



The World Today

CARICOM and the Rio Group

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The Carnival season in Latin America and the Caribbean continues and as we celebrate and highlight the cultural similarities, it is useful to discuss the potential for increased Caribbean – Latin American cooperation, especially in the light of the unheralded assumption of the Chairmanship of the Rio Group by Guyana, on behalf of CARICOM. Guyana has represented CARICOM in the Rio Group since 1998 and this historic event marks the first time that a member of CARICOM has assumed chairmanship of the Group since its establishment in 1986 and opens the way for the institutionalization of the relations between the two regions. However, there is still a popular body of opinion which suggests that the historical, linguistic and geographical distance and divide between our two worlds are so significant that no effort can succeed in establishing a lasting bridge. Further, some analysts argue that Latin America could still only be considered our “distant cousins” and others present the view that even the new Latin leadership will not exert much energy to develop an alliance with CARICOM. Still, there are those who suggest that a “diplomacy of lethargy” by CARICOM in relation to Latin America will only serve to maintain the elements of distrust and suspicion, which have traditionally characterized the relations between the two regions.

CARICOM has taken on the mantle as Chair of the Group at a very delicate period in the hemisphere’s history. The relationship between key members of the Rio Group and the U.S. has become increasingly complex as a wave of populist and leftist thinking of varying levels of intensity moves through the region. It is imperative that CARICOM use its formidable diplomatic skills to present a pragmatic and balanced agenda for hemispheric cooperation.

It is critical therefore, that CARICOM seeks to use this opportunity, as Chair of the Rio Group, to reposition the region in the hemisphere by strengthening its relations with the entire membership. It is important to note that the Rio Group, officially known as the Permanent Mechanism for Consultation and Concerted Political Action in Latin America and the Caribbean was formed as an outcome of the Contadora Process which was aimed at providing a forum for dialogue aimed at securing peace in Central America. The success of the Contadora Process led to the group’s formation by Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama (the original Contadora group), in association with Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Peru (the Contadora Support Group). By the end of the 1990s, all of the Central American states, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia and Paraguay, the Dominican Republic and CARICOM were fully participating as members of the Group. Further, of significance is the fact that a CARICOM member state, Belize, has been admitted, in its

own right, as a full member of the Group, since last year. The 1986 Declaration of Rio de Janeiro, and the Veracruz Act of 1999 have together clearly set out the Group's objectives which include the expansion of political cooperation among member states, the common search for solutions to regional conflicts and challenges and the exploration of fields of cooperation which can enhance economic, social scientific and technological development, all of which have important implications and potential benefits for CARICOM states, among others.

CARICOM must therefore ensure the formulation and articulation of a strategic agenda during its tenure as Chair. One of its first priorities as Chair must be to ensure that the Group is fully sensitized to the peculiar vulnerabilities of the small CARICOM states and, that in this context it appreciates and supports the demand for special and differential treatment for CARICOM states in global markets. Indeed, one of the overarching objectives of the CARICOM Chairmanship must be to begin the correction of the asymmetries which currently exist in the development of member states of the Group so as to achieve the objectives of solidarity and unity.

There are some hopeful signs which suggest that with sustained engagement with the Rio Group, there could be greater CARICOM – Latin American collaboration. We have witnessed the recent emergence of new political directorates in some major Rio Group states which share with CARICOM some major concerns and challenges. The convergence of interests in areas such as physical infrastructure integration can lead to increased trade, economic and cultural cooperation. Mutual concerns with respect to poverty reduction, environmental management, arms and drug trafficking can stimulate collective action for mutual benefit.

While the Carnival spirit continues in the region, CARICOM must use this important opportunity to develop the momentum to enhance cooperation within the Rio Group and to provide greater prominence CARICOM within Latin America.