



# US interests can benefit from stronger congressional ties with the Caribbean

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## Toplines

- Safeguarding long-term US interests starts by strengthening relations with Caribbean countries, sometimes referred to as the US “third border.” The Caribbean’s geographic proximity to the United States—as well as its use as a transit point for US citizens, goods, and financial services—makes it a crucial hub for US national interests.
- However, the relationship has suffered from inconsistent and infrequent assistance. Changes in US policy priorities bring ever-changing adjustments to US engagement, leaving the Caribbean, its leadership, and its institutions with insufficient time to benefit from US policy action.
- For Caribbean countries, policy continuity is critical for implementation and to see tangible and meaningful development. The region’s small populations and markets, vulnerability to natural disasters and changing global commodity prices, and limited institutional capacity slow the pace of receiving and utilizing development assistance and support.
- Underpinning US-Caribbean ties with stronger US congressional engagement can provide needed longevity to the relationship. Congressional actions—like newly appropriated resources and committee hearings—can bring tangible benefits to US-Caribbean relations.

## Introduction

The Caribbean is crucial to US security and economic interests, but inconsistent engagement has weakened the relationship. Stronger, sustained US congressional action can build a long-term partnership that protects US influence in the region and supports Caribbean economic development.

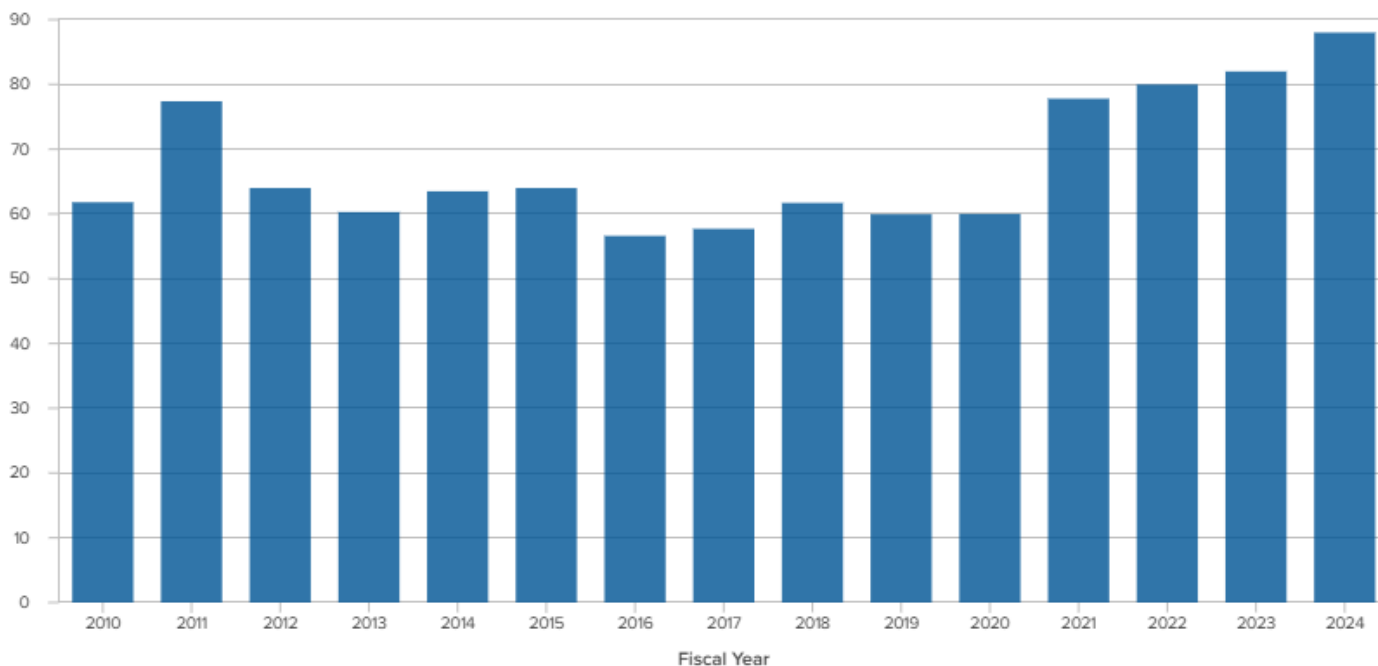
## US-Caribbean congressional ties today

What has US congressional engagement in the Caribbean looked like to date? The Caribbean benefits from the [Caribbean Basin Security Initiative](#) (CBSI), which allocates annual financial assistance to help

address regional security concerns, along with several high-profile congressional delegations (CODELs) in recent years. While this has ensured that some form of legislative action assisting Caribbean countries exist, there is more to be done. The financial resources of the CBSI, which was first announced in 2009 and can be renewed every five years—pending congressional approval—are minimal relative to the scale of Caribbean security challenges.

