

US Site Publishes ‘Diplomatic Cable’ at Heart of Imran Khan’s ‘Foreign Conspiracy’ Claim

By [The Wire](#)

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More than a year after Imran Khan brandished a document at a public rally, claiming it was a diplomatic cable that substantiated US effort to dethrone him from the position of Prime Minister of Pakistan, a news website based in the United States released the purported classified document on Wednesday, August 9, 2023.

The encrypted message, published by The Intercept, allegedly quotes a senior US diplomat suggesting that Pakistan’s relations with US and Europe would improve if the former cricketer was not at the helm.

In April 2022, [Khan was ousted](#) as prime minister after a parliamentary vote of no confidence by the joint opposition alliance. He is currently [jailed](#) after being sentenced for corruption allegations. After the conviction, the Election Commission [disqualified him from running for office for five years](#).

A month earlier, senior State Department official Donald Lu attended a lunch for outgoing Pakistani ambassador Asad Majeed Khan at the latter’s residence in Washington. The alleged diplomatic cable at the centre of the political controversy was based on the discussions at the lunch sent by the Pakistani diplomat to headquarters in Islamabad.

At the start of the discussions, as per the note published by *The Intercept*, Lu conveyed that there was a lot of unhappiness over Pakistan’s policy on Ukraine. Russia had begun the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, just as Imran Khan was enroute Moscow on a state visit. Thereafter, Pakistan had also abstained on various UN resolutions that criticised Russia on the Ukraine war.

The note stated that Lu said that it was “quite clear that this is the Prime Minister’s policy”, indicating that the military establishment was not on the same page.

Lu added that the view was that this policy over Russia was “tied to the current political dramas in Islamabad that he (Prime Minister) needs and is trying to show a public face”. The Pakistani ambassador apparently responded that this wasn’t a correct reading of the developments.

The following key excerpt from the diplomatic cable is where Lu refers to the disenchantment over Khan. He conveyed, as per the version transcribed by the Pakistani diplomat, that if Khan lost the no-confidence vote, it will be easier for US and its western allies to quickly mend frayed diplomatic ties with Pakistan,

I asked Don if the reason for a strong U.S. reaction was Pakistan’s abstention in the voting in the UNGA. He categorically replied in the negative and said that it was due to the Prime Minister’s visit to Moscow. He said that “I think if the no-confidence vote against the Prime Minister succeeds, all will be forgiven in Washington because the Russia visit is being looked at as a decision by the Prime Minister. Otherwise, I think it will be tough going ahead.” He paused and then said “I cannot tell how this will be seen by Europe but I suspect their reaction will be similar.” He then said that “honestly I think isolation of the Prime Minister will become very strong from Europe and the United States.” Don further commented that it seemed that the Prime Minister’s visit to Moscow was planned during the Beijing Olympics and there was an attempt by the Prime Minister to meet Putin which was not successful and then this idea was hatched that he would go to Moscow.

In another part of the published cable, the Pakistani diplomat accused the US of being tougher on Pakistan while going easy on India - which had also taken a neutral position on the Ukraine war.

Don was evasive and responded that Washington looked at the U.S.-India relationship very much through the lens of what was happening in China. He added that while India had a close relationship with Moscow, “I think we will actually see a change in India’s policy once all Indian students are out of Ukraine.”

The article also said that the document was “provided to *The Intercept* by an anonymous source in the Pakistani military who said that they had no ties to Imran Khan or Khan’s party”.

[According to Dawn](#), despite this disclaimer by *The Intercept* about the source, “many believe that the source of the leak could be the PTI itself”.

The newspaper said that timing of the alleged cable’s publication “seems quite significant, as it comes in the wake of the [imprisonment](#) of Imran Khan over charges of graft in the Toshakhana case”. It noted that as per protocol, only a limited number of senior officials had access to the confidential cable, which included the prime minister, foreign minister and army chief.

‘Massive crime’ Says Shehbaz Sharif

In an [interview](#) with WE News today, Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif was asked about *The Intercept*’s story.

While the Pakistan government’s tenure ended at Wednesday midnight, he said that

during two meetings of the National Security Committee on the cypher were held under his leadership.

“In one of the meetings, former ambassador and foreign secretary Asad Majeed clearly stated that there was no discussion of a conspiracy in his meeting with Donald Lu,” he said.

He added that if the contents of the cypher are true and they were published in an international media outlet, “then it is a massive crime”.

