Drug trafficking, especially cocaine trafficking, from source countries in South America to Europe has produced alarming and lasting effects on both sides of the Atlantic. While various trafficking routes to Europe exist, transshipment through the Caribbean, including through the European territories in the region, is of growing concern. In Europe, the expanding cocaine market has brought a rise in homicides, kidnappings, and intimidation. In the city of Antwerp, for example, there were around 200 drug-related violent incidents in the past five years as competing gangs fought over control of territory. In the Caribbean, drug trafficking by organized crime has been associated with record homicide levels, corruption, democratic backsliding, and money laundering, among other pernicious effects. It has also prompted wars between gangs over the control of criminal economies, expanded illegal firearms trafficking, and exacerbated human trafficking both within the region and beyond. Shedding light on the complexity of the issue—while providing policy recommendations for increased cooperation between the United States, Europe, and Caribbean countries—is necessary as both continents seek regional and extra-regional security.

The Cocaine Market’s Shift to Europe

The United States had been the de facto market for cocaine originating from South America—mainly from Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru—since its popularization in the sixties. A decline in U.S. cocaine consumption in the past decade, however, along with a transition to synthetic drugs such as fentanyl, have left an opening in an inelastic global market with high levels of supply. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the global area used for coca bush cultivation in South America remained consistent in 2020 at around 234,200 hectares (578,700 acres), but from 2006 to 2010, cocaine use in the United States fell from 300 to 150 tons of cocaine. Facing lower demand in the United States, criminal groups in South America sought other markets around the world, with Europe
the most profitable among them. Many factors contributed to the emergence of Europe as a sizable importer of cocaine, but among the most indisputable factors are higher prices, low interdiction rates, and minor legal penalties for possession and consumption.

The price of cocaine has fluctuated as criminal networks diversified the cocaine market in Europe. According to one report, in 2021 a kilogram of cocaine in the United States was worth up to $28,000, while the same kilogram was worth around $40,000 in places like France and Spain—and up to $118,000 in the United Kingdom. While cocaine imports initially involved criminal groups in Europe cooperating with cartels in Mexico, European criminal organizations eventually moved higher in the supply chain to guarantee their access to cocaine. The diversification in trafficking groups, primarily heightened by market competition, has dramatically lowered the price of cocaine and increased its availability to unprecedented levels, but prices remain higher in Europe than in the United States. Lower prices are expected to remain stable in the upcoming years, since there is evidence that these groups are moving cocaine production to mainland Europe after importing the base from Latin American countries.

Many factors contributed to the emergence of Europe as a sizable importer of cocaine, but among the most indisputable factors are higher prices, low interdiction rates, and minor legal penalties for possession and consumption.

Low interdiction levels in Europe further provide traffickers the opportunity to introduce more cocaine for distribution throughout the continent. For comparison, since the 1970s, the United States has devoted large budgets to tackle the supply side of cocaine flow. According to the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, the United States spends an average of $11 billion on supply-side reduction each year, with efforts ranging from drug interdiction, law enforcement investigations, and prosecutions both at home and abroad. Although the European Union does not disclose budgetary allocations, the data available suggests it spends $3–4 billion on supply-side reduction—an amount that, according to a European official, only allows border security forces to interdict around 10–12 percent of the total flow of cocaine into the continent.¹

Lastly, penalties for cocaine use and distribution are more relaxed in European countries than in the United States. In the top countries driving demand for cocaine—Austria, Ireland, Croatia, the Netherlands, and Spain—the legal penalties for consuming or distributing drugs are very low. The penalties for possession range from small fines to up to 12 months in prison. This allows criminal groups to operate more freely. For example, in Rotterdam, one of the main entry points for cocaine into Europe, the Dutch police report that the youth working to extract drugs from ship containers typically carry cash to pay the fine on the spot.

