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Caricom states contend with a new era of great-power rivalry

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As the *Caribbean Community (Caricom)* foreign policy apparatus is concluding preparations for the upcoming 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), which is the UN's main policy-making organ, the bloc will harness the event to reaffirm its broader interests in foundational tenets of the UN Charter, **Nand C. Bardouille** (The University of the West Indies) explains.

In line with their status as **small states** in the international system, when it comes to politics among nations, Caricom member states have a long history of routinely taking the stance of the inviolability of national sovereignty and territorial integrity and the political independence of any State. (Even the **tenets** of their respective foreign policies contribute to such a stance.) At this juncture, they will double down on this mindset in the

UN, committing significant resources and political capital to champion such cornerstone principles.

Small states are at a bigger risk of international law breaches

Caricom member states are organizing themselves diplomatically in this way against a backdrop of Russia's now more than six-month-long high-stakes, full-scale invasion of Ukraine. From the perspective of such small states, this state of affairs risks upsetting the applecart in respect of the post-war, UN-underwritten 'rules of the road' for the international system.

In their estimation, if those rules and norms go awry, more than most, the system could potentially leave them in the lurch, and as some **international relations theorists** have determined, such a scenario would lead to troubling, **power politics**-related excesses.

Among the first casualties is international law, which small states prefer to focus attention on per power asymmetries. In this regard, Caricom member states have shared and intersecting interests.

Hegemons can also warp international institutions, as **some** have accused Russia of doing in the case of the UN Security Council (UNSC) *vis-à-vis* its attack on Ukraine.

As one of the half-dozen principal UN organs, pursuant to the UN Charter, the primary charge of the UNSC is the maintenance of international peace and security. This is why the UNSC holds a vitally important **brief** on Russia's grinding war of attrition in Ukraine, which has become a proxy war that pits the Euro-Atlantic security order against Russia, but whose security implications are wide-reaching.

Also at risk is the **Pax Americana**-hinged **liberal world order**, whose **guarantor** is the United States. On the other side of the geopolitical ledger, just as crucially, are contender and revisionist states. While the rise of such states has attracted considerable **scholarly attention**, **less attention** has been paid to

Caricom member states in that regard. This article expands the focus of the ongoing 'great-power rivalry' debate accordingly—as some work has already done—drawing from one of its most recent talking points: Revanchist Russia.

Guardrail matters

Regarding Caricom member states' post-independence foreign policies, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to the national interest. Notwithstanding, in one key respect, they reflect the following consensus: These states have historically seen the most gains when leader countries do not stray wildly from the bedrock principles of the UN Charter. This applies to global and/or regional players' statecraft, as it hinges on various "conceptions of power" held up in foreign policy decisions relative to small(er) states.

This is primarily why Caricom member states joined with most of the international community in adopting a landmark UNGA resolution "demanding that Russia immediately end its military operations in Ukraine" when the country invaded Ukraine in February this year.

This is also why they expressed disquiet about Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014—which in hindsight was a prelude to the Kremlin's current aspirations to partition Ukraine—as well as the Kremlin's hand in the insurgency in Eastern Ukraine thereafter.

The bloc's leadership and foreign policy-making communities are mounting effective—albeit disparate—diplomatic responses as regards their concerns about Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, not least because it could potentially open the door for some hegemonies to act with reckless abandon to have their way in their purported spheres of influence.

There is little question that Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Ralph Gonsalves' recent state visit to Taiwan, which came on the heels of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's high profile and a high-stakes visit to that island, is an outgrowth of this thinking. Gonsalves led a delegation on a six-day state visit to Taiwan, beginning on August 8th.

As we saw with a **letter** addressed to his Russian counterpart, Prime Minister Gonsalves underscores that his country is “deeply disturbed” by the Kremlin’s so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine, calling for an end to the same.

Assessing seismic systemic shifts vis-à-vis Caricom member states

As previously intimated, as much as the Vincentian leader waded into oft-fraught Taiwan Strait relations in aid of Taiwan at an especially combustible moment, his diplomatic action was not just about amplifying collective push back regarding a consequential Indo-Pacific power’s aspirations in that part of the world.

Furthermore, it may appear self-evident that such action resonates with Caricom member states at large. However, a diplomatic playbook that action is not.

