

*The View from Europe*  
*By David Jessop*

## How will Caribbean respond to new US thinking?

On November 13 the Xinhua News Agency, the official press agency of China, carried a report that indicated an important and seemingly strategic change in US policy towards the Caribbean and Latin America.

In a story widely covered in the Chinese media, but hardly noticed internationally, it reported that the United States does not see China's increasing engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean as a threat, and that the two countries' presence in the hemisphere was not a zero sum game.

Referring to a visit to Beijing by Roberta Jacobson, the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the US State Department, the report quoted remarks made after she co-chaired the Sixth China-US Sub Dialogue on Latin America: an annual consultation with China to share views and policy priorities on the Latin American and Caribbean regions.

Xinhua quoted her as having told journalists: We see China's increasing engagement in the (Western) Hemisphere – in both its trade and investment relationship – as extremely positive. Millions of people in Latin America had been lifted out of poverty over the last decade. Many people had also become part of the middle class. The robustness of the relationship with China was part of the reason for the economic improvement. As long as trade and investment are based on international rules that everyone has agreed to and complies with local labour and environmental standards, it is “absolutely and definitely” a good thing.

The Chinese agency also reported the Assistant Secretary as having said: Chinese and US trade and investment relationships (with the Latin American and Caribbean region) are different. What the US provides for Latin American consumers are mostly high-end and value-added products. “We do not in any way see China as a threat”. “What we do see is the potential for greater partnership”.

The co-operation between the United States and China in Latin America can be a win-win-win for all three, Ms Jacobson said.

Ms Jacobson's comments appear to have far reaching implications. If taken together with the remarks made five days later in Washington by US Secretary of State, John Kerry, when he declared the Munroe Doctrine dead, they suggest a resetting of US policy towards the Americas in the wake of President Obama's pivot to the east.

In his remarks to the Organization of American States, the Secretary of State said that the United States will no longer seek to intervene in the affairs of other American states. The US was moving on, he said, and was making a different choice. “The relationship that we seek and that we have worked hard to foster is.... about all of our countries viewing one another as equals, sharing responsibilities, cooperating on security issues, and adhering not to doctrine, but to the decisions that we make as partners to advance the values and the interests that we share.”

What is becoming apparent is that this new and pragmatic thinking is meant also to embrace a role for China and others not regarded as hostile in the Caribbean and more generally the Americas.

How this will occur and in what areas there might be future co-ordination is as yet unclear but what is slowly emerging is that this new approach of seeking engagement with Beijing is not confined to the US but seems also to apply to other traditional partners of the region. Although so far unstated, it would appear that Europe more generally and Canada are also looking at how to develop new strategies in the Caribbean Basin in ways that would seek to identify how China and others might be better engaged in a more co-ordinated way.

As far as the Caribbean is concerned, there is now a widespread sense that the Caribbean's indebtedness, growing rates of crime, inter-regional divisions, and its failure to make integration work, carry with them a more general danger of instability and increased vulnerability to criminal networks.

More specifically, it is clear that thinking in Washington about how best to help the Caribbean address these issues is changing and that the US Vice President, Joe Biden, is taking a special interest in how a package of measures for the Caribbean might be put together during President Obama's final term in office. While this may in part be driven politically by a recognition of the role of the Caribbean Diaspora vote along with other minority votes in the next US presidential election in 2016, there is a very real interest in identifying what a new programme of support for the region might look like.

Although the principal focus remains on the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, there is a clear understanding that there are also other problems facing the region with which the US and others might be able to help. These relate to the high cost of energy, the need to find new ways to stimulate prosperity in ways that are sustainable, governance, and how a focus on the environment could bring long term gains.

However, what is missing, officials on both sides of the Atlantic suggest, is a clear message from the Caribbean as to its medium to long term needs. Instead, among all traditional partners there is a sense of frustration that the region's continuing focus remains on resource transfer and specific impediments to trade rather than on the presentation of sustainable proposals that would enable the region to begin to address its economic problems in a manner that could be supported through new measures.

To illustrate this, the point is made that it is striking the extent to which almost all Central American nations separately and jointly are now bringing to Europe and the US ideas that indicate how private sector led growth might be stimulated, energy initiatives developed, integration enhanced, and issues related to crime and security addressed.

The growing interest in seeking China's, and to a lesser extent Brazil's, engagement in the Caribbean Basin suggests an opportunity to expand the group of nations prepared to work together in the region's interests. So far, however, there appears to be little sign that the Caribbean has concluded how to best to undertake a dialogue to take long term advantage of what might now be on offer.

David Jessop is the Director of the Caribbean Council and can be contacted at [david.jessop@caribbean-council.org](mailto:david.jessop@caribbean-council.org)

Previous columns can be found at [www.caribbean-council.org](http://www.caribbean-council.org)

December 1, 2012