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During Mission Readiness Training for Operation CARIBBE, HMCS *Moncton* conducts focus transfer with a CH-148 Cyclone helicopter in the Bedford Basin, 18 January 2021.

The Greater Caribbean Basin as a Complex Littoral System: Implications for Joint Operations in the Region

by Juan Castillo

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Introduction

The physical and human geography of the western hemisphere, and of the Greater Caribbean Basin in particular, has been shaped into a security environment where a plethora of networked non-state actors impact its dynamics on a daily basis. The legacy of state-sponsored and non-state proxies that were supported by both the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, together with the emergence of transnational criminal organizations in the 1980s, helped shape the features that generated this contemporary hemispheric security environment.¹ Moreover, structural conditions linked to gaps in governance, state presence and economic inequality throughout

the region have enabled not only the proliferation of these actors, but also their ability to thrive, making them a constant security challenge for governments across the region.² Actors such as drug trafficking organizations, local criminal gangs, and insurgencies (some of which have more in common with the former), continue to erode the monopoly of violence held by state-based security institutions in the region. In some instances, they have acquired more sophisticated military-type capabilities than those possessed by the host states in which they operate.³ Apart from the social, political and economic conditions that facilitate the proliferation and overall operational success of these non-state actors, the diverse geography found in this region plays an equally pivotal role not only in facilitating their sustainment but also in maintaining the transactional processes in which they participate. Dense rainforests, fluvial waterways, coastal lines with access to the ocean, and rugged mountainous terrain facilitate activities that range from kinetic operations to the movement of weapons, contraband, narcotics and cash. Over time, the Greater Caribbean Basin has become a permissive theatre of operations for actors that challenge or undermine state structures and institutions across the region.

In the current state of play, the security environment is being shaped by recalcitrant insurgencies that operate in the Colombian and Venezuelan hinterland; Mexican cartels that are expanding their reach; and other transnational organized crime organizations, as well as localized (and armed) criminal gangs that operate across countries in the region.⁴ These violent non-state actors (VNSAs) do not exist in operational silos but instead rely on the ability to cooperate with, influence and/or coerce each other, creating a web where the exchange of violence, contraband and funding transcend national boundaries. Ostensibly, these actors have generated their own operational environments, which ultimately feed into a macro-system that overlies a significant portion of the western hemisphere. Human and physical geography play an important

role in maintaining this system. The clandestine routes formed by mountain ranges, dense jungles, and complex fluvial and littoral waterways are closely linked to the way in which VNSAs are able to thrive and operate, while challenging the monopoly on violence held by the host states. Moreover, civilian space (or “white space”) becomes equally vital and critical terrain on which these actors can achieve their objectives. By gaining the support of locals, VNSAs are able to access the freedom of movement, logistical support and human resources they need to support their operations across the board.⁵

The aim of this article is to advance the notion that the Greater Caribbean Basin is a complex security system that is littoral in nature, and which in turn should be viewed as a wider area of operations – in contrast to specific country-focused approaches – for ongoing efforts led by the US, Canada and other like-minded partners that operate in the region. To this end, the article is divided into three sections. The first will discuss the theoretical implications behind littoral complex systems and how they can contribute to a better understanding of the security dynamics experienced in a defined geographic space. The second section will focus on applying the complex system model addressed in the previous section to the current operating environment in the Greater Caribbean Basin. The third and final section will discuss the implications for ongoing multinational operations in the region. For the purposes of this article, the Greater Caribbean Basin will include not only the Caribbean Sea, but also the Gulf of Mexico, the Central American subcontinent and its Pacific Coast, and the northern portion of South America. These geographic parameters reflect the system discussed in this article.