The primary issue is that per the Caricom bloc’s **constituent treaty**, the conduct of foreign policy in terms of the regional grouping hinges per se on coordination, not harmonisation. The following captures this reality: Only five of the 14 sovereign Caricom member states extend **diplomatic recognition** to Taiwan. The rest subscribe to the **One China principle**, the linchpin in Beijing’s portrayal of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in international politics. The PRC’s relations with countries of the Caribbean Basin is a prime example.

Over the last two decades, the PRC has extended its geopolitical footprint and foreign policy presence across the Caribbean, building on decades-old diplomatic ties with several states therein. The impetus is the PRC’s ‘rise’, apposite to America’s relative disinterest in several world regions—the Caribbean included—following the end of the Cold War in 1991 and up until the end of the unipolar moment in 2014.

It looks like Washington is coming around to the thinking that, in the post-Cold War age, the United States needs to treat with the Caribbean

systematically. Some analysts of PRC-Caribbean relations remain **critical**, though, of Washington's about-turn.

Whether it is in the form of the PRC's "**growing economic and political presence in the Caribbean**" or the Washington-backed **U.S.-Caribbean Partnership to Address the Climate Crisis 2030 (PACC 2030)**, the Sino-U.S. global rivalry has expanded to include the Caribbean.

One of the factors driving Washington's ramped-up engagement with the Caribbean nowadays is that, somewhat on the back foot, it is ostensibly a response to Beijing's efforts to entwine the Caribbean Basin in the PRC's great-power aspirations.

Emblematic of our time and consistent with the PRC's attempts to woo support in the Global South writ large, in the main (Cuba, for example, excepted), the Biden Administration's strategy is soft power-driven. It rests on an evolved geopolitical and geo-economic footing, which marks a departure from heavy-handed carrot-and-stick foreign policy.

Even so, in this still emergent era of post-Cold War great-power rivalry, Caricom member states will potentially have to contend with some knock-on effects of a revanchist Russia. **Elsewhere**—a scholarly contribution previously **summarized**—I explain how that response is already taking shape.

In the case of the PRC, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its influence in large parts of the Caribbean is likely to continue to grow. There are implications for Taiwan, whose diplomatic recognition has steadily eroded in the wider region.

That said, things are far from clear-cut in respect of the BRI. First off, the COVID-19 pandemic will **likely affect** the Initiative. Secondly, China watchers have sounded a **cautionary note** about the risks associated with the BRI for its Caribbean beneficiaries in the same vein as the "**BRI's scale and complexity**" give some pause.

As regards the third (preeminent) great power—the United States—at this time, regional states must be mindful of Washington's power play relative to

Beijing in the Caribbean Basin. Thus, they must assess anew and recalibrate their respective foreign policies.

Indications are they stand to gain markedly from the relationship during the Biden Administration, but as always, by how much and how fast turns on the nature of American domestic politics' influence on American foreign policy. In short, post-pandemic and post-Trump America is facing unprecedented headwinds, the effects of which are wide-ranging.

Amid these shifts, chock-full of differing goals and motives, Caricom's leadership is concerned. Fundamentally, the bloc has a considerable stake in the region as a 'Zone of Peace'. This is a long-standing refrain of the region's leadership, who look to the past, citing the useful lessons it holds regarding hegemons who set in motion events with lasting ramifications for the region and its people. Periodically, when hegemons flex their geopolitical muscles in a manner that has implications for jurisdictions bordered by the Caribbean Sea, leaders **invoke** this concept. A case in point is a **statement** made in recent months by Prime Minister of Barbados Mia Amor Mottley on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Looking to the future

A strategic competition involving China, Russia and the United States, then, has the Caribbean eyeing how to gain an advantage and hedge against post-'unipolar moment' hegemonic geopolitics, in a context where—by its very nature—the new wave of great-power rivalry will keep Beijing and Washington focused on the region for the foreseeable future.

Going forward, Caricom member states need to definitively decide what they want from this new era of great-power competition, just as much as they need to determine what they want from each other in this geopolitical context.

While the bloc has a set of common foreign policy interests, this moment threw its conduct of foreign policy into sharp relief, as the dominant narrative is coordination-centric. In this dispensation, as hegemons increasingly focus

on Caricom member states, the latter will have to engage in an ever more complex juggling act geared toward achieving foreign policy goals animated by “a community of sovereign states in which sovereignty is pooled but never ceded.”

By leveraging the [available deliberative process](#), this is a propitious time to broaden [prevailing debates](#), focusing on the bloc’s foreign policy construct relative to the salience of the stakes, preferences and interests involved in the revival of great-power competition.

Notes:

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