



The World Today

SIZE IS NOT DESTINY, REGIONALISM IS

Dr. Indira Rampersad

Alumni, The UWI Graduate Institute of International Relations, UWI,
St. Augustine

Was it sheer coincidence that an alleged plot to blow up a fuel supply to JFK airport by some geriatric Caribbean “terrorists” had dramatically unfolded before our incredulous eyes just over a week before seventeen Caribbean leaders flocked to Washington D.C. in a combusive burst of tropical exuberance to participate in the *Conference on the Caribbean – a 20/20 Vision* (June 19th-21st, 2007)?

The conference was the product of the collaborative efforts of the caucus of Caribbean Ambassadors to Washington, the CARICOM Secretariat, the IDB, the World Bank, the OAS and the U.S. government. The three-fold Expert, Diaspora and Private Sector forums collectively and critically addressed anything and everything that are of concern to the region including, trade, investment, finance, energy, education, crime, security, diaspora and deeper, faster and denser integration through the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME).

We frequently hear that all politics are domestic. The bombshell terrorist plot exploded in timely fashion to be a convenient diversion from the doldrums into which the current Bush administration has sunk itself. That same week of alleged “Caribbean terrorism”, the U.S. media was having a field day with the minority AG Alberto Gonzales’s catastrophic dismissal of three minority judges. Then came allegations of the U.S. decision to fund Sunni insurgents in Iraq. Not surprisingly, Bush’s approval rating continues to slide to an all time low. It is rather curious though, how quickly the analysts were able to prepare their media speeches on “Caribbean terrorism” and make the link to Islamic fundamentalism. The message is clear. Whether in the Middle East or in our tropical paradise in America’s backyard, the issue of the day is “American Insecurity.”

Our leaders and professionals from the region and the U.S. diaspora embraced the conference with passion, zeal and true Caribbean fervor. Jamaica’s Prime Minister, Portia Simpson-Miller, insisted that “Size is not Destiny, Regionalism Is”. But the call for a new Shiprider agreement in the interest of regional security, this time on Caribbean terms and conditions, supports the old saying that “it’s not the size of the ship, but the motion in the ocean that really matters.” The Titanic may have sunk, but our incessant navigation for regional security has not.

So far, the Caribbean conference has received virtually no attention from the mainstream American media. Our seventeen Caribbean leaders could not compete with Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, for Bush’s and the media’s attention. The visit further cemented the relationship between Israel and the US and the US’s support of Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians.

Clearly, Olmert's visit was well-timed. The 2008 election drums are rolling in the U.S. Hilary and Obama have already raised millions for their respective Democratic campaigns. And though money has never been a major problem for the Conservatives, the enormous contributions of the powerful Jewish-American lobby to the Democratic Party is no secret. Indeed, it is larger than the financial contributions from any other ethnic Political Action Committee in the U.S. Yes, all politics are domestic.

It was clear that "American insecurity" rather than "regional security" was the issue of the day when our leaders met with Bush on Wednesday, June 20th. Hoping to repeat at least some of the gains of Reagan's Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), their reasonable demands for more aid, trade, preferential treatment and investment from Uncle Sam, more than likely fell on deaf ears. Bush was more preoccupied with the Caribbean's relations with Venezuelan firebrand, Hugo Chavez and Cuba's indomitable *Comandante*, Fidel Castro. Why?

U.S. Cuba Policy can be explained in the geopolitical context of U.S. domestic politics; "Manifest Destiny" which justifies American expansionism; and the 1823 Monroe Doctrine – the historic mission of the U.S. to ward-off European powers and protect what it considers its sphere of influence in the region. In a post-Cold War era, it seems that America's worst fears are justified. The capitalist superpower has failed to remove Castro from power for forty-six years and is now forced to deal with political leftist movements within its own backyard.

Ironically, it is taking place in the absence of a powerful Soviet Union and 17 years after the Cold War has ended. A neo-Monroe Doctrine targeting the socialist ideology, rather than European powers, is not only timely but an imperative for the U.S. Cuba's Fidel Castro, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Bolivia's Evo Morales, Brazil's Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, Argentina's Nestor Kirchner, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, Uruguay's Tabare Vasquez, Chile's Michelle Bachelet and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, all veer toward the left. Some such as Chavez, Kirchner, Ortega, Morales and Correa have overtly expressed anti-imperialist sentiments and resentment for the Washington Consensus. Vasquez's first announcement upon election victory in 2004 was the restoration of diplomatic ties with Cuba. Correa quipped that Chavez "calling Bush the devil, is an insult to the devil".

Yes, all politics are domestic. Strong anti-Castro Republican representation by exiled Cuban-Americans in South Florida has ensured that the embargo on Cuba continues. They represent the second most important campaign financiers in the U.S., superseded only by that of the Jewish-American lobby. The latest 2004 and 2006 Reports of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, describe the policies which currently govern American foreign policy to the island. Their objectives closely mirror those of Monroe Doctrine of 1823 and its later Amendment in 1904 in the form of the Roosevelt Corollary.

Fortunately, some of our regional leaders, are still intact have asserted sovereign rights of the Caribbean. It is the fearless and dynamic Guyanese and Soviet trained Bharat Jagdeo, who took the Bush by the horns in his defence of the Caribbean's relations with Chavez and Castro for which Bush expressed open concern. "It is in our national interest to have relations with Venezuela and Cuba," he explained to the

distraught Bush. “Just as it is in your interest to have relations with un-democratic Saudi Arabia.” He should have added “and socialist China” which incidentally, is the largest trading partner of the United States.

The astute Jagdeo must have long realized that despite the myriad of issues on the Caribbean agenda at the Conference, the only real concern of the U.S. with regards to the region is the formidable expansion of the leftist “Castro-led Axis in Latin America” to the Caribbean. After all, Jamaica’s Michael Manley (1976-1980), Grenada’s Maurice Bishop (1979-1983) and Jagdeo’s predecessor, Cheddi Jagan (1957-1964, 1992-1998), have all flirted outrageously with socialism in the past. Jagdeo must also be acutely aware that herein lays the Caribbean’s trump card for invaluable aid, trade security and preferential treatment from the United States.

But even without an expansion of the “Castro-led Axis” into Caribbean waters, a U.S. accord with regional governments which affords the superpower easy access to the region under the guise of “Caribbean terrorism” would fulfill the historical objectives of “Manifest Destiny” and the Monroe Doctrine. It would also divert from the catastrophe in Middle East in a desperate bid to win invaluable electoral votes in the 2008 elections. Yes, all politics are domestic.

If anything, our leaders’ three-day dedication to regional issues in Washington has heightened awareness of the need to improve the quality of life in the region. They assured and reassured us that the DC Conference is not just shop talk. But we can only wait and see. By now, Caribbean leaders should know that the responsibility is on them to collectively take the initiative for the region’s development. For “Size is not Destiny, but Regionalism is”. And as far as the United States is concerned, all politics are domestic.

Dr. Indira Rampersad is currently attached to the Department of Political Science, University of Florida