Littoral Operating Environments as Complex (Security) Systems

In the post-9/11 era, the application of systems theory to active operating environments has emerged as a tool for



Map of the vast geographic space of the Greater Caribbean Basin, which includes the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, the Central American subcontinent, its Pacific Coast and the northern portion of South America.

understanding complex dynamics that involve multiple actors, including but not limited to adversaries, as well as their interactions. The West's engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq facilitated the application of this concept in operational environments at the time, and concurrent and subsequent conflicts across northern Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe have shown that there is still a good degree of utility for this applied paradigm.⁶ Borrowing from the economics, biology and computer science literature on this topic, the best way to describe a complex system is as a structure that is made up of various autonomous components with several intricate lines of interaction.⁷ Moreover, key features that must be present in a system for it to be complex are the "ensemble of many elements," including the diversity of its components; their interactions; inherent disorder due to the physical and cognitive independence of each component; and an inherent capacity for organization or development of patterns within the system's confines.⁸ Although there might not be an overarching hierarchy within the system's components, the interactions among them, which can include collaboration, competition or any other sort of intra-systemic feedback processes, will generate alignments, patterns and placements of some sort. Another factor that influences system dynamics is the environment where the actual system is contained, which can include even a much larger system. In the same way that the various components interact among themselves, they can also interact or react to their external environment, creating a complex adaptive system or a "system of systems" that is sustained by these structured internal and external flows and thus adapts to external conditions.⁹ Indeed, a complex system can be contained within a larger system, which in turn can also enclose smaller systems as the remainder of its components.¹⁰ An actor such as an insurgency can be seen as a complex system that comprises components such as its leadership, members, supporters, materiel and logistical assets.¹¹ So can other actors such as security forces, government institutions and segments of civil society. However, the theatre of operations where the insurgency and other actors are engaged is in turn a macro-system of which the actor-based systems are the components, and their interactions and the way they play out in the physical domain generate the necessary dynamics and conditions to make such larger systems complex.¹² Another example of this model could include networked terrorist organizations, which themselves are complex systems with components that are critical for their overall operational sustainability, survival, and efforts to achieve their political-military objectives. Since they are able to interact with other elements across sovereign territorial boundaries, including other actors, the larger systems shaped by transnational terrorist organizations overlie a vast geographic space.¹³

The application of the complex systems paradigm to littoral operating environments is certainly relevant, given that the latter possess many of the features described above. According to US joint doctrine, the littoral space specifically refers to two elements in the maritime operating environment: first, "seaward," or "the area from the open ocean to the shore, which must be controlled to support operations ashore," and, second, "landward" or "the area inland from the shore that can be supported and defended directly from the sea."¹⁴ Similarly, British doctrine describes the

littoral space as "those land areas (and their adjacent areas and associated air space) that are susceptible to engagement and influence from the sea" as well as "those areas of the sea susceptible to engagement from the land, from both land and air forces."¹⁵ But while both descriptions capture the notion that the littoral space is a geographically defined area of the physical domain where different elements (specifically weapon systems) interact, the British definition alludes to the notion that it can include elements other than kinetic capabilities. Indeed, the littorals challenge military planners because of their diverse geography and hydrology (such as shallow waters, enclosed seas, and straits, among other things), which impact the employment of weapon systems.¹⁶ Yaneer Bar-Bam describes the littoral region as a complex system where multiple operational domains (air, land, sea, information, etc.) converge while, concurrently, different networked agents, from an individual combatant to a combined joint force or from an insurgent fighter to a sophisticated armed non-state group, are engaging other active elements in the operating environment.¹⁷ In addition, we cannot forget that "approximately 95 percent of the world's population lives within six hundred miles of the coast," making the littoral regions equally challenging from a human terrain perspective and due to the fact that other elements can quickly come into play, including the great diversity of actors that operate in this space.¹⁸ According to David Kilcullen, the littoral environment has not only become highly urbanized due to the

"The littorals challenge military planners because of their diverse geography and hydrology."

demographic density in the sphere of influence of coastal areas, but it has also increased its connectivity due to the adoption of new information and communications technologies which support networks that overlie traditional maritime trade and demographic routes.¹⁹ Moreover, littoral regions are a point of convergence where actors, including potential adversaries, operating in the cyber, maritime, land, urban and information space, meet and create a system where they engage through highly intricate flows.²⁰ In such an environment, insurgencies, organized crime or even state-sponsored hybrid actors can quickly exploit such flows to further key objectives, from cultivating legitimacy among key target populations to co-opting actors such as shipping companies or ports to enable logistic functions across the area of operations.

