As the Wuhan Coronavirus has forced the closure of the country's borders, Trinidad and Tobago is continuing to face an influx of illegal migrants from Venezuela as that country's economic implosion continues apace. Some of the more recent incidents included an apparent influx of 150 migrants on 14 July 2020, and another 11 detained by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) on 24 July 2020. This has brought renewed focus on the country's maritime security which last came into focus one year ago following the murder on 23-24 July 2019 of seven fishermen after they were assaulted at sea by bandits within the territorial waters of the country.

It is doubly unfortunate that the country is plunged into a keenly contested General Election and a somewhat embattled governing party (the People's National Movement – PNM), led by Dr. Keith Rowley, has sought to address maritime security by launching a tirade against his predecessor, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar of the United National Congress (UNC), alleging, with a mix of some truth, selected half-truths and falsehoods, that her government undermined maritime security between 2010 and 2015, ignoring his own government's evident failings on the subject over the last five years.

It is always unfortunate when an issue as serious as maritime security becomes a partisan political issue. That approach does little to address serious concerns which plague the country's maritime security structure.

Image source: Britannica

Why are the Maritime Borders Porous?

The country's maritime domain, maritime areas under the jurisdiction of Trinidad and Tobago for which domain awareness is necessary. This includes the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the Territorial, Archipelagic Waters and Internal Waters.

To achieve this domain awareness, which would effectively seal our maritime borders, or at least render them less porous, requires a coherent plan, a synergy of effort to make effective use of resources and the provision of adequate resources in respect of coastal radars, ships and air support.

The previous administration had taken significant steps towards establishing a maritime security wall – synergizing and integrating the land-based radars with naval assets and air support – with due attention to each of the three tiers of our maritime domain. Unfortunately, post-2015, it has not come to fruition.

The present state of affairs suggests a complete absence of a coherent plan and there is a lack of synergy in respect of making use of our radars, ships and air support. In the case of the latter, the decline of Trinidad's air assets has a disproportionate impact on our maritime domain awareness.

Trinidad's Porous Maritime Borders – Myths and Reality

Regrettably, the Trinidadian discourse on the subject is replete with myths, misconceptions and misinformation which precludes informed debate or discourse. This has become particularly apparent in respect of discussions on the state of the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard.

Certain myths have been perpetuated, some by those seeking to avoid responsibility and others by those genuinely unaware. However, these myths need to be debunked and reality stated.

Image source: Wikiwand

Myth 1: The Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard lacks ships

Reality:

The Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard has never had more operational ships at its disposal. This was the result of a steady and considered force accretion policy between the years 2014 and 2016.

When an operational audit, of which I was a part, of the Coast Guard took place in 2013, the formation had:

- One OPV, two CPVs and six FPCs plus 17 interceptors and six pirogues.
- It had exactly 2 FPCs, 4 interceptors and six pirogues operational.
- Despite efforts which involved procuring new engines (under then Minister Warner), the interceptors remained very problematic with serviceability hovering between 2 and four at any time.
- The Austal FPCs were under a full maintenance contract with Austal until mid-2015. Even with all Austal's efforts, serviceability was appalling – between one and four (only once were four serviceable).

In late 2013, an expert Naval Assets Acquisition Implementation Team (NAAIT) – of which I was a member – was established and it worked, between the years 2014 and 2016, to a program which was to attempt to obtain a fleet which included:

- One (1) Long Range Patrol Vessel (LRPV) with the option to purchase a second vessel;
- Seven (7) Coastal Patrol Vessels (CPVs);
- Sixteen (16) Coastal Interceptors;
- Five (5) Floating Coastal Stations.

The interceptors and floating coastal stations were part of a plan to allow for more flexible deployment of the interceptor fleet and to enable the Coast Guard to establish a virtually permanent presence on all coasts.

Budgetary constraints impacted the Interceptor and Coastal Station projects, but the team did enable the procurement of a force of:

- Four (4) Coastal Patrol vessels (Spa 5009) – 50 m vessels;
- Two (2) Utility Vessels (FCS 5009) – 50 m vessels which were also armed

- Six (6) onboard Interceptors – 11 m vessels capable of being launched from the CPVs

At the end of 2014, two near-derelict CPVs – CG-21 and CG-22 – were repaired locally at Interisle.

