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U.S., Caribbean Countries Seize the Foreign Policy Moment: An Analysis of the Start to Uncertain Trump 2.0 Era Relations

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All Smiles, as American Diplomacy Runs Roughshod

It is not lost on foreign policy analysts that U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's recent Caribbean visit exuded goodwill towards America's bilateral relations with a number of Caribbean countries. Few will have taken note, if at all, of this trip that got underway in Jamaica, continuing onto Guyana, and rounding off in Suriname. Many analysts tuned into other, high-profile diplomatic undertakings that unfolded in parallel across global centers of power. Of note, with an eye to securing long-term peace for Ukraine, Paris hosted an international gathering geared toward bolstering support for that war-torn country.

Instructively, analysts viewed Rubio's Caribbean trip as an intriguing diplomatic development. This trip, described by the U.S. Department of State as "highly successful," went without a hitch. The Caribbean leaders concerned also spoke quite positively about their respective engagements with Rubio — even as Trump's so-called "hardball diplomacy" remains top of mind for many world leaders. Simply put, assertive, Trumpian diplomacy has now cast its long shadow over America's broader approach to statecraft. Some analysts have called out this kind of behavior for *what* it is and *who* it tends to target: i.e. bullying, especially of smaller nations. Taken together, these foreign policy postures constitute a test of the "principle of the sovereign equality [of states]" — a fundamental tenet of the postwar international order. This

Highlights

Donald Trump's so-called doctrinaire approach to the management of American statecraft, from the very outset of his second term, has put a lot of distance between the U.S. and its so-called 'third border' — the Caribbean.

Yet U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's recent two-day visit — beginning on March 26th — to three Caribbean Community (CARICOM) bloc member states, where he met with a number of Caribbean leaders, revealed a readiness to see a way forward to advance a crosscutting agenda for cooperation in the Trump 2.0 era.

Trump's return to the U.S. presidency caused a sense of unease among such small states, raising "the prospect that, over the next four years, the Caribbean's playbook regarding its longstanding relations with the U.S. will be tested as never before." As a result of his Caribbean trip, Secretary Rubio — who has spoken of "a new era in U.S.-Caribbean relations" grounded in "shared values, heritage, culture and community" that bind the U.S. and the Caribbean — may have helped to ease such concerns.

However, this optimism was short-lived. Trump's newly unveiled sweeping global tariffs, which also impact CARICOM member states, have put a damper on this moment.

is taking place at a time when Trump is talking up enlarging America's borders, while his administration conducts Ukraine policy in deference to Russian President Vladimir Putin — who initiated (and whose country is the aggressor in) the Ukraine war. Simultaneously, Trump is orchestrating efforts to undermine Ukrainian security and, by extension, the European security order, as well as the decades-old transatlantic partnership that undergirds it.

It is no mean feat staying clear of what, with increasing frequency, can be perfunctory or even heavy-handed foreign policy dust-ups of President Trump's second term. Just ask Gazans, recalling Trump's 'Riviera' vision and his proposed U.S. takeover of the strip, which Arab leaders have [pushed back](#) against for weeks now. The now-notorious Oval Office encounter in which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was sharply rebuked by both the American president and vice president ranks as perhaps the most overt example of high-stakes, unorthodox diplomacy in recent memory.

Some Second Trump Administration Obstacles

The international community continues to grapple with — to [paraphrase](#) the late Winston Churchill — playing to Washington's "vanity" and is wary that, in the age of Trump 2.0, the United States "will exact its last pound of flesh." For their part, CARICOM member states are worried about a number of U.S. policy actions, stemming from Trump's [America First](#)-oriented executive orders. These include actions that open the door to [migrant deportations](#). Given the large numbers of Caribbean nationals who stand to be impacted, "[Caribbean nations have been closely monitoring developments](#)." Haitian migrants are especially caught up in this action, given the Trump administration's indication that

— along with migrants from three other countries in the wider Latin American and Caribbean region — [revocation](#) of the temporary legal status of migrants from Haiti is in the offing. All the while, the urgency of the [crisis](#) in Haiti has resulted in an elder Caribbean statesman [cautioning](#) that this CARICOM member state is "'perilously close' to being a failed state."

