

Guyana: Elections and the Imperatives of Geopolitical Neighborhoods¹

By

Ivelaw Lloyd Griffith

I. INTRODUCTION

This year electoral winds will blow across eight national landscapes in Latin America and the Caribbean—Belize, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. Voters there will determine whether we will witness cool winds of continuity or tempestuous cyclones of change. But irrespective of the national circumstances, serious contenders do not have the luxury of focusing only on the run up to the elections; they also need to consider possible electoral outcomes and life after victory.

II. BIG OIL

This surely is the case in Guyana, which had early voting by the army and the police on February 21, and which will have the most consequential elections of the eight countries, largely because of the massive offshore oil and gas find there. The discovery of some 8 billion barrels of oil will witness economic growth of a whopping 86 percent this year alone according to the International Monetary Fund. Last year's figure was 4.7 percent. Last December, Anthony Bryan, an energy expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, cited estimates that placed revenue over the lifetime of the projects at US\$117 billion.² However, that was before the January 27, 2020 announcement by ExxonMobil of its 16th deep water discovery since oil was first struck in May 2015. Now the lifetime estimates are projected at US\$168 billion.

¹ This article captures thoughts shared at the February 13, 2020 Roundtable on Guyana held in Washington, DC, which was cohosted by the Center for Strategic & International Studies and the International Republican Institute.

² See his "Clear de way Guyana coming back: Oil, high expectations, and cautious optimism," CNG Media, December 8, 2019, available at <https://www.caribbeannewsglobal.com/clear-de-way-guyana-coming-back-oil-high-expectations-and-cautious-optimism/>.

According to Energy Director Dr. Mark Bynoe earlier this month, Guyana is entitled to five million barrels of oil and 2 percent royalty as part of the profit share with ExxonMobil and the other partners this year alone. The oil finds have made Guyana's 6.6 million-acre Stabroek Block the largest crude discovery globally in recent years. Guyana is now among the world's largest crude oil producers. Incidentally, although ExxonMobil captures the headlines, the enterprise is actually a partnership involving ExxonMobil, Hess Corporation, and a unit of China's National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC).

Esso Exploration and Production Guyana Limited is the operator and holds 45 percent interest in the partnership, while Hess Guyana Exploration Ltd holds 30 percent interest, and CNOOC Nexen Petroleum Guyana Limited holds 25 percent interest. Keep in mind that the ExxonMobil partnership is not the only oil pursuit in Guyana. Companies from Britain, Canada, France, and Spain also are part of the country's Black Gold seascape and landscape. December 20 last year marked the historic First Oil production and President David Granger declared the day as National Petroleum Day. Crude oil production is estimated to reach 120,000 barrels per day by the end of this year.

Because of the oil find, but not only because of it, whomever wins the March 2 elections in South America's sole English-speaking republic will need to ponder some geopolitical realities and make some tough consequential decisions. Given the nature of the issues involved, the post-elections leaders will need to think beyond one electoral cycle; in terms of at least 10 to 15 years.

At least three sets of geopolitical issues warrant attention. Indeed, they are of such vital importance as to rise to the level of Imperatives—things that need to be actioned, and not just pondered—and they pertain to what I describe as Geopolitical Neighborhoods: the Proximate Neighborhood; Far Away Neighborhoods; and the Wet Neighborhood. As explained elsewhere, my approach to geopolitics views it as the relationship between physical and political geography on the one hand, and national power on the other, with key factors being the possession of strategic materials, ownership of or access to strategic waterways, and the possession or location of military bases and other security installations. Geopolitics provides the context in which national power can be enhanced directly or indirectly, or threats and vulnerabilities may develop or be heightened.³

³ See page 10 of my [The United States and the Caribbean 30 Years after the Grenada Invasion: Dynamics of Geopolitics and Geonarcotics](#). Occasional Paper, William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, National

What, Geopolitical Imperatives, then, might the electoral winners in Guyana consider after victory is declared next week?

III. IMPERATIVES OF THE PROXIMATE NEIGHBORHOOD

Brazil, Suriname, and Venezuela are the key countries in Guyana's Proximate Geopolitical Neighborhood. Venezuela dynamics constitute the most consequential and immediate of the three. March is not just important to Guyana electorally, but also in relation to efforts to resolve Venezuela's territorial claim. Public hearings before the International Court of Justice in the Hague will begin on the 23rd. Guyana will present the first round of oral arguments on that day, and Venezuela will present its case the following day. Guyana then will present its second round of arguments on March 25, and Venezuela will respond two days later. How Guyana conducts itself during the campaign period, on elections day and immediately after the voting will help to color the perceptions about the nation in the Hague when the hearings begin.