In addition, as part of a government to government agreement, the Coast Guard also acquired a 79m LRPV from the People's Republic of China.

Therefore, by the end of 2016, from contracts signed under the People's Partnership government, the Coast Guard had:

- One 79m Chinese made LRPV
- Four 50m Damen SPa 5009 CPVs
- Two 50m Damen FCS 5009 armed utility vessels
- Two 46m legacy CPVs returned to service.
- Six legacy Austal APB 30 Fast Patrol Craft (of dubious serviceability)
- Six DI 1102 onboard interceptors
- Seventeen legacy interceptors (four of which were operational)
- Six pirogues.

The Coast Guard, therefore, has never had more operational vessels and has a force that is completely capable of securing our maritime borders without the need for immediate acquisitions. In terms of vessel availability, and serviceable ships, the TTCG has never been in a better position, though the Austal APB30 vessels are largely non-operational due to severe maintenance issues. Serviceability problems have bedevilled the interceptor fleet but some efforts to restore unserviceable vessels have shown results.

The purchase of two Austal Cape-class patrol boats in 2018 will add to the existing fleet but it is unclear as to what role they would fulfil, being somewhat less capable than the SPa 5009 fleet in the CPV role but lacking the range to make them OPVs.

Image source: Twitter

Myth 2: The Coast Guard needs more Manpower

Reality:

The Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard has more personnel than the Irish Navy.

In 2018, after sustained recruiting efforts between 2013 and 2016, the Coast Guard had 102 officers and 1387 ratings. Its sanctioned strength is 143 officers and 1465 ratings.

In contrast, the Irish Naval Service operates eight large OPVs with a manpower strength of 1094.

Image source: Flickr

Myth 3: The OPVs cancelled in 2010 would have secured the maritime border

Reality:

Trinidad and Tobago contracted for three OPVs from VT shipyards, later BAES. These vessels were cancelled in 2010 sparking a nearly continuous sniping war between the PNM (under whose 2007-2010 government the purchase was made) and the UNC (under whose 2010-2015 government the purchase was cancelled). This has once again come to the fore as the 2020 General election nears.

Defective Weapons System

While there were multiple issues at play, the principal reason for the cancellation of the vessels was a deficiency with its combat management system and its main armament.

The vessel had a main armament of a 30mm cannon in a DS30M mount with an electro-optical director. This was slaved to an OSIRIS Combat Management System from Ultra Electronics. The DS30M had not slaved to any Combat Management System anywhere at the time. The DS30M is usually used in a short-range role under either local or remote control with the EO director being sufficient.

The interface between the OSIRIS CMS with the EO system was problematic and the laser-rangefinder ended up being changed. The accuracy of the DS30M was thus adversely impacted.

Even the radar – a Terma 4100 (an excellent radar by any standard) – had trouble interfacing with the CMS. It was so bad that the radar failed to detect a target aircraft under ideal conditions (it flew right over the OPV, undetected).

Insufficient Manpower and Inadequate Infrastructure for OPVs

While the BAES OPVs would have been capable vessels once their defects were solved, the sad fact is that the Coast Guard in 2010 did not, and even in 2020, does not, have the manpower to effectively operate three OPVs of that size and complexity.

The 2013 operational audit estimated that to operate just two OPVs/ LRPVs would require at least 55 additional seagoing officers.

The said operational audit of the TTCG disclosed that of its officer strength of 57 (at the time), only 9 were seagoing officers.

Upon discovering this, the Coast Guard with government sanction, assisted by the Defence Force Commissions Board (of which I was a member between 2010 and 2016), embarked upon determined efforts to recruit more seagoing officers and the deficiency in this regard has been reduced but still falls far short of the level required to operate two, much less three OPVs. Even its sanctioned strength of 143 officers and 1465 ratings would be inadequate to operate three OPVs.

It should be noted that the Irish Navy with a much smaller personnel strength also has a much larger officer cadre – more than double that of the TTCG.

Besides manpower, the Coast Guard berthing, refuelling, bunkers, storage, and other shore-based infrastructure would need to be upgraded at considerable cost.

Vessels are only effective if the manpower and support structures are in place to enable

them to work effectively.

Whatever the merits or demerits of the OPVs as ships, the infrastructure and manpower were not in place to support their operating with any degree of efficiency.

