

AUSMIN and Assange: The Great Vassal Smackdown

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It was there for all to see. Embarrassing, cloying, and bound make you cough up the remnants of your summit lunch, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin III stopped by one of the vassal states to make sure that the meal and military service was orderly, the troops well behaved, and the weapons working as they should. On the occasion of 2023 AUSMIN meetings, [the questions asked](#) were mild and generally unprovocative; answers were naturally tailored.

Seeing that Australia is now rapidly moving into the US orbit of client status - its minerals will be designated a US domestic resource in due course - and given that its land, sea and air are to be more available than ever for the US armed forces, nuclear and conventional, nothing will interrupt this inexorable extinguishing of sovereignty.

One vestige of Australian sovereignty might have evinced itself, notably in how Canberra might push for the release, or at the very least better terms, for the Australian national and founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange. The publisher faces 18 counts, all but one of them pertaining to the Espionage Act of 1917, an archaic, wartime act with a dark record of punishing free speech and contrarians. The Albanese government, eschewing "the hailer" approach in favour of "quiet diplomacy" and [not offending](#) Washington, has conspicuously failed to make any impression.

In April, [an open letter](#) to the US Attorney General, Merrick Garland, featuring 48 Australian MPs and Senators, including 13 from the governing Labor Party, argued that the Assange prosecution "would set a dangerous precedent for all global citizens, journalists, publishers, media organizations and the freedom of the press. It would also be needlessly damaging for the US as a world leader on freedom of expression and the rule of law."

Despite such concerns bubbling away in Parliament, Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong was in no danger of upsetting their guests.

“[W]e have made clear our view that Mr Assange’s case has dragged for too long, and our desire it be brought to a conclusion, and we’ve said that publicly and you would anticipate that that reflects also the positive we articulate in private.” But, as ever, “there are limits until Mr. Assange’s legal processes have concluded.”

The assumption, laid bare, is that Australia will only push for terms *once* the US secures its treasured quarry.

Blinken [parroted staged](#), withered lines, politely dismissing Wong’s statements while pouring acid on the Assange plea.

“I really do understand and certainly confirm what Penny said about the fact that this matter was raised with us, as it has been in the past, and I understand the sensitivities, I understand the concerns and view of Australians.”

He thought it “important”, as if it mattered “that our friends here understand our concerns about this matter.”

Those friends were made to understand that matter in no uncertain terms. Assange had been “charged with very serious criminal conduct in the United States in connection with his alleged role in one of the largest compromises of classified information in the history of our country. The actions that he has alleged to have committed risked very serious harm to our national security, to the benefit of our adversaries, and put named sources at grave risk – grave risk – of physical harm, and grave risk of detention.”

Such excremental, false reasoning was galling, and went unchallenged by the all too pliant Senator Wong and the Australian Defence Minister, Richard Marles. This, despite the cool findings by Blinken’s own colleagues at the Pentagon that the WikiLeaks disclosures never posed a risk to any valued source in the service of the US imperium, and the fact that other outlets have also published these purportedly “named sources” without having their collars fingered by the US Department of Justice. The double standard is gold in Washington.

The same babbling nonsense was evident during the extradition trial proceedings of Assange that were held at London’s Central Criminal Court in 2020. There, the prosecution, representing a number of clumsy, clownish and impressively ignorant representatives from Freedom Land, proved unable to produce a single instance of actual compromise or harm to a single informant of the US imperium. They also showed, with idiotic facility, an ignorance of the court martial that the US military had subjected Chelsea Manning to when she faced charges for revealing classified national security information to WikiLeaks.

Wong, as part of her buttoned-up brief dictated by Washington’s suits, either did not know nor care to correct Blinken who, for all we know, is equally ignorant of his brief on the subject. If the prosecutors in London in 2020 had no idea, why should the US secretary of state, let alone the Australian foreign minister?

As a terrible omen for the Australians, [four defence personnel seem to have perished](#) in waters near Hamilton Island through an accident with their MRH-90 Taipan helicopter as part of the Talisman Sabre war games. The US overlords were paternal and benevolent; their Australian counterparts were grateful for the interest. Blinken soppily suggested how the sacrifice was appreciated. “They have been on our minds throughout today; they remain very much on our minds right now.” But the message was clear: Australia, you are now less

a state than a protectorate, territory to exploit, a resource basket to appropriate. Why not just make it official?

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