This stage follows the filing by Guyana in March 2018 of an application to the Court seeking to confirm the legal validity and binding effect of the Arbitral Award of October 1899. Venezuela claims the entire territory west of the Essequibo River, some five-eighths of Guyana's 214,970 square kilometers, an area rich in oil, gold, diamond and other minerals and is part of Guyana's Amazon territory. It presents the area on its maps as part of its territory; as *la Zona en reclamación*. Venezuela's claim is an existential one for Guyana, and the Court's ultimate ruling will have far-reaching implications for it. Incidentally, this phase of the matter deals just with jurisdiction. If the Court affirms jurisdiction, it then will consider the merits of the claim. Thus, the entire matter will take several more years before finality, which means that this Geopolitical Neighborhood issue will command the attention of Guyana's leaders for a while more, and it will continue to cost a pretty penny, which Guyana now will be able to afford quite easily.

Yet, the claim on the Guyana's western front is not the only one in the Proximate Neighborhood. There have been maritime and territorial disputes with Suriname, which originated

Defense University, December 2013; available at http://www.williamjperrycenter.org/sites/default/files/publication_associated_files/The%20United%20States%20and%20the%20Caribbean%2030%20Years%20after%20the%20Grenada%20Invasion.pdf.

in the colonial era and helped to influence post-independence relations between the two countries. On the maritime side, the oil-and marine-rich contested zone of 31,600 km² witnessed several dramatic high points over the last five decades, the most notable of which was the Suriname Defense Force's ejection in June 2000 of the oil platforms of a Canadian-owned company, CGX, which had been licensed by Guyana to drill in the Guyana Basin.

Bilateral resolution efforts proved futile, as did efforts by CARICOM. Guyana then took the matter to arbitration under the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in February 2004. Suriname challenged the Tribunal's jurisdiction and the validity of the established international legal principle of equidistance in fixing boundaries, and it attempted to justify the use of force in June 2000. Nevertheless, in September 2007, some three-and-a-half years after action was initiated, the UNCLOS Tribunal announced its finding: Guyana was entitled to two-thirds of the disputed zone and Suriname one-third.

The 15,540 km² mineral- and timber-rich New River Triangle is still in dispute. The Guyana-Suriname Border Mixed Commission, established in 1989 as a framework for rapprochement and to move the parties progressively towards resolution, has not been as effective as had been hoped. Meanwhile, over the last few decades there have been many diplomatic and security twists and turns in the territorial saga. A significant development, and a daring one by Suriname, was Suriname's action in presenting to the world what it long had done inside the country: cartographically portraying the New River Triangle as part of its territory. It did this at a World Bank Low Carbon Development Forum in October 2009 in Washington, DC. Guyana offered a feeble protest but has been unable to secure a retraction of the map since then.

As noted earlier, 2020 also is a power contestation year for Suriname, with elections carded for this May. As with Guyana, electoral winds likely will blow gusts of continuity, although President Desi Bouterse was convicted last November by a military tribunal for his role of the execution of 15 political opponents in 1982. Suriname also has an oil boon in the offing. On January 7 this year American-owned Apache Corp and French-owned company Total SA announced a major offshore discovery. The discovery sent Apache's shares surging nearly 27 percent. Because of the preoccupation with petroleum pursuits, among other things, the New River issue probably will be a low priority for both nations. Rather, they likely will accentuate the good working relations of the last few years, including reenergizing the work of the Mixed Border

Commission. Important, too, is the personal chemistry between Presidents David Granger and Desi Bouterse, who are kindred spirits from their army days.⁴

IV. IMPERATIVES RELATED TO FAR AWAY NEIGHBORHOODS

Guyana is now a serious magnet for people and businesses. For instance, the first Annual International Petroleum Business Summit and Exhibition (GIPEX) in 2018, which I attended, attracted some 270 individuals from the Caribbean, North America, Europe and Africa. The attendance leaped to 600 delegates and 200 companies represented at the second GIPEX last year and will grow over ensuing years. In relation to just the United States, the embassy in Georgetown announced on February 20 this year that they were handling inquiries from more than 100 American businesses about launching operations in Guyana. American Airlines started flying there from Miami in 2018 and from New York last December, Jet Blue will do so from this April, and Delta is contemplating resuming its service, which it had suspended in 2013.

Consider, too, that oil is not the only economic game in town. Guyana has gold, diamonds, bauxite, agriculture, timber, and tourism. To his credit, and reflective of lessons learned from experiences of other oil producers in the developing world, President Granger had already promised economic diversification. Therefore, non-oil areas also will continue to attract people from other Neighborhoods, including from Far Away Neighborhoods.