Certainly, the U.S. framed the Secretary's Caribbean trip and the bilaterals that took place therein as representing an important opportunity for the Caribbean leaders involved to get on the winning side of history. In Jamaica, in addition to meeting with the country's Prime Minister Andrew Holness, Rubio had separate bilateral meetings with leaders of three other CARICOM member states. He held a [meeting](#) with Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley of Barbados, who is also the current Chair of CARICOM. Rubio also [engaged](#) Haitian

Transitional Presidential Council President Fritz Alphonse Jean, [meeting](#) separately with Trinidad and Tobago Prime Minister Stuart Young — whose government has specific energy-related [concerns](#).

For the CARICOM member states involved, their leaders deploy a different reasoning. They want to have America's top diplomat's ear and, through him, to have their voices qua interests carry to the White House vis-à-vis a gamut of issues. Given their regional resonance, two are especially noteworthy.

Ahead of Rubio's arrival in Jamaica, and against a backdrop of the Trump administration's stated aim of "[restoring a tough U.S.-Cuba policy](#)," a senior member of his team [criticized](#) the long-standing Cuban medical assistance program. It plays a vital role in health care systems throughout CARICOM member states. In calling attention to that program, he reaffirmed what the Trump administration contends are the human trafficking implications for the states involved. CARICOM leaders have [pushed back](#) against this U.S. policy/narrative, which hinges on the enforcement — according to Washington — of a "[visa restriction policy that targets forced labor linked to the Cuban labor export program](#)." The official in question [cautioned](#) that CARICOM member states would do well to play ball with the Trump administration on the matter.

In addition, the Trump administration's [planned](#) imposition of U.S. tariffs on Chinese-linked ships/vessels has implications for the region — sparking widespread concern among CARICOM member states. This matter relates to the U.S. Trade

Rubio's Caribbean trip is an important window into the interplay of respective national interests

Representative [Section 301](#) proposed remedies for Chinese maritime, logistics, and shipbuilding practices. (As this brief went to press, [reports](#) surfaced that Washington has now exempted the Caribbean from these proposed U.S. tariffs.) In the Caribbean context, the bigger picture is the United States is minded of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) [growing influence](#). Indeed, Rubio is [on record](#) as characterizing the PRC as "the single greatest challenge [the United States] has ever faced." Hence, the tariff matter regarding Chinese-linked ships/vessels is [tied up in](#) the broader issue of Sino-American strategic competition. On the one hand, geopolitics is at play and, on the other hand, geo-economics is a major factor in the scheme of things in that the U.S. is focused on "combat[ing] China's unfair trade policies." What is the upshot of this great power competition for respective Chinese and American foreign policy dealings with the Caribbean? Whereas Beijing is

inclined to woo the Caribbean, in a departure from the Biden era, Washington has renewed its efforts to assert influence in the region through the foreign policy prism of what U.S. National Security Advisor Mike Waltz [recently labelled](#) Monroe Doctrine 2.0.

Economic operators and governments in the Caribbean have [misgivings](#) about those shipping fees, along with Trump's [tariff policy](#) and [trade policy agenda](#). Caribbean trade policy experts and policymakers have long [worried](#) about the ability of regional states' [small, highly open economies](#) to weather Trump's [America First Trade Policy](#). As of this writing — April 2nd — they are in the early stages of assessing and devising responses to the Trump administration's [announcement](#) of even date of *Regulating Imports with a Reciprocal Tariff to Rectify Trade Practices that Contribute to Large and Persistent Annual United States Goods Trade Deficits*. Significant concern has now set in, owing to Trump's "[new global trade war](#)." Its principal threads are the imposition of a 10% baseline tariff, along with country-specific reciprocal tariffs, and sector-specific tariffs. Of the over 180 countries and territories [impacted](#) — according to [White House-published documentation](#), [Forbes](#), and [CNBC](#) — CARICOM bloc member states are subject to the baseline tariff in question. Guyana is the lone bloc member that has been struck with a 38% reciprocal (adjusted) tariff on its goods-related exports to the United States. Gleaning what goods exactly are targeted by these tariffs forms part of regional states' ongoing consultations with the United States, which analysts [conclude](#) has "ceded its role as a bastion of free trade and is instead leading a resurgence of protectionism that will hurt consumers and businesses worldwide."

