

Assange Freedom May be Pivotal in Australia's Support for US Cold War with China

Australian cooperation with the United States' cold war against China is not a slam dunk.

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The stakes are high as Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese arrives in Washington, D.C., today to meet with President Joe Biden. The U.S. government hopes to obtain Australia's support for its [cold war initiatives](#) against China.

Australia is one of the United States' closest allies. Australia, the U.S. and the U.K. comprise "AUKUS," a trilateral "security" alliance in the Indo-Pacific.

This is a crucial issue for Australia as well. Before Albanese left for the United States, he [told parliament](#) that the AUKUS transfer of U.S. and British nuclear submarine technology to Australia was critical to the future of the alliance.

Another item on the agenda when Albanese meets with Biden is the extradition of *WikiLeaks* founder Julian Assange, an Australian citizen. Assange, who has been incarcerated for four years in a top-security London prison, was indicted by the Trump administration for charges under the Espionage Act for *WikiLeaks'* 2010-2011 revelations of [U.S. war crimes](#) in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay. If extradited from the U.K. to the United States and convicted, Assange faces up to 175 years in prison.

The Obama administration, which indicted more whistleblowers under the Espionage Act than all prior administrations combined, refused to indict Assange because of the "*New York Times* problem." That is, if the administration charged Assange, it would also have to charge *The New York Times* and other media outlets that also published classified military and diplomatic secrets.

But instead of dismissing the indictment and the request for extradition, the Biden administration is vigorously pursuing it.

In August, Albanese said his government firmly opposes the prosecution of Assange. The freedom of Assange is “widely seen as a test of Australia’s leverage with the Biden administration,” the *Associated Press* [reported](#).

“The Prime Minister is here to call for the extradition of Julian Assange to be dropped. This request is coming from the United States’ closest ally at a time the U.S. is seeking Australia’s support as a bulwark, both financially and militarily, against the perceived threat from China,” Vincent De Stefano, national organizing director of [Assange Defense](#), told *Truthout*.

In September, a cross-party delegation from Australia’s parliament came to Washington, D.C., and argued that the prosecution of Assange should be dismissed. They met with U.S. senators and congress members, the State Department, the Department of Justice, and key think tanks and NGOs.

The delegation came after 63 left, center and right-wing members of the Australian parliament signed a [full-page ad](#) in *The Washington Post* urging Albanese and Biden to find a diplomatic solution to Assange’s case. The [statement](#) by what *ABC News* characterized as an “[unlikely coalition](#)” of parliamentarians said it is “wrong in principle” that Assange is being charged under the Espionage Act and noted that “it was a political decision to bring the prosecution in the first place.”

The Australian lawmakers [warned](#) of “a sharp and sustained outcry in Australia” if Assange is extradited. At least [90 percent](#) of Australians agree that the case against Assange must be dropped and he must be returned home to Australia.

“To ignore the request from the prime minister regarding the extradition of an Australian citizen, whose only crime was being an honest journalist, while at the same time asking for a huge expenditure and commitment from our ally, is an insult of the highest order — a slap in the face, really,” De Stefano said.

Gabriel Shipton, Assange’s brother, [called](#) the indictment “a wedge in the Australia-US relationship ... which is a very important relationship at the moment, particularly with everything that’s going on with the US and China and the sort of strategic pivot that is happening.”

Australia’s cooperation with the U.S.’s cold war on China is not a slam dunk. In a [research paper](#) released on October 12, the Congressional Research Service said Australia may be unwilling to join forces with the United States in a war against China. It cited statements made in March by Richard Marles, the Australian defense minister, clarifying that the AUKUS deal didn’t include any pre-commitments by Australia to back the U.S. in a conflict with Taiwan. China’s position that Taiwan is part of China is nonnegotiable. Although the U.S. has historically agreed with this “One China” policy, [recent overtures](#) indicate that the U.S. may support an independent Taiwan. There is [increasing opposition to AUKUS](#) in Australia, including in the ruling Labor Party.

Last November, *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *the Guardian*, *DER SPIEGEL* and *El País* signed a [joint open letter](#) urging the U.S. government to dismiss the Espionage Act charges against Assange for publishing classified military and diplomatic secrets. “Publishing is not a crime,” the letter says. “The U.S. government should end its prosecution of Julian Assange for publishing secrets.”

A [bipartisan letter](#) to Joe Biden is being [circulated](#) for congressional signatures by Representatives Jim McGovern (D-Massachusetts) and Thomas Massie (R-Kentucky). They write to “strongly encourage” the Biden administration to withdraw the extradition request and end all prosecutorial proceedings against Assange.

The congressional letter notes that the Espionage Act was intended to punish the provision of state secrets to “enemy governments.” It was not “to punish journalists and whistleblowers for attempting to inform the public about serious issues that some U.S. government officials might prefer to keep secret.” The signatories warn that if the extradition and prosecution proceed, “there is a significant risk that our bilateral relationship with Australia will be badly damaged.”

Assange’s appeal of the extradition order is pending in the U.K. High Court. Since the court is now back in session, it could quickly deny his appeal. Assange would then ask the European Court of Human Rights to review his case. But even if that court issued an injunction to stop the extradition, there is no guarantee that [the U.K. would honor it](#).

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