

## Region could benefit from State visit

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Trinidad and Tobago should use the visit of US Vice President Joe Biden and President of China Xi Jinping to make strategic demands to ensure T&T and the rest of the region benefit from current and future relations, international relations experts have said.

Biden and Xi will both travel to this country this week on official state visits when they will hold meetings with Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar and President Anthony Carmona in areas that include trade, citizen security and energy.

Prof Andy Knight, director of the Institute of International Relations at The University of the West Indies, St Augustine, told the Express this is a chance for Trinidad and Tobago to demonstrate as well that it is a leader of the Caribbean region since the visits are an indication that this country is important to both of the "great powers".

"I don't think we should read anything sinister into the timing of these two visits. But what they say to me is that Trinidad is considered as an important regional player for both the current hegemon, the US, and the swiftly rising great power, China.

"The Trinidad Government needs to seize upon this opportunity to make some strategic demands of both powers and to take advantage of this obvious interest in Trinidad and Tobago to develop economic and trade partnerships with both powers and demonstrate that this country is prepared to play a leadership role in the Caribbean," Knight said.

He said both Biden and Xi should go away with a great impression of Trinidad and Tobago and with the understanding that to get things done in this region it is important to go through Trinidad and Tobago.

"If this is the lasting impression that China and the US have of Trinidad and Tobago then this can help our country punch above our weight at the global level," Knight said.

He went on to say that although the US is clearly still the world's hegemon, China is making great gains in the international hierarchy of states and could conceivably become a global hegemon in a few decades.

"The US better realise that if it ignores the Caribbean and Latin American region, China is prepared to fill

the power vacuum right in America's backyard. It would be foolhardy for Trinidad to put all its eggs in one basket. It would be wise for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to use these two important visits to diversify the country's trade and commercial opportunities and to make strategic deals with both the US and China that would benefit the economy and social conditions of our small state.

"What is interesting about these visits is that they are occurring within days of each other. The US can be accused sometimes of neglecting the Caribbean...China, in its quest for energy sources wherever it can find them, is paying attention to Trinidad specifically because of this country's oil and gas deposits. But China is also beginning to flex its muscle at the global level and is demonstrating that it is willing to develop a presence even in the US backyard," he said.

Knight said he suspects that this new brazen attitude of China is beginning to disturb US officials somewhat, but the United States also has a significant presence in China's backyard that has developed clear strategic alliances with Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, and that its military presence in the South China Sea is also of concern to China.

Former ambassador to the World Trade Organisation Sir Ronald Sanders told the Express he doubted that the visit of the Chinese President to the region was an attempt to send any message to the US but that China has an interest in the resources of some of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean which is completely independent of its relations with the US.

"China has an insatiable appetite for oil and gas to push its development and the countries being visited by the Chinese President possess these resources. As China continues to invest in the region and to purchase the commodities it needs, it will increasingly become an influence in the region which—like all other great powers—expects support for its causes from the countries it helps.

"The US should welcome China's assistance and investment in the region. It helps to shape a global response to the Caribbean's development needs. If the US began to match the Chinese contribution, it would make several countries of the region less dependent on China and encourage an independent relationship based on mutual interest," Sanders said.

However, he too believes if the US does not demonstrate its own commitment to the economic development of the region, it will lose influence to China.

He added that it is a pity all the Caricom Heads of Government will not be in Port of Spain to meet with Biden and Xi, but explained that this was because several Caricom countries have diplomatic relations with Taiwan and not China.

Sanders said this was the most blatant manifestation of Caricom's failure to pursue a joint foreign policy in its collective interest.

At the same time, the countries of Caricom should establish a framework and rules for their relations

with China.

“The region’s relationship with China could be put on a much better footing if Caricom countries were dealing with China collectively—in much the same way that they deal with the European Union.

“If they fail to do so, the current rules—set by China alone—will continue to violate Caribbean labour laws, immigration policy, and investment criteria. Countries might benefit from Chinese investment and assistance in the short-term, but unless the rules are negotiated and agreed (and are similar to those accorded to other countries such as the US and Canada), there will be a backlash in the future as local businesses, small and large, are adversely affected,” he added.