



SPC1: Special Conference on Sustainable Development

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Issue: The question of military buildup in the Caribbean Sea

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Committee: Special Conference on Marine Affairs (SPC1)
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I. Introduction



Picture 1: "Map of the Caribbean Region" (Britannica)

The military buildup in the Caribbean Sea is quite similar to that in the South China Sea where tensions caused by the clash of regional and international parties' geopolitical interests is the fundamental cause driving conflicts. Some of the predominant countries involved in the military buildup within the region are Venezuela, Colombia, the United States, and Russia. One of the driving factors behind this military buildup is the region's importance in international maritime trade as it connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico and the Panama Canal. Additionally, the abundance of valuable metals and minerals in the region further contributes to its economic importance. The increase in militarization in the region and the polarization between different parties is only escalating the situation at hand, posing a significant threat to regional and global security. Due to its threat to international peace and global trade, addressing this issue is of utmost urgency.



II. Involved Countries and Organizations

United States (US)

The US possesses a central role in the military dynamics in the region with its involvement in strategic, security, and political domains. The US maintains its military presence in the Caribbean through the US Southern Command, one of the unified military commands located in Florida, and the Fourth Fleet which is one of the navy units Washington has assigned to the Southern Command. One of the fundamental ways through which these forces maintain their military presence is the conducting of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) where American vessels would pass through contested maritime zones to protest excessive maritime claims, ensure safe passage through critical waterways, and assert international navigation rights. This policy of Washington is similar to the one that is being implemented in the South China Sea. Washington talks about these freedom of navigation operations in their yearly reports where they explicitly explain which specific maritime claim they are protesting through the operations. In the fiscal year of 2023, the US announced that they conducted FONOPs against Colombia and the Dominican Republic for different reasons.

In addition to the FONOPs, the US also conducts joint military exercises with Caribbean nations, one of the most significant ones being the Exercise Tradewinds. The drill that had countries besides the US such as but not limited to Barbados, Belie, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, France, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Mexico was conducted to “enhance the collective ability of their defense forces and constabularies to counter transnational organized crime and conduct humanitarian/disaster relief operations while developing strong relationships and reinforcing human rights awareness”.

The main view of the US on the issue revolves around international maritime law. Through FONOPs, Washington manages to protest the excessive maritime claims of the countries in the Caribbean while also maintaining its right to navigate freely in international waters. Another reason why the US is as active as it is in the region is to diminish the influence of non-regional powers like Russia and China. Additionally, the US states that American military presence in the region is necessary to deal with other threats such as drug cartels. The general reasoning of the US policy in the Caribbean can be seen through a snippet from the Western Hemisphere Strategic Framework which states, “Repressive dictatorial regimes threaten regional security, a situation exacerbated by the encroachment of both transnational criminal organizations and adversarial countries exerting malign influence. Throughout the region, these external actors seek to align themselves with sympathetic regimes, exploit the region’s abundant resources for their gain, and target their investments and donations to expand their own political and economic influence, all while contributing to widespread corruption and the systematic deterioration of the rule of law”.



Venezuela

Venezuela has been actively enhancing its military presence in the Caribbean, especially around its eastern coast and the contested Essequibo region. At the end of 2023, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro instructed the National Bolivarian Armed Forces to run defensive exercises along the nation's eastern coast next to the border with Guyana, deploying 6,000 troops including air and naval units. These exercises were put in order in response to the United Kingdom's deployment of British vessels to Guyana's territorial waters amid a territorial dispute between the two South American borders. Therefore, it's safe to say that Venezuela maintains a military presence in the region to preserve its territorial sovereignty while resisting the involvement of non-regional countries. The driving factor behind Venezuela's pressure towards Guyana on the Essequibo region, on the other hand, is the abundance of natural resources and oil reserves in the region. It's worth noting that Venezuela's stepping up its military activities to take control of the contested region is a violation of the International Court of Justice ruling.

