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Correa and Assange: A Peculiar Relationship

It is far from true that Ecuador's President Correa is a long-standing sympathiser of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks. Yet today he is certainly the Australian's leading supporter, having given him shelter in the Ecuadorian embassy in London to prevent his extradition to Sweden. While Assange's supporters fear that, should the extradition occur, the Swedish authorities would send him to the US, where he would face legal action over the largest leak of official documents in American history, such a possibility is highly unlikely, regardless of what some experts might say.

Despite his current support for Assange, Correa took a very different stance on the issue only two years ago. In November 2010, when some in the Western hemisphere were enjoying the spectacle of Washington squirming over the WikiLeaks cables, Ecuador's deputy foreign minister, Kintto Lucas, said his government was willing to allow Assange to reside in the country with no strings attached. He would be able, he

announced, not only to live there, but also to lecture and present the information he possessed. At first, senior aides to Correa confirmed the offer, but the president then quickly overruled the minister, dismissing his invitation as unauthorised. He even said that Ecuador would under no circumstances countenance a breach in any country's laws, whether its government had engaged in illegitimate action or not. President Correa, at this stage, therefore, criticised both the US and WikiLeaks equally, pointing out that while Washington had undermined the confidence of its allies, those responsible for the leaks should be held accountable.

Economic factors might offer some clues as to the president's initial reaction. At the time, Correa was hoping to extend his country's preferential trade agreement with the US, Ecuador's biggest trading partner. At the same time, however, he knew that WikiLeaks had more than 1,600 cables from the US embassy in Quito and was keen to discover their content. Driven by his

interest in learning what the cables had to say, a year later he changed his position and decided to offer Assange asylum. It was certainly not a decision taken on impulse, as many have argued.

According to the Ecuadorian authorities, they tried, unsuccessfully, to contact Assange during the first months of 2011. At the same time, the media that had obtained the WikiLeaks cables – among them the national newspapers *El Universo* and *El Comercio* – proved reluctant to pass them on.

Meanwhile, in April 2011, Ecuador expelled the US ambassador over a diplomatic cable published in Spanish newspaper *El País* that alleged that President Correa was aware of the truth of accusations of bribery and extortion made against Ecuador's chief of police. Another cable, published a few days later by the Colombian magazine *Semana*, disclosed links between the Ecuadorian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (the FARC), while local media also made public a

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Colombia: Talking about Peace

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PLUS NATO's Operation *Active Endeavour*, Canada-UK embassy sharing, reform of the Bundeswehr, and the re-election of Hugo Chávez

cable alleging that Correa had sought funds for his election from both the Venezuelan government and Colombian rebels.

This led to a furious reaction on the part of Correa, who was, at the time, campaigning for a national referendum on constitutional reforms – including restrictions on the media – and wished to avoid any damage to his reputation that might diminish his support. President Correa had long had a tense relationship with the private media, arguing that it was controlled by hostile businessmen determined to undermine his government, and now criticised the Ecuadorian media for giving credence to uncorroborated reports. He first attempted to discredit the cables' veracity, but soon decided that this was not the best way to gain political advantage or to access all of the information they contained.

It was thus that the interests of Correa and Assange came to converge in 2012. The latter's choice of the Ecuadorian embassy was not his decision alone, since the granting of diplomatic asylum requires prior contact with host country authorities, while Latin America is the only part of the world where the right to asylum is fully established.

The request for asylum was therefore preceded by lengthy talks with the Ecuadorians, with WikiLeaks staffers visiting Quito several times to sound out the situation since the beginning of 2012. Resources were also reallocated to refurbish the embassy and adapt it to its new guest. Nevertheless, Ecuadorian diplomatic sources have denied any prior secret deal to grant Assange asylum, and insist that the ambassador had to rush home to fetch an inflatable mattress for Assange to sleep on.

When, in May 2012, Assange interviewed Correa on his televised discussion series *The World Tomorrow*, the rapprochement was more than obvious. During the interview, Assange could have posed some tough questions to Correa regarding freedom of the press in Ecuador but, perhaps not surprisingly, failed to do so. The two seemed to get on well and their personal chemistry was evident. Correa welcomed Assange 'to the club of the persecuted', in reference to the US, and this was perhaps enough to convince the Australian of his position.

