

# TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO AND LATIN AMERICA AFTER 50 YEARS

## RELATIONS WITH OUR NEIGHBOURS



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In the month of August 1962 Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) became an independent nation at the height of the cold war and at the closest moment that the world ever came to a nuclear war. The 1962 Cuban missile crisis demonstrated that the Caribbean theatre was just as active as Asia or Europe strategically in terms of rivalries between the US and USSR – a situation which existed until the end of the 90s with the fall of the Berlin wall. In this period T&T adopted a pro-Western foreign policy without sacrificing nationalistic margins of manoeuvre by developing and maintaining relations with communist countries, especially Cuba since 1972, and supporting nationalist movements struggling against apartheid and for decolonisation.

T&T anchored its independence in regional integration which it saw as the baseline for its development and negotiation with the wider world. Top priority was given to the formation of CARIFTA in 1968, the Caribbean Community in 1973 and later in 1994 the Association of Caribbean States (ACS). Over the years in spite of the ups and downs, regional integration has remained a fundamental plank of its external policy.

On Independence T&T considered certain multilateral organisations critical for building third world solidarity in the struggle to protect the independence of small states. Membership in the United Nations, its Specialised Agencies; as well as the Non-aligned Movement; the Group of '77; the Commonwealth; the Organisation of American States; the African, Pacific and Caribbean Group of states (ACP); and World Trade Organisation (WTO), was considered important in this regard. Immediately in 1962 T&T joined the Commonwealth, whose democratic values it shared and technical assistance it mobilised to promote its development and advance its foreign policy objectives particularly concerning small and developing countries

Bilaterally, without sacrificing its key historic links to Europe and the US, T&T established diplomatic relations with a wide range of countries in Europe, North and South America, Africa and Asia.

The stability and pragmatism that governed T&T foreign policy as it navigated the difficult cold war period would have been responsible to some extent for T&T “staying below the radar” in its international profile. As the cold war ended, opening up new possibilities for a wider set of relationships, greater activism could be seen in initiatives to develop and strengthen new partnerships particularly in Latin America, Asia and Africa. This effort at diversification was largely driven by the imperatives of development and security to a lesser extent.

### **T&T relations with Latin America**

#### *The Immediate Post-Colonial Period*

Two major legacies of colonialism in the region were the inheritance by newly-independent states of ill-defined borders and the non-recognition by some Latin American neighbours of certain practices of former colonial powers. In the case of T&T, while borders were relatively well established, the law of the sea was now emerging and T&T felt insecure as a small state next to a larger Venezuela. The traditional practice in T&T of fishing in Venezuelan waters defined as common, as well as the uncertainty as to whether Venezuela would accept the UN new rules governing the law of the sea such as the 12 miles territorial sea and the 200 miles exclusive economic zone, led T&T to regard Venezuela, especially as it had a claim to two-thirds of Guyana, as a state with undefined borders that could threaten the territorial integrity of T&T. In a wider context, this problem had also to be linked to Venezuelan control of Aves Island with its implications for Dominica as well as claims by Guatemala and Argentina on Belize and the Falkland Islands respectively.

Special metropolitan trading preferences in the UK that were later extended to the European Union and excluded Latin American countries were also a part of a colonial legacy which tended to divide the newly independent Caribbean states from Latin America. Special border charges such as the 30 per cent Venezuelan surtax on goods imported from T&T were also sources of friction.

The first initiative by T&T to deal with these issues was to set about defining the Caribbean as a specific geopolitical sphere with its own strategic interests separate from Latin America. A definition of the Caribbean was advanced that included all the Caribbean islands along with the newly independent non-Latin states as Belize, Suriname and Guyana. The major result of this initiative was to achieve within the UN system a new recognition of the Caribbean as distinct from Latin America where it was previously located. One concrete achievement of this approach was the creation of the UN ECLAC sub-regional office and the Caribbean Development and

Cooperation Committee within ECLAC.

