

The United States and the Caribbean Community: Building on Forty Years of Partnership

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On July 4, 2013, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) marked the fortieth anniversary of its founding under the Treaty of Chaguaramas. Established to promote economic integration, coordinate foreign policies, and facilitate functional cooperation in human and social development among its fifteen member states, CARICOM has dismantled trade barriers, created a regional Supreme Court, and coordinated regional approaches to education, public health, disaster response, climate change and development financing.

It is a fortuitous coincidence that CARICOM shares a common foundation date with the United States, its closest neighbor, major trading partner, and home to millions of Caribbean people. Our common birthday reflects our shared commitment to democratic values and respect for human rights, close social and economic ties, intertwined multicultural richness, and geographic interconnectedness. It also reflects our common determination to achieve social justice, prosperity, and security for the people of our countries. That is why, at the 5th Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009, President Obama affirmed his desire to seek a new and more balanced relationship with the Caribbean region through the development of practical initiatives rooted in mutually beneficial partnerships.

Over the past forty years, the United States and the countries of the Caribbean Community have enjoyed close and mutually beneficial relations, though not without overcoming challenges inherent in relations between small states and a much larger neighbor. We have worked closely together to boost trade through the Caribbean Basin Initiative. We have collaborated to deter illicit narcotics and weapons trafficking and to boost the capabilities of Caribbean law enforcement and security forces to protect their shores and deter violent crime through the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI). US development assistance has built roads, schools, and medical facilities, supported agricultural diversification, strengthened judicial systems, rebuilt hurricane devastated infrastructure, and strengthened education. We have worked in partnership to combat the scourge of HIV/AIDS and mitigate the impact of climate change. Our people study together, travel in each other's countries, invest in new businesses, and integrate each other's cultural dynamism into our rich national tapestries.

Today, we are building on this firm foundation of cooperation to tackle a broad array of new challenges and advance shared security, economic, and social goals. In May this year, Vice President Biden met with Caribbean leaders in Port of Spain, Trinidad, where he reaffirmed the United States' commitment to deepening our economic collaboration with the Caribbean region to expand prosperity and boost social inclusion.

The meeting also reinforced our common commitment to closer cooperation to enhance citizen security, build safe communities, and promote a favorable business and investment climate.

The Administration recognizes the value of elevating our relationship with regional organizations to bolster partnerships, including deepening its engagement with the Caribbean Community. Given the broad alignment of interests and values that exist between the United States and the member states of CARICOM, it is very much in the US interest to work more closely with this regional grouping closest to our shores.

As CARICOM turned 40 this year, many of its member states found themselves facing some of the most difficult headwinds in the region's independent history. Seven CARICOM countries are burdened with what the President of the Caribbean Development Bank considers unsustainable debt. Tourism-based economies have been contracting or suffering from low growth, while unemployment has increased, especially among the young. This in turn has generated higher crime levels and a growing sense of insecurity among citizens.

In the face of these challenges, CARICOM countries have become preoccupied with pressing domestic issues, contributing to waning enthusiasm for implementation of the region's signature project—the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME). The CSME was supposed to remove barriers to the free movement of capital and labor, stimulate intra-regional trade and investment, encourage growth of regional businesses, and create a single currency—all by 2015. But the global financial crisis and its aftermath created a difficult environment and, to some extent, forestalled regional integration efforts. Regionalism had promised much, but seemingly delivered little.

While CARICOM Heads of Government at a 2012 meeting in Suriname downplayed the sense of an existential crisis for CARICOM, they nevertheless agreed on the urgent need to address deficiencies in regional cooperation, strengthen the CARICOM Secretariat, and adapt regional cooperation to focus more urgently on core economic, social and security challenges.

Recognizing the challenges facing the countries of the Caribbean Community, the United States is working both bilaterally and regionally to create new economic opportunity, especially for young people. In these efforts to tackle social challenges, reinforce the rule of law, and enhance citizen security, CARICOM has been an effective and reliable international partner.

Despite the cynicism that many in the Caribbean region feel from what has been characterized as an “implementation deficit,” CARICOM is doing much more than often portrayed in the region's media. CARICOM's Secretariat coordinates trade and promotes economic integration, advances human and social development, and harmonizes member states' foreign and security policy. CARICOM's unheralded core strength is rooted in its regional sub-organizations that are quietly building a web of functional cooperation that

has enhanced the region's resilience, built on best practices, and facilitated engagement with international partners, including the United States.

CARICOM plays a central role in coordinating and implementing CBSI, launched by President Obama at the 2009 Summit of the Americas in Trinidad. The CBSI partnership is strengthening our common ability to reduce illicit trafficking, enhance public safety and security, and promote justice in the Caribbean. It represents an innovative approach to security that seeks to address both the root causes as well as the consequences of crime and violence that threaten the social fabric and economic vitality of CARICOM member states and the Dominican Republic. CBSI partners believe the young people of the region are seeking greater economic opportunity, and the United States is committed to working with CARICOM, member states, and civil society partners to enhance life and job skills of at-risk youth.

