Greater Caribbean nations like the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Panama.

The Caribbean island-states, while addressing major security challenges with smaller budgets, have also carried out other security-related initiatives. Most notably is the case of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, which inaugurated a new coast guard base in Canouan. The base was constructed with a \$2 million USD financial contribution from the US government as part of the *Secure Seas* program (Washington also donated two inflatable boats and a pick-up vehicle). Meanwhile, Trinidad and Tobago is interested in acquiring two long range patrol vessels (likely from Spain) to support its coast guard, given ongoing problems with several of its current patrol boats.

The advantage that Washington and the U.S. Coast Guard have now is that regional nations also want to crackdown on transnational crimes. Applying this to the WHS, the authors of this research article disagree with its paradoxical statement, which argues:

Despite globalization of world economies, many regional countries are growing more politically independent and no longer rely as much on their North American partners for assistance in addressing domestic challenges. As these

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governments become more distant, they are cultivating non-traditional allies. Russia and China are beginning to see progress in their efforts to engage Western Hemisphere nations.

Certainly several Greater Caribbean nations are looking to Moscow and Beijing for alliances and support, including arms sales (i.e. Venezuela), but this does not necessarily mean that these nations are interested in detaching themselves from US aid. For example, while Trinidad and Tobago may purchase Chinese patrol vessels for its coast guard, it is also a member of the Caribbean Border Security Initiative, which the US launched in 2009 to combat drug-related violence, trafficking, and terrorism in the region. Hence, acquiring Chinese (or Russian) security equipment does not necessarily signify that Greater Caribbean nations intend to sever their ties with the US. In other words, as the Greater Caribbean nations seek to tackle security challenges such as the drug trade, Washington is poised to remain involved as a prominent strategic partner.

Inter-Agency Cooperation

In his aforementioned speech at CSIS, the Coast Guard's Admiral Zukunft also stressed the importance of task forces. In the strategy, he plans for the U.S. Coast Guard to continue to collaborate and team with the U.S. Southern Command, U.S. Northern Command, and U.S. Special Operations Command "to increase awareness of threats, build competencies of partner nations by maintaining and expanding international training and exercise programs, and synergize strategies and operations for identifying and interdicting threats through established task forces." These task forces include the Joint Task Force East, which deals with border security, and Joint Task Force West, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security. The WHS also stresses the importance of continuing to be a leading "partner of joint and interagency operations commands such as Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF)-South," which is a multi-national operation targeting the illicit trafficking routes in the Caribbean.

Another task force with notable importance is the Joint Task Force-Bravo, which operates out of Soto Cano, a US military base located in Honduras, a Central American state known for internal insecurity, violence, and high levels of drug trafficking. US security agencies, including the task forces, are operating major security initiatives, such as Operation MARTILLO—a US, European, Central American, South American and Caribbean effort that targets illicit narcotic trafficking routes in the coastal waters of the Caribbean. The US is heavily involved in the multinational detection, monitoring, and interdiction operations. It has also contributed various US Navy and Coast Guard vessels, an aircraft from US federal law enforcement agencies, and military and law enforcement units. Combined with other Caribbean and European security units and law enforcement officers, this multinational operation aims to deny TCOs the ability to exploit transnational shipment routes in Central American and Caribbean waters for the movement of narcotics.

The cooperative strategy between the US and its anti-drug trade allies is important to the counter narcotics operations as well. For example, the relationship between the Colombian Navy and the U.S. Coast Guard, dating back to 1997 with the signing of the Bilateral Maritime Agreement, has been very important to counter narcotics operations. Between 1997 and 2005, 435 metric tons of cocaine were seized in the Caribbean. Sixty-three percent of these seizures were the results of combined operations between the Colombian Navy and the Coast Guard.

Other countries, especially those suffering from the effects of the illicit drug trade, seek the help of the US. Hence, one positive geopolitical factor that the USCG has on its side is that, unlike other regions of the world where the US is struggling to make alliances, in the Greater Caribbean, most nations desire greater US support and there are already well established US security facilities, not to mention the geographical proximity to the US itself. Contrary to other regions in the world where governments can be labeled as unreliable (e.g. Central Asia and Africa), Greater Caribbean governments, with few exceptions, have been actively engaged in cooperating with the US to combat the illicit drug trade. In addition, most of these states participate in various programs and initiatives like the TRADEWINDS program and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, which will be discussed in the following section. Despite their capabilities, having allies that want to cooperate with the USCG and other US security agencies is a strong pillar from which beneficial multinational operations can sprout.

Agreements and Cooperation

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The WHS focuses on how the Coast Guard can aid US partners in the Caribbean through various programs— one prominent example is TRADEWINDS, which includes classroom and at-sea training, practice drills, and scenario-based exercises to increase TCO network interdiction and coordination between partner nations. Another program that the US has spearheaded is the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative. This initiative ensures that newly acquired assets and capabilities are used optimally by applicable partner nations, which will guarantee maximum execution of combating the illicit narcotics networks in the Caribbean waters.

