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# An Emperor Without Clothes: Wikileaks and the Limits of American Power

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Two months into the public disclosure of US diplomatic cables by Wikileaks, what has been their impact? Although at this point only about 10% of over 250,000 leaked cables are available to the public, the widespread reporting on their content in the media, in particular by those outlets with access to the cables in advance, allows spending some thoughts on this question. Specifically, we should like to ask how much remains from the initial claim that these leaks would cause damage to the US.

My (at this stage admittedly cautious) answer is 'not much'; at least not in the sense suggested by headlines in the days following the release of the documents. Their dominant claim was that the publication of the cables would expose what the US government 'really' thinks and how it 'really' goes about its business. In the words of the Wikileaks website (migrating through cyberspace) the cables would "show the contradictions between the US's public persona and what it says behind closed doors". It was suggested that they would enable us to access that parallel, secret world of great power politics and show the extent of US influence on events and political dynamics across the globe. The cables would give us the emperor without clothes and reveal its not-so benign face. Such expectations were fostered by the desire of media outlets to sell revelations (with Wikileaks setting the tone by providing the label 'Cablegate', suggesting an affinity to 'Watergate'); yet they also fit the recent debate among academics over the nature and reality of an American empire.

There is no doubt that the cables confirm an impressive US presence in the world. Yet the overall picture that emerges offers little food for one-dimensional conspiracy theories. Instead, the picture we get is more complex and more interesting, with rather counterintuitive consequences.

Of course, unless we actually sift through these cables ourselves, most of what we read is filtered by media analysts and editors. And their reporting occurs from a particular place within a particular political context, which affects the selection and evaluation of cables as well as how stories are constructed out of them. Even so, up until now, the leaked documents have not generated many, if any, surprises, at least not to serious observers of US foreign policy and/or the countries the cables deal with. The majority of the documents are unclassified (accessible by millions working in US government institutions) and contain what one might call common knowledge. That is, they contain information and evaluations gained in private conversations, perhaps, but not going beyond what local journalists or taxi drivers know or suspect (after all, locals tend to be the source of information). This makes for interesting reading of how US officials assess individuals, situations, and dynamics within a particular society, which improves our understanding of how they see 'the world' or, rather, a fragment thereof. What the documents do not tell us, however, is a tale of US omnipotence.

Because many of the cables are reports back to Washington and deal with the politics of the respective host country, their content is potentially more embarrassing and consequential for the host government than the White House. Again, this is not so much because the cables contain surprising revelations. Yet they can become an authoritative source substantiating suspicions and explicating known yet unspoken facts, in particular in countries which lack transparency and investigative journalism. In such cases, political elites would have reason to be concerned because the leaks reveal activities they would rather hide from their constituency. And rather than unmasking an hitherto invisible American web of control the cables often show the opposite. Whether it concerns the 2008 Georgia-Russia war or the dynamics in Iraq or Afghanistan following Western military intervention, the cables indicate a lack of American control and, instead, highlight agency and, thus, responsibility of local actors. In other words, it makes apparent that others are not merely objects but subjects of history. From the US perspective this is damaging only to the extent that it pokes holes in the notion of an American empire, fostered by Hollywood images and overly self-confident attitudes of American officials, often happily exploited by actors elsewhere looking for a convenient scapegoat. Thus, 'Cablegate' may not only render it more difficult for the US to take credit or blame for the order of things, it may also fuel resistance against local rulers by an unhappy people, as appears to have been the case in Tunisia.

Still, it has been noted that Wikileaks would cause damage to the relations America holds with others because it suggests that the US bureaucracy has difficulty with keeping secrets, prompting contacts to be more hesitant about sharing information with US officials. This is a valid concern, as many informants rely on anonymity for fear of retribution, even if many of the documents hardly contain secrets in a meaningful sense. However, the measures now put in place within US government bureaucracies to prevent such leaks in the future will probably alleviate such concerns. And even if we ignore the rather crude remarks by prominent (Republican) politicians of hunting down and executing those responsible for leaking the documents, it is safe to assume that US agencies are involved in the aggressive campaign trying to take Wikileaks offline.

Yet it is precisely here, in the American reaction to Wikileaks, where we see the potential for great damage to the US. In all fairness, the attempt of the Obama administration to stop the publication of internal documents and prevent further leaks is understandable. Any government in the world facing a similar situation would feel compelled to do the same; indeed most people would object to having strangers read private conversations. The irony is that this attempt to stop the flow of information comes from what is arguably still the most open society on this planet. Despite the secrecies and deceptive manoeuvrings of the Bush administration, as any researcher knows the amount of information about US government business formally available to the public (and not just the American public) is unparalleled. What is more, the Obama administration promised to re-establish transparency and civil liberties curbed by its predecessor, symbolised in the move of declaring the White House 'the people's house'. This promise, part of the broader agenda of improving America's global image, sits uneasily with internet censorship. Thus, the Obama administration faces an interesting dilemma: if it succeeds in shutting down Wikileaks it will damage America's identity as the 'land of the free', and if it fails to stop the leaks it might provide us with further evidence of the limits of American power.

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