

## Interview – Jacqueline Laguardia Martinez

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Jacqueline Laguardia Martinez holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Havana and currently serves as a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of International Relations at The University of the West Indies (The UWI). Previously, she was an Associate Professor at the University of Havana and a Research Associate at the Cuban Institute for Cultural Research 'Juan Marinello'. Dr. Laguardia Martinez has an extensive academic portfolio, having participated in numerous scholarly events, delivered lectures, and undertaken teaching responsibilities across North America, Latin America, Asia, Europe, and the Caribbean. She is a member of the Cátedra de Estudios del Caribe 'Norman Girvan' at the University of Havana and co-coordinates the CLACSO Working Group on "Crisis, respuestas y alternativas en el Gran Caribe".

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

In International Relations of the Caribbean, some of the most stimulating research is currently centered on economic resilience and sustainability, given the region's susceptibility to climate change and other extreme meteorological events. Caribbean small states show poor economic growth, high dependence on food imports, and have limited options for economic diversification due to the reduced landmass and small population in most Caribbean territories. Exceptions include countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, and Jamaica, which have achieved some degree of industrialization and possess fossil fuel resources and minerals. The other Caribbean islands heavily rely on tourism and other services to generate foreign currency for importing food and energy resources.

Considering the development challenges that Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face today, key debates are centered around achieving food security, energy security, adapting to climate change, economic development, and regional integration and cooperation. These discussions occur within the context of global transitions that disrupt traditional alliances and compel Caribbean SIDS to explore alternative partnerships with emerging powers and multilateral blocs. Additionally, important debates are taking place in the areas of crime and security, migration, cultural and creative industries, and technological change, particularly with the extended use of artificial intelligence and its implications for the Caribbean.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

My understanding of the world has evolved significantly, influenced by both academic and personal experiences. My initial undergraduate degree was in Economics, and I specialized in this discipline during my postgraduate studies, obtaining a master's degree in international economics and a PhD in Economics. However, since my undergraduate years, I have been inclined towards interdisciplinary research by recognizing the interconnectedness of economic, social, and environmental issues. Early in my career, I conducted research in Environmental Economics, and my PhD research project focused on Cultural Industries. This pursuit of nearby disciplines and acquiring a broader view of economic issues as social matters led me to complete two additional undergraduate degrees in History and Cultural Studies.

The opportunity to engage in academic collaborations by participating in scholarly events across different regions has exposed me to diverse viewpoints and methodologies, enriching my understanding of the world, its peoples and

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their circumstances. Working closely with Caribbean experts has deepened my focus on issues pertinent to the Wider Caribbean. Mentorship from esteemed colleagues and interactions with influential scholars have been instrumental in shaping my thinking. I must acknowledge my lecturers and peers in Cuba, particularly my colleagues at the Center for International Economic Research (CIEI), the Cuban Institute for Cultural Research Juan Marinello, the Cuban Observatory for Book and Literature, the Center for Studies of the Cuban Economy (CEEC), and the “Norman Girvan” Chair of Caribbean Studies at the University of Havana.

Regional networking has been vital for developing my research and teaching skills. Participating in joint projects within the Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (CLACSO) for almost 30 years has been an invaluable experience that allowed me to grow as a young researcher and Latin American/Caribbean scholar.

**As a researcher and lecturer for both the University of Havana and the University of the West Indies, do you find there to be open collaboration between academics in your field across these institutions?**

There is a sense of open collaboration among academics in the field of Caribbean Studies in the region, and the University of Havana and the University of the West Indies are no exception. Over the years, strong collaboration links have flourished between the “Norman Girvan” Chair of Caribbean Studies at the University of Havana, and the St. Augustine and Cave Hill campuses of the University of West Indies. This is evident through various initiatives, including joint panels at the International Conferences of Caribbean Studies in Havana for over two decades, as well as joint participation in academic events, research projects, and international field trips with UWI students visiting the University of Havana. These platforms encourage cross-disciplinary dialogue and the sharing of research, fostering a collaborative environment.

In December 2019, The UWI-University of Havana Centre for the Sustainable Development of Caribbean People was established at the University of Havana. I hope this new step towards strengthening academic collaboration will have a positive impact on broadening and deepening the links between academics in both universities.