A little more than two decades ago, while on a book tour through the Caribbean to promote my then-recently-released book Drugs and Security in the Caribbean: Sovereignty Under Siege, the head of the prisons in Aruba shared a remarkable observation with me: “Professor, this international drug trafficking is providing my prison officers with a great education about world geography; we have in prison people from countries that we never knew existed.” In all likelihood, as Guyana magnetizes because of the oil and the economic diversification, people will trek to Guyana from places some Guyanese never knew existed.

⁴ For both Geopolitical and Goeconomic reasons, Brazil likely will increase its interest in and engagement with both Guyana and Suriname, as will the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, and China. Thus, the Neighborhood will increase in complexity.

Most trekkers will make lawful ingress. But many, perhaps thousands depending on economic conditions in Venezuela and elsewhere in the Proximate Neighborhood, will try to enter illegally. Guyana's post-elections leaders must prepare for this, not only by boosting border control and immigration services, but also consular services for people from countries that currently have no diplomatic or consular links with Guyana. No doubt, they will want to recalibrate the country's foreign policy engagement, extending its global reach with diplomatic and consular presence elsewhere in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

The post-elections leaders also will need to boost the nation's capabilities related to public security and the administration of justice, as crime—especially homicides, burglary, spousal abuse, prostitution, sex trafficking, illegal mining, and drug trafficking and abuse—likely will spike.⁵ Moreover, a higher premium should be placed on cybersecurity; Guyana will become a cybercrime magnet and a trojan, in relation to businesses, government entities and individuals of high worth. The authorities also should pay particular attention to piracy, which posed a major security headache there just a few years ago. People will come from Far Away Neighborhoods by sea, and not only with lawful intent. Overall, significant investments in the country's public security will become a Geopolitical Imperative, both to enhance domestic safety and security and mitigate the negative pursuits of people from Far Away Neighborhoods.

V. IMPERATIVES CONCERNING THE WET NEIGHBORHOOD

This third area is more of a Geo-environmental Imperative than a Geopolitical one. Indeed, it really it should command a pride of place as the first Imperative. It pertains to where Guyana is geographically and what it is facing environmentally.

In comparative Caribbean terms, Guyana is a large nation. It is 20 times the size of Jamaica and it could accommodate all the member countries of CARICOM in its territory. However, it is in a Wet Neighborhood. The name Guyana derives from an indigenous Indian (Amerindian) term

⁵ In relation to drugs, I am hopeful that the post-elections leaders will move quickly to decriminalize limited cannabis production and use, as Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and several other jurisdictions have done, and focus attention and resources on the trafficking of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamines, which is likely to increase at least in the short term. Abundant cash also could encourage lifestyle changes by locals and importation by foreigners, inclusive of the use of hard drugs.

meaning “Land of Waters.” Called so for good reason, Guyana has some 965 miles of navigable rivers, of which the Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo are the largest. The Essequibo—the largest of the three—originates at the Acarai Mountains in southern Guyana, near the border with Brazil, and runs 600 miles north and empties into the Atlantic Ocean. Its estuary alone is 20 miles wide.

Another part of the Wet Neighborhood reality relates to Guyana’s 285-mile Atlantic coastline, which is below sea level, ranging from 19 inches below in some places to as much as six feet in others. The coastal existence is “protected” by a Sea Wall, construction of which began in 1855 following a massive flood that left a trail of destruction along the coast. Also part of the “protection” are mangrove forests and rivers and canals that channel the water flow from the country’s interior through the plains to the Atlantic Ocean. A system of kokers (sluices), designed by the Dutch when they controlled Guyana, is a key part of the protection. At high tide the kokers are closed to prevent inundation, and at lower tide they are opened to permit the water flow from the country’s interior through to the Atlantic Ocean.

Are there other factors on this Geo-environmental landscape? The answer is yes! Not only does the capital city, Georgetown, lie along the coast, but some 80 percent of the country’s population lives there. Thus, Guyana is vulnerable to coastal flooding and has had to deal with this for more than a century. The most devastating episode in recent times occurred in January 2005 when the country experienced the highest recorded rainfall since 1888, which resulted in a massive flood that affected about 84 percent of the population and left an estimated US\$500 million in damages. Rainfall is said to average seven inches per month normally, but by mid-January, some 27 inches of rain had fallen. According to one report, “The disaster received little international attention, coming soon after the tsunami in Asia, but it killed 34 people and generated disease, ruined crops, polluted drinking water, battered the nation’s already feeble economy, and strained race relations.”⁶

The Granger government demonstrated its appreciation of the seriousness of the Wet Neighborhood challenge in undertaking a flood mitigation and environmental beautification project just after being elected in May 2015. In partnership with private sector companies it cleared canals and drains in Georgetown and in villages along the coast, as blockage had been a major

⁶ See Freedom House, “Guyana: Countries at the Crossroads 2006,” available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/countries-crossroads/2006/guyana>.

flood mitigation obstacle over the years. Moreover, with support from the European Union and other partners, it repaired and strengthened the Sea Wall and restored several mangrove areas. However, such efforts will not suffice given the magnitude of the challenge.

