

CARIBBEAN: A New Era of South-Oriented Geopolitics?

By Peter Richards

PORT OF SPAIN, Trinidad, Mar 1, 2010 (IPS) - As chair of the 15-member regional integration movement, Dominica's Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit insists that the decision by Caribbean Community countries to be part of a new Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CLACS) is not intended to sideline longtime hemispheric alliances such as the Organisation of American States.

"As it is now, there is no one body comprising all of us, save and except the OAS ...but Cuba is out of the OAS," he told IPS.

"We don't see ourselves supplanting the existing arrangements which we now have," Skerrit added. "I don't see us setting them aside, I don't see us ending them."

While details of the new arrangement are still to be finalised, the leaders of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and Latin America, who met in Cancun, Mexico last week, have already agreed to meet in Venezuela next year. And the United States and Canada have not been asked to be party to the new arrangements.

Skerrit justified their exclusion by explaining that the new organisation is intended to bring a closer relationship among the developing nations of Latin American and the Caribbean.

"I don't want to get caught up in this notion that we want to set aside the U.S. and Canada," he said. "There are peculiar and particular challenges and issues which confront the Caribbean and Latin American countries and which do not affect the United States and Canada, and the question is can we not find solutions among ourselves, are we not able enough to address the issues?"

Grenada's Foreign Minister Peter David told reporters after the Cancun meeting that "all of us in CARICOM" support the new CLACS grouping.

"I have not heard a single person indicate it is intended to replace or somehow diminish the role of the OAS," he said, adding "certainly among CARICOM countries that spoke in Cancun last weekend, none of them indicated at any time that the intent was to do just that."

But one Caribbean newspaper has asked what this new Community of Latin American and Caribbean States is all about, noting perhaps "it is simply all things to all leaders".

In an editorial over the weekend, the Guyana Stabroek newspaper wondered whether the new grouping "allows Mexico to re-enter the councils of the Latin American nations from which it had been excluded by Brazil with its geographical categories."

"As for Brazil itself, it now has another forum in which to exert its influence, and another potential pressure group to help it secure a seat on the Security Council," the editorial said.

"... Nations like Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and possibly others, see this as an opportunity to replace the OAS and reduce U.S. influence on the southern continent, while others do not. Some states, including one suspects those in CARICOM, had no pre-conceived notions, and are just waiting to see how the organisation evolves," the paper added.

Dr. Mark Kirton, a senior lecturer at the Institute of International Relations at the University of the West Indies (UWI), also questions why Mexico, which organised its own summit with CARICOM last month after years of a relatively low profile in the grouping, should now seek to reengage the small Caribbean states.

He argues that Mexico now finds it necessary to strategically reposition itself in this environment of hemispheric political and economic reconfigurations to counter the thrust by Brazil and Venezuela to assert their influence in the Caribbean.

"It must also be remembered that since the 1970s, Mexico moved to fashion a relationship with CARICOM which sought to promote closer cooperation and provide the scope for increased cultural, commercial and economic linkages," Kirton said. "The relationship has however oscillated between an era of intense activity and a period of 'benign' neglect."

"It is therefore interesting to observe that more than three decades later, Mexico is in the vanguard of a move to create a community of Latin American and Caribbean states, without the United States and Canada," he noted.

In the early 1970s, Mexico's foreign policy included strong interests with the Caribbean that led to several initiatives including its joint sponsorship, with Venezuela, of the Sistema Economico Latinoamericano y del Caribe (SELA), which was significant in that it included CARICOM states and Cuba but excluded the United States.

When the convention establishing the Trinidad-based Association of Caribbean States (ACS) was signed on Jul. 24, 1994 in Colombia, it brought together all the 25 countries in the Spanish, English and Dutch Caribbean with the intent to promote consultation, cooperation and concerted action among all members.

"The ACS has provided the institutional framework for the development of geo-strategic relations and it is therefore worthy of note that the 2010 Summit Declaration indicates an agreement to 'constructively strengthen the ACS and to collaborate in the fulfillment of its mandate'," said Kirton in his weekend newspaper column.

Now, as regional leaders get ready to gather in Dominica for their inter-sessional summit from Mar. 11-13, some observers are closely following this new maneuvering.

Former Caribbean diplomat Sir Ronald Sanders noted, for example, the Caribbean governments' position on a joint "Declaration on (the) Falklands Islands Issue" which "confirmed their support of Argentina's legitimate rights in the sovereignty dispute with the United Kingdom over the Falkland Islands Issue".

"The support of Latin American countries for Argentina in this matter is quite understandable. They have links of language, culture, history and proximity that go back centuries. But the support of CARICOM countries for Argentina's 'legitimate rights' is puzzling," noted Sanders.

"Unless there is something they have not made public, this position by Caribbean governments appears on the surface to run counter to their own national interests," he said noting that the region's position could well undermine future trade and other relations with London.

CARICOM's trade with Britain far exceeds trade with Argentina. Investment in CARICOM countries from Britain is much greater than any investment from Argentina, and Sanders points out that official development assistance from Britain to CARICOM countries directly and indirectly (through the European Union and the Commonwealth, for instance) is much larger than any assistance from Argentina.

In addition, he argues that the number of tourists from Britain to CARICOM countries is considerably greater than from Argentina, and far more CARICOM nationals live, work and study in Britain than in Argentina.

But Grenadian Foreign Minister Peter David insists that the CARICOM's position is supportive of the mechanism put in place at the United Nations to deal with the issue and "all that is being said by CARICOM...is that we should that process must be given a chance to work."

"We are fully supportive of the U.N. process with respect to that," he added.

Respected Caribbean journalist Rickey Singh in his newspaper column last weekend said that there needs to be a definitive statement - "the sooner the better" - from CARICOM governments "offering the rationale for and benefits of" joining this new entity.

He notes that a number of regional leaders were themselves absent from the Cancun meeting and that Skerrit, a close ally of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, "felt the need to go quickly on the defensive" with regards to the intention of the new body.

Singh has also thrown out the question as to whether or not the regional leaders held a caucus before arriving at their decision to support the establishment of this new entity.