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Naval Option for the Caribbean: The US Coast Guard

by

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Caribbean countries and territories have become conspicuous in the United States' discussions about areas of national interest. Cuba, of course, has been the subject of discussion for some time, but now it is not alone as an area of concern. Many of the Caribbean countries suffer from political instability, poverty, socioeconomic inequities, and local insecurity, all causing anxieties both in those countries and in our own, because these conditions could be exploited by radical elements wishing to establish Communist governments in our hemisphere. The Soviet Union would, of course, be the ultimate benefactor for any such movements.

Since the isthmus, continental, and island nations share a common sea, a major focus of US policy should be to help develop regional naval forces that contribute to their collective security and economic well being. In addition, the United States should maintain a naval surveillance and peace-keeping presence in the area. In my judgment, these goals can best be accomplished by the US Coast Guard. In this arena, Coast Guard forces would be augmenting the Navy's worldwide efforts to preserve international stability. Furthermore, the Coast Guard's current missions, size, and capabilities make it an appropriate choice as a naval instrument of national policy for the Caribbean. It can act as a role model, provide instructions for developing navies, and supply the appropriate level of deterrence in the area.

Economic and Political Instability

Some of the countries, Mexico, Venezuela, and Trinidad-Tobago, produce oil, but the others, the island nations in particular, have very little industry and suffer from trade deficits and high oil prices. Even Jamaica, which exports bauxite, is plagued with an economic decline and rising inflation. Tourism, modest agriculture, and light industry do not provide sufficient income to support government modernization, adequate education and health services, or better income distribution schemes. Many unfulfilled promises of steady jobs, welfare services, and an improved way of life sharpen discontent and frustration. These are the seeds of riot and revolution.

In February 1982, President Reagan began a new trade and development policy to improve the Caribbean's economic well being. The approach is low-keyed, with a keen regard for emerging nationalism and the divergent backgrounds and interests of the perimeter nations. Assistance is to be in the form of trade preferences, underwriting private investments in the area, and fostering regional self-defense. This must be accomplished tactfully to avoid impressions of paternalism that can spark anti-American sloganeering.

Of the eleven Caribbean island nations, only three were in existence in 1960. Although most of the fledgling nations are democracies, extreme nationalism and socialism are strong forces that provide slogans for radical elements. The first Caribbean take-over, after Cuba, by a radical, leftist force occurred in Grenada in 1979. Once in power, the new government aligned itself with Cuba and became hostile to the United States. Washington was concerned that similar revolutions would spread to other troubled islands in the eastern Caribbean, chiefly Dominica, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent. Although this has not happened, the new leftist elements have become more prominent in each of these nations.

Cuba stands ready to assist any revolutionary coup attempt in the Caribbean, as she did in Nicaragua and is doing in El Salvador. Of course, the Soviet Union would like nothing better than to stimulate trouble in the Western Hemisphere, right at the doorstep of the United States. The Soviet-Cuban Communist partnership would relish a Vietnam styled US involvement in El Salvador to deflect attention from Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan and problems in Poland.

In the Caribbean, a modest movement away from leftist styled governments has become evident since the Grenada and Nicaragua take-overs. Edward Seaga defeated Michael Manley in Jamaica and halted the Manley attempt to align with Cuba. In other nations, as well, recent elections



have brought in moderate-conservative groups. However, the pervasive leftist movements, such as that emerging in Guatemala, are future forces to be considered.

US Maritime Force Choice

In August 1980, Senator Frank Church disclosed that a 3,000-man Soviet brigade had moved into Cuba. This presence in the Western Hemisphere added to the Carter administration's concerns over sophisticated air and naval platforms supplied to Cuba by the Soviets, more frequent Soviet naval visits to Cuba, and exercises in the Caribbean Sea.