The Wet Neighborhood Imperative is an existential one. The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) has explained that sea level has been rising globally since the end of the last ice age, but the rate of that rise has increased significantly. Between 1993 and 2009, the annual rate rose nearly twice the 20th century average, due to climate change. After studying the volume of water that could come from shrinking glaciers and ice sheets, the UCS experts projected a rise of between 2.6 feet and 6.6 feet by 2100.

They explained that besides global sea-level rise, several other factors influence regional sea levels, including sinking or rising of land, circulation of the atmosphere and the ocean, and the origin of meltwater. In relation to Guyana, they note that “the Guyana coast is subsiding owing to groundwater extraction, soil compaction, and drainage of wetlands. From 1951 to 1979, sea level off Guyana rose at a rate some six times the global average, (0.4 inch, or 10.2 millimeters per year), around 6 times the twentieth century average or 3 times the 1993 to 2009 annual average.”⁷

Clearly, existential dangers lie ahead, and the post-elections leaders will need to address them with what Martin Luther King, Jr. once called “the fierce urgency of now.” Distinguished economist Jay Mandle captured some of this urgency in citing a sobering 2014 report by the Caribbean Planning for Adaptation to Global Climate Change Project (CPACC), noting that: “CPACC concludes that ‘the entire fabric of Guyanese society – population, agriculture, industry, and infrastructure – is vulnerable to even slight increases in sea level rises, rainfall intensities, saltwater intrusion and droughts. ...’”⁸ CPACC also predicted that floodwaters will remain stagnant for longer periods over land, which will increase the possibility of the spread of disease, that agriculture will suffer irreversible damages because of salt-water intrusion and inundation, and that coastal ecosystems will disappear.

⁷ Union of Concerned Scientists, Hot Climate Map, Guyana, 2011, available at <https://www.climatehotmap.org/global-warming-locations/guyana.html>.

⁸ See Jay R. Mandle, “Petroleum and Climate Change in Guyana’s Future,” Inaugural C.Y. Thomas Distinguished Lecture, Pegasus Hotel Georgetown, Guyana, October 27, 2016, Renaissance Occasional Paper No. 1, available at <http://www.ugpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/1.-UG-Press-Renaissance-Lectures-Mandle.pdf>.

Undoubtedly, the Wet Neighborhood presents some clear and present dangers to Guyana's citizens and its oil and other investors. At least the capital city should be relocated away from the coast. This is a proposition with a long planning and execution gestation. Plans to relocate Georgetown have been touted since the time of President Forbes Burnham in the 1970s. Regrettably, I suspect it will take another—and, perhaps, worse than 2005—flood disaster to propel leadership and citizenry into action in this respect.

The oil wealth that will accrue to the country will provide more than enough funding to undertake what will be a mega project. And, there's no shortage of land. Some of the urban planning and infrastructure investments contemplated are laudable. But some of them—such as the plan, announced on February 19, 2020, to develop a new City of Ogle along the East Coast of Demerara—present complicating factors. One hopes that the post-elections leaders will act on this capital relocation Imperative before too long.

VI. CONCLUSION

This is an exciting time for Guyana. Were Charles Dickens, author of A Tale of Two Cities and other classics, writing about contemporary Guyana he probably would describe the country as facing “the best of times, with even better times to come.” Plus, so far, there is no evidence that power contenders and their supporters are demonstrating electoral “age of foolishness.” Guyana is in a transformational mode. However the electoral winds blow there, the post-elections leaders will have to manage several realities, including the Imperatives related to the Proximate Neighborhood, Far Away Neighborhoods, and the Wet Neighborhood.

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Ivelaw Lloyd Griffith is non-resident Senior Associate in the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the University of Delaware. A former Vice Chancellor of the University of Guyana, he's an expert on Caribbean security who has testified before the United States Congress on Caribbean security matters. He's currently finalizing Challenged Sovereignty: The Impact of Drugs, Crime, Terrorism and Cyber Challenges on Security and Sovereignty in the Caribbean for the University of Illinois Press.