Assange's asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy has shown Correa's capacity to turn to his advantage situations that were previously working against him. It is not the first time he has managed to do so. In September 2010, when Ecuadorian police went on strike over pay and other issues, Correa decided to tackle the crisis in person by appearing at the police barracks to explain his policies. As the tension mounted, Correa bared his chest and dared police to kill him 'if you have the guts'. In the subsequent scuffle, tear gas was released, and Correa taken to hospital, where he was detained by protesters for nine hours. Finally, special forces freed Correa, who successfully turned a labour-related controversy to his advantage by claiming that the country had narrowly averted a coup, obtaining, as a result, broad international support, including from Washington, and an increase in his poll ratings. Sheltering Assange has presented another golden opportunity for the Ecuadorian president, allowing him to make a nationalistic and, at the same time, anti-American gesture that might help him win another term in office at elections in February: public opinion in Ecuador has mostly approved of the government's move to grant Assange asylum.

Anti-imperialist stances are still very popular in some Latin American countries, especially when a country's sovereignty is perceived to be under threat. When British officials announced that police were legally entitled to raid the Ecuadorian embassy, Correa was handed another opportunity on a silver platter: this was a big mistake by the UK that was bound to trigger a strident response. It also provided Correa with cautious support from the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Organization of American States (OAS), which declared solidarity with Ecuador over the threat to its embassy and re-affirmed their belief in the right to diplomatic asylum. They did not, however, give their explicit backing to Correa's harbouring of Assange, with Correa, conversely, failing to mobilise comprehensive support for this position beyond that offered by his leftist partners in the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), which Ecuador joined in 2009.

While the Assange case has put the small country of Ecuador on the world stage, Correa is not interested in presenting himself as a major international player. His concern, instead, is to use the case to

push for leadership of the political far left in Latin America. With Latin America's elder statesman Fidel Castro old and infirm, and Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez the latest leader to battle with cancer, Correa is widely regarded as the hemisphere's strongman in waiting, the man most likely to grow in status in Latin American hearts and minds.

However, Correa's actions also bear costs, specifically in terms of Ecuador's trade relations with the US and EU. Many US business groups are already urging the White House to suspend Ecuador's trade benefits under the Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA), which requires co-operation on counter-narcotic issues and respect for the rights of US companies, and is currently up for review. Ecuador has failed to combat the illicit narcotic business since the expulsion of the US counter-narcotic unit from Manta in 2009, and has been involved in a high-stakes shakedown of US oil company Chevron. There are also rising concerns about Correa's clampdown on the media, as well as his close co-operation with Iran and open support for its controversial nuclear programme. The Ecuadorian embassy in Washington, meanwhile, is currently campaigning to convince the US Congress that Ecuador deserves continued access to the ATPA. Yet for many US congressmen, the decision to grant Assange asylum is just another reason for Washington to re-examine its relationship with the country.

The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton, meanwhile, has kept her distance from the issue, stressing that the Assange case is essentially a bilateral issue between the UK and Ecuador. At the same time, the EU had been negotiating a new trade agreement with Ecuador, until a meeting planned for 10 September was suspended indefinitely by Correa. While the EU is a key consumer of the country's non-oil exports, Ecuador considers some of the terms proposed under the agreement to be contrary to its national interest, which is the government's overriding concern. As Correa underlined on *The World Tomorrow*, despite the US and EU being Ecuador's largest trading partners, the country is seeking to expand its markets and sources of financing with a view to diluting its position of dependence and co-operating with new trade partners such as China.

The situation with regard to Assange, meanwhile, is currently at an impasse from which no party stands to gain. It certainly benefits neither Correa nor his country on the international stage, despite Ecuadorian officials having stated that the founder of WikiLeaks may remain in the building as long as he wants.