T&T also sought to build alliances mainly with Cuba, Colombia, Mexico and Brazil as counterweights to Venezuela. In the Caribbean, Cuba was particularly viewed as a potential ally in this new Caribbean strategy which included the recognition of the Caribbean Sea as an Archipelagic Sea – a concept which proved difficult to sell to many Caribbean islands and the metropolitan powers with overseas dependencies in the region.

Relations with Brazil, Colombia and Mexico also flourished as new trade and cooperation agreements were signed with these countries. Relations with Brazil were particularly noteworthy in terms of trade, investment and technical cooperation.

The above in no way suggests that T&T did not seek to develop its relations with Venezuela. Diplomatic relations were established with Venezuela at the time of Independence and Venezuela was the first developing country to offer T&T and CARICOM a non-reciprocal trading ►

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Trinidad and Tobago was the first Commonwealth Caribbean country to join the OAS, in 1967, and hosted the Fifth Summit of the Americas in 2009

◀ agreement that was subsequently superseded in the case of T&T by a Partial Scope Agreement. In many areas such as maritime delimitation, fisheries conservation, trade, security and energy, cooperation was actively pursued.

#### **Era of Liberalisation and Globalisation**

The post-colonial period was followed by an era of liberalisation and South-South cooperation. Given its energy and manufacturing base along with an export-oriented strategy, T&T has always seen Latin America as its “natural market” in its efforts to diversify its links away from its traditional metropolitan partners. T&T has a sizeable amount of trading with Latin America unlike most, if not all, other Caribbean countries, and the expansion of this trade is dependent on greater access to Latin American markets. T&T has always rooted for more market opening between the Caribbean and Latin America and in this regard was instrumental in promoting the CARICOM Free Trade Agreement with Costa Rica.

Consistently promoting itself as the gateway to Latin America, T&T welcomed the idea of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas and has been seeking to open markets in Latin America. The focus of the latter initiative has been on Central America from 1998 with a Partial Scope Agreement being recently signed with Panama and negotiations underway with Guatemala and El Salvador. T&T has also taken new initiatives towards Brazil over the last two years in an effort to expand trade and investment and in recognition of the growing strategic importance of Brazil in the hemisphere.

At the level of the Caribbean Community, T&T has also been part of the movement to strengthen relations with Latin America. CARICOM has been meeting with SICA and Brazil and Mexico are now meeting CARICOM at the Summit level.

At the multilateral level, T&T has also showed some dynamism. In March 1967, Trinidad

and Tobago became the first Commonwealth Caribbean member of the OAS and by extension the IDB. This participation has led to T&T being active in the Summit of the Americas process and by even hosting this Summit in 2009. T&T also joined the Andean Development Corporation, the Latin American Economic System (SELA) in 1975 and participated in the Rio Group and the Latin America and Caribbean Integration and Development (CALC) process which recently have now been succeeded by the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) whose aim is to promote cooperation and development.

#### **Progress and Challenges**

Since Independence T&T has made significant strides in its relations with Latin America. Noteworthy achievements were the settlement of the fishing dispute with Venezuela, the removal of the Antillean Surtax by Venezuela, the delimitation of maritime boundaries with Venezuela, agreement on the cross-border unitisation of gas reserves with Venezuela, entry for all CARICOM countries into the OAS even the ones with border issues, increased bilateral trade with Latin America partly resulting from greater negotiated market openings, and enhanced technical and political cooperation especially with Mexico and Brazil.

While the environment today is fundamentally more conducive to expanding South-South cooperation with Latin America, certain challenges remain. In spite of the successes noted above, T&T's relations with Venezuela fall far below its potential in terms of trade and security cooperation. Trinidad and Tobago is also yet to fully exploit the scope for increasing trade, investment and political cooperation with Latin America as a whole. At the private sector level for instance, a lot still has to be done as the removal of lingering barriers is pursued. Finally, greater cooperative efforts are needed to deal with transnational crime and especially the drug trade. ■

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