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THREATS TO HUMAN SECURITY WHEN BORDERS REMAIN 'OPEN' – TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Sqn Ldr Kemba Hannays

JCSP 43 DL

Exercise Solo Flight

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES
JCSP 43 DL – PCEMI 43 AD
2017 – 2018

EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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Word Count: 3058

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THREATS TO HUMAN SECURITY WHEN BORDERS REMAIN ‘OPEN’– TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Introduction

Representing a departure from orthodox security studies, whereby the security of the state is priority, a human security approach to national and international security puts emphasis on human beings. In a broad sense, the United Nations describes this concept as ‘people’s freedom from fear and freedom from want’¹. The 1994 Human Development Report (HDR) in which human security was introduced, listed seven essential dimensions of human security; economic, health, personal, political, food, environmental and community². Whatsoever threatens these aspects of life, are direct threats to human security as well as the state within which the affected group resides.

Trinidad and Tobago is a twin island state, originally colonized by Great Britain, gaining its independence in 1962. They are the southernmost islands in the West Indian chain of islands, lying some four miles of the coast of South America (specifically, Venezuela), at the closest point. Within the last two decade, this state has seen a significant increase in criminal activity within and around its borders. There has been an emergence of an almost uncontrollable trade of illegal firearms, narcotics as well as human trafficking. Gang activity is at an all-time high and the islands are strategically located to facilitate transshipment of illicit items bound for North America and Europe.

¹ Gomez O.A, Gasper D. United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report Office. Human Security; A Thematic Guidance Note for Regional and National Human Development Report Teams. Last accessed 21 May 2018, 1

² Ibid, 2

The relationship between the governments of Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela has remained mostly cordial over time. It is poised to become strained though, as Venezuela has recently plummeted into well know crisis of their own, forcing their citizens to flee and illegally take up residence on many of the neighboring countries, including Trinidad. Apart from the immigration issue, the presence of oil reserves as well as fishing grounds at disputed locations have the potential to cause conflict between the states and their citizens.

A state's inability to protect itself from potential harm is a direct threat to its citizens' welfare. Lesser developed nations' dependency on foreign more powerful allies to step in where necessary often result in their own military capabilities being taken for granted or undervalued. Trinidad and Tobago is no exception; with negligent availability of aerial surveillance along its territorial borders, weak points of entry where there is a tendency for corruption to occur and a less than adequately equipped Coast Guard. Given the current environment Trinidad and Tobago finds itself, the government has no choice but to do what it must in order to attempt to secure its easily penetrable borders. This paper will highlight the importance of military involvement in the security of the borders of Trinidad and Tobago and highlight the threats to human security that arise from an open border, specifically with regard to economics, personal and political realms. The emphasis of this military presence is not on force, but a necessity to meet the mandate of the government, to make its people feel free from fear and want, without a complete dependency on foreign intervention.

Current Status

The current economic difficulties faced by Trinidad and Tobago resulted directly from the steep decline of oil prices on the global market in between 2014-2016. Prior to this, public

funding for government agencies, whilst not infinite, were abundantly available, particularly to the Ministry of National Security, under whose purview the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force (TTDF) falls. This Force (made up of land forces, a Coast Guard and an Air Guard) is mandated to ‘defend the sovereign good of...Trinidad and Tobago, respond to natural disasters, provide aide to the civil power, local as well as regional obligations to provide search and rescue services and most critically, monitoring and protection of the state’s borders³. With the increased criminal activity within the borders of Trinidad and Tobago, the TTDF’s land force has taken on aide to the civil power as a primary role. Trust in the Police Service by the general public remains low, as such the TTDF has been unable to pull troops out of a ‘joint patrol’ arrangement with the Police that has been in effect for in excess of a decade.

In more fruitful times the military, through the government, attempted to equip itself to appropriately deal with the influx of illicit items and personnel by increasing its air power and sea power. Sophisticated air and sea vessels were acquired along with the necessary maintenance contracts required to sustain their effectiveness. With the economic decline came the competition for ‘dollars and cents’ amongst the various arms of the government; maintenance cost of military assets became simply too expensive (for a peace time military) and not comparable to fundamental necessities such as the need for health care and education.