President Carter responded by establishing a Caribbean Contingency Joint Task Force in Key West, Florida. The Navy announced they were assigning the six new *Pegasus*-class hydrofoil missile boats as a support group for this task force. This modest contingent only has enough unrefueled range to patrol the Strait of Florida and the northwest Caribbean Sea, leaving the rest of the Caribbean unattended except during naval exercises and by the hodgepodge of ships normally in training out of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

This small Navy commitment to the Joint Task Force is a result not of design, but of necessity. The Navy does not have sufficient ships to handle simultaneous contingencies wherever they occur. As the former Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Thomas Hayward, stated in his report for Fiscal Year 1982, the Navy is stretched thinner now than any time since 1940 because it is being used to meet a three-ocean commitment with a one-and-a-half ocean force.

In addition, many advocates argue the Navy should concentrate on nuclear submarines, battle groups, and amphibious forces, which, I feel, are inappropriate for the current Caribbean climate, even if they are available. Any permanent cruising force of amphibious or battle group composition in the region would be disproportionate to present threats and could reawaken fears of the US Marines landing once again in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, or Nicaragua.

If the six *Pegasus* boats are not enough, and a high-mix force is too much, what, then, is a proper sized US naval force for the Caribbean to provide a naval presence, as well as stimulate regional maritime economic development? I contend the US Coast Guard, with its current missions and force capabilities, can provide vital assistance to the Caribbean nations to expand their maritime economic base and provide for their own security. The Coast Guard can also safeguard the US economic and security interests in the area.

Mission Compatibility

The organization and mission requirements of the Coast Guard are similar to those of both the small new nations and the larger navies of the developed countries. Many of the emerging Caribbean nations' mission requirements

are already being accomplished in cooperation with the US Coast Guard. This compatibility provides a natural relationship of shared interests, problems, and solutions, without the stigma of paternalistic approaches.

Search and Rescue. The Seventh Coast Guard District in Miami, Florida, and, especially, its Greater Antilles Section, is responsible for all Coast Guard activities in the Caribbean. Historically, the Seventh District has sought to establish international coordination and cooperation for search and rescue missions with the Caribbean nations. This type of joint effort was highlighted by a rescue effort that began with an Italian motor vessel's report to the Coast Guard in Miami of a smoldering wreck south of Haiti. Since the wreck was abandoned, the Coast Guard opened a combined survivor search with Curacao, Jamaica, Venezuela, and the US Navy in Guantanamo Bay. The multinational ship and plane search found four survivors.

The mainstay of the Coast Guard's search and rescue surface operations are its motor life boats and patrol boats ranging up to 95 feet in length. These boats are comparable to those used by the island nations. For instance, Barbados is converting 75-foot shrimp boats to coastal patrol boats, the Dominican Republic operates a variety of ex-US Navy and US Coast Guard patrol boats, Honduras operates a small squadron of fast patrol and coastal patrol boats, and Venezuela operates a fleet of Italian- and French-built patrol craft. Most of the smaller island nations do not, as yet, operate any boats that are capable of sustained operations beyond the harbor entrances.

With about 2,200 boats and patrol boats of its own, the Coast Guard has the experience to foster standardization of patrol boats among the Caribbean nations to take advantage of economies of scale in construction and maintenance. Similarly, the Coast Guard can encourage compatible equipment installations, so that joint training and multinational manning can be realized in mission areas of mutual interest. Communications equipment, radars, and propulsion plants are examples that lend themselves to this concept.

As noted in the joint rescue operation cited, tactical coordination can be helpful in search and rescue. Some of these tactics are taught at the Coast Guard's National Search and Rescue School on Governors Island, New York. In April 1981, a mobile training team from this school conducted a two-week coastal search planning course for the Jamaican Coast Guard in Port Royal, Jamaica. This course was especially tailored for the local conditions, and was the first such course taught by the Coast Guard in a foreign country.

Aids to Navigation. The Caribbean Sea is a notoriously poor area for point-to-point visual and electronics navigation. Aside from SatCom, the best navigation results are still obtained from sun lines and stars.