The so-called ‘Gambier solution’ – a proposal to transfer Assange to the Ecuadorian embassy in Stockholm under Quito’s protection – might, however, present a solution to the diplomatic stalemate. This proposal, made by Argentinian lawyer Beltrán Gambier – who also helped to design the legal strategy that enables Assange to remain in the embassy in London – aims first of all to ensure that the UK provides safe passage for the WikiLeaks founder to the Ecuadorian embassy in Sweden. This solution would both respect what Ecuador considers its right to grant political asylum and comply with the UK’s binding obligation to extradite him to Sweden,

while at the same time satisfying, to a certain extent, the demands of the Swedish judiciary by allowing the case to proceed, albeit under the protection of Ecuador. The Swedish courts, however, have so far been unwavering in their requirements and have more than once refused to countenance such a possibility.

Meanwhile, Washington has reiterated that it has presented no criminal charges against Assange, despite State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland berating Ecuador for granting him asylum. Moreover, the Obama administration remains divided as to the wisdom of prosecuting Assange, and the likelihood of the US pressing criminal charges against him is probably receding rather than growing. Nevertheless, the US has accused Assange of making wild assertions about his possible prosecution in the US in a bid to deflect attention from the sex-abuse allegations he is facing in Sweden, a case that has nothing to do with WikiLeaks.

At the same time, the reality is that Julian Assange is moving away from his fight for freedom of information and increasingly concentrating on his celebrity friends, thereby losing some of his erstwhile supporters, including hacking collective Anonymous. Most recently, Assange has announced plans to create a political party that he will call ‘Julian Assange WikiLeaks’, and has expressed his intention to run in the Australian Senate elections next year. But does this represent anything more than just another strategy to escape Swedish justice?

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The Air-Sea Battle Debate and the Future of Conflict in East Asia

One of the key factors shaping continuity and change in a country’s use of force is its organisational receptivity to military innovation – a constant process that must be calibrated in a comparative perspective, relative to shifts in the strategic environment, operational lessons learned, and the conceptual, organisational and technological innovation metrics of other militaries. This article takes a closer look at the current processes of conceptual military innovation in both China and the US, which reflect a process of mutual ‘stealth benchmarking’ – the adoption of a portfolio of defence strategies, operational concepts and capability domains to enable both militaries to offset, deny, delimit and interfere with each other’s strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific.

On the Chinese side, the operational lessons from the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis, when the US deployed two carrier groups in response to Chinese missile tests in the vicinity of Taiwan, have been learned. The People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) strategic priorities have since shifted toward adopting a diverse portfolio of capabilities for air, sea and land operations

designed to deter, delay and prevent external (US) entry into specific areas vital to China’s ‘core interests’. The US military perceives the PLA’s approach to be part of an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy, in which ‘anti-access’ refers to the prevention of access to major fixed-point targets such as forward-deployed bases, while ‘area-denial’ focuses on mobile targets in selected areas of operations. To this end, the PLA has been gradually upgrading its existing weapons systems and platforms, while experimenting with the next generation of design concepts. This can be seen in the comprehensive modernisation of China’s nuclear and conventional ballistic missiles; integrated air-, missile- and early-warning defence systems; electronic and cyber-warfare capabilities; submarines; surface combat vessels and the introduction of the fourth and fifth generations of multi-role combat aircraft.

Alongside the qualitative shifts in ‘hardware’, the PLA has also been revamping its ‘software’, including its military doctrine, organisational force structure and operational concepts, which are now conceptualised in the context of ‘Local Wars Under Informationalized

Conditions’. In particular, China’s military doctrine envisions future conflicts as being short in duration, limited to its coastal periphery or ‘near seas’ (the Yellow, East and South China Seas), and involving integrated or joint military operations across the air, sea, land, space and cyberspace domains. The shifting character of the future battlefield in turn alters the PLA’s operational requirements and compels the Chinese military to adopt innovative concepts and capabilities that would constrain the US’s strategic advantage and freedom of action in the region. These include A2/AD-oriented ‘attack and defence’ concepts that aim to offset the military effectiveness of US forward-deployed bases, mobile forces and their supporting infrastructure.

In a range of potential conventional crisis scenarios on the Korean Peninsula, for example, China could take measures to disrupt the build-up of US combat power in terms of size, location and timeframes. Specifically, the PLA could delineate clear air, sea and land buffer zones (conflict limit lines) beyond which US-South Korean forces could not operate. In such a case, the US would need to construct alternative points of entry for its reinforcements,