Russia

In partial similarity to American foreign policy in the region, Russia views its military activities in the Caribbean as a legitimate exercise of its naval capabilities. Yet on a larger scale, the main reason behind the Russian military presence in the region is to challenge the efforts to expand Western influence over the world. Russian military presence is a form of engagement with allies that challenges American leadership in the region. Current Russian activity in the region is quite similar to the Soviet Union's endeavors to spread communism in Latin America, especially Cuba. Today's Russian military presence in the region "is shaped by its reaction to the US-led response to its actions in Ukraine and its ongoing military engagements there". In other words, Russian presence in the region is not only an attempt to prevent American dominance in the region but also another way to react to the pressure caused by Washington in Ukraine. One of the main ways through which Russia tries to do this is through diplomatic support to Venezuela and Cuba.

Russia, apart from its diplomatic presence in the region through its close relations with Venezuela, stepped up its military presence in June 2024 as Russian warships arrived in Cuban waters for a planned military exercise. This deployment marked the first major Russian naval presence in the region since the end of the Cold War. Though Russia made periodic appearances in the region with its military units, this deployment was important as it occurred right after President Joe Biden "authorized Ukraine to use US-provided weapons to strike inside Russia to protect Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city".

Cuba

Cuba, as aforementioned, is a close ally of Russia in the case of the military buildup in the Caribbean. Cuba has helped Russia maintain its military presence by allowing Moscow to dock its military



vessels in Cuba periodically. Besides hosting foreign military assets though, Cuba has worked towards enhancing its military capabilities as well. Through conducting joint military drills with Russian forces, Cuba managed to reinforce its presence in the region through military means. The Cuban government views these military collaborations as acts to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Especially with the presence of American and British military units in the region, Cuba sees these actions as countermeasures towards external threats and a way to balance the power dynamics in the region.

III. Focused Overview of the Issues

To understand the whole power dynamics, many factors should be considered. The complicated nature of the military build-up in the Caribbean Sea derives from historical, geopolitical, and security contexts. This overview will look into complications concerning military presence in the Caribbean.

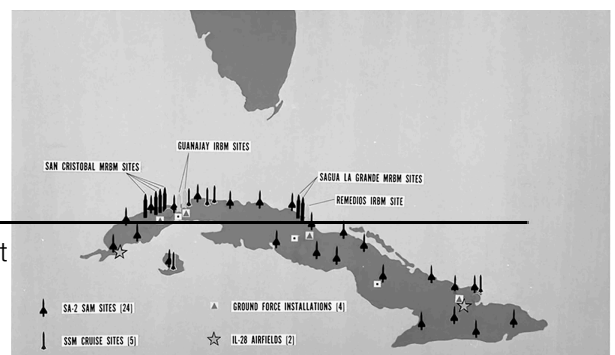
1. Historical Context

Since its discovery, The Caribbean has always been a significant region for the colonial powers, as it is placed at an intersection of important sea routes. It is the Spanish-American War of 1898 that best represents the actual turning point when, after the defeat of Spain, the US proved itself to be an important powerhouse and a dominant force in the region. It seized the island of Puerto Rico during that war and it established an ever-stronger militarization of the location. In this respect, the US placed many bases throughout the Caribbean to protect the realm of logistical aspects of military operations.



Picture 2: "Spanish-American War" (Britannica)

The second significant milestone was the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. The Cold War began with the Truman Doctrine which was signed to express the US's "support for democracies





against authoritarian threats. (“Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations”)” United States reconnaissance flights disclosed Soviet missile installations in Cuba. On this issue, President John F. Kennedy issued a naval quarantine to prevent further shipments of Soviet military equipment. It brought a new crisis not only to the Soviets but also placed Cuba as the focal point of Soviet naval operations in the Western Hemisphere. Between October 16-28, 1962, frantic naval activities took place while the US imposed its quarantine and mobilized its forces in preparation for any eventuality declaration of war in a moment so vital to US-Cuba relations and Cold War geopolitics.