[Rana Sanaullah Khan, interior minister in Sharif cabinet, tweeted](#) that there had to be an investigation to establish the authenticity of the document. “Potentially, it is a very sinister, treacherous, and seditious act,” he said.

Though there is nothing new in this story, the investigation needs to be held to establish the authenticity of the information or source document. Potentially, it is a very sinister, treacherous, and seditious act.

(1/2)

— Rana SanaUllah Khan (@RanaSanaullahPK) [August 9, 2023](#)

Indicating that the article could be the basis of further action, the interior minister noted that Khan had stated that he had a “copy of the cypher, which he has not returned and has accepted (on record) that he misplaced or lost it”.

“If proven guilty, Khan should be tried under the Official Secret Act,” he tweeted.

[At a media briefing on Wednesday in Washington](#), the US State department spokesperson Mathew Miller confirmed that the US had expressed its concern both privately and publicly about Imran Khan’s visit to Moscow.

“We express concern privately to the Government of Pakistan, as we express concern publicly, about the visit of then Prime Minister Khan to Moscow on the very day of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. We made that concern quite clear,” he said in response to a media query.

While refusing to authenticate the document, Miller added that the comments in the published note “were accurate as reported, they in no way show the United States taking a position on who the leader of Pakistan ought to be”.

“The allegations that the United States has interfered in internal decisions about the leadership of Pakistan are false, as we have stated they were false. They were always false and they remain false,” he stated.

When pointed out that the remarks could be construed as regime change due to the US’s history of ousting leaders in other countries, Miller noted,

“I will say that I can understand how those comments, number one, could be taken out of context; and number two, how people might have the desire for them to be taken out of context, and might try to use them to advance an agenda that is not represented by the comments themselves.”

[In the run-up to the no-confidence vote](#), Khan had first mentioned the “foreign plot” when he wave a document and claimed that it was “credible proof” of a conspiracy to remove him from office. On March 31, his government [issued a demarche](#) to the US embassy to make a formal protest that the United States had backed the opposition on the no-confidence vote.

The US state department had then said that there “no truth” to the allegations made by Khan.

Four days later, in a televised address to his party lawmakers, [Khan named US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu](#) as having reportedly warned in a meeting with Pakistan’s Ambassador to the US, Asad Majeed that there could be implications if he survived the opposition’s no-confidence motion in the National Assembly.

Image: Donald Lu. Photo: US Department of State, Public Domain



Incidentally, Khan had this February gone back on his earlier allegations targeting the United States and accused former army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa for being responsible for his ouster.

“Whatever happened, now as things unfold, it wasn’t the US who told Pakistan [to oust me]. It was unfortunately, from what evidence has come up, [former army chief] Gen [Qamar Javed] Bajwa who somehow managed to tell the Americans that I was anti-American. And so, it [the plan to oust me] wasn’t imported from there. It was exported from here to there,” [he told Voice of America in an interview](#).

Last month, the cipher controversy again came back to top headlines of the Pakistani media after alleged “confession” of Imran Khan’s former principal secretary surfaced. In the ‘confession’, allegedly recorded before a magistrate, Azam Khan who went ‘missing’ earlier, accused the former prime minister of using the diplomatic cable to gain political mileage and build an “anti-establishment narrative”.

[As per the statement reported by Dawn on July 20](#), Khan was allegedly “euphoric” after reading the cipher. Azam Khan also said that a copy of the cipher was “retained by Imran Khan and the next day (March 10) when he asked for it, Imran Khan replied that he has misplaced it.” The statement claimed that the PTI chief did not return the original cipher,

despite repeated requests. Imran Khan had subsequently responded that the cipher copy had not been misplaced and remained in the custody of the foreign office.

Hours after the 'confession' being published in the media, Rana Sanaullah held a press conference to claim that the statement was credible. Thereafter, the Federal Investigation Agency issued a notice to Imran Khan, asking him to appear before the bureau in Islamabad

The interior minister had then claimed that the cipher case was "similar to the [proceedings initiated](#) against former US President Donald Trump for mishandling classified documents".

[A day later](#), Imran Khan said that the cipher controversy had been dug up again to disqualify him from contesting elections and alleged that his former aide was forced to make the statement.

He claimed that the US was actually addressing the former army chief through the cipher as the latter had the power to remove his government. "My own army chief was lobbying against me and acting to topple his government that had revived the country's economy and industry after hectic efforts," the PTI chairman alleged on July 21.

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Featured image: Imran Khan. Photo: Screengrab via Twitter

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