In light of this complexity, national or multinational military operations that are focused on supporting security efforts in littoral environments must tailor their response to the conditions and dynamics of the larger security system at play. According to Fernando Escobar and his colleagues, the non-linear and multi-vector nature of the littorals requires that a national or multinational combatant force apply an integrated diplomatic, information, military and economic (DIME) framework that is able to shape and transform critical flows within the littoral system to achieve a desired end-state.²¹ Indeed, the DIME framework is in itself a system made up of specialized elements (such as the diplomatic corps, military assets, programs and targeted financial investments) that can pool resources and capabilities to address specific, yet interrelated, challenges within the littoral system.²² Threats such as insurgencies, transnational terrorism, organized crime and piracy can be elements that operate and sustain themselves through the flows that exist in complex littoral systems; therefore, applying a framework that is multi-pronged, fit for purpose and tailored to the complexity of the littoral space can be a more effective strategy to counter such threats. Another operational concept that is aligned with the tenet of a DIME framework is the notion

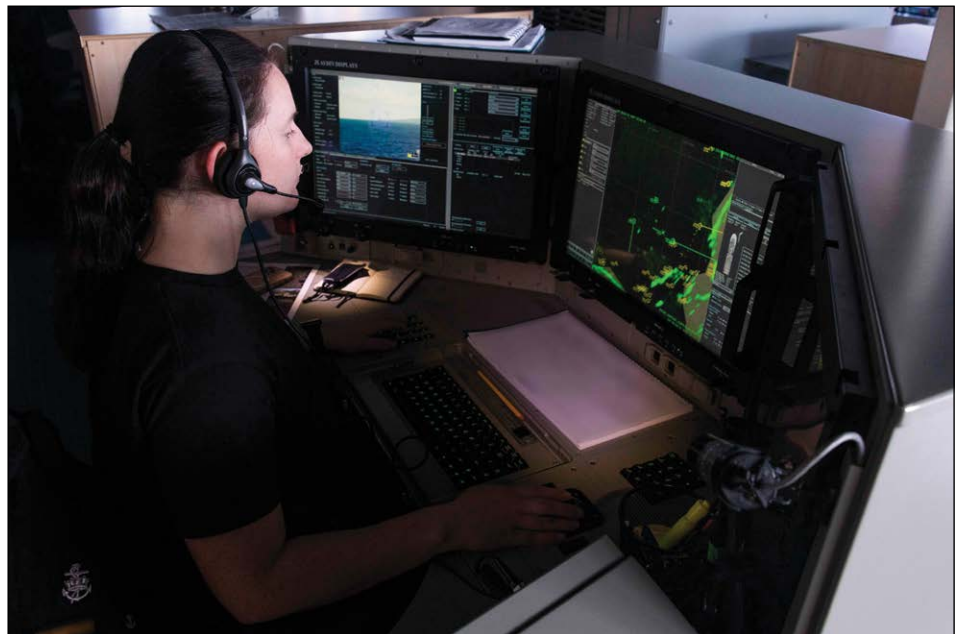
of Unified Action, which has been advanced by the US defence community. Unified Action is defined as the synchronization, coordination and/or integration of the activities of governmental and nongovernmental entities with military operations to achieve unity of effort.²³ That entails achieving a compound effect through the combination of different efforts that include military activities working through other lines of operation as well as activities that are being led by other instruments of national power including diplomatic engagement, international assistance and other security-related activities such as international law enforcement. Ultimately, the littorals are a multi-domain environment where naval, air and land forces can play a critical role in achieving key military objectives. The littoral operating environment, in all of its complexity, requires a comprehensive engagement that enables the use of a wide range of strategic tools, including joint forces integrated with other whole-of-government capabilities. This can ensure that the right set of capabilities is employed to defeat threats or adversaries that are exploiting the complexity of the littorals to their advantage.