Though transporting cocaine across the Atlantic presents additional challenges, the prospects of larger economic gains, combined with lower interdiction rates and legal penalties, presents an opportunity

¹ Conversation with a European official conducted at a CSIS roundtable under Chatham House Rule, May 16, 2023.
for traffickers looking for higher profits and lower risks. And while traditional drug trafficking routes have involved direct shipments from Colombia and Ecuador, criminal groups have now identified a region with low interdiction capacity and a direct line to Europe: the Caribbean. The Caribbean emerged as an attractive transshipment point due to weak governance, corruption, and small law enforcement and interdiction capacity, as well as the existence of European territories there. The region’s close proximity to South America further makes it a unique convergence point for illicit trade. The main modes of transporting cocaine across the Atlantic are by air (via commercial flights) and by sea (via cargo ships and, more audaciously, “narco subs”).

When comparing the total amounts of cocaine seized per region, the Caribbean accounts for only 1 percent of global seizures, standing in stark contrast to South America (52.6 percent), North America (19.3 percent), and Europe (15.2 percent) according to data from 2019. Yet there are two factors to consider when analyzing these figures. First, the flow of cocaine from South America to its destinations in Europe and the United States is rarely continuous. Facing stricter surveillance and interdiction efforts in airports and at sea ports in places such as Mexico and Colombia, drug traffickers are using not just main transit countries, but sometimes secondary ones, in order to reach their destinations—thereby making it harder to detect cocaine shipments, which are often concealed among large quantities of legitimate goods or within the structure of a container. Second, small seizure totals may reflect the low interdiction capacity of many of these island nations rather than low levels of cocaine being shipped through the Caribbean. As discussed below, a little more than half the cocaine seized in metropolitan France in 2022 came from its territories in the region.

Among the countries that play a significant role in transshiping cocaine through the Caribbean are the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Suriname. The Dominican Republic, with a vibrant tourist industry of 5 million visitors a year and six container ports, offers endless opportunities for moving people, goods, and drugs. Cocaine, typically grown in Colombia, makes its way via land through Catatumbo, Vichada, and Guanina in Venezuela. After this, transportistas in go-fast boats take the cargo directly to the Dominican Republic through the Guajira and Paraguaná peninsulas or by “island hopping” through the islands of Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, Martinique, and St. Kitts and Nevis. Due to the language link, drugs leaving the Dominican Republic are typically destined for Spain, one of Europe’s largest drug entry points; however, in recent years, authorities in the Netherlands report stronger criminal ties between Dutch and Dominican criminal groups. In 2022, authorities in the Dominican Republic seized over 27 tons of cocaine, compared to the 19 tons they seized in 2021 and the 10 tons seized in 2020, demarking the increasing centrality of the Dominican Republic as a transshipment point.

Haiti has been a transit country for the movement of cocaine since the 1980s. However, recent instability in the country has made it more attractive to traffickers. The cocaine arriving in Haiti likely originates from Colombia and transits through Venezuela, the Bahamas, Costa Rica, Turks and Caicos, and the Dominican Republic. The most common entry points for drugs include Jacmel, Port-au-Prince, and Cap-Haitien. In 2022, Haitian authorities interdicted 35 kilograms (77 pounds) of cocaine and 2,070 kilograms (4,563 pounds) of cannabis, though the country’s ongoing crises have likely degraded this interdiction capacity. The country’s drug enforcement agency, the Bureau for the Fight against Narcotics Trafficking, reportedly has “just one functioning boat for maritime interdiction.”
Lastly, Suriname is one of the more prevalent countries of departure for cocaine confiscated by customs authorities in Western and Central Europe, right below Colombia and Paraguay; in 2020, French authorities assessed Suriname as the most frequently detected departure country for cocaine reaching France. Cocaine typically leaves Suriname in human mules who are paid to carry the drugs either inside their bodies or on their persons. Drug traffickers also leave cocaine in waters near Suriname for a cargo vessel to pick up after it has already been loaded with a legitimate cargo and passed port inspection.

**Accessibility via the European Territories**

European overseas territories—whether self-governing or forming an integral part of France, the Netherlands, or the United Kingdom—offer distinct advantages to drug smugglers over other parts of the Caribbean given that they have direct access by air or maritime routes to Europe, have extensive commercial and familial ties with the old continent, and in some cases are within the same customs and immigration regime as mainland Europe. Information on the place, quantity, and type of drugs seized and on the origin and destination of cargoes give indications of the main routes and modes of transport. However, traffickers adapt quickly to law enforcement action and shift their operations accordingly.