Is there a price tag attached to security of one’s citizens? Without much analysis of the cost benefit of the removal of the essential services provided by the military assets in question, funding was cut off and the units left in limbo as to what the next move must be. The units of the TTDF are the only ones mandated with protection of the state’s borders. There is some duplication of effort by other national agencies regarding internal security, but their mandates

³ Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Ministry of National Security. Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force last updated 2015

(and future given the economic decline) are also in question. The capacity of the military arms to fulfil their roles and responsibilities has been significantly stymied, thereby fueling the cycle of the internal fight against the illicit trade within the nation.

Emerging Threats to Human Security for Trinidad and Tobago

Economic – The strength of a state's security is its economy⁴. The mainstay of Trinidad and Tobago's economy has forever been the production and refining of oil and natural gas. This is the main source of foreign exchange for the government; as is evidenced by the current shortage of United States (and other foreign) currency in this country since the decline in the oil and gas market. Granted the price of oil on the global market directly affects this economy and is completely out of Trinidad and Tobago's control, the very security of the potential income the local industry can continue to enjoy is threatened if offshore installations are not readily defended.

⁴ Ronins S.R. Economic Security – Neglected Dimension of National Security. 2011, xi

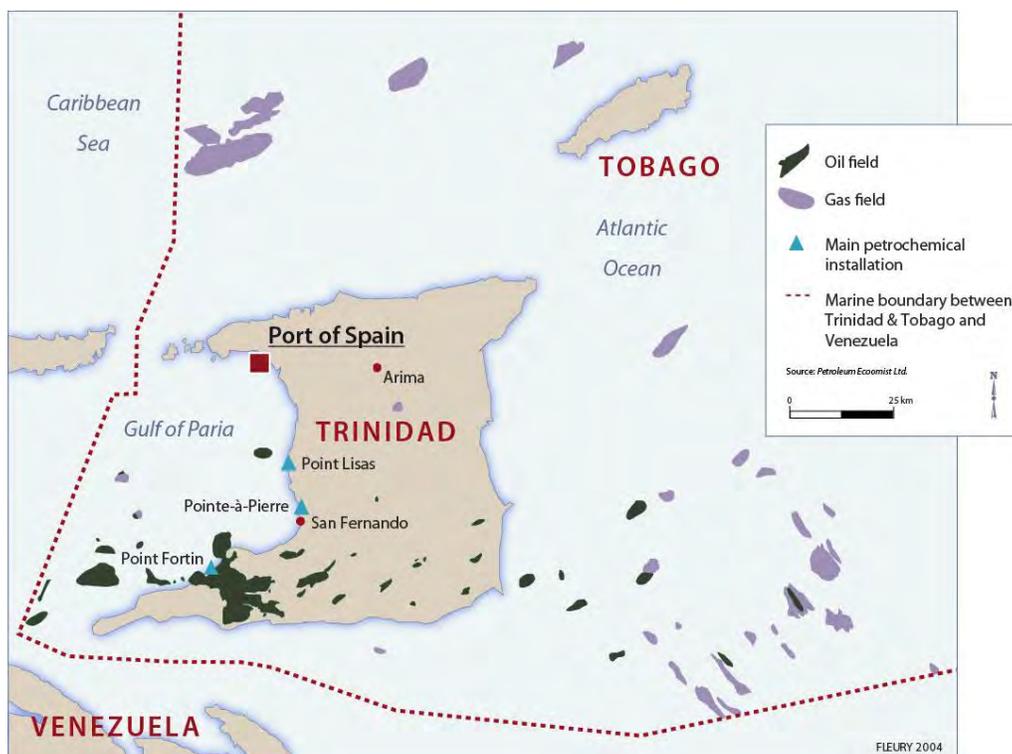


Figure 1. Map of Trinidad and Tobago – Oil and Gas Fields

Source: *Caribbean Atlas online*

The military aviation assets that were once in operation provided a sense of security to the operators of the offshore installations by their mere presence and acted as a deterrent to potential attackers. The wide expanse of the Atlantic Ocean lies to the east, leaving these installations open to potential terrorist attacks. While many of these installations are operated by foreign entities, the stake Trinidad and Tobago has in their level of production as well as their security is a matter of national concern.