Picture 3: “Bases in Cuba” (Britannica)

Over the course of the next several decades, the US military presence within the Caribbean continued to evolve. The establishment of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) in 1963 reflected a new focus on Central and South America as much as on the Caribbean itself. In the latter years of the 20th century, US forces participated in several interventions intended to bring a greater sense of stability to the region and to challenge perceived communist threats. Nowadays, SOUTHCOM plays a relevant role concerning the security of the Caribbean region. It coordinates all the activities conducted within fields such as counter-narcotic trafficking, criminality, humanitarian assistance, and others. Patrols, together with joint exercises, have often been conducted to strengthen maritime security with the regional forces by the US Navy and Coast Guard.

Major annual multinational exercises include Tradewinds, Caraibes, and Event Horizon, toward better interoperability between the Caribbean nations and United States forces. For instance, this year, Tradewinds 2024 was conducted; it will be hosted by Barbados. Exercises such as these, in their focus on various aspects of maritime security, range in scope from law enforcement capacity building to humanitarian assistance. The problem here is that it is forcing many of the Caribbean countries to upgrade their militaries. Besides this, countries like Jamaica and the Bahamas have ordered patrol ships as part of strengthening their respective maritime security capabilities. For example, in November 2023, the Jamaica Defence Force commissioned its offshore patrol vessel HMJS Norman Stanley. Also, regional defense forces conduct training with US military personnel in advance of doing operations against transnational crime and natural disasters.

2. Regional Security Concerns

Many serious regional security threats take the spotlight in the Caribbean, particularly on drug trafficking and organized crime. It is a part of the main entryways of narcotics coming in from South America into the United States. The rise in trafficking has, therefore, impelled Caribbean countries to enhance their military capabilities to counter organized crimes. The United States has been working through the years to



deter such threats together with the regional partners through shared intelligence and common exercises that aim at fragmenting these trafficked crime networks. Besides, the Caribbean is prone to natural calamities such as hurricanes and earthquakes, hence requiring the military to be well-set in providing humanitarian assistance as well as disaster relief. The US military has been involved in the provision of aid during disasters like the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti in January 2010.

3. Foreign Military Presence

Of late, Russia has been struggling to regain its foothold in the Caribbean through military cooperation with Venezuela. The prospects for military deployments to either Cuba or Venezuela have emerged within the framework of broader geopolitical steps to roll back US influence in the region, following the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine. Now, reports indicate that Russia plans naval exercises in the Caribbean Sea: Warships would go to Cuba and Venezuela in June 2024 as part of an increase in Russian naval activities amid growing tensions between Russia and the NATO nations. Although other European countries have possessions in the Caribbean, military presences protect their interests, in their way, in the security of the region. More particularly, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom invest in maritime patrols and combined exercises with regional forces, thus investing in the collective security effort in the region. The strategic relevance of the Caribbean to the global powers cannot be underestimated. This region is an international trade gateway connecting the US through strategic sea routes, where national security interests more often than not blur issues like drug trafficking and illegal immigration.