The Greater Caribbean as a Complex Littoral System

Based on the model described above, there are key characteristics that can be applied to the Greater Caribbean Basin area of operations, making it, from a security perspective, a strong case study of a complex littoral system. Those characteristics are, first, the ensemble of actor-based components; second, the flows and relationships that exist among those components; and last, the overarching structure that encases both the components and their flows. In terms of the cognitive components, it is evident that an assortment of actors is present in the multi-domain space, and that they have different sets of capabilities and military objectives and occupy specific niches within the larger security ecology of the region. Foremost, the presence of threat actors in the form of VNSAs is quite salient in the operating environment, and countering their activities has been the main effort for existing multinational inter-agency operations in the region.²⁴ In the geographic space that extends from the northern tip of South America to the US–Mexico border, there is a significant presence of threat actors that seek to challenge or undermine state governments to advance political or economic goals.²⁵ For instance, the National Liberation Army (ELN), right-wing criminal bands (BACRIM) and dissident units from the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are engaged in an asymmetric warfare campaign against the state as well as among themselves for territorial control of areas that are essential for cocaine production, illegal mining and other illicit activities.²⁶ These actors do not limit themselves to the Colombian borders, and they thus have a

footprint in neighbouring countries such as Ecuador, Venezuela and Panama.²⁷ Equally destabilizing is the presence of transnational criminal gangs in Central America, which not only boast a well-profiled capacity to use violence but are also able to influence (through coercion and persuasion) different elements of the civilian space, including population segments and local government institutions.²⁸ While the main objectives of these actors are economic, they have the capacity to achieve limited political objectives that include limiting government presence and exercising basic governance functions in the areas where they have achieved some degree of territoriality.²⁹ Mexican cartels have also emerged as prevalent actors in the last two decades, shaping the regional security environment. Apart from showcasing sophisticated military capabilities, they challenge the state's monopoly on violence and they also enjoy vast economic power, which allows them to influence and persuade other actors that operate in the space.³⁰ Like the Colombian VNSAs and the Central American criminal organizations, the Mexican cartels also conduct operations outside their own country's borders, especially as they seek to facilitate the drug trade across the western hemisphere.³¹

State actors with a relative hostile posture are also shaping the overall security environment within the Greater Caribbean Basin. The Maduro regime in Venezuela is challenging Western security objectives by not only supporting some of the aforementioned VNSAs, but also providing a footprint for Russia (and to a lesser degree Iran and China) as those countries seek to ramp up activities advancing great power competition outside their traditional spheres of influence.³² All of these actors are inherently complex entities with sophisticated command and control nodes, multi-domain capabilities and operational support mechanisms. The overall strategic objectives of all these actors are focused on their respective geographic core areas, yet there are interdependencies or systemic flows that exist among them due to their stake in the drug trade and other illicit transnational activities.



A Royal Canadian Navy member aboard HMCS *Harry DeWolf* operates the radar system to monitor the ship's surroundings as it approaches the port of Montego Bay, Jamaica during Operation CARIBBE, 1 December 2021. (Photo has been digitally altered for operational security).