Figure 1 shows that annual CBSI funding to the Caribbean has ranged from \$61 million to \$88 million over a fourteen-year period, at a time when the region’s security challenges have risen to new heights. In [2024](#), nine

**Figure 1: Caribbean Basin Security Initiative funding by foreign aid account**  
**CBSI funding by foreign aid account (U.S. \$ millions)**



Source: Karla I. Rios, (November 27, 2024), Congressional Research Service - U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justifications for Foreign Operations, FY2012 to FY2025; State Department data provided to CRS, November 2024; and Explanatory Statement (H2091) to Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-47).

Caribbean countries ranked in the top ten of Latin American and Caribbean countries with the highest homicide rates per one hundred thousand people. High homicide rates not only affect citizen safety but also have economic costs. [Inter-American Development Bank](#) estimates put the direct costs of crime and violence in the Caribbean at more than 3 percent of total gross domestic product (GDP), with additional indirect costs affecting tourism, productivity, and investment.

CODELs have strengthened diplomatic ties with Caribbean leaders but have yet to deliver a long-term US strategy with tangible benefits attached. Several members of the House Financial Services Committee traveled to Barbados to meet with Caribbean leaders in [2022](#), and Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries led a nine-member delegation to the country in [2024](#). Further, attention to the Caribbean is concentrated in the Caribbean Congressional Caucus. While this has created some consistency, congressional engagement has not expanded to other

caucuses that are critical to Caribbean interests, such as energy, ports, financial services, and security.

The benefits of stronger congressional ties to the Caribbean can limit the stop-start nature of current US engagement in the region. Every four to eight years, Caribbean countries contend with a new US policy. For example, in less than a decade, countries signed onto President Donald Trump's Growth in the Americas (America Crece) Initiative in 2019–2020, participated in the US-Caribbean Partnership to Address the Climate Crisis 2030 that was launched in 2022, and are likely to see new policies in a second Trump administration. Congressional engagement, especially via a legislated strategy, can underpin the relationship as important to US and Caribbean interests. This can allow current or new presidential administrations to build on the foundation set by Congress and provide the time Caribbean countries need to absorb US policies and assistance.

**Figure 2:** Taiwan's five Caribbean allies



### Does the Caribbean even matter to the United States?

US national interests are inextricably linked to the security, prosperity, and development of Caribbean countries. Travel between the United States and the Caribbean is frequent. More than [20 million](#) US citizens travel annually to the region for overnight stays, meaning that safe and secure Caribbean countries are paramount for US citizen safety. At the same time, the Caribbean's US-based diaspora amounts to almost [5 million people as of 2023](#), with the highest concentrations located in Florida (almost 2 million) and New York (more than 1 million)—

two constituencies that play outsized roles in US domestic politics.

The Caribbean is also a critical market for US goods, services, and investments. The United States is the Caribbean Basin's largest trading partner, totaling \$92.3 billion in trade in 2024 with a US surplus of more than \$40 billion. Caribbean economies depend on imports primarily for food, energy, medical services, and foreign exchange—all of which contribute to high demand for US products. For example, the tourism-dependent economies in the Caribbean purchase hotel products from small US businesses, such as pillows, hotel linen, and toiletries. Given that tourism is the main source of fo-

## FIVE CARIBBEAN COUNTRIES

are allies  
of Taiwan

## \$0.24 AVERAGE PRICE

of a kilowatt  
hour in the  
Caribbean—  
among the  
highest in the  
Americas

## \$1.015 BILLION

in US foreign  
assistance to  
the region over  
15 years

reign exchange and GDP growth for most Caribbean countries, US goods are in high demand for the region's multinational and local tourism-focused businesses.

The United States also has geopolitical interests in the Caribbean. As in the rest of Latin America, China has made inroads on infrastructure financing and development in the Caribbean. Just in the past few years, China has secured large-scale contracts in the region—including Guyana's \$260-million Demerara Harbor Bridge Expansion project awarded in [2022](#), a \$121-million Barbados loan from the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM) in [2023](#), and a host of additional diplomatic overtures and donations to the region. At the same time, the Caribbean is home to five of Taiwan's twelve remaining diplomatic allies (see Figure 2). While Taiwan remains a competitive development partner for its allies in the Caribbean, the region is hounded by frequent natural disasters and under constant fiscal duress. This creates organic opportunities in which Chinese investment and development financing might become attractive and can therefore influence a Taiwan's Caribbean allies to switch diplomatic ties to China.

