

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO'S FOREIGN RELATIONS SINCE INDEPENDENCE

UNDERSTANDING OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD



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For three decades after the independence of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) on 31st August 1962, the nation's international relations can be characterised as circumstances of limited complexity in a predictable world environment. The key elements in the relations were its historical links with the Commonwealth and Europe, its geopolitical relevance to the United States, its active membership in CARICOM and CARIFORUM, and the adoption of "principled" foreign policy stances in international forums such as the United Nations (UN), the Organisation of American States (OAS), the Commonwealth, and the Non-Aligned Movement. For both self interest and "cultural" ties, T&T was instrumental in efforts to promote a common regional foreign policy and has had substantial influence on the diplomacy and international relations for the CARICOM subset of countries. As a result of its identification with similar developing states, T&T has pressed the case of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), in the UN for special treatment of these countries on environmental, economic and social matters.

Mainstream theoretical perspectives on realism and pluralism, as well as the literature on decolonisation, democracy, socialism, non-alignment, anti-apartheid, fragmentation, multilateralism, unilateralism, bilateralism, and regionalism, served as mantras at various times over the three decades to partly explain the ideologies, practices, and customs associated with CARICOM and T&T international relations and foreign policy behaviour. Today the country still engages in proactive endorsement of principles such as respect for territorial integrity, non-intervention and the non-use of force for settling disputes. The dominant international relations perspective shared by T&T and other Caribbean countries is their vulnerability as small states in the international system.

The international relations of the past 20 years

have been more complicated for T&T and its Caribbean neighbours. At the end of the Cold War, the traditional paradigms and theoretical analyses of international relations from global and regional perspectives were brought into question. The continuously rapid and often unpredictable changes in the emerging international order created disturbing fluidity and uncertainty. The diplomatic agenda is now dominated by new actors and agendas including the building of regional security in the face of transnational criminal organisations and violent drug cartels, international terrorism, porous borders that threaten territorial sovereignty, energy security, food security, and responses to global environmental degradation, among many other scenarios.

State-State Relations

Although the international relations of T&T are not constrained to relations among states, Cuba and Venezuela stand out as countries with which T&T has had special relationships. T&T has enjoyed strong trade and cultural exchanges with Cuba since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1972. Geographical proximity and the geological resource connection to Venezuela also fostered firm social and family ties on both sides of the close maritime borders, though it has also spawned fishing and maritime delimitation disputes over energy resources. T&T has also developed Latin American economic and diplomatic interests, as well as an incipient Latin American identity. Consistent emigration to North America and Europe, the existence of vast T&T diasporas, as well as more recent immigration from, India, China and Africa, continue to influence the nation's diplomacy and foreign policy orientation. Today there is strong interest by T&T toward the more proximate southern Caribbean countries, as well as toward Guyana and Suriname, with which Trinidad specifically shares a strong majority Indo-

Caribbean identification and an interest in the energy potential of those countries.

Energy Diplomacy

Although T&T has never declared a policy of energy diplomacy, it has practiced as much. It is a very small state, but a mature oil and natural gas economy. Its hydrocarbon-based energy resources have allowed it to play a leadership role in the Caribbean region and in international institutions. At times, T&T's influence in the CARICOM region has been threatened by Venezuela's own natural resource diplomacy and the relationship between both countries has been intense. In 1975 T&T's Prime Minister, Dr Eric Williams, portrayed Venezuela as a neighbourhood giant attempting to "re-colonise the Caribbean" through "petrodollar politics." This was the prelude to a much later controversy in 2005 over the PetroCaribe agreement between Venezuela and a number of Caribbean countries which created diplomatic tensions between T&T and those CARICOM neighbours that were recipients of PetroCaribe "largesse." Today, the T&T-Venezuela relationship has progressed in positive ways including Memoranda of Understanding to facilitate the joint development of oil and gas fields which straddle the maritime boundaries of both countries. Energy cooperation, energy supply, and financial assistance through regional energy funds, are also vital components of T&T's energy diplomacy with its CARICOM island neighbours.

The Practice of Diplomacy

During the first 30 years of its nationhood, T&T was often complimented internationally for the formidable calibre of its diplomatic representatives abroad, and for its leadership (together with Barbados, Jamaica and Guyana) in pursuit of several diplomatic agendas of the era. Unfortunately, trends over the past decade

in the appointment of overseas representatives on the basis of political patronage, rather than professional training, suggest that a total overhaul of the Foreign Service and the criteria for overseas representation should be undertaken. The international relations of the 21st Century demand new proactive strategies and hard reciprocal bargaining not short term domestic political agendas. The pursuit of creative diplomacy is the job of well trained diplomats even now more so than in the past. ■



Photograph: Alice Besson

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Knowsley: built by businessman William Gordon at the turn of the 19th century, it presently houses the Ministry of Foreign Affairs