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DND/CAF photo

A United States Navy member aboard HMCS *Harry DeWolf* coordinates the transfer of seized illegal drugs to the United States Coast Guard as part of an illegal drug seizure while on a drug trafficking interdiction operation during Operation CARIBBE in the East Pacific Ocean, 13 November 2021. (Photo has been digitally altered for operational security).

as described above, is itself encapsulated in a much larger system that includes the demographic, social, economic and political processes that occur in the region's diverse physical domain on a daily basis. The Greater Caribbean Basin is characterized by complex geography around a major oceanic sea that has been used for commerce, war and overall human development for centuries. In this littoral periphery, threat actors maximize the use of the physical terrain to their advantage. On the one hand, features such as fluvial systems, highlands and jungles act as obsta-

The VNSAs that currently operate in the Greater Caribbean Basin have diverse capabilities, footprints and intent. Nevertheless, overlapping objectives, an appetite for collaboration among themselves, and opportunities for such collaboration have facilitated systemic flows among these different components within the complex security system that exists in the region. These flows facilitate the exchange of strategic commodities such as weapons, expertise and resources, and they ultimately play a role in the trade of illicit goods, mainly but not limited to narcotics. Also, these flows generate alignments through which various actors (notwithstanding their projection capacity) position themselves to support each other's political-military goals. At a macro-system level, actors are closely aligned. For example, Colombian VNSAs, criminal organizations based in Jamaica, Mexico-based cartels, and other VNSAs that are present in strategic geographic areas such as key port areas across the Pacific are likely to share interests.³³ At the local level there is competition and conflict among threat actors, which is evident in Central America, Colombia and Mexico, where violence among VNSAs is quite conspicuous. Yet, as violent actors seek to undermine both domestic and regional security frameworks led by state governments and the international community, the overall system becomes more conducive to their alignment, since the flows seek to shape the system in a way that sets the conditions to achieve their overall strategic (or integrated military, political and economic/criminal) goals. Ultimately, the connectivity that exists at a system-wide level generates a compounded threat environment, which is itself a multi-vector and multi-domain complex system.

The last but not least element that makes the Greater Caribbean Basin a complex security system, and more specifically a littoral one, is the region's physical and human geography. The system generated by the alignment of elements and the flows among them,

cles for state governments in the region that seek to extend their presence and governance as well as their military/security footprint within their boundaries. On the other hand, this rugged terrain is used by threat actors to establish operational nodes, including bases and logistics hubs from which the movement of illicit commodities, personnel and hardware is facilitated. Moreover, this geographic periphery allows threat actors to engage in asymmetric warfare activities to protect or advance their existing political and economic goals. Apart from the physical geography, the human geography also plays a critical role, especially in urban centres within the Greater Caribbean Basin. While cities and other built-up areas offer operational advantages to threat actors due to the impact human-made infrastructure has on the physical domain, the host state's poor governance and lack of presence are ultimately exploited by threat actors in the urban environments.³⁴ Indeed, the combination of economic power, due to the drug trade and other illicit criminal activities, and an established capability to employ violence allows threat actors to enjoy a high degree of influence over key demographics.³⁵ This translates into achieving a significant degree of territoriality where control of the human terrain provides access to operational resources, but more importantly erodes both the legitimacy and the presence of state institutions. According to John P. Sullivan, there are plenty of examples of major urban centres across the Greater Caribbean basin where threat actors are able to exercise this degree of territoriality, including Ciudad Juarez in Mexico, San Pedro Sula in Honduras, Caracas in Venezuela and Buenaventura in Colombia, among others.³⁶ In the end, the complex system components that include threat actors (as the lead elements) and their flows have thrived in the Greater Caribbean Basin because they have successfully adapted to the region's geographic space while simultaneously integrating into the larger security ecosystem within this defined littoral geographic space.

Implications for Combined Joint Operations in the Region

The complex littoral system that exists in the Caribbean has significant strategic value for North American and Western European states. Curtis Ward notes that the Caribbean acts as a “third border” to the US, and that securing it means preventing “terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal migration, human trafficking, and the smuggling of contraband and of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear materials” from reaching the North American mainland.³⁷ In addition, the Caribbean remains a strategic transit route for maritime trade, a destination for tourists and expatriates, and a significant recipient of foreign direct investment.³⁸ Although specifically addressing US interests in the region, the salient points raised by Ward could equally apply to Canada or like-minded European countries with a footprint in the region, such as the UK, France and the Netherlands.