IV. Key Vocabulary

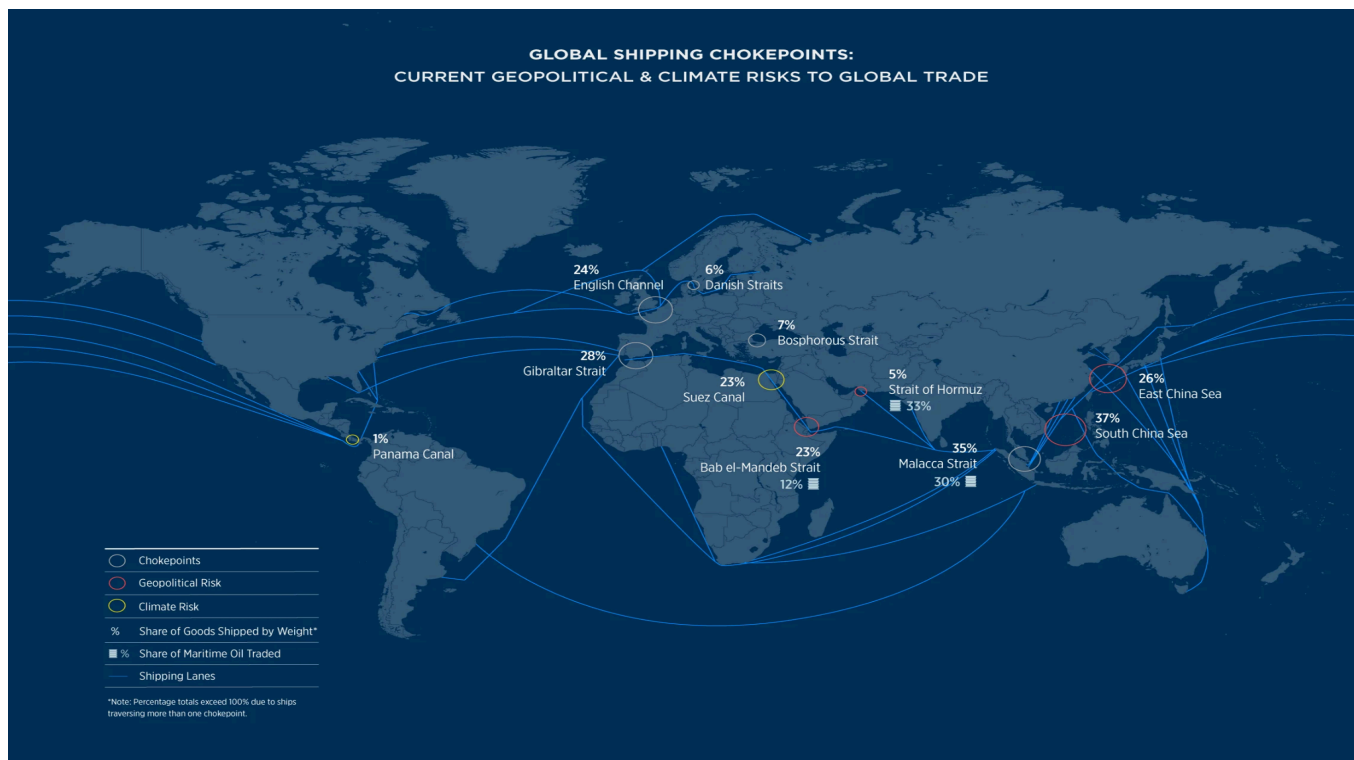
Essequibo Region: The Essequibo Region is along the Northeastern coast of South America, and is significant in comprising two thirds of Guyana, however is also claimed by Venezuela. After Venezuela gained its independence from Spain, Venezuela laid claim on the Essequibo.





At the end of the 19th century, the UK, Russia, and the US awarded the region to the colony of British Guiana. In 1966, Guyana came together with Venezuela and Britain to reconsider the border dispute. Once oil was discovered in the Atlantic Ocean off of Essequibo's coast, Venezuela's claims increased.

Picture 6: "Map of the Essequibo Region" (Britannica)



Picture 7: "Map of Global Shipping Chokepoints" (Global Guardian)

Maritime Choke Point: In maritime affairs, chokepoints are defined to be narrow passages along a waterway that are critical for the movement of vessels and their goods. They are vital for global trade because they often represent the shortest or most efficient routes between major ports or regions. Panama Canal is one of the most important maritime chokepoints and is incredibly relevant to the issue as it is situated in Latin America and acts as a passway between the Far East and Europe. 6% of the world's maritime commerce flows through the Panama Canal. However, the Panama Canal is currently facing severe risks due to the climatic conditions. On October 23, the region marked the lowest rainfall since 1950. Due to this, the canal has lost nearly 50% of the capacity for ships to travel through, causing transit fees to increase extremely. This chokepoint's importance in influencing military missions should not be left in hindsight.

