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ON THE RIGHT

Does Anyone Have Our Back In Caribbean?

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There's someone at America's back door, and it's not a friendly neighbor.

While our national attention is focused on the decimation of our 401(k)s, a Congress lusting after tax increases, "the never-ending political campaign" and events in the Middle East, a very significant strategic economic threat to America is looming in the Caribbean Sea and along its littoral.

Venezuela and Cuba, with noteworthy help from outside the region, are successfully building an anti-America axis in the Caribbean that has opened the back door to U.S. economic security.

It won't take much more in the way of air and naval power in those two countries to put them in a position to challenge current U.S. military capabilities in the area. And there are eager enemies of the United States demonstrably willing to provide the military wherewithal to accomplish that end.

The evidence of the problem is mounting. A joint Venezuelan-Russian naval exercise in the Caribbean is one of the more obvious, and there is also talk of Russia basing long-range bombers in Cuba. Other countries on the Caribbean rim, such as Nicaragua, are watching to see which way the wind is going to blow in the near future.

While these events have been developing, China has emerged as an economic and strategic wild card, having steadily built very significant economic ties with many countries in the Caribbean and on its rim.

The fact that Chinese is the most popular second language presently taught in the Caribbean islands' schools underscores the degree of its economic penetration in the region.

Menacing Neighbors

Control of the Panama Canal by a Chinese company with links to that country's army adds significantly to China's economic influence in the region. China's commercial leverage in the managing of the Panama Canal, combined with its steadily increasing naval reach, adds an ominous dimension to its current de facto control of the Panama Canal "choke point."

The U.S. economic vulnerability to a threat from the Caribbean is very real and, at least as far as political and media attention is concerned, largely ignored. Consider, for example, the vulnerability of the U.S. Gulf Coast offshore oil platforms.

Picture for a moment the TV images of the U.S. Gulf Coast during the approaches of the periodic hurricanes that sweep into the Gulf of Mexico. The thousands of offshore oil rigs are so numerous that they blend together into one visual mass on your TV screens.

And while the TV commentators are always quick to point out the economic implications of hurricanes to America's offshore oil sources in the Gulf of Mexico, they haven't picked up on the greater, and increasing, threat from aggressively unfriendly Caribbean neighbors.

A few successful naval or air attacks against those rigs could eliminate scores of those platforms outright and shut down the entire Gulf Coast offshore production capability, simply on the basis of the threat of further attacks.

Since those platforms account for roughly 25% of U.S. oil production, such a situation would instantaneously bring the United States to its knees economically.

Military Cuts

There is also the issue of the U.S. oil-refining facilities along the Gulf Coast and of the U.S. imports and exports that pass through our Gulf Coast ports. The latter include not just petro-products but also much of the stuff of daily life in the United States. That seaborne commerce accounts for roughly 10% of total U.S. imports and exports.

Clearly the U.S. Navy is aware of the threat, and recently it re-established the 4th Fleet for operations in the Caribbean. Problem is, the 4th Fleet is mostly a paper command, with tangible military assets to be added "as needed."

Unfortunately, with our currently undersized and shrinking Navy, there are not a lot of assets available, and building up meaningful U.S. naval strength in the Caribbean would mean drawing down forces that are focused on such critical areas as the Middle East and the Western Pacific.

There have been a lot of major political, economic, military and diplomatic distractions for America recently, but the time has come to take a long, hard look at what is going on in our geographic backyard.

And if the current situation in the Caribbean is as serious as the facts indicate, somebody better talk to politicians such as Rep. Barney Frank, who recently advanced the idea of a 25% cut in our military budget!

It's time for a reality check. There are some very shady characters at America's back door, and they can't be dismissed by such labels as "El Loco," and they aren't going to knock politely when they decide to come in.

■ **Callo** is a retired U.S. Navy rear admiral and author. His most recent book is "John Paul Jones: America's First Sea Warrior."