Venezuela—led by authoritarian Nicolas Maduro—also creates panic and insecurity across the Caribbean. Aggressive military actions on Venezuela's land and maritime borders with Guyana threaten the country's economic security, including US investments and operations in its energy sector. Further, Maduro's willingness to restart a version of [Petrocaribe](#)—which provides low-cost loans to Caribbean countries so they can buy Venezuelan oil—is attractive to a region that (with the exception of Trinidad and Tobago) imports more than 85 percent of its petroleum products. US attempts to isolate Maduro and delegitimize his actions become increasingly difficult in the face of Caribbean neighbors willing to afford him such a legitimizing diplomatic platform.

### Where should the US Congress put its attention?

The heterogenous nature of the Caribbean offers various opportunities to strengthen

relations with the region and, by extension, advance US interests. From natural gas to geothermal energy, Caribbean countries offer new opportunities for US investment. Reducing crime and gang proliferation across the region can protect US citizens traveling abroad and stem the potential flow of illicit goods and services.

### Energy security

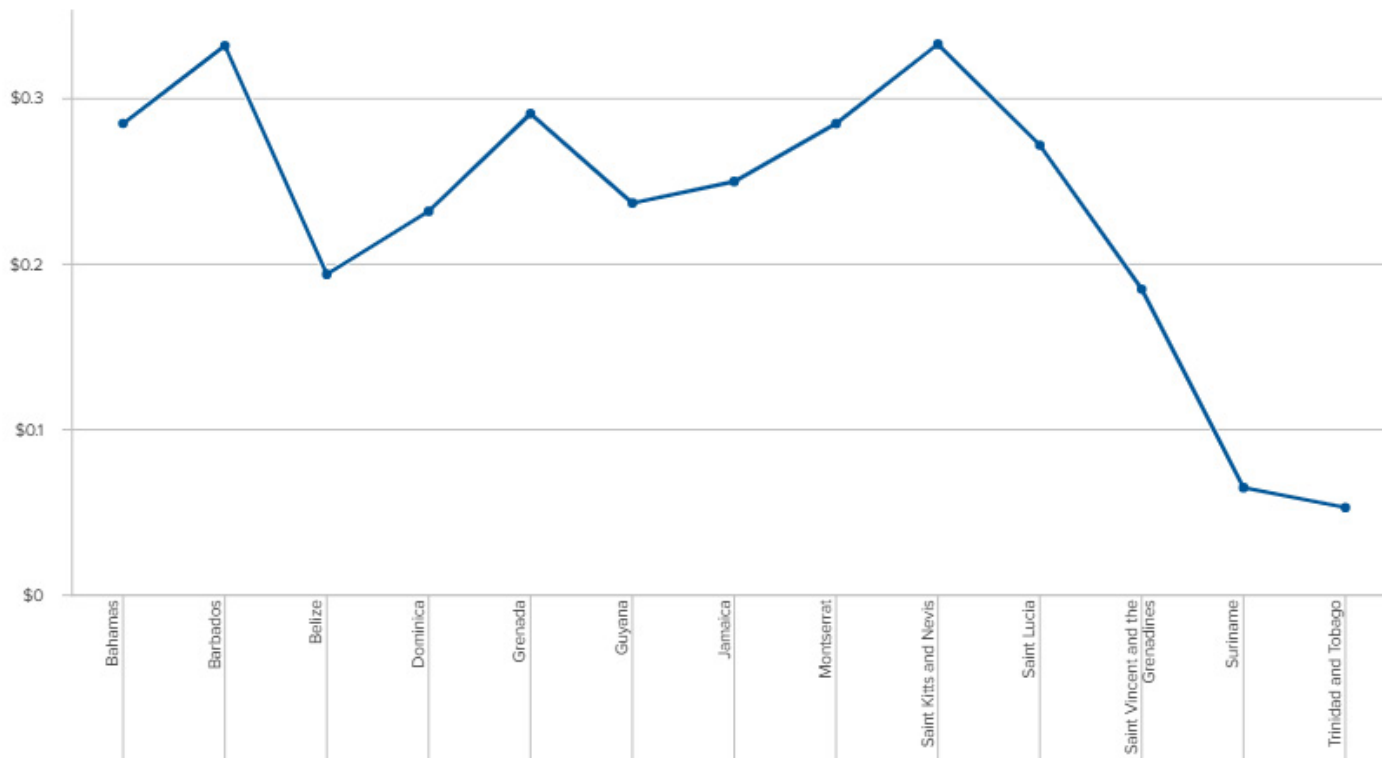
The United States can strengthen its position in the Caribbean by supporting regional energy security, based on their current estimated reserves. Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago house almost 30 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, with further offshore exploration expected. At the same time, other countries require reliable power generation—which can be provided by liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports—to provide resilience to their electricity grids during natural disasters, improve economic competitiveness, and underpin ambitions to add renewables to their energy matrix.