These efforts reinforce CARICOM's own Social Development and Crime Prevention Action Plan. CARICOM's Implementation Agency on Crime and Security (IMPACS) coordinates CBSI technical working groups and intra-regional security initiatives with the United States and the Dominican Republic. Its intelligence arm shares security and law enforcement information across boundaries, which has contributed to increasing drug seizures and arrests. Through our collaboration with IMPACS' Joint Regional Communications Center we have screened over three million airline passengers to help secure our collective borders against terrorist and criminal elements.

The United States and CARICOM are also determined to work as partners to build greater prosperity and closer economic links between our people and our businesses. The United States believes regional economic integration and expanded trading opportunities are fundamental to the prosperity and sustainable development of the Caribbean region. To these ends, we are working with CARICOM to promote an economic growth agenda that facilitates trade, promotes public-private partnerships, expands entrepreneurship, fosters attractive business and investment climates, and expands access to reliable, clean, and affordable energy.

During the Vice President's May 2013 meeting in Trinidad with Caribbean Heads of Government, he and President Martelly of Haiti signed the US-CARICOM Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA). The TIFA gives our trade relationship a strategic framework for a closer trade and investment dialogue, and establishes the US-CARICOM Trade and Investment Council (TIC) to implement the agreement. The TIFA will build on three decades of expanding trade through the Caribbean Basin Initiative and the Caribbean Basin Trade Partnership Act (CBTPA), whose extension through 2020 will ensure continued preferential access to US markets for Caribbean products to stimulate growth and job creation. As a result of these efforts, Caribbean exports to the United States have increased 178 percent over the past decade, while US exports have also grown by a healthy 133 percent.

CARICOM countries are saddled with some of the highest energy costs in the world, eroding their competitiveness and reducing growth. To overcome this economic drag,

the United States is working through the Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas (ECPA) to reduce Caribbean dependence on imported fossil fuels. ECPA donors have funded feasibility assessments of the commercial and technical viability of renewable energy projects, including geothermal, solar, wind, and hydro power, and examined prospects for inter-connections among countries to boost economic benefits. We are also actively engaging the Caribbean hotel sector to promote energy efficiency, while supporting solar energy demonstration projects and business plan development.

In the area of public health, CARICOM's Pan-Caribbean Partnership against HIV/AIDS (PANCAP) has been reducing the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS by coordinating the work of national HIV/AIDS programs and international and regional agencies and donors. It has fostered the development of common approaches and programmatic activities, advocated for increased donor support, and built capacity among member states. PANCAP has been a primary implementing partner for the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), allowing us to focus our PEPFAR efforts more strategically. The newly established Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) offers scope for future coordination with CARICOM in addressing the growing challenges faced by a region with one of the highest global incidence of non-communicable diseases.

The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) is another active US partner. Working closely with USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), CDEMA supports the national efforts among its member states to mitigate potential disasters and provide immediate, coordinated responses in this hurricane, earthquake and flood-prone region. Through CDEMA, CARICOM was supportive of the work of US and other international agencies in the aftermath of Haiti's devastating earthquake.

In a region where many countries have gained their independence in the past half century, the Caribbean has been, with rare exception, a bastion of democratic governance in a turbulent world. Our shared democratic values have made CARICOM an important global partner for the United States in support of democracy, human rights and good governance. CARICOM countries provided a crucial unified bloc of votes in support of the US candidacy for the United Nations Human Rights Council. In the face of challenges to vital Inter-American human rights institutions, CARICOM again delivered critical support to elect a US candidate to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission this year. CARICOM itself provides election observer missions for elections within the region, and often plays active behind the scenes roles in mitigating political tensions and violence that threaten democracy in the region. Our common interests have been particularly evident in Haiti, where CARICOM played a key leadership role in ensuring free and fair elections and in expanding economic opportunity by removing trade restrictions on Haitian exports.

In keeping with their values and proud democratic traditions, CARICOM member states should begin to move beyond Cold War era sentiments of solidarity and consider ways to support democratic change in Cuba. CARICOM countries could share their experiences with Cuba on the role of free labor unions, uncensored media, access to the Internet, and open and fair elections as a tool to build political consensus.

Beyond all of the many programs, joint initiatives, and partnerships between CARICOM and the United States, our close relationship is reinforced by an extraordinary range of connections among our people, families, businesses, artists, musicians, and tourists. To build on these vital connections, the United States developed a partnership to enlist members of the Caribbean Diaspora to put their talents, energy, and entrepreneurial spirit to work for the region. To better tap this potential, the State Department launched the International Diaspora Engagement Alliance (IDEA) to bridge the gap between Diaspora communities and entrepreneurs in their countries of origin. The Caribbean was the first region in the world selected to demonstrate the potential of these alliances, and here, too, CARICOM has been a supportive partner.

As the many partnerships and connections make clear, the relationship between the United States and the Caribbean Community is dynamic, multifaceted, and mutually beneficial. The countries of CARICOM are our closest non-contiguous neighbors, and the personal connections between us, including immigration, tourism, business and investment are close and intense. By deepening our engagement with CARICOM, we can build a closer and ever more productive partnership for democracy, prosperity and security between the United States and the Caribbean.