**European overseas territories—whether self-governing or forming an integral part of France, the Netherlands, or the United Kingdom—offer distinct advantages to drug smugglers over other parts of the Caribbean.**

French Guiana and the French Antilles are an integral part of the French Republic. According to the French Ministry of the Interior, over the past 10 years, cocaine seizures have increased fivefold in the country. In 2021, 27.7 tons were seized, compared to 5.6 tons in 2012, the former having an estimated street value of 1.8 billion euros. In 2022, 55 percent of cocaine seizures entering mainland France, or 14 tons, came from the French Antilles and French Guiana.

Drug trafficking cases have become so endemic in French Guiana—especially on commercial aircraft—that they are affecting broad sectors of society. In 2021, officials seized 1.3 tons of cocaine at Félix Eboué airport from travelers going to mainland France carrying drugs on or in their person or their luggage—a huge amount for individuals to be carrying. In fact, departures from the airport to the mainland had an average of 10 to 30 individual mules on each flight, overwhelming police and customs officials. In response, authorities instituted a new policy of searching 100 percent of all passengers and luggage as of October 21, 2022, relying on extensive search powers granted under a 1946 law on the customs service. However, France’s Constitutional Court declared in September 2022 that the provision was too broad and ordered its repeal beginning September 1, 2023. French legislators are now rushing to provide an alternative rewrite, as the current, now unconstitutional provision is the cornerstone of illicit-narcotics enforcement.

Meanwhile, most of the cocaine from Guiana and the Antilles is sent to metropolitan France by maritime containers. Corrupt officials at both embarkation points in the French Caribbean and in ports in France—such as Dunkirk, Marseilles, and Le Havre—facilitate the shipment of cocaine, as revealed
by several investigations following multiple seizures of hundreds of kilograms of cocaine leaving Martinique or the French Guianese port of Degrad des Cannes. Traffickers in neighboring Suriname are also anxious to ship their cargoes from French overseas territories in the Caribbean, as multiple seizures have shown. The largest intercepted amount was 2.3 tons of cocaine, seized at the port of Paramaribo in 2019 and found in a cargo of rice intended for the French market via Guadeloupe.

In the Caribbean parts of the Netherlands, the Royal Dutch Navy intercepted a staggering amount of drugs in 2022, with support from the U.S. Coast Guard. According to figures from the Dutch Ministry of Defense, the HMS Groningen made 18 drug seizures in 2022, ranging in size from 2.3 to 300 kilograms (4.9 to 661 pounds) for a total of 21,230 metric tons (23,402 tons)—presumably mostly cocaine, although the specific drug seized in each case was not reported publicly. The same year, the HMS Friesland seized 3.9 metric tons (4.3 tons) of drugs and the HMS Holland seized 15.6 metric tons (17.2 tons). The three ships confiscated a committed total of 40.7 metric tons (44.9 tons) of drugs, the most ever seized by the Dutch Navy in the region. Some of these operations took place with the help of Joint Interagency Task Force South in a U.S.-led multinational partnership focused on international counternarcotics operations. These seizures resulted from intercepting go-fast boats and occasionally fishing boats from Venezuela headed to Aruba. In waters off Curaçao or Aruba, Dutch and Colombian authorities have interdicted even large commercial ships such as the Russian-flagged bulk carrier Aressa, detained in 2020 on its way to Thessaloniki, Greece, after leaving Puerto Guaranao, Venezuela. The ship was carrying 5 metric tons of cocaine believed to be destined for Europe.