Gunboat Diplomacy: Gunboat diplomacy is the use or threat of military force to advance foreign policy objectives. It is especially used to refer to the 19th-century abuse of naval power by "the great maritime nations", namely Britain. Therefore it directly refers to the background of the Essequibo region. Further, it is also used to describe the US policy on Latin America.



Paradox of Plenty: The paradox of plenty, or the resource curse, is a hypothesis that states “some societies are more prone to conflict than others because they offer more inviting economic prospects for rebellion” (Colier). Countries owning large deposits of valuable natural resources face institutional weaknesses that therefore lead to the conclusion that undemocratic and dysfunctional governance by corrupt political elites is a factor potentially leading to armed conflict. The resource curse also states that the availability of resources can further prolong hostilities due to the rebellious or conflicting groups being able to access them. Latin American countries show a mixed picture, confirming the idea that the resource curse is not a deterministic phenomenon and that dependence on, rather than abundance of, natural resources is associated with developmental failures. Countries that have been commodity exporters for a long time have suffered through the resource curse due to a lack of policies targeting it. Being both an important economic phenomenon and a baseline of why these regions are targeted, the Paradox of Plenty is important in the perception of the region.

V. Important Events & Chronology

| Date (Day/Month/Year) | Event |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| February 15, 1898 | USS Maine explodes in Havana Harbor |
| April 21, 1898 | US Navy begins a blockade of Northern Cuba |
| July 3, 1898 | The Battle of Santiago, the Spanish loss |
| February 16- November 30, 1942 | The Battle of the Caribbean occurs during World War II, German submarines threaten shipping routes in the Caribbean and are engaged by the US Naval Forces |
| March 12, 1947 | The Truman Doctrine is signed. This Doctrine effectively started the Cold War. |
| October 16-28, 1962 | The Cuban Missile Crisis |
| December 31, 1977 | The Panama Canal Treaty is signed, establishing a timeline for the withdrawal of US military forces from Panama by December 31, 1999. |
| December 20, 1989 - January 31, 1990 | Operation Just Cause takes place as US forces invade Panama to depose General Manuel Noriega. Approximately 27,000 troops are deployed during this operation. |
| October 14, 1994 | The 193rd Infantry Brigade, a key unit stationed in Panama, is inactivated as part of the troop reduction mandated by the Panama Canal Treaty. |



| | |
|------------------|---|
| January 12, 2010 | A devastating earthquake struck Haiti; the US military launched Operation Unified Response to provide humanitarian assistance. |
| February 2015 | The US Southern Command announces increased naval patrols in the Caribbean to combat drug trafficking and organized crime. |
| April 2020 | The US has increased its naval presence in the Caribbean amid rising tensions with Venezuela and concerns over Russian influence in the region. |
| June 2021 | Joint military exercises involving Caribbean nations and US forces are conducted to enhance regional security cooperation against drug trafficking and other threats. |
| June 2024 | A set of multinational military exercises called Tradewinds, aimed at enhancing regional cooperation among Caribbean nations was hosted this year by Barbados. |

VI. Past Resolutions and Treaties

[Caribbean Maritime Security Strategy & Implementation Plan](#): Put together by a collaboration between the Caribbean Community Implementation Agency for Crime and Security and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the report aims to “secure the blue economy for present & future prosperity”. It focuses on five different strategic goals that can be outlined as enhancing maritime domain awareness in the region, protecting the population as well as the artificial components of the region, developing maritime security, strengthening the legal framework with a focus on penalization, and enriching scientific and technological practices.

Delegates are highly encouraged to take an inquisitive approach in reading this document to understand how solutions can be proposed under these fields, what sorts of implementation aid/support they require, and potential risks. Furthermore, as the report underlines sustainable development goals 1 and 8, no poverty and economic growth, the delegates are encouraged to garner connections between the issue and the main theme. By emphasizing economic growth, employment, poverty reduction, and prosperity, delegates can highlight how regional development will translate into political stability.

