

Op-Ed

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## A new spine runs through it

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AP In this August 19, 2012 photo, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange makes a statement at a window of Ecuadorian Embassy in London. Latin America's diplomatic victory still leaves open the eventual denouement. Assange can be arrested if he leaves the diplomatic premises.

Latin America's spirited response to the threat of force by the U.K. government in the Assange-Ecuador episode has revealed a surprising degree of cohesion and political unity within the region

On August 19, news networks all over the world showed Julian Assange step onto a small balcony of the apartment occupied by the Embassy of Ecuador in London, to thank hundreds of his supporters gathered below, along with dozens of U.K. policemen, for helping him stay a free man, and urge the United States government to call off its “witch-hunt.” Assange had already become a hero to millions who had read the contents of over 2,50,000 documents, including classified cables to and from numerous U.S. Embassies, which his organisation systematically handed over to media agencies and individuals around the world, when a U.K. court decreed in May 2012 that he should be extradited to Sweden on charges of sexual assault. The fear was that he may be extradited from Sweden eventually to the U.S., to face even more serious charges. A U.S. court is already examining his links with Bradley Manning, the American soldier jailed in the U.S. for having downloaded the files from U.S. government archives.

On June 19, the 41-year-old Australian, who had interviewed Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa earlier, walked into the Embassy of the Republic of Ecuador in London and claimed asylum. The U.K. Foreign Office went ballistic over this manoeuvre, and on August 15 sent an aide mémoire to the Ecuadorean Embassy claiming “... there are legal grounds in the United Kingdom — the Diplomatic and Consular Premises Act of 1987 — that would allow us to take steps to arrest Mr. Assange on the Embassy’s current premises,” and reserving the right to withdraw the diplomatic status of the Embassy if it “ceases to use land for the purposes of its mission or exclusively for the purposes of a consular post.” President Correa and his Foreign Minister, Ricardo Patiño, stood their ground and, reportedly after consultations and a legal examination, granted Assange’s request for asylum on August 16. Renowned Spanish jurist Baltasar Garzón, who is defending Assange, said the charges against him were “arbitrary and baseless.”

On August 17, the Permanent Council of the Washington-based Organisation of American States (OAS), convened by Ecuador, voted to convene a Meeting of Consultation of Foreign Ministers to debate the issue, with 23 in favour to three against (the U.S., Canada and Trinidad and Tobago) and five small Central American States abstaining. On August 19, an emergency meeting of Foreign Ministers of the 12-nation South American bloc, Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), in Guayaquil, Ecuador, strongly condemned the threat of force by the U.K. government, and called for respect for international law, and a mutually acceptable solution. A day earlier, the left-wing Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) grouping, to which Ecuador belongs, issued an even stronger statement in support of Ecuador. The U.K. government climbed down, saying it did not intend to storm the Embassy but only to ensure its legal obligation to extradite Assange to Sweden.

On August 24, the OAS Ministerial meeting resolved “To reject any attempt that might put at risk the inviolability of the premises of diplomatic missions, to reiterate the obligation of all states not to invoke provisions of their domestic law...to express its solidarity and support for the Government of the Republic of Ecuador.” Twelve Latin American Foreign Ministers intervened in the debate. This diplomatic victory still leaves open the eventual denouement — Assange can be arrested if he leaves the diplomatic premises.

## **Cablegate and Latin America**

Of the quarter million documents in “Cablegate,” over 30,000 are understood to have come to or from U.S. missions in Latin America, of which 900 were classified secret and 10,000 confidential, exposing a host of U.S. activities that resulted in considerable embarrassment for the State Department, and the recall of two of its Ambassadors — from Mexico and Ecuador. The revelations stirred debates that had repercussions all over the region, with analysts claiming they could be the tip of the iceberg, since the State Department is not the agency involved in dirty tricks. In fact some cables showed responsible reporting on the part of U.S. officials.

An interesting feature of the Assange-Ecuador episode is the degree of cohesion and political unity it revealed within the region. Though reports of the OAS debates indicate reluctance on the part of some important Latin American states to escalate tensions, it is clear the U.S. and U.K. had to back down. There is no doubt that the nation-states of Latin America and the Caribbean have consolidated their regional identity, and acquired a new resilience. The alacrity with which their Foreign Ministries moved to convene and condemn a threat to a member not all of them have always been in agreement with, is remarkable for a region that has historically been reluctant to speak with one voice. In the words of the Foreign Minister of Peru, the countries of the region “have reaffirmed our commitment to international law, our ability to express support for a country when threatened and our capacity for dialogue.”

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