The British self-governing territories in the Caribbean—including the British Virgin Islands (BVI), Monserrat, and Anguilla—are also not immune to being used as transshipment points for cocaine bound for Europe and the United States. In waters near Montserrat, a Royal Navy ship carrying U.S. Coast Guard officials interdicted a Puerto Rico-bound boat that was carrying a cocaine shipment organized by Henry Carrillo-Ramirez, a Colombian national who pleaded guilty to drug trafficking in U.S. federal court on November 4, 2019. Carrillo had arranged for multiple cocaine shipments, sourced in Colombia, to be sent via Venezuela to Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland, as well as through the Caribbean to Europe. In November 2020, BVI authorities seized a record 2,353 kilograms (5,187 pounds) of cocaine, worth 75 percent of the islands’ entire national budget, from the residence of a BVI police officer in “one of the largest seizures in the history of any British Overseas Territory or the UK.” Following this incident, BVI governor Augustus Jaspert underscored the significant scale of illegal drug trafficking taking place and the territory’s vulnerability to regional organized crime—especially since its geographic location makes it an attractive route through to the United States and also to Europe. Less than two years later, in April 2022, BVI premier Andrew Fahie was arrested along with the territory’s ports authority managing director and her son for allegedly smuggling cocaine into the United States. The ports manager pleaded guilty on June 12, 2023, and Fahie’s own trial was set to begin later the same month; their cases show that officials at the highest levels are corruptible and participate in smuggling drugs, whether to the United States or to Europe.

Building Barriers: Port Security, Interdiction, and Intelligence

Over the past decade, container shipping has become the most common way to send drugs to Europe. Every year, over 98 million containers are shipped to Europe, only 10 percent of which originate in South America—and only 2 percent overall are inspected, making detection of illicit goods extremely
challenging. Drugs can be packed into containers at various times during the sea voyage, including at the port of origin (concealed within legitimate export items), near the port of origin, in transit at an intermediary stop or destination, or on the high seas. According to the UNODC, the most popular method in recent years has been to “piggyback” on a legitimate shipment without the shipper’s knowledge. But other methods—including breaking into containers sealed by customs authorities, loading them with drugs, then reinstalling fake customs seals to conceal the tampering—have also become commonplace, especially for multi-ton shipments. Moving large quantities of cocaine in any of these ways requires a network of collaborators in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe: port workers, freight forwarders, shipping agents, importers, transport companies, customs officials, and boat owners and operators. Those who organize the extraction of drugs from containers at the final destination reportedly receive between 7 and 15 percent of the value of the illicit load.

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To help combat this problem, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the World Customs Organization (WCO) have jointly formed the UNODC-WCO Container Control Program, which seeks to strengthen the security and management of ports by establishing Port Control Units (PCUs), thereby minimizing access to maritime containers for drug trafficking and other transnational organized crime. As of 2022, there were 22 PCUs in Latin America and the Caribbean, but only 6 in the Caribbean proper, specifically in the Bahamas, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Guiana, Jamaica, and Suriname. There are no PCUs in any of the Caribbean nations of the Lesser Antilles.

On the Caribbean end, there is a need to address deficiencies both in law enforcement and in port security. In July 2022, the Center for Naval Analysis (CNA) published an examination of the maritime security and law enforcement capabilities of 12 Caribbean Basin Security Initiative partner nations: Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. The report assessed the countries in 11 categories, including three that are particularly relevant for creating barriers to traffickers operating throughout the Caribbean, namely port security, interdiction capabilities, and intelligence gathering.

Of the 12 countries, only the Dominican Republic was rated as having “high” port security; two, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago, were rated as having “medium” security; and most of the rest had “low” security. (There was no information on St. Vincent and the Grenadines.) But even with the country’s high port security rating, the Dominican Republic’s major port, Caucedo, is a hotspot for drug shipments leaving the country for Europe. In January 2022, Dominican anti-narcotics agents seized 1.2 tons of cocaine hidden inside a shipment of bananas on its way to Belgium. Countries with “low” port security had unsecured port facilities, few customs personnel, an absence of scanners or operable scanners, only a handful of K9 units, and/or problems with corruption.
In terms of patrol and interdiction capabilities, the 12 countries fared a little better. The Bahamas and the Dominican Republic rated as having “high” patrol and interdiction capabilities; six countries rated as “medium”; and the rest (Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, St. Kitts and Nevis, and St. Lucia) had low or unknown capabilities. Obstacles include a lack of operable vessels, boats with limited offshore range, poor communications, and lack of radar equipment. Some of the countries with the fewest assets prefer to engage suspect vessels at shore, meaning they do not control their maritime spaces properly.

