

## **SCENARIO 264**

### **CYPHER CASE**

**On 7<sup>th</sup> March 2022:** The US State Department encouraged the Pakistani government in a meeting to remove Imran Khan as prime minister over his neutrality on the Russian invasion of Ukraine; a classified Pakistani government document obtained by '*The Intercept org*' noted; **THE INTER-CEPT** dated 9<sup>th</sup> August 2023 is referred.

This meeting was held in Washington between the Pakistani ambassador in the US and two State Department officials. Later it became the subject of scrutiny and controversy in Pakistan after PM Khan's removal when members of Mr Khan's political party [PTI] and his military & civilian opponents made it a power-test. One month after the meeting with US officials, a no-confidence vote was held in Pakistan's Parliament, leading to Khan's removal from power; the leakage of the said '*meeting's cypher*' was quoted as one of the charges against Mr Khan. Thus, a cold-war between Khan and his supporters with the military and its civilian allies started. BUT it remains a fact that it was the Pak-military that had managed the political chess-game to bring up Imran Khan in power in 2018.

### **THE CYPHER**

**(Original Transcription) dated 7<sup>th</sup> March 2022:**

[NOTE: The body of the cable below, published by THE INTER-CEPT.COM, correcting minor typos in the text because such details could be used to **watermark documents** and track their dissemination. *The Intercept* removed classification markings and numerical elements that could be used for tracking purposes. Labeled SECRET, the cable included an account of the meeting between State Department officials, including Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu, and Asad Majeed Khan, the then Pakistan's ambassador to the US.]

I had a luncheon meeting today with Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Donald Lu. He was accompanied by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Les Viguerie. DCM, DA and Counsellor Qasim joined me.

At the outset, Don referred to Pakistan's position on the Ukraine crisis and said that: "people here and in Europe are quite concerned about why Pakistan is taking such an aggressively neutral position (on Ukraine), if such a position is even possible. It does not seem such a neutral stand to us."

He shared that in his discussions with the NSC, "it seems quite clear that this is the Prime Minister's policy." He continued that he was of the view that: "this was tied to the current political dramas in Islamabad that he (Prime Minister) needs and is trying to show a public face." I replied that this was not a correct reading of the situation as Pakistan's position on Ukraine was a result of intense interagency consultations. Pakistan had never resorted to conducting diplomacy in public sphere. The Prime Minister's remarks during a political rally were in reaction to the public letter by European Ambassadors in Islamabad which was against diplomatic etiquette and protocol. Any political leader, whether in Pakistan or the U.S., would be constrained to give a public reply in such a situation.

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.

I told Don that this was a completely misinformed and wrong perception. The visit to Moscow had been in the works for at least few years and was the result of a deliberative institutional process. I stressed that when the Prime Minister was flying to Moscow, Russian invasion of Ukraine had not started and there was still hope for a peaceful resolution. I also pointed out that leaders of European countries were also traveling to Moscow around the same time. Don interjected that: *“those visits were specifically for seeking resolution of the Ukraine standoff while the Prime Minister’s visit was for bilateral economic reasons.”* I drew his attention to the fact that the Prime Minister clearly regretted the situation while being in Moscow and had hoped for diplomacy to work. The Prime Minister’s visit, I stressed, was purely in the bilateral context and should not be seen either as a condonation or endorsement of Russia’s action against Ukraine. I said that our position is dictated by our desire to keep the channels of communication with all sides open. Our subsequent statements at the UN and by our Spokesperson spelled that out clearly, while reaffirming our commitment to the principle of UN Charter, non-use or threat of use of force, sovereignty and territorial integrity of States, and pacific settlement of disputes.

I also told Don that Pakistan was worried of how the Ukraine crisis would play out in the context of Afghanistan. We had paid a very high price due to the long-term impact of this conflict. Our priority was to have peace and stability in Afghanistan, for which it was imperative to have cooperation and coordination with all major powers, including Russia. From this