

The Greater Caribbean and the Global Challenge: Integration for Geostrategic Action



By Manuel Alcántara / Latinoamérica21

The Trumpian disruption inaugurated on January 20 has led to the erosion of the international order established after the end of World War II. In this context, and beyond its complex colonial history and inherited institutional structures, the current moment demands coordinated, bold, and sustained action from the Greater Caribbean region in order to consolidate itself as a relevant geostrategic actor on the global stage.

The order that emerged in the years following 1945 allowed for the emergence of a significant number of new states, a result of the widespread decolonization process. In the Americas, the number of states integrated into the international community nearly doubled, many of them with coastlines on the Caribbean Sea and a colonial legacy tied to powers such as France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands.

The diverse colonial legacy placed countries previously shaped under primarily Spanish influence in contrast with the new states. This situation gave rise to a culturally rich melting pot that, nevertheless, highlighted the distinctiveness between continental and insular realities. Added to this were institutional contrasts stemming from inherited political models, as the former British colonies adopted parliamentary systems with differing effects on the distribution of power and responsiveness to political crises.

Another relevant factor on the international stage is the historical view of the United States regarding the Caribbean as an internal sea—a view that solidified in the mid-19th century as the region became a strategic connection between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts during U.S. territorial expansion. This geopolitical logic was reinforced by the construction of the Panama Canal in the early 20th century and led to numerous interventions in the region. The most forceful reaction to this presence was the Cuban Revolution of 1959, although in the following decades the region experienced high-tension episodes such as U.S. military interventions in the Dominican Republic (1965), Grenada (1983), and Panama (1989). In this context, and with the goal of promoting political, economic, and social integration, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) was created in 1973 by 15 member states and 5 associate members, all of them island nations.

The strategic interest of the United States in the region waned with the arrival of the 21st century and the transfer of the Panama Canal to Panamanian authorities, coinciding with the rise of the Chavista project in Latin America. In the Caribbean, this translated into the influence of PDVSA through PetroCaribe, launched in 2005 as part of the ALBA initiative, which brought fifteen Caribbean states closer to 21st-century socialism until its operations ceased in 2019.

The death of Hugo Chávez and, more importantly, the drop in oil prices changed the regional landscape, opening up space for greater cooperation among Caribbean states. This new context has crystallized around two key challenges: a growing awareness of the risks posed by global warming and the pull of the U.S. labor market for a population willing to emigrate, given the limited economic development of the states and regions bordering the Caribbean Sea, which largely depend on tourism.

At the beginning of 2023, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned the Security Council that rising sea levels threatened “a mass exodus of biblical proportions,” a reality already beginning to materialize in Panama’s San Blas archipelago. Climate change projections forecast critical scenarios in the near future. At the same time, Trump’s imperial rebranding of the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America reaffirms the United States’ hegemonic ambition over the region and revives the “manifest destiny” doctrine of more than a century ago.

Both of these developments represent clear challenges for the Association of Caribbean States, whose progress has languished over its three-decade history amid the previously described dynamics—paralleling the limited achievements of other regional integration efforts in the Americas. The 25 member states and 10 associate members reaffirm their commitment to sovereignty, multilateralism, and unity in diversity at a particularly critical moment. Their upcoming summit in Cartagena, taking place amid the crescendo of international (dis)order, must not become just another meeting that ends with rhetorical declarations lacking real commitments.

In the immediate political agenda, Caribbean states face three challenges that, in my opinion, must be addressed. The first concerns the consolidation of their institutionalization process into an association with a permanent and robust governance structure, equipped with agile decision-making mechanisms and a representative model that fairly balances the size of member states. The second challenge pertains to the unequal relationship currently imposed by the United States and its aim to restore “manifest destiny” in the region, exemplified by the Gulf of Mexico renaming episode. Finally, the unequivocal commitment to multilateralism must translate into the mobilization of joint actions to address the most pressing challenges of the Greater Caribbean: improving disaster risk mitigation, advancing toward a sustainable blue economy, confronting climate change decisively, strengthening connectivity solutions in transport and trade, and consolidating a truly sustainable and inclusive tourism sector. Multilateralism must be more than a principle—it must be an active tool for the region’s transformation.

The region’s heterogeneous past, the advancement of democratic values in most of its member states, and the absence of a dominant leadership—an element that, in turn, facilitates horizontal dialogue and can simplify decision-making—undoubtedly offer an incentive to drive forward these lines of cooperation, which require urgent and decisive action.