

## The Dangers of Sit-and-Wait (Ambush) Predation: Is it time to change the approach towards Caribbean-US Relations? By David Gomez<sup>i</sup>



Mention of the Trump administration's plans to "redirect funding away from countries deemed less strategically important" (Global Development Briefing, 25/5/17) should be serious cause for concern for Caribbean countries. It's anybody's guess whether the region is considered strategically important to America but looking back over the last several years the case can be made that it isn't, and perhaps hasn't been for some time now. So how does the region stack up in terms of strategic importance to the US? And why is the region seemingly in a sit-and-wait mode and not, as it should be doing, proactively preparing for what may be coming down the Trump administration pipeline?

On the political front the focus of Caribbean-US relations has more or less centered on addressing the problem of crime, criminal deportations and the illicit drugs trade among a few other things. Much of the bi-lateral efforts here seem to take place around the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative which has benefitted in the recent past from substantial US support (i.e. as much as US\$200 million). Whether this program is itself going to benefit from any funding extensions is unknown at this point but it is likely that in the wider exercise of US budget cuts to international development programs this will suffer. That however should not deter Caribbean states from placing issues on the table that are of importance to them - this should include, among other things, the likely impact of US immigration reforms on Caribbean nationals; and perhaps also the impact of increasing Chinese engagement in the region on Caribbean-US relations. CARICOM is desperately in need of a strategy here and it may serve it well to consider whether the latter can be leveraged in order to exact continued support for continuing the work in the above mentioned areas or

more importantly to secure a nod from the Trump administration that the region is one of strategic importance.

On the economic front Caribbean-US relations have centered around the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) which was administered under the Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act (CBERA). The CBI which was expanded in 2000 by the U.S.-Caribbean Basin Trade Partnership Act (CBTPA) and again by the Trade Act of 2002 is scheduled to expire on September 30, 2020 ([www.ustr.gov](http://www.ustr.gov)). According to the Eleventh Report to Congress on CBERA (2015) exports from the region have declined significantly (by almost US\$4 billion) owing to a fall in petroleum and petroleum related exports. On the flip-side the region ranks 23rd or 24th in terms of importance for US exports which totaled some US\$12 billion in 2014. The figures suggest a couple of things: one, that CBERA as

currently constituted has essentially lost its relevance and hence is not providing the types of access to markets for (goods) products and sectors that are of importance to Caribbean economies (rum included); two, the Caribbean states have not sufficiently diversified their economies to allow them to take better advantage of CBERA; or both. With CBERA due to expire in a couple of years perhaps this is where CARICOM and the OTN should be focusing their efforts - and not only to extend the current program but to negotiate a much improved program capable of providing enhanced benefits to Caribbean economies. One would of course expect the issue of rum subsidies to be addressed within the context of any such negotiations, not to forget international banking services...

The Jamaica Gleaner in December 2016 rightly hinted at the ominous portent for the region, and I am of a similar opinion that the Caribbean will not be a priority for the US over the course of the next four years. The possibility and probability that the region will not be categorized as being of strategic importance should have served to trigger movement on the Caribbean front - the silence coming out of Guyana on matters of such critical importance is deafening and utterly frustrating. The sit-and-wait style of international relations that has come to characterize the region's style of

engagement in the past eight years or so does not serve its interests well (or maybe it does for some). From my lowly vantage point however it seems that what is required is more proactive engagement at the political level by the region's leaders but I hasten to add here that this should be predicated on well thought out positions in areas of interest where meaningful gain can be had (no sense in getting new shoes if they won't fit anyway). Within the animal kingdom, the danger for sit-and-wait predators is that they are themselves subject to being ambushed. Right now the Caribbean is in danger of its development being ambushed.

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