Finally, the largest capability gaps exist with respect to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) in each of the countries surveyed. Only Trinidad and Tobago ranked “high,” as the country operates radars across most of its maritime territory and shares information efficiently; Barbados and the Dominican Republic ranked “medium”; and most of the rest ranked “low”—while Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and St. Kitts and Nevis had no ISR capabilities at all. Some of the problems the CNA identified in this category included having too few personnel, no radars or other sensors, no reconnaissance aircraft or aircraft with limited availability and endurance, too few patrol vessels, and only terrestrial or inshore intelligence. In addition, a senior Caribbean Community (CARICOM) security official interviewed for this paper stated that intelligence sharing was hampered by legal restrictions on releasing certain types of information, such as financial or personal data, among CARICOM member states and that even where agreements for intelligence sharing are in place, a lack of trust among authorities still limits what is shared. The weaknesses that the CNA identified across these and other categories should be the focus of international cooperation, including through the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative.

On the European end—where the facilities are larger, more secure, and sophisticated—criminal groups have increasingly exploited the use of misappropriated container PIN codes to retrieve their illicit merchandise. According to Europol, this process has mainly been detected in the container ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam (the two largest in Europe), through which an estimated 200 metric tons (220 tons) of cocaine have been trafficked using this system since 2018. This method does not require a corrupted port employee to work, only a corrupt logistics company official at the origin point who can provide the PIN codes to traffickers, who then simply pick up the drugs-laden container. In response, in January 2021 the port of Antwerp replaced its PIN code system with a “certified pick up” system: a digital, secure, and integrated solution for the release of containers that makes it much harder for traffickers to gain access. However, criminal networks may divert their operations to secondary EU ports with less stringent security measures in place.

Building Bridges: U.S.-Caribbean-European Cooperation

Criminal organizations adapt to emerging law enforcement cooperation patterns. As the shore in Colombia became more tightly patrolled, criminal networks diversified their operations into lower-profile countries such as Bolivia and Peru. The cocaine supply chain has also become more decentralized, with criminal groups working as “service providers” who manage fractured parts of the supply chain, making them much harder to track. Cohesive and coordinated cooperation among U.S., Caribbean, and European stakeholders is necessary to execute a coherent strategy to counter narcotics trafficking.

2 Video interview with CARICOM official, June 14, 2023.
The Caribbean’s main cooperation mechanism on counternarcotics is the CARICOM Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (CARICOM IMPACS), established in 2006, which centralizes the implementation of counternarcotic strategies. A relatively new organization, CARICOM IMPACS has established a Joint Regional Communications Centre and Regional Intelligence Fusion Centre, both of which have helped small islands in the Caribbean combine their assets and improve their abilities to interdict shipments of narcotics.

The progress that CARICOM IMPACS has achieved has been stunted by the lack of cooperation and buy-in from reluctant Caribbean states. For example, just two out of the fifteen member states, Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica, cover most of the organization’s funding, and the IMPACS budget was reduced from an initial $14 million to $7 million by 2022. Furthermore, the lack of trust regarding asset sharing, along with demonstrated reluctance to share intelligence, present immediate challenges to the success of the organization.

In addition to IMPACS, the Regional Security System (RSS) of the eastern Caribbean plays an important role as a collective security and law enforcement organ through which member states can pool their assets to combat crime. RSS serves as a force multiplier not only by deploying sea- and aircraft, but also by providing ISR capabilities. Members of RSS, primarily in the eastern Caribbean, include Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and (most recently) Guiana. The organization’s main challenges are its limited budget, currently only $7.5 million a year, and limited interdiction capacity—with only 54 total vessels covering an area the size of California, 49 of which are small interceptor boats that can operate out to only 12 nautical miles (13.8 miles) from shore.