The Coast Guard operates one buoy tender for aids to navigation missions out of San Juan, Puerto Rico, and numerous others out of Miami. Generally they maintain aids only in US territorial waters.

Reliable Loran C navigation coverage is available only in the northwest Caribbean. Omega is generally available, but it is accurate only to 2-4 nautical miles. In any event, like SatCom, not many mariners can afford the Omega receivers and associated equipment. Therefore, until he reaches a harbor approach, the ordinary navigator in the Caribbean has few modern tools with which to fix his position.

The Coast Guard's expertise in maintaining over 44,000 aids to navigation can be shared with the Caribbean nations. The Service has small, capable buoy tenders. These can be used as training platforms and model vessels for purchase once the host nation has obtained some graduates from the Coast Guard's aids to navigation school. I would also recommend that a Loran C network be jointly developed with interested Caribbean nations to penetrate the area of poor coverage in the central and southeastern Caribbean. Among the results of this mutual effort would be a shared sense of accomplishment.

Maritime Pollution Control. Since 1970 the Coast Guard has been charged with control of maritime pollution. These duties were extended after the tanker *Argo Merchant* broke up off Nantucket Island in 1976. To meet these responsibilities, the Coast Guard has developed a comprehensive system of pollution surveillance, inspection and control, and has organized expert Strike Teams to contain pollution at the scene of any maritime disaster.

Many deep-water harbors in the Bahamas, the Netherlands Antilles, Puerto Rico, Trinidad-Tobago, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and the Virgin Islands contain large crude oil refineries. Supertankers and other large tankers regularly carry crude and refined petroleum through the Caribbean. In fact, 310 million tons, almost one-half of the petroleum coming into the United States annually, passes through these waters. Modest prudence would dictate a comprehensive preparedness plan for a catastrophic pollution incident at sea or in port.

Such a plan, the Oil Spill Contingency Plan for the Caribbean, has been under development by over twenty area nations, as well as by a number of international and intergovernmental organizations. Its aim is to provide oil spill control, and depends heavily on prearranged actions in case of a spill.

The essential quick response capability of the Oil Spill Contingency Plan has been encouraged by the Coast Guard, most recently in pollution response and intervention seminars held in Puerto Rico in October 1982. However, I believe a broader initiative could be started by providing a Coast Guard nucleus for a Caribbean Region Strike Team modeled on the Coast Guard's own pollution response strike teams. Coast Guard personnel could help standardize techniques and equipment, as well as provide local training. The team itself would be a multinational Caribbean force which would be located and equipped to respond to a pollution emergency anywhere in the region. In addition, the strike team could go throughout the area conducting vessel and

port inspections, and training smaller local teams to handle routine spills, and keeping up the local antipollution consciousness.

Law Enforcement. The Coast Guard's Enforcement of Laws and Treaties program is directed at fisheries zone management and the prevention of smuggling. In the 1970s, Congress and the President tasked the Coast Guard with developing programs to enforce the mandates. This was consistent with Title 14, US Code, which established the Coast Guard as the only federal, seagoing law enforcement agency, with authority over waters under US jurisdiction.

The Coast Guard answered by altering its "good guy" image, seizing ships that violated fishing regulations, and firing at maritime drug traffickers who were reluctant to halt. To use its forces efficiently, the Coast Guard had to develop intelligence networks, surveillance techniques, interdiction plans, boarding procedures, search techniques, and vessel seizure procedures. The fisheries conservation action generally took place off the Grand Banks and in the Bering Sea, but the drug traffic interdiction happened in the Caribbean. The Yucatan Channel, the Strait of Florida, and the Windward Passage became Coast Guard chokepoints for picking off the smugglers.

Since all the independent countries of the Caribbean region have now declared a 200 nm. maritime economic zone, they must be prepared to police their expanded areas. Many of the maritime enforcement techniques developed by the Coast Guard provide efficient models that could be transferred to the Caribbean countries.