Recently, Trump's global trade war took yet another turn. By way of an [Executive Order](#) dated April 8th, President Trump amended his administration's stance on how it intends to move forward with new tariff rates. In this regard, he also [upped the ante](#) vis-à-vis the PRC. Furthermore, on April 8th, Prime Minister Young [announced](#) that Washington recently revoked the licenses it had previously granted to the government of Trinidad and Tobago to develop cross-border gas fields with Venezuela.

The hard reality is that — in today's geopolitical landscape — the pragmatism and compromise U.S. foreign policy demands of countries on the receiving end constitute a significant concern for CARICOM member states. Yet, to some degree, there is an upside to the outlook for U.S.-CARICOM relations.

Seeing Opportunity in Trump 2.0

With respect to the Cuban medical assistance program and shipping fees, Rubio emerged from his bilateral engagements with a deeper understanding of the ways in which these countries are attempting to address associated concerns. [Indications](#) are that the respective sides teed up further dialogue. Rubio signalled the State Department's openness to further talks — in recognition of CARICOM member states' concerns and their willingness to take seriously U.S. interests. If the pressers held in [Kingston](#), [Georgetown](#), and [Paramaribo](#) — following Rubio's bilaterals with Prime Minister Holness, President Mohamed Irfaan Ali of Guyana, and President

Whereas Beijing is inclined to woo the Caribbean, Washington has renewed its efforts to assert influence in the region through the foreign policy prism of what it calls Monroe Doctrine 2.0

Chandrikapersad Santokhi of Suriname, respectively — are any guide, the bilaterals in question had the desired results in all the ways that matter in diplomacy: (i) personal dynamics; (ii) depth and breadth of concrete engagement; and (iii) bonus (a.k.a. positively unscripted) policy-related commitments.

First, not only was the tone of publicly facing engagements respectful, it was endearing. The CARICOM member states involved focused on giving their bilateral engagements a historical feel, stressing that they are trusted American partners. It is an approach that resonates with Rubio, who was previously a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Moreover, he seemed at ease in such engagements. In this regard, a couple of anecdotes come to mind. At the aforementioned pressers, as he interacted with respective hosts and media operatives on hand, one could tell from Rubio's body language that he was pleased with what had been accomplished in the various bilateral meetings. Cameras also caught Rubio having a light-hearted moment with Jamaican security personnel on the airport tarmac in Kingston, as diplomatic staff escorted him to board his plane for his onward journey to Guyana.

Second, the picture is even brighter regarding the agreed agenda for cooperation. While fundamental differences in facets of the respective sides' negotiation positions obtain, as previously sketched, there is a shared interest in pressing

ahead with a mutually beneficial and wide-ranging agenda. [Telegraphed](#) beforehand, the U.S. Department of State would later [underscore](#) that Rubio's "engagements with [America's] valued Caribbean partners promoted regional cooperation to end illegal immigration, counter transnational organized crime, strengthen regional actions to address Haiti's political and security challenges, and strengthen the United States' economic partnerships with Caribbean countries."