**The United States has seen a drastic shift in foreign policy under the second Trump administration, including controversial statements regarding a return of territories like the Panama Canal to American Sovereignty. What does this new direction signal for the sovereign states of the Caribbean? What has the reaction been by relevant actors?**

The second Trump administration’s foreign policy has been characterized by a more aggressive and expansionist approach in Latin America and the Caribbean, in line with the Monroe Doctrine. The Caribbean has already felt the impact of increased U.S. interventionist policies, which could undermine the sovereignty of Caribbean states. A recent example includes the announcement by the U.S. government to cancel visas for anyone working with or supporting Cuban medical brigades, citing allegations of forced labor and claiming these missions “enrich the Cuban regime.” The U.S. State Department stated that the restrictions would extend to “current or former Cuban government officials, and other individuals, including foreign government officials, who are believed to be responsible for, or involved in, the Cuban labor export program, particularly Cuba’s overseas medical missions” (U.S. Department of State, February 25, 2025).

Caribbean leaders from Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Jamaica, Grenada, The Bahamas, Saint Kitts and Nevis have denounced the U.S. policy as unfair and unjustified. Politicians and civil society representatives have recognized Cuban medical missions as a critical asset for the healthcare systems in the Caribbean, and highlighted Cuba’s health cooperation of outmost importance to face COVID-19. Cuba has been a reliable development cooperation partner for the Caribbean for over five decades while the United States has recently withdrawn from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

**The Caribbean region still hosts some of the few states that recognize the Republic of China (Taiwan) over the People’s Republic of China. Has this affected the People’s Republic of China’s outlook and strategy with regards to incorporating the region into its Belt and Road Initiative?**

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The recognition of Taiwan by certain Caribbean states has influenced the People's Republic of China strategy in the region, as it precludes the People's Republic of China from engaging at a regional level with the Caribbean via the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) or the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS). The PRC maintains diplomatic relations with the majority of Caribbean SIDS, with the exceptions of Belize, Haiti, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which continue to recognize Taiwan. With all of them, except for The Bahamas, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been signed. The PRC has enlarged its presence as creditor, investor and cooperation partner in the Caribbean contributing to large infrastructure developments. However, its importance as trade partner for the region falls behind the United States and Europe.

**To what degree does the Republic of Cuba participate and cooperate with local international organizations like CELAC and CARICOM? Does its unique domestic situation impact these processes in any way?**

Although Cuba is not a CARICOM member, it maintains diplomatic relations with all Caribbean SIDS and operates embassies in each of them. Cuba sustains a wide array of cooperation programs with CARICOM Member States in diverse areas, notably in health, education and disaster risk reduction. The country offers scholarship programs to train doctors and other professionals who then return to their Caribbean homelands to contribute to the social welfare of their societies.

A key characteristic of Cuba's cooperation is that the programs are aligned to meet the development needs identified by Caribbean partners. The success of Cuba's cooperation in the Caribbean can be attributed to the absence of ideological-political conditions. Despite Cuba's unique domestic situation, including its socialist government, economic challenges, and increasing tensions with the United States, the island has fruitfully maintained strong diplomatic and cooperation ties with the rest of the Caribbean.

Contrary to CARICOM, which is a regional organization aiming at Caribbean integration, CELAC is a regional mechanism for coordinating political dialogue and cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean. Cuba has been an enthusiastic promoter of regionalism in the Americas without U.S. interference and therefore has supported CELAC since its inception. Cuba hosted the II Summit of CELAC in 2014 in Havana and continues to be committed to the regional vision propelled by CELAC.

**Do you consider the wide range of ideologies and growing polarization of national governments and political movements across Latin America a threat to systems of international cooperation in the region? What are some unifying factors at play, if any?**

The growing ideological polarization in Latin America does pose a threat to international cooperation in the region. A clear example of how extreme ideologies have undermined Latin American regionalism was Brazil's withdrawal from CELAC in 2020 during Bolsonaro's presidency, only to return in 2023 when Lula was re-elected president. The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) also succumbed following the decline of the Pink Tide and the rise of right-wing governments more inclined to nurture bilateral relations rather than regional institutions, and to cultivate close relations with the United States.