At the present time, fisheries are the only maritime endeavors requiring protection. But, deep seabed mineral explorations would be encouraged in Caribbean waters if adequate protection for projects was demonstrated. Chemicals, minerals, oil and gas, as well as the protein available from offshore fish catches will require national, or preferably, regional coast guards to protect assets above and below the surface. These forces can be trained by the US Coast Guard, under the US International Military Education and Training program, or other reimbursable programs. Since 1979, eleven Caribbean countries have received over 1900 weeks of training by the Coast Guard in a variety of mission areas.

The Coast Guard can assist in determining the size of the maritime forces that can be supported by a country. It can provide training platforms in the host country, and it can offer quotas in related Coast Guard courses. In particular, the Coast Guard can reduce the tensions caused by overlapping maritime jurisdictional claims by encouraging and supporting multinational maritime forces to police the economic zones.

US National Security

In addition to the brigade in Cuba and the possibility of helicopters and advisors in Nicaragua, other increases in Soviet Caribbean activities have

occurred since 1969. Bear "D" reconnaissance aircraft regularly call in Cuba, and surface and subsurface units exercise in the Caribbean in conjunction with calls at Havana and Cienfuegos. In 1970, the Soviets constructed a submarine tender facility at Cienfuegos, a deep-water port capable of handling nuclear submarines. American disclosure caused them to abandon the use of this facility—at least temporarily.

The Soviets and Cubans regularly exercise in the Caribbean with surface vessels and submarines. On one occasion, a Golf-class SSBN was spotted in Cuba, and was later kept under surveillance by P-3 aircraft. In 1979, the Soviets delivered two Foxtrot-class submarines to Cuba.

In 1971, the US Navy established Destroyer Squadron 18 at Key West to monitor the Soviet surface and subsurface activity. This squadron observed Soviet exercises in the Strait of Florida which used Hormone helicopters and Foxtrot-class submarines. Cuban patrol boats and MiG-21 aircraft (more presents from the Russians) also participated in the exercises. Unfortunately, this US destroyer squadron was discontinued in 1973. An increase in the number of Coast Guard cutters patrolling in the Caribbean Sea would restore much of this surveillance, and put the Soviets and Cubans on notice that the United States was actively engaged in the region.

Coast Guard Caribbean Resource Recommendations

Many Coast Guard forces already mentioned are in place and operating in the Caribbean. This includes cutters from other east coast Districts which supplement those in the Seventh District (and those further west in the Gulf of Mexico, which is in the Eighth Coast Guard District) on drug enforcement patrols and for emergencies such as the Cuban exodus. In addition, the US Coast Guard now has a senior officer in Panama assigned to Commander, South Atlantic Forces, and a security assistance officer on CinCLantFlt staff in Norfolk.

The Coast Guard also participated with the US Navy in UNITAS '81 and '82 exercises. Although these were primarily ASW exercises with South American forces, the US Coast Guard provided ships and boats that do not engage in ASW. Instead, in 1981, a 210-foot medium endurance cutter, an 82-foot patrol boat, and two search and rescue boats went with the forces to demonstrate their multimission capabilities. These ships and boats provided model platforms for the types of missions generally performed by the Caribbean nations. Last year, the Coast Guard sent a 32-foot harbor patrol boat to demonstrate its pollution surveillance capabilities.

In October 1981, the Commandant of the Coast Guard hosted a conference in Miami for representatives from many Caribbean nations to discuss items of mutual interest. The topics of this conference centered around search and rescue and oil pollution response. A second conference is planned to convene late this year. Follow-up mini-conferences on pollution response and investigation were held in Puerto Rico last fall.

Some of the Caribbean nations are making a longer term commitment to train their officer candidates in Coast Guard procedures. Barbados, Trinidad-Tobago, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, and Guyana all have cadets enrolled at the Coast Guard Academy. These cadets will develop life-long friendships with their US classmates, which will facilitate professional exchanges long after graduation. Similarly, Caribbean nations have sent students to the Coast Guard's Officer Candidate School at Yorktown, Virginia.

