


# What Julian Assange did to western world order

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 E-Paper

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## The hesitation in Washington to directly intervene in costly unwinnable wars abroad, which we see these days, may even be termed a moral victory for Assange.

The freeing of Julian Assange, the Australian activist and founder of the whistleblowing website, WikiLeaks, through a plea bargain after 14 long years in isolation, uncertainty and imprisonment has ended a saga that holds a mirror to defining issues of our time. His high-profile ordeal reflects fundamental debates relating to press freedom and the role of the news media in the internet age, the conflict between national security establishments and anti-war movements, and the alliances and rivalries in international politics that impinge upon acts of individual courage and defiance.



TOPSHOT - WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange gives thumbs up after arriving at Canberra Airport in Canberra on June 26, 2024, after he pleaded guilty at a US court in Saipan to a single count of conspiracy to obtain and disseminate US national defence information. WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange returned home to Australia to start life as a free man June 26 after admitting he revealed US defence secrets in a deal that unlocked the door to his London prison cell. (Photo by WILLIAM WEST / AFP) (AFP)

Assange's ordeal began in 2010, when his guerrilla media operation used cyber hacking tactics to publicly release a massive trove of classified American military documents which exposed the dark side of the United States (US)'s then ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was a daring digital strike meant to mobilise public opinion against what Assange and his band of progressives considered Washington's illegal and immoral wars being waged in the name of a "global war against terrorism".

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Motivated by the ideal of speaking truth to power and uncovering the excesses and abuses of the US's military machine, including killings of innocent civilians, Assange became a global icon for opponents of American neo-imperialism and interventions in developing countries. Advocates of press freedom believed that Assange broke through a web of deception and cover-up in which mainstream western news media houses were invested, and heralded a new transparent era where unfiltered information could fulfill citizens' "right to know" about their rulers' misdeeds.

But since WikiLeaks was not a traditional media institution with editorial discretion, and given the indiscriminate and damning military and diplomatic cables and content it kept disclosing, the American establishment went after it on grounds that its recklessness was endangering the lives of US troops, diplomats and their local collaborators in sensitive parts of the world. The so-called American deep State saw in Assange a threat to its viability and sought his arrest and extradition to set a punitive deterrent for other cyber activists who might dare to emulate him.

WikiLeaks also rubbed the entrenched political class in the US up the wrong way by releasing emails that damaged Hillary Clinton's presidential election chances in 2016. If angry "super-empowered individuals", as the writer Thomas Friedman put it, could "increasingly act on the world stage directly, unmediated by a State", the very order in which formal institutions dictate terms could be upended. Hounding Assange was felt to be absolutely necessary to preempt a transnational movement that might undermine America's freedom to intervene globally and challenge the legitimacy of western democracies.

One big ideological division that Assange's ordeal revealed was between the Global Right and the Global Left. The US mobilised its allies and partners like Britain and Sweden to apply legal pressure on Assange, who, in turn, found political asylum in the embassy of socialist-ruled Ecuador in London for seven years. The line-up of governments and voices demanding that Assange be freed as opposed to those baying for his blood displayed the fault lines of an international order where western dominance was being contested.

Assange was both a victim and a beneficiary of the intense competition to set the terms for a new world order. He could avoid arrest and prison while stranded in the United Kingdom until 2019 because his case turned into a cause célèbre for worldwide anti-colonialist sentiment. WikiLeaks allegedly received the help of Russia in its propaganda campaign to sow doubts about the quality of democracy in the US. Ultimately, the plea bargain that enabled his freedom was possible due to internal pressure on the Joe Biden administration from American liberals to let Assange go, and also due to the concerns of the US's ally, Australia, which had been seeking closure on the unending agony of one of its most famous citizens.

In hindsight, did Assange who suffered greatly in terms of his personal liberties succeed in his struggle against western hypocrisy and hegemony? Champions of press freedom have decried the dangerous precedent that he was forced to admit guilt for committing conspiracy in order to finally win freedom. But in a political sense, Assange did manage to let the genie out of the bottle. The 2013 leak by Edward Snowden of top-secret information about global surveillance programmes by American intelligence agencies, and continued efforts by online whistleblowers to unearth dirty truths about western shenanigans, suggest that Assange has lit a fire that is not extinguishable.

The hesitation in Washington to directly intervene in costly unwinnable wars abroad, which we see these days, may even be termed a moral victory for Assange. Ultimately, he might be vindicated for contributing in a small way to ushering in a post-western world order.

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