Third, as I contend in the [Trinidad and Tobago Newsday](#) and the [Trinidad and Tobago Guardian](#), Washington is firmly in Georgetown's corner in relation to the Guyana-Venezuela border dispute. It has had occasion to reaffirm its support for Guyana's claim — in law — to the Essequibo subnational region, rejecting out of hand Caracas' escalating border-related provocations. At his [press conference](#) with President Ali, Rubio gave a full-throated response to a border-related question from a Guyanese member of the press corps. She inquired as to whether America would come to Guyana's defence if it were attacked by Venezuela, or, if U.S. oil major ExxonMobil (which is operating in offshore Guyana) were attacked by that country. In his official reaction, Rubio did not mince his words. He said: "It would be a very bad day for the

Manoeuvring for an Advantage

In short, where the U.S. is pressing its advantage with CARICOM member states, the latter countries are making a concerted effort to advance a comprehensive foreign policy agenda. Rubio's Caribbean trip is an important window into the interplay of respective national interests, which lend themselves to this reality. The U.S. and the several Caribbean countries involved seem to have come away from the meetings in question with a better understanding of respective positions and perspectives vis-à-vis live issues that animate contemporary bilateral relations, giving a new impetus to trust. Inasmuch as those meetings appear to have built up a head of steam for an early, promising start to their Trump 2.0 era relations, though, Washington's hardening position on some contentious issues complicated ongoing diplomatic efforts.

For one thing, as of this writing, a lot of attention is being devoted to the Trump administration's so-called 'Liberation Day' for U.S. trade policy. The advent of the resultant sweeping new tariff plan is a major [blow](#) to CARICOM member states, which have long held a trade deficit with the United States. Just one week following Rubio's Caribbean trip, regional stakeholders who were previously buoyed about U.S.-CARICOM relations are no longer as optimistic about those ties. The most pressing next step for all concerned is to build-out crucial forward momentum, working through diplomatic channels

to advance (shared) interests. The good news is that — apparently in the Trump 2.0 foreign policy era — the U.S. and those Caribbean countries are willing to go the distance with the best traditions of their friendly, long-standing relations in mind. That said, unsurprisingly, there are likely going to be bumps in the road.

Assessment

In sum, I assess that a dual narrative is unfolding in the initial stage of Trump 2.0 era U.S.-CARICOM relations. From all outward appearances, the two sides have a strong base to build on. Yet the fact is that — in the foreign policy cognoscenti's telling, behind closed doors — there is a larger truth about these relations. In practical terms, against the backdrop of broader CARICOM concern about contemporary "[global crises](#)," the said relations have lurched into a dauntingly fraught moment.

The bilaterals had the desired results in all the ways that matter in diplomacy — personal dynamics, concrete engagement, and positively unscripted policy commitments

Venezuelan regime if they were to attack Guyana, or, if they were to attack ExxonMobil." He went on to say: "It would be a very bad day, a very bad week for them, and it would not end well for them." In this context, he spoke of the prowess and reach of the U.S. navy, emphasizing U.S. commitments to Guyana. Rubio concluded: "It would be a very bad move, a very big mistake for them [Maduro's regime]."

The crux of the matter is that Guyana came away from its bilateral with the U.S. with more than it perhaps had hoped for. The wider context: Guyana has long regarded Venezuela with suspicion, keeping a wary eye on its westerly neighbor's affinity for stirring up trouble in relation to the border dispute between these two South American countries. In light of Rubio's statement (above), the issue holds the diplomatic spotlight in a way that hitherto it has not.

The whirlwind of Trumpian foreign policymaking aimed at upending the [liberal international order](#), which the United States is largely responsible for having brought about and led, will hit CARICOM member states hard. As the foregoing analysis reveals, too, this is not the only reason why the United States will let these states down. It is not yet clear if political directorates and their associated bureaucracies have figured out a way to get through to Washington, with a view to advancing respective countries' national interests. Rubio's Caribbean trip evaluated relative to the Trump administration's tariff-related foreign policy actions immediately thereafter is illustrative that, on balance, CARICOM member states have a ways to go yet. (In fairness, for the most part, other countries are not faring better.) Time alone will tell whether they are able to find their footing, where foreign policy dealings with the United States are concerned, in the face of the hallmark of the Trump administration's policy-related manoeuvring: *chaos*. Indeed, during his first U.S. presidential term, they had [a hard time of it](#) with Trump's furtherance of American hegemony.

Suffice to say, the execution of U.S.-related foreign policies of respective CARICOM member states is *not* going to plan. In the circumstances, a rethink of their approach is in order.

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