The countries of the Greater Caribbean must draw closer together



A few days ago, Dr. Omar Jaén Suárez wrote an article entitled “We must bring the countries of the great Bolivarian Colombia closer together”. I would like to take advantage of his idea to expand on it a little with the experience I have had during the last three and a half years as Secretary General of the Association of Caribbean States. Multilateral mechanisms such as the ACS exist precisely to achieve these rapprochements, especially when among the focal themes and in the action plan is clearly established the improvement of both physical and digital connectivity to boost regional trade and tourism.

Panama is not only a member of the ACS, but also of SICA and SELA, which are other regional mechanisms that have economic and trade integration among their focal issues. Panama is also a member of multilateral development banks such as CAF, IDB, CABEI and the World Bank, whose portfolios include transport and logistics projects to improve trade and regional integration.

In other words, what Dr. Jaén proposes is perfectly feasible within the existing multilateral mechanisms and organisations. All that is lacking is political will and proactive leadership so that the mechanisms fulfil the mission for which they were established, together with multilateral development banks.

Dr. Jaén proposes to start with a “diagnosis of the current situation of the four originally large Colombian states. Their complementarity between countries and regions. Then, to consider how to bring them closer together with respect to their national singularities and their own identities”. The ACS has that mandate for all the countries of the Greater Caribbean, including Panama, Colombia and Venezuela, and we are currently engaged in a strategic planning exercise that includes that kind of diagnosis in its first phase. For example, a closer logistical link with the Caribbean Small Island States could help them to lower their import costs while helping us to gain support for our diplomatic priorities.

The steps to follow, according to Dr Jaén, are: “first, physical integration; second, identify and socialise the benefits of integration to face the challenges posed by other states and groups in the international community; third, integrate economies, companies and workers in complementary, strategic projects that respect the natural environment; and fourth, Panama can take the solidarity initiative to promote this project of rapprochement”.

It strikes me that at the heart of Dr. Jaén's article is a concept of strategic planning which was the basis on which the Association of Caribbean States was founded. In 1989 the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) commissioned the West Indies Commission to prepare a report analysing the current situation and making recommendations. The final report, called “Time for Action”, stated: “Extraordinary changes in the world impose the need to act together with urgency. Changes were once quite rapid, but in the short time since the Grand Anse Declaration (July 1989), the international context has been completely transformed”. He continued: “The Soviet Union has disintegrated, the Cold War is over and it is now a world of one, not two, military superpowers with all that this implies for the shaping of new world orders.

The 522-page report was a diagnosis of how, what was happening at the time required urgent action. From that report, which was finally concluded in 1992, the Association of Caribbean States was born. Precisely for that purpose, to bring the countries of the Greater Caribbean closer together, but to draw them closer together on operational issues that did not affect the identity or sovereignty of the countries.

It is clear that the changes that were taking place in the 1990s were transcendental, but even more so are those that are taking place today, which is why the action to which Dr. Jaén refers is even more urgent. Hence, I fully agree with Dr Jaén, but I recommend that we use existing mechanisms with renewed interest and leadership from our institutions dedicated to representing us in such bodies to promote such action.

In 2018, I wrote an article called “Size Doesn't Matter”, based on a paper by Tommy Koh, Ambassador of Singapore, who stated that the size of a country is not the determining factor in defining its destiny. As one of the world's smallest, with no natural resources, with less than three million people, in that decade, Singapore surpassed expectations. How had it achieved this and how could it continue to scale?

The answer is that the new nature of power derives from having a clear country vision, which proposes to raise it to a multidimensional level where intellectual, communicational, diplomatic and political power sits in international fora and we adopt leadership roles. To this end, we must: First: transform the legal, juridical system, the governance of institutions, technology, the trade framework and the removal of barriers. This means professionalising government agencies and raising the education, culture and living standards of citizens.

Second: developing the most competitive clusters in order to achieve excellence in the niches with the greatest potential and recruiting the best talent, to raise the bar in the shortest possible time. It implies recognising that the state's main asset is knowledge and promoting the technological and innovation revolution by encouraging research and improving the quality of education.

Third: recognising that the new world order is multipolar, but at the same time multilateral. Therefore, increasingly the UN, IMF, WTO, IMO and OECD play an important role. In addition to multilateral bodies, the foreign service is the most important tool. Indeed, it is incumbent upon us to recognise that not having a tradition of cultivating a strong foreign policy, one that withstands the comings and goings of successive governments, has cost us dearly: defining what role we want to play in the world will in turn guide and determine our internal development. This is what Tommy

Koh said about Singapore and the lessons apply perfectly to our case.

Finally, genuine leadership must achieve the integration of these three factors in a government that plans and executes strategically in an outward and inward manner.