Another polarizing issue in Latin America is the political situation in Venezuela, namely the recent elections in 2024 that resulted in the renewed presidency of Nicolás Maduro. The results were challenged by the right and center governments of Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, Perú, Panamá and Costa Rica, while some left-wing governments such as Brazil and Colombia demanded more transparency in the process. This type of disagreement is detrimental to regional cooperation, political dialogue, and Latin American regionalism.

**What do you consider to be the most persistent and pressing challenges to Caribbean integration in the modern day?**

The Caribbean faces a myriad of challenges in advancing regional integration. These challenges are multifaceted,

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encompassing geographic and economic asymmetries. Among the most persistent challenges, besides disparities among Caribbean states, I recognize limited resources (particularly insufficient communications infrastructure), differing national interests, and the large influence of external factors such as the rise of trade protectionism, preference for bilateral relations, and the impacts of climate change and transnational crime, all of which further complicate integration efforts. Despite most CARICOM economies being considered vulnerable, poorly diversified, and highly indebted, they are classified as middle-income countries by the World Bank due to their GDP per capita. This classification prevents them from accessing concessional finance and development aid funds. Other elements acting against Caribbean integration include poor policy coordination, insufficient financing and credit mechanisms, and scarce participation of non-state actors. Additionally, the region faces demographic pressure due to the emigration of young and skilled labor, depriving the Caribbean of its most valuable resource: people.

The intergovernmental nature of CARICOM, with the exception of the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ), which functions as the tribunal with original, compulsory, and exclusive jurisdiction over the interpretation and application of the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas, limits the organization's ability to implement decisions effectively. The absence of a supranational authority allows CARICOM member states to disregard agreed-upon actions, weakening the effectiveness of the organization's policies and initiatives. Without accountability mechanisms, commitments may remain unfulfilled, and critics arise to question unsatisfied goals such as the full implementation of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME) or the asymmetrical distribution of benefits, leaving smaller and less developed CARICOM countries struggling to obtain proportional benefits.

Caribbean integration also contends with the presence of a considerable number of non-independent territories, complicating efforts to achieve cohesive regional policies. The current situation in Haiti, plunged into a multidimensional crisis where institutions have crumbled, public services have deteriorated, economic life is disrupted, and heavily armed gangs control 80% of the capital, poses a significant risk to regional integration and stability.

### **As Anthropocene Climate Change ramps up, Caribbean states are on the frontline of the dangers it poses. What role are regional international organizations taking to address these growing concerns?**

Caribbean states have been actively engaged in the Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings. Alongside other SIDS, Caribbean countries have consistently called for increased financial support to help SIDS adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change. This includes funding for renewable energy projects, disaster resilience, and sustainable development initiatives. The Caribbean has also pushed for mechanisms to address loss and damage, seeking compensation and support for recovery efforts following extreme weather events, as well as to achieve increased capacity building and technology transfer, including training, technical assistance, and access to climate-friendly technologies.

Caribbean islands advocate for more ambitious global emission reduction targets to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. CARICOM defends this position, having identified climate change as a key development challenge. The organization has also manifested its support to the Bridgetown Initiative. This initiative aims to reform the international financial architecture, demanding an urgent update of the international financial institutions considering recent global challenges such as demographic, technological, economic, geopolitical, and environmental transformations in the context of increasing inequality and integrated financial markets in the absence of an international regulatory framework. While the initiative is named after the capital city of Barbados, where it originated, it has evolved into a coalition of partners advocating for global change.

Regional organizations like the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre (CCCCC), affiliated with CARICOM, play a crucial role in addressing climate change concerns in the Caribbean. The CCCCC coordinates regional responses, provides policy advice, and implements projects aimed at building climate resilience. These organizations also facilitate access to international funding and support for climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?**

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My key recommendation is to remain curious and open-minded to better understand complex and constantly evolving global issues. Engage in discussions with your peers and experts in related disciplines to learn about diverse perspectives and challenge your own established arguments. In order to broaden your capacity for learning about other parts of the world and alternative viewpoints, it is essential to stay informed by following reputable news sources and major developments. Additionally, learning multiple languages is a valuable asset that will enhance your ability to communicate and understand different cultures, contexts, and worldviews.