Aside from that, the most direct link to be drawn between the document and the issue at hand is through ensuring national and regional security. For this matter, the report proposes maritime security centers to be created and coastal guards to be utilized. To improve legislation, regional mechanisms are key. National legislation is not sufficient to answer the questions in the Caribbean. The delegates should also



bear in mind that this project was launched in 2021, and, as far as the military situation is concerned, is yet to be fruitful, and thus a failed solution attempt.

[American Convention of Human Rights \(Treaty of San Jose\)](#)

The main aim of this treaty is to enhance maritime security in the region by creating a mechanism through which states can share capacity. It also states that “Any law enforcement operations to suppress illicit traffic in the waters or airspace of any other party will only be conducted with the authorization of that party.”. Therefore, the consent and sovereignty are entirely conserved by the party that owns the exclusive economic zone. While trying to resolve conflicts, this clause might cause further disagreement.

This treaty is also significant in reiterating the 1988 Vienna Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Thus, it highlights the “narco-state” structure present in the region, which is the baseline of problems faced. It is also noteworthy to underline the Organization of American States’ insistence on the ratification of this treaty, which, to an outsider, looks like a reiteration of the Human Rights Convention, but includes added points regarding such polarized situations in the between the lines.

[Joint Statement of the 2023 Caribbean-U.S. High Level Security Cooperation Dialogue](#)

In November 2023, the US government came together with the Caribbean Community and the Dominican Republic to reaffirm their previous pledges of collaboration. They underlined the two major issues of illicit trafficking, especially in the maritime domain, at ports of entry, and the criminal gangs and transnational organized crime.

This document could be an excellent look into what bilateral or multilateral collaboration can look like in the long term, despite the US view on the CARICOM region in general being controversial. Delegates suggesting international dialogue should also detail how those solutions will translate into reality over decades.

VII. Failed Solution Attempts

Military build-up in the Caribbean Sea has presented a long-lasting concern. Various organizations and Member States attempted to find adequate and sustainable solutions. Yet, many such attempts haven’t been successful due to a variety of factors.

The Organization of American States(OAS) attempted to mediate military tension within the region. OAS advocated for the establishment of a regional arms limitation agreement, which would aim to limit the deployment of military assets by external powers and mitigate regional arms races. This effort was plagued



by the inability of some Member States who benefit from the uneven power dynamics, to give up their strategic interests within the region.

The United Nations also endeavored to create demilitarized zones in the region. Especially, a set of resolutions passed in the General Assembly, but failed to be enforced due to the veto power of relevant stakeholders in the region.

VIII. Possible Solutions

As a 21st-century approach requires, delegates are strongly urged to follow a holistic approach in considering this agenda item. As delegates may see, both the solution approaches pursued by UN or regional actors and the key terminology and events suggest that this issue is much more than military build-up. This is because the CARICOM countries are not able to directly target the military presence in their marine territories, mainly because those premises belong to much more powerful countries. Thus, they have no other possibility than targeting the root cause, which is the economic development hindered by the abundant resources present in the region.

In hindsight, delegates are widely encouraged to formulate their solutions as outlined in the related documents section. Law enforcement agencies and legislation enhancement come as a first priority, but can only be successfully implemented throughout the Caribbean by regional cooperation. Thus, multilateral dialogues and treaties hold great importance. Either national or regional attempts at decreasing economic dependence are also the key to successfully recalibrating the balance bars in the region.

IX. Useful Links

A video that explains the concept of the global chokepoints:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPfofGLVe7o&pp=ygUUbWFyaXRpbWUgY2hva2Vwb2ludHM%3D>

A mini explainer video on Venezuela and Guyana's Essequibo dispute: <https://youtu.be/Q-C4tosjBk8>

An explainer video on the resource curse: <https://youtu.be/lvW0kcajWKk>

CARICOM's database of documents: <https://caricom.org/documents-and-publications/>

Official website on sustainable development in the Caribbean: <https://agenda2030lac.org/en>



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