Several active military and security activities in the region seek to address particular security interests, some of which take a bilateral country-specific approach while others have more of a regional focus.³⁹ Examples include ongoing capacity-building packages that are delivered by western forces to state security forces, increased participation in multilateral exercises, and a major counter-narcotics Combined Joint Operation (Operation MARTILLO), which is led by the US with several contributing countries, including Canada (through Operation CARIBBE).⁴⁰ In addition, other security agencies also implement programming

seeking to bolster security in the region. They focus on enhancing law enforcement, the rule of law and other non-military security efforts.⁴¹ Although these targeted operations have been critical in addressing current security threats in the region, they will likely encounter the challenge of facing a wider system in which threat actors can easily adapt, persevere and continue their operational tempo due to alignments that occur at a wider structural level. Thanks to systemic flows that include (economic) resource generation, transnational mobility, and even transfer of combat commodities, the system at large can adapt and generate resiliency towards ongoing military and security operations from a bilateral, regional and state perspective.

In this light, it is worth considering an approach that focuses on generating unity of effort through a “combined joint inter-agency” platform that could coordinate all military and security operations across the Greater Caribbean Basin. Such a platform would not necessarily establish a unified chain of command, which could be quite challenging given competing priorities and interests, as well as other political challenges among partner countries. Instead, it would focus on synchronization, collaboration and ultimately generating a space for joint operational planning to re-adjust to shifts in the alignment of the threat system across the region. Currently, the US Southern Command maintains a Joint Inter-Agency Task Force that supports Operation MARTILLO. However, the scope of both the task force and the operation is narcotics interdiction (maritime, air and law enforcement activities) as opposed to the full spectrum of interconnected threats that are present in the region. A combined joint and interagency



DND/CAF photo

HMCS *Moncton* transits the Atlantic Ocean on their way to the Caribbean Sea during Operation CARIBBE to support the US-led Campaign MARTILLO, a multinational effort to prevent illicit trafficking by organized crime and improve security in the region, 31 January 2021.

platform could offer an opportunity to North American, European, and regional partners to address the threat system by adjusting to changes and shifts in the system through information sharing, synchronization of action and subsequently linking activities that at this point are exclusively focused on bilateral or localized efforts, such as capacity-building or support for partner security forces. As highlighted earlier, given the complexity of littoral operating environments, especially ones as vast as the Greater Caribbean Basin, the use of DIME or the unified action approaches can help maximize efficiency and impact when employing all instruments of state power to advance security objectives. Ergo, a platform that can coordinate multi-domain activities across a variety of lines of effort that are implemented by a set of like-minded countries could help address fluidity that exists in a complex security system. In the end, there would have to be an appetite among partners to establish such a security architecture, yet this is a process that can be built up through gradual steps that facilitate operational integration.

Conclusion

The Greater Caribbean Basin is a complex security system that is littoral in nature and which, in turn, requires a

comprehensive approach to regional security to address interconnected threats that are of a transnational nature. Overall, the physical and human geography of the region, which borders a major oceanic body of water, hosts elements that include threat actor--based components as well as flows that contribute to the complex relationships among them. Indeed, these components include non-state and state actors that either cooperate with or compete against each other while simultaneously creating alignments that ultimately shape the security environment across the region. Given the way in which threats have managed to intertwine through transboundary networks across the Greater Caribbean Basin, there is a need to enable a high degree of coordination, collaboration and planning across all military and security efforts in the region, in spite of the political and administrative challenges involved. To that end, this article proposes exploring the establishment of a combined joint interagency structure with a mandate to oversee operations across the region. As both Western nations and local partners continue to counter threats in the region, these are opportunities that merit consideration.



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