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Caribbean Security

More's Involved than Nutmeg and Tourism

Washington.

CAN GRENADA, a poor island of 110,000 people whose only products are cocoa and spice, a country with no navy, no air force, only a motley people's militia, threaten the vital security interests of the mighty United States? It seems hard to believe. Yet, consider the following facts:

During a major speech on the defense budget, President Reagan showed a photo-

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graph of the airstrip under construction in Grenada and the press had a field day, while Maurice Bishop, who recently seized Grenada by force, immediately disclaimed any threat emanating from Grenada and justified the airfield simply on the basis of tourism. Someone should have asked him: If that is the purpose of the airfield, why is the refueling capacity so far in excess of that necessary for commercial aircraft to transport tourists?

All the furor resulting from the president's address, of course, has made for a great deal of engaging copy in the press. It has also tended to obscure important developments in the region during recent years. As Mr. Reagan pointed out in an earlier speech, what is at stake in the Caribbean is not nutmeg, nor tourist transportation facilities for that matter. It is the mandatory requirement for safe transit through a strategically vital waterway in our own backyard.

Nearly half of America's oil imports and over-all foreign trade originates in or passes through the Caribbean. The Galleons Passage, the favored thoroughfare for much of this traffic, lies just to the south of Grenada, making it a key lifeline for the American economy.

A significant change is the recent evolution of Cuban naval capabilities. Until recently, the Cuban Navy was composed mainly of small patrol craft operating in coastal waters where American surveillance had a relatively easy time keeping tabs on them. In the past few years the Soviet Union has pro-

vided its Cuban allies with a custom-made Koni-class destroyer and two Foxtrot diesel-powered attack subs. Last July a pair of amphibious ships, each capable of carrying 180 troops and five tanks, was delivered. Training and experience with these larger ships have advanced to the point where Cuba is on the verge of acquiring a blue-water naval capability. The ships already in its inventory can roam throughout the Caribbean and up and down the Eastern Seaboard. American intelligence believes that up to four more Foxtrot subs are under construction for delivery to Cuba.

It is often forgotten that during the first six months of 1942, when German U-boats wreaked havoc on U.S. shipping in the Caribbean, there were never more than three in the area at a time.

The Cuban potential for sustained long-range naval operations appears even more threatening when one looks at a basing structure developing among its allies in Nicaragua, Grenada and now Surinam. Cuba's modern fleet of MiG fighters as well as Soviet surveillance and combat aircraft rapidly flown into the Caribbean could deploy to the Nicaraguan airfields where aircraft shelters and revetments are under construction and to Grenada when that airstrip is completed. Nicaragua is developing naval and air bases on both coasts when it has no air force or navy to speak of. Who do you think will use these bases?

All this in an area where the primary U.S. naval facility at Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, has no ships or aircraft permanently assigned.

NATO's area of responsibility is north of the Tropic of Cancer and thus excludes not only the land mass of Cuba, but the entire Caribbean area, although a significant pro-

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portion of NATO's supply of oil as well as much of the combat supplies for forces in Europe come out of Gulf ports and pass through the narrow straits between Florida and Cuba. If unopposed, Cuba now has the capacity to interdict this channel and the Yucatan passage to the west. In the event of war in Europe, it will be the responsibility of the United States to maintain the security of the shipping lanes in the Caribbean now progressively threatened by a growing Soviet presence and proxies such as Cuba and Nicaragua. American forces presently required for important NATO tasks elsewhere would have to be diverted to deal with Cuba.

The more immediate peacetime threat from Cuba comes from its support, through Nicaragua, of leftist insurgents throughout Latin America. Grenada, whose leader Maurice Bishop has just returned from meetings with his ideological soulmates in Moscow and Pyongyang, is believed to be undertaking similar joint efforts with Cuba in the eastern Caribbean. Colonial flotsam of four European empires forms the island chain arcing between Cuba and Grenada. They are for the most part tiny, newly independent states with lively parliamentary governments and fragile economies dependent on tourism and agricultural exports. Leaders of the other island nations resent the intrusion of Soviet and Cuban influence and ideology into the eastern Caribbean through Grenada. There have been allegations that training of left-wing groups from these struggling democracies is underway in Grenada and at a base in southwestern Cuba. Remember that Mr. Bishop took power in Grenada in a coup involving only a few dozen Cuban-trained supporters.

Late last year, the five islands north of Grenada formed a regional security group to

protect themselves from potential aggression. Their leaders carefully insist their defense force, a rather pathetic fleet of five small patrol craft including two converted shrimp-boats, is not directed against Grenada or Cuba. But there is great concern over the regional effects of Mr. Bishop's sharp move towards the Soviet bloc.

The United States should carefully promote this kind of regional arrangement with money and training administered in a careful, unobtrusive manner.

While sufficient military aid must be provided to ensure security and protection of the infrastructure, it must also be considered that the inherent weakness of the economies of these tiny states creates openings for subversive activities. The Reagan administration, often attacked for taking a one-dimensional approach stressing military solutions, last year offered a broad regional economic and political package known as the Caribbean Basin Initiative. The program became bogged down by congressional wrangling over trade concessions. In the eyes of regional leaders this economic aid is paramount to preserving stability.

The United States should also move to heighten its visibility in the Caribbean on a regular and permanent basis. Consideration should be given to basing a destroyer squadron permanently in Puerto Rico and Key West to shadow Cuban naval movements as they begin to range more widely across strategic sealanes.

American intelligence capabilities in the Caribbean basin, once excellent, have been largely dismantled over the last decade. In this area of the world electronic intercepts and satellite photography are not very useful.

The necessary intelligence functions have not much changed since the time of Sir Francis Drake. A better knowledge of political and economic developments in the Caribbean is essential.

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