Comparing Deals

Comparing BAES OPV deal with the deal for Damen patrol vessels signed in 2015 is something of an utter nonsense as the classes of a vessel are entirely different.

The BAES OPV deal cost TT$2,314,845,015, including the three main vessels, maintenance and six PAC-24 RHIB interceptors.

In contrast, the 2015 Damen deal cost some TT$1,358,474,696, inclusive of four SPa 5009 CPVs, two FCS 5009 utility vessels and six DI 1102 interceptors plus maintenance and spares.

In an ideal situation, the Damen vessels and BAES OPVs could have formed a complementary force, working in conjunction to establish an extremely effective maritime security grid. However reality is not ideal and the unfortunate fact is that the cost of operating, maintaining and otherwise sustaining the OPVs would have been prohibitive.

Image source: Pinterest

Myth 4: Ships alone can secure borders

There seems to be an idea, prevalent in Trinidad, that maritime security is limited to purchasing ships and that this is sufficient to secure maritime borders. Ships undoubtedly play an important part. However, functioning alone, they are less than effective.

Even before discussing other requirements, it is worth remembering that, without crews and fuel, ships are worthless.

At present, only the four Damen SPa 5009s have permanent crews attached to them, the remaining vessels are either without such crew assignments or have skeleton crews. At one stage, due to bureaucratic inertia and perhaps incompetence, the TTCG was unable to pay for fuel for its vessels.

The reason behind this unsatisfactory state of affairs is as yet unclear. However, responsibility needs to be affixed and changes made otherwise no number of ships would be

sufficient. To date, any changes have been minimal and the Coast Guard has yet to establish a sustained presence in the maritime domain.

An Integrated System is Needed

Critical to any securing of the maritime borders is surveillance from a network of coastal radars plus aerial surveillance using a combination of maritime patrol aircraft and helicopters.

The country possesses an excellent coastal radar network with Elta El/ M-2226 radars around the country's coast and also covers the islands of St. Vincent and Grenada. While there have been occasional serviceability issues, these radars are functional and are being upgraded.

The previous administration had begun steps to not only upgrade the existing coastal radar network and install gap-filler radars to cover places closer to the shore. At least in respect of the former, the current government has continued this plan.

Image source: Office of The Prime Minister

Air Support Grounded

The previous UNC administration, building on work done by its PNM predecessor, developed an effective air surveillance network.

The Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard had two C-26 aircraft and four AW 139 helicopters. The Air Division of the National Operations Centre had four additional helicopters – a S-76A+, two BO-105CBS-4s and one AS.355F2, with two more – a S-76D and another AS.355 – being leased to bolster assets.

The current administration, however, has decimated these resources.

The four AW-139s of the TTAG were grounded because of their high maintenance costs. Recent efforts to restore them to service, the first supposed to be operational in June 2019, have not shown results.

To add insult to injury, Cobham Helicopter Services Limited (the company which had successfully tendered for the maintenance contract), was able to successfully sue the current government,

The TTAG is now in a state of near collapse with at least seventeen pilots leaving (out of a very small number to begin with) and its sole assets – two C-26 aircraft – being in dire need of overhaul and repair with their surveillance equipment being non-functional.

The NOC Air Division, now a new unit under their Air Guard, has been reduced to two aircraft (one BO-105CBS-4 and one AS.355F2).In addition, their surveillance equipment is unserviceable, restricting their operations at night.

This does not bode well for either land-based law-enforcement support or maritime border surveillance.

Conclusions

That Trinidad's maritime borders are porous is undeniable. Understanding why requires a debunking of several often-repeated myths. This is obfuscating the fact that despite the Coast Guard having adequate numbers of vessels, the maritime security grid has collapsed. This seems to be due to extraneous factors where the fleet of ships has been compromised by poor use of manpower resources and a lack of fuel. The grid is further compromised by

the complete disintegration of the country’s air support network.

Harping on about deals cancelled 10 years ago is singularly unproductive. Bemoaning a lack of ships is even more so, as it is evidently untrue. Unfortunately, rather than outlining plans to move forward, perhaps acknowledging existing shortcomings, political rhetoric has been allowed to dominate the discourse on the subject, thus seemingly precluding any move towards effective solutions.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Kootneeti Team

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