These modest starts, coupled with the training initiatives and joint concepts mentioned earlier, can assist the Caribbean nations in their own economic progress and security. Also, some of the economic and military funds for the Caribbean, announced by President Reagan, can be used for patrol craft, maintenance costs, and shore facilities seed money.

While these activities will support recovery and self-sufficiency efforts of the Caribbean basin nations, including assistance to avoid Cuban encroachments, the scope of the effort for US economic and security interests must be larger. We must provide visible security for our imported petroleum which comes through the Caribbean either from refineries or transshipment points, or from the west coast passing through the Panama Canal, en route to the eastern seaboard. In the event of US-USSR hostilities, unmonitored Cuban Foxtrot-class submarines could be used to lay mines in the mouth of the Panama Canal or in the island passes. The Louisiana Offshore Oil Port (LOOP) is also unprotected against quiet submarines with mines or torpedoes. Finally, the Strait of Florida can be a chokepoint for resupply ships sailing from Gulf ports in the event of a Nato war. All these areas require routine ASW surveillance.

If Russia has the freedom to use the Caribbean as a regular exercise area with her playmate, what is to prevent her from leaving one or two clandestine Echo II long-range missile submarines behind when the rest of the fleet goes home? This could raise havoc throughout the Caribbean as well as in the southern approaches to Florida and the Gulf states.

To monitor hostile activity and provide a viable security presence in the Caribbean, I propose assigning six new 270-foot medium endurance Coast Guard cutters, and at least four 378-foot high endurance cutters to the area. This will provide sufficient cruising cutters to insure a regular visible presence in the Caribbean. These cutters will both be equipped with sensors and weapon systems that are equal to the current threats, including Cuba's new Koni-class frigate, and be compatible with the environment. For example, the Cuban diesel submarines will be vulnerable to the 378-foot high-endurance cutter's SQS-38 sonars, especially in chokepoints and at the access points to deep-water ports; and the AN/SQR-19 Tactas sonar, to be installed on the 270-foot medium-endurance cutters, will be able to listen in the deep Caribbean basins—many areas are over 12,000 feet—for transiting nuclear submarines.

These ships will also support the boats and teams that will be spread throughout the Caribbean on search and rescue, aids to navigation, and

antipollution missions. They should also provide welcomed tourist revenues during their port calls without overwhelming local facilities. But their most significant impact will be the sense of security and well being they will project in supporting our friends in the Caribbean. The white hulls and distinctive markings of the Coast Guard ships will be a regular reminder to these nations that the United States intends to back up her resolve to be the dominant naval force in support of freedom in the region.

The Coast Guard ships and boats will also be supported by the new HU-25A Falcon aircraft flying out of southern Florida. These long-range, multimission planes will have superior all-weather sensors to conduct search and rescue and antipollution patrols, as well as ocean and coastal surface surveillance.

Recommendations

The Caribbean nations should develop individual and regional naval forces for search and rescue, aids to navigation, pollution prevention and control, and security of their offshore assets. The Coast Guard's forces can provide assistance, training, and ship models for these new maritime efforts. In addition, the Coast Guard can guide the nations toward affordable forces, and can join with them in exercises and operations for mutual benefits. This Coast Guard assistance, as a part of this country's new Caribbean policy, can help in the economic development and political stability of the region.

The Coast Guard's ships and planes can provide a deterrence to Cuban and Soviet influence in the area. Outfitted with state-of-the-art surface and subsurface surveillance equipment, they can detect and track contacts in both deep and shallow waters. In this low-mix environment, a committed, determined, and capable US Coast Guard can free US Navy resources for blue-water action elsewhere.

Writing in *Harper's Monthly* for October, 1897, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan noted the similarity of the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, ". . . their conspicuous characteristics now are their political and military importance, in the broadest sense, as concerning not only the countries that border them, but the world at large." His prescient observation remains true today.

Captain Trainer is the US Coast Guard Advisor to the President, Naval War College.