Europe’s relevant collective security organization is the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre-Narcotics (MAOC-N), which focuses on “multilateral cooperation to tackle illicit drug trafficking by sea and air.” Like its Caribbean counterparts, MAOC-N pools naval and air assets from partner nations and shares intelligence relevant to drug-trafficking operations. Currently, partners of MAOC-N include France, Ireland, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the United Kingdom—but it misses critical players such as Belgium, which reportedly accounts for 40 percent of all cocaine found in Europe. MAOC-N’s ability to serve as a centralized organization is critical in creating a cohesive interdiction response for Europe as a whole, something that individual navies are unable to do. It is also able to effectively communicate and cooperate with other centralized organizations such as CARICOM IMPACS in the Caribbean, thus expanding the breadth of intelligence to which it has access.

In addition to CARICOM IMPACS and MAOC-N, the U.S. Southern Command’s Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S), along with the Royal Netherlands Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy, also maintains a strong role in the Caribbean. Each of these organizations provides crucial intelligence and analysis to the operational aspects of cocaine interdiction. JIATF-S in particular has had remarkable success in disrupting the flow of cocaine to the United States, receiving intelligence from U.S. law enforcement agencies about cocaine movements. This allows it to direct operations at more specific targets, rather than searching wide expanses of the Caribbean for suspicious movements of boats and aircraft.

3 Ibid.
While this interagency process has been successful domestically, it is not without challenges. On the international scale, overclassification, bureaucratic red tape, and ex post facto information sharing have limited the ability of JIATF-S to coordinate with partners who are not members of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance (comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Caribbean and European representatives maintain that JIATF-S has maintained a tight grip on its intelligence, hampering cooperation. Furthermore, even when Europe and the United States have access to robust intelligence, they sometimes do not fully trust Caribbean states’ ability—and, at times, willingness—to act on it given their low interdiction capacity and high rates of corruption. When the United States and European states choose to partner bilaterally by sharing intelligence or providing aid directly to Caribbean states, they rob the region of the opportunity to present a coordinated counternarcotic strategy.

Another tool to improve cooperation for drug interdiction in the Caribbean is the Agreement Concerning Cooperation in Suppressing Illicit Maritime and Air Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances in the Caribbean Area, also known as the Treaty of San Jose. The agreement, signed in April 2003 and in effect since 2008, seeks to combat drug trafficking in the region by encouraging cooperation, simplifying maritime drug interdiction, and enhancing law-enforcement capacity, including by allowing multinational ship riders. Nine countries have ratified the treaty (Belize, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, France, Guatemala, Honduras, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, and the United States), and four have signed but not ratified (Haiti, Jamaica, Panama, and the United Kingdom). This leaves 16 Caribbean-region states who could potentially become party to the agreement. Notably, only one CARICOM country, Belize, has ratified it. Concern over loss of sovereignty is one reason for the relatively few numbers of signatories—even though the treaty is almost entirely optional in nature, except for a mandatory clause requiring expeditious response to a request for vessel identification.

In addition to country-specific alliances, one multilateral body has been particularly successful in building bridges. The UNODC offers a unique combination of research, trend analysis, and international cooperation models. The expansion of its Container Control Program to Argentina, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Peru, and Uruguay most likely led to the 2022 increase in cocaine seizures. One factor that may have led to the UNODC’s success is its centralization of border security efforts under the new Border Management Branch, which brings together prevention, detection, interdiction, investigation, prosecution, and adjudication assistance to member states. Furthermore, the Container Control Program promotes collaboration with the private sector—companies whose containers are being used for illicit trade. Currently, only Canada, the United States, and Germany contribute financially to the program’s implementation, with participation by Caribbean states limited to the Bahamas, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Guiana, Jamaica, and Suriname.

**Recommendations**

Countering the flow of cocaine to Europe through the Caribbean can only be possible using a multifaceted, multilayered, and multilateral approach. Cooperation with the United States, given its vast experience in interagency collaboration, can help shape a counternarcotics strategy in the Caribbean and Europe. To achieve this, the United States and its partners should take the following initial steps:
• **Create a cohesive and centralized strategy.** Actors affected by the flow of cocaine out of South America and through the Caribbean should coordinate and draft a cohesive strategy to be implemented by CARICOM IMPACS—which, as an indigenous organization, is in the best position to give Caribbean states a sense of ownership and self-determination in the process. Other options include creating a combined operation center to include CARICOM IMPACS, MAOC-N, JIATF-S, and UNODC, as well as establishing an annual forum for sandbox exercises for coordination on interdiction operations.