Here, the United States will find opportunities on three fronts. First, US oil and gas companies and mid-size service-based companies can invest in natural gas exploration opportunities, liquefaction infrastructure, and building pipelines and LNG storage. Second, imported oil from Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago can be low-cost and competitive options vis-à-vis other suppliers to satisfy growing US energy demand and supplement domestic shale supply in Texas and Midwestern states. Finally, members of Congress can work with the Southern Caribbean hydrocarbon producers to support energy security in Europe and reduce demand for Russian energy resources by increasing cargo exports to European Union (EU) members.

Greater Caribbean energy security can also lead to lower electricity prices, which can benefit constituents of US congressional members traveling to the Caribbean and potentially reduce migration to the United States. Most of the region (except for Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago) pays some of the highest electricity prices in the Ame-

**Figure 3: Average price of a kilowatt hour in the Caribbean, US dollars**

**Average price of 1KW/h (USD)**



Source: <https://bestbroadbanddeals.co.uk/energy/worldwide-pricing/>

ricas (see Figure 3)—on average, double or triple what US consumers pay. At the same time, electricity can account for almost [70 percent](#) of a hotel’s utility costs due to air conditioning, lighting, and heating.

Therefore, to keep profits stable, these high costs are passed to the consumer—in this case, US tourists. Bringing down electricity costs and lowering the costs to travel to and stay overnight in the Caribbean would mean US tourists benefit and have more purchasing power to buy in-country goods (most of which are imported from the United States). Further, reducing electricity prices can stem Caribbean emigration flows to US shores, given that high costs of living are a key migratory push factor.

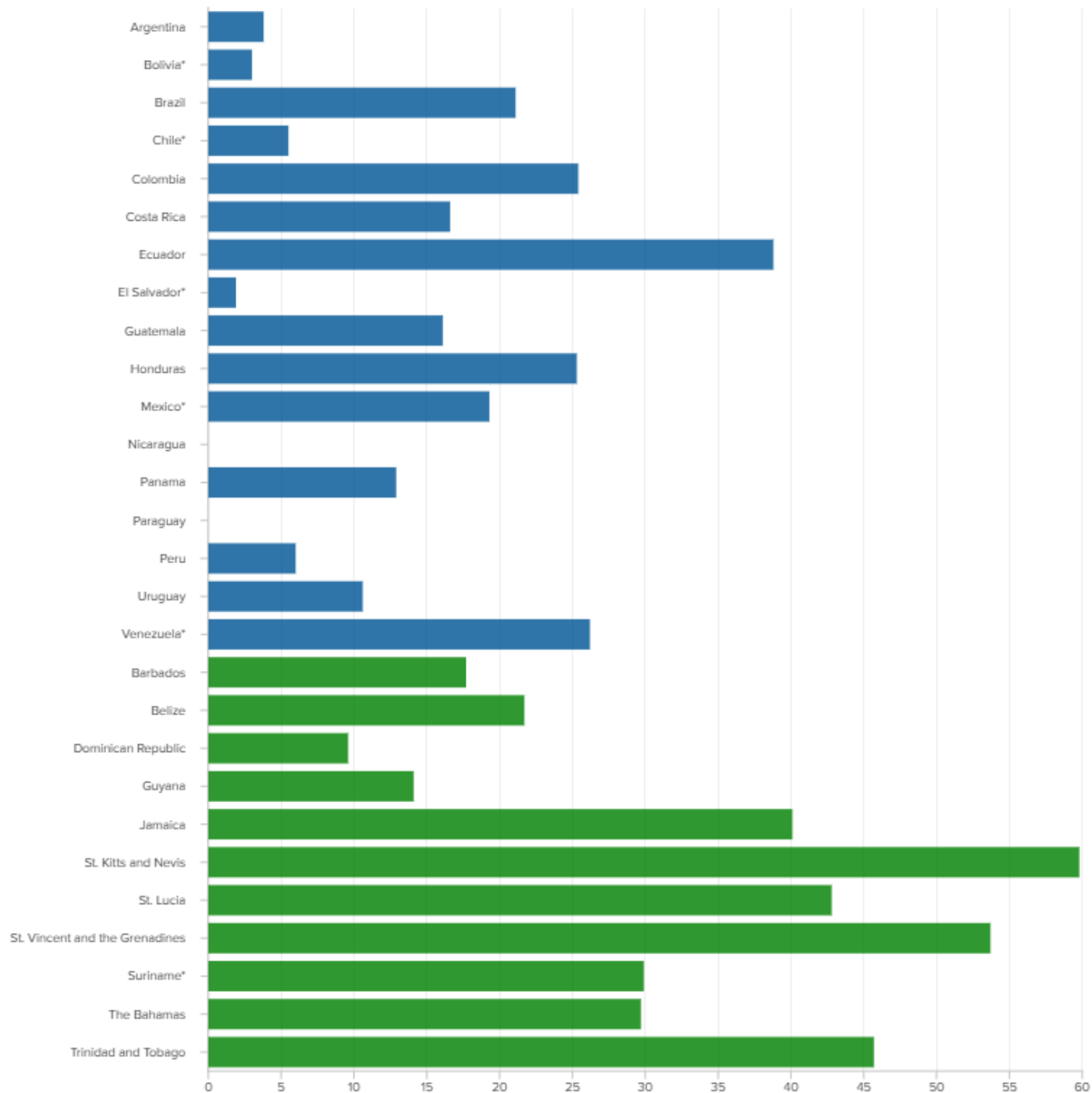
## Reducing violent crime and gang activity