Apart from the oil and gas installations, the livelihood of the majority of citizens in the coastal areas depends heavily on fishing. Being a meagre four miles from Venezuela, there are often incidents where fishermen from either side have allegedly wandered over the border.

Allegations of piracy is another concern, one that was proven to be alleviated when the presence of the Coast Guard was at its highest, acting as a deterrent to the attackers and safety net to the locals. In the north, fishing disputes of a similar nature have occurred between Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados. The proximity of these islands to each other facilitate access within our borders to nationals of neighboring states, competing for the same marine livestock as the locals. The absence of border protection, as a deterrent and enforcer is well known, encouraging illegal entry by foreign fisher-folk.

Unlike other jurisdictions like the United States where the military does not have a direct legislative mandate to protect or patrol the border, the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force is the only entity so mandated to do by the state. Without the appropriate training, manpower and equipment, the economy is at risk directly and indirectly given the abdication of security networks in the offshore areas. Apart from the territorial waters, the Exclusive Economic Zone extends well out into the Atlantic and requires coverage and protection of resources as well.

Personal – Of greatest concern to human security is personal security, particularly in a society where the feeling of safety and well-being has become a daily concern. On an island that is merely 5,128 square kilometers with a population of approximately 1.3 million, the annual murder rate often surpasses four hundred (mostly resulting from gang related activity). Criminal activity has been on a constant rise over the years, so much so, the murder statistic was separated from ‘other serious crime’ in an attempt to create a more realistic picture of the crime trend, other than murder. These gang related homicides can be directly related to the increase in illicit trafficking of drugs, arms and ammunition and human beings.

Trinidad and Tobago is often featured on international listings of countries with the highest crime rates around the world; amongst others such as Brazil, Kenya and El Salvador⁵. This reality is directly related to the sense of fear across the nation, and affects the economy as the tourism industry, a diverse means of foreign exchange, suffers as a result.

Since the early 2000's, members of the Defence Force have been engaged in joint patrols, in keeping with their aid to civil power mandate. The sight of a soldier fully dressed including helmet and other protective gear is a common sight on the city streets as the population has lost trust in the Police Service and their ability to control the crime problem at hand. Feet on the ground as a deterrent though, has become part of a cycle of reactive behavior, as the illicit items being traded are not manufactured or produced within the country. Without the correct measure implemented, the influx of drugs and arms from South America will continue to go unchecked.

Much of the illegal immigration into Trinidad and Tobago from South America arises out of the need for the immigrants to support their families at home. These undocumented individuals are able to board countless fishing vessels and enter this country at various unmanned points. Often their vision of a better life is quickly dimmed by the reality of modern day slavery as they are forced into the sex trade or domestic work for which they are not compensated.

Human security analyses threats to fulfill basic values; it looks towards securing basic needs of ordinary people⁶. The denial of a safety net at the border for the ordinary citizens of Trinidad and Tobago in exchange for reactive responses to crime is contradictory to the basic fundamentals of Human Security. While the measure of military force at the border to challenge things other than attacks against the country may seem overboard, there are no other agencies so

⁵ Gazette Review. Countries with the Highest Crime Rates – 2018 List

⁶ Gomez. O. Human Security Thinking in Practice - 'Personal Security', 'Citizen Security'. Comprehensive Mappings. 1

mandated in this jurisdiction. The Customs and Immigration have their roles, but at the official points of entry which themselves are limited. This leaves the rest of the shoreline to be operated and manned by the criminal elements who earn their living by these means.

Political – Trinidad and Tobago has historically enjoyed a stable political environment; healthy political debate (and even satire) with free and democratic elections. From an external perspective, this state is viewed as a leader in the West Indian (Caribbean Community CARICOM) region (in terms of development and industrialization) and has had cordial international relations within the region, its South American neighbors (including Venezuela) and the wider world (including the US, UK, Canada and China). This is a comfort zone that should never be taken for granted as the political arena is a volatile one and local and foreign elements can bring change to the atmosphere.