• **Encourage ratification of the Treaty of San Jose.** The nine states that have ratified the agreement should make a concerted effort to encourage the 16 Caribbean-region states who could potentially sign to become party to the agreement.

• **Develop uniform customs and border protocols for all Caribbean states.** Drawing on the example of the U.S. Transportation Security Administration, Caribbean states should design an authority responsible for standards setting and enforcement of customs examinations. Partnership with countries with advanced border control systems, such as the United States, will be key in designing a system that incorporates new technologies, including using biometrics to maintain updated traveler logs and passenger-scanning technologies to detect drug carriers.

• **Shore up patrolling and interdiction capacity.** The United States, along with Canada and European governments, should prioritize equipment sharing and capacity building in the Caribbean in a cohesive and comprehensive manner. Due to the uncoordinated allocation of resources, parts of the Caribbean—especially the south—lack the resources to interdict cocaine shipments, even if they have the appropriate intelligence to track the ships. According to one CARICOM security official, in smaller Caribbean states, criminal organizations have faster, more efficient equipment than interdiction forces do. European countries with overseas territories—the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands—should work together with the United States and Canada to loan or provide security assistance that fills in the geostrategic gaps left in the parts of the Caribbean that are neither overseas territories nor of U.S. interest.

• **Boost surveillance technology at ports.** In 2020, an estimated 94 percent of all containers arriving in Barbados went unscanned; this is illustrative of a broader problem in the Caribbean. With low human and technological capacity to surveil ports, Caribbean nations will continue to operate with glaring gaps in their border security. Technology loans from the United States would help Caribbean countries identify which apparatuses are best at identifying illicit cargo in their ports. Furthermore, multinational shipping companies can continue to develop technology such as smart containers that could trigger alarms if tampered with post-inspection.

• **Expand and retain human capacity.** Building human capacity requires not only training for customs officials in the Caribbean, but also a plan to invigorate their mission mindset. The Bahamas’ maritime forces, for example, train and retain their personnel by increasing wages and offering them an above-average quality of life. Further capacity could be developed through exchange programs at U.S. or European military colleges, particularly with the U.S. Navy or Coast

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4 Conversation with a European official conducted at a CSIS roundtable under Chatham House Rule, May 16, 2023.
Guard, for officers from Caribbean navies. These opportunities would boost camaraderie and a heightened sense of a collaborative mission.

- **Facilitate intelligence sharing.** The United States’ successful interdictions of northbound cocaine in the Caribbean primarily rely on interagency cooperation. Due to the immediacy of interdiction operations, the United States and European partners should create an accelerated plan to approve intelligence sharing with Caribbean and other European nations. This would allow for a coordinated response to immediate threats in the Caribbean and a more efficient allocation of resources, including interdiction ships, patrolling helicopters, and law enforcement personnel. To address U.S. fears of intelligence leaks, Caribbean security forces should undergo rigorous background checks and financial assessments every two years. Stronger counterintelligence operations could further enhance these efforts.

- **Impose stronger penalties for bulk drug trafficking.** The light penalties in Europe incentivize drug traffickers to continue their illicit trade. Legislating harsher penalties for trafficking large amounts of cocaine would deter subcontractors in the collection and distribution stages of the cocaine supply chain and could encourage legitimate transportation companies to tighten security. Punitive measures should also be accompanied by economic opportunities for underrepresented sectors of the population who are vulnerable to exploitation by drug traffickers.

- **Partner with the private sector.** Shipping container companies play an important role in ensuring the integrity of their cargo. Government corruption in places such as Ecuador has allowed criminal groups to set up legitimate companies, particularly of perishable food items that can be expedited through customs. However, law-abiding companies should partner with port authorities to ensure their container ships are not used for illicit trade. In addition to developing new container technologies, port authorities should prioritize conducting rigorous employee screening and maintaining a biometric database of all port and shipping container employees. The expansion of UNODC’s Container Control Program in the Caribbean should be encouraged.

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This report was made possible by the generous support of the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement of the U.S. Department of State.

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