Security concerns in the Caribbean are on the rise. Figure 4 shows that Caribbean

countries have high homicide rates relative to their Latin American neighbors. Rates have been on the rise due to increased gang proliferation and illegal imports of small arms—many of which originate from the United States. For example, Trinidad and Tobago declared a state of emergency late 2024 due to increased gang activity including the use of high-powered assault weapons. Gang proliferation is also on the rise. While Caribbean countries do not house large gangs, smaller gangs pervade the region, using informal ports of entry to move illicit guns, goods, and services. In 2021, Jamaica identified 379 different gangs, while Trinidad and Tobago named 140 in 2023. The decentralized nature of criminal and gang networks in the region inhibits the ability of Caribbean governments and police forces to combat gang operations. Further, gangs in the Caribbean, especially in Jamaica, are [turf oriented](#). This allows smaller gangs to gain footholds in lo-

**Figure 4:** Homicide rates in Latin America and the Caribbean (2024, per one hundred thousand people)

**2024 Homicide Rates in Latin America and the Caribbean (per 100,000)**



Source: <https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2024-homicide-round-up/>

cal communities, sometimes acting as community leaders and providing needed social services and protection from rival gangs.

Addressing Caribbean security challenges can protect US citizens traveling to the region and also curb gang activity and illicit trafficking before they reach US shores. Travel destinations for US citizens, such as Jamaica and islands in the Eastern Caribbean, are among the most violent areas in the region. Therefore, improving citizen safety in the Caribbean ensures US citizens' safety as well. Given that gun-related activities are a primary driver of citizen insecurity, one solution is for US agencies to work closer with Caribbean defense and police forces to improve monitoring, tracking, and seizures of illegal small arms.

Further, stemming gang activity in the region can also disrupt transnational criminal organizations' operations. Specifically, Caribbean countries are used as a transit point for drugs, many of which end up in the United States. Enhanced maritime security and interdiction in the Caribbean Sea can help [interrupt illegal drug supply chains](#) and weaken transnational criminal organizations. However, the capacity to monitor drug flows is a challenge. Partnerships with the United States to gain access to satellite imagery and drone technologies to identify drug shipment routes can provide Caribbean governments the needed tools to tackle drug flows.

### ■ Bottom lines

- The challenges facing Caribbean countries are growing and their consequences are not constrained to the region's geographic borders—and are likely to directly or indirectly affect US interests. This can be avoided if there are consistent and strong partnerships between the Caribbean and the United States. This can, and should, start with stronger US congressional engagement with the region.
- US congressional members should consider legislation that prioritizes a holistic strategy with appropriated resources to the Caribbean. While CBSI tackles security challenges, support is needed across energy, infrastructure development, agricultural, financial services, and other areas.
- Given the importance of the Caribbean to US interests, the House Foreign Affairs Committee should consider a hearing that highlights new opportunities to strengthen US interests in the Caribbean and the broader US-Caribbean partnership.
- Strengthening US-Caribbean ties starts with building a foundation for a long-term partnership. US congressional engagement can help turn four-year policies into decades of friendship, all while protecting US interests along its “third border.”

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### About this issue brief

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### About the center

The Atlantic Council's nonpartisan Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center (AALAC) broadens understanding of regional transformations while demonstrating why Latin America and the Caribbean matter to the world. The center focuses on pressing political, economic, and social issues that will define the region's trajectory, proposing constructive, results-oriented solutions to inform public sector, business, and multilateral action based on a shared vision for a more prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable future.