It's (Trinidad and Tobago's) closest non-CARICOM neighbour, Venezuela, has made global headlines within recent times due to public frustrations over the shortage of basic amenities and a general lack of confidence in the current administration. The threat for Trinidad and Tobago here, lies in its inability to control the influx and movement of Venezuelan citizens (attempting to take up residence as well as conduct illicit activity within its borders) and the political fallout from measures that may be necessary to reverse this pattern. In April 2018, in an apparent joint agreement with the current Venezuelan administration, Trinidad and Tobago elected to conduct a mass deportation exercise of eighty two Venezuelan citizens back to their home country; some of whom were reportedly seeking asylum. This move was publicly criticized by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) who claimed to have not been given access to the asylum seekers and have since 2014 had been encouraging other nations to give

access to Venezuelans seeking asylum after a marked 2000 percent increase in this statistic⁷. The statements by the UN have far reaching implications for a small nation like Trinidad and Tobago. The government stood by and defended its actions, adamantly claiming each deportees left of their own volition.

Apart from its current crises and the immigration issue, Trinidad and Tobago's political relationship with Venezuela has been up and down over the years. This territory, which has been known to be included as part of Venezuela (as has parts of Columbia) is in no position to defend itself against their military might without assistance from more powerful allies. That being said, the lack of military activity (surveillance patrols, deterrent presence in known illicit activity areas, etc.) encourages an environment of free movement across the borders, whereby unwitting citizens from either side may result in political fallout. In 1997, relations between the two countries reached an all-time low after a Trinidadian politician publicly accused the mainland republic of 'an extreme violation of this country's sovereignty and dignity'; referring to several incidents of the Guardia Nacional's arrest and attacks on local fishermen and boarding of an oil exploration vessel⁸. This particular incident may seem dated, but as recently as the first quarter of 2018, two local fishermen, having been reported missing by their families after their failed to return from their expedition, were found to be in the custody of Venezuelan authorities. The men were observed (and recorded) being 'kidnapped' in Trinidad and Tobago waters, the Venezuelan authorities later claiming they were chased there from the other side of the border. These incidents could easily be mitigated with a military presence along the border which will act both as protection for the locals, a deterrent for both illegal traffic as well as the Guardia Nacional who cannot then make false claims of locals' wrong doing.

⁷ Reuters. U.N. says Trinidad forcibly deported Venezuelan refugees. Last modified 23 April 2018

⁸ Inter Press Service. Trinidad and Tobago: Relations with Venezuela at All-Time Low. Last accessed 26 May 2018

Global impact

Trinidad and Tobago may seem insignificant in size and global impact, given all the threats faced by the tiny twin island nation are far from unique and have taken hold in many states across the globe. But human security is a people centered concept which focusses on individuals, communities and the global environment⁹. Trinidad and Tobago's proximity to South America, and more so, its inability to thoroughly monitor all activity in the 360 degrees required, makes this particular location attractive for criminal elements. Much of the violence and gang related activity which takes place within the borders of Trinidad and Tobago are the residual effect of the bigger picture; that this country is a transshipment point for illicit goods from South America and even as far as the African continent, bound for North America and Europe.

As a gateway to the world this state has a responsibility to do its part to assist in the global war against illegal activity, by firstly protecting its own borders and denying the criminal element a breeding ground for its livelihood.

⁹ Human Security. Partners for Peacebuilding Policy. Last modified 2010

Conclusion

The national security paradigm speaks to military action; whilst multi-track efforts including government and community efforts are more suited to human security¹⁰. This is ideal, but from the Trinidad and Tobago perspective, freedom from fear and want require military intervention. From this perspective, military involvement in security efforts represents more than brute force; it actually provides a sense of security to the citizens who have grown to trust them as the only body capable of protecting their (the citizens') interests.

The decline and subsequent instability of the global price on oil and gas has had its impact, however, what price is any nation willing to pay for its citizens to feel a sense of security in their daily lives? Public funding is in high demand from several competitors all of whom will justify their importance when given the opportunity. However, an analysis of the impact of an open border would far outweigh most any argument. Every aspect of human security is affected by the free flow of illicit items. Until such time some other institution is mandated to protect the borders of Trinidad and Tobago, the insinuation that the assets required so to do are simply too expensive/unsustainable cannot be an acceptable position for any government to take.

¹⁰ Human Security. Partners for Peacebuilding Policy. Last modified 2010

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