The annual TRADEWINDS program involves most Caribbean states in exercises that strengthen their capabilities. This operation focuses on the development of basic military skills, as well as improving their responses to natural disasters, illegal migration, and narcotics trafficking. It also allows the US to build stronger relationships in the Western Hemisphere, though one concern is that such initiatives will make Washington's partners rely too much on the US, and the Coast Guard in particular, for vital support to combat TCOs. At a time when the US government continues to debate over its future security objectives, and the defense budget has shifting priorities, it is in Washington's interest to not only support its Caribbean allies, but also train them so that they do not have to perpetually rely on the USCG.

The WHS also highlights the importance of the Department of Homeland Security's international diplomatic aid and security initiatives, such as the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative. Such initiatives represent the pillar of the US security strategy that focuses on citizen safety throughout the Western Hemisphere. The CBSI brings together all members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Dominican Republic, to jointly collaborate on regional security with the United States as a partner. According to the State Department, the US has provided \$263 million USD to the CBSI since 2010. Nevertheless, the CBSI initiative has also been critiqued because it allows for US security agencies to get more involved in Caribbean affairs, disrespecting the sovereignty of the smaller, weaker island-states. In other words, in strengthening USCG ties with its Caribbean partners, the Coast Guard must walk a fine line to not be regarded as undermining the sovereignty of these governments, as it will invoke recent experiences of the US doing so throughout the Cold War in the name of its national interests (i.e. the US military operations in the Dominican Republic in 1965 or Grenada in 1983).

Finally, in his speech at CSIS, Admiral Zukunft expressed the importance of bilateral agreements to combat TCOs. These bilateral agreements will strengthen the U.S. Coast Guard's interdiction capabilities by obtaining legal and diplomatic approval that will allow authorities to board vessels suspected of illicit TCO network activities. The expansion of bilateral agreements will give the U.S. Coast Guard more jurisdiction in the Caribbean and Latin American waters, allowing them to do more preventative action in the "War on Drugs."

Conclusions

The 2014 *Western Hemisphere Strategy* is an important document for the U.S. Coast Guard as it lays out the priorities for this security agency in coming years, most notably addressing drug trafficking within the Greater Caribbean. The WHS explains that the Caribbean should not be viewed as small, since it is an "incredibly diverse and expansive region includ[ing] more than 1,200 islands governed by more than 25 nations." Thus, the challenge that persists is not merely harmonizing the security interests and priorities of over two dozen nations, but also in monitoring a large geographic area consisting of over a thousand islands. Additionally, the WHS correctly notes future developments that will affect the Greater Caribbean. For example, the expansion of the Panama Canal will change shipping routes for the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, while most of the analysis and recommendations found in the WHS is relevant and realistic, the report does fall short on some issues. For example, it does not fully discuss, or praise, the role of extra-hemispheric powers whose navies are active in combatting drug traffickers in the Caribbean. The truth is that the US is not alone in countering the illicit drug trade; the Royal Navy, for example, significantly invests in helping to counter the TCOs in the region by deploying several of its warships to Caribbean waters (with positive results). Moreover, the report also tends to mostly praise USCG accomplishments within the region without giving a brief "tip of the hat" to Caribbean nations which are doing what they can to increase their coast guard services and promote regional security, such as island states acquiring new equipment to monitor their maritime territory.

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Growing relations between the region and countries like China and Russia are understandably portrayed under a prism of potential problems (especially given Russia's recent actions in Ukraine). However, the report could acknowledge that this development is natural, as Greater Caribbean nations look to diversify their relationships beyond the U.S. to secure "good deals" on weapons purchases. While it may be troubling that Trinidad and Tobago aim to purchase patrol vessels from China, if said vessels are effectively cracking down on narco-submarines and narco-speedboats aiming to bring drugs into the US, then such a relationship may have its benefits. Moreover, most Greater Caribbean nations maintain strong security relations with the US, best exemplified by their participation in the CBSI, TRADEWINDS exercises and Operation MARTILLO.

It is a worrisome development that TCOs have developed, expanded, and are now present in various, if not all, Latin American and Caribbean states. But thankfully the region, along with extra-hemispheric partners, is coming together to combat these common security threats.

Given Washington's history with Latin America, and the Greater Caribbean in particular, it is understandable that there is a certain degree of skepticism towards US military initiatives in the region. Nevertheless, as Admiral Zukunft puts it, "It takes a network to defeat a network." Via its *Western Hemisphere Strategy*, the U.S. Coast Guard seems interested in being the tip of the spear regarding positive and constructive U.S. security activities in the Greater Caribbean's future.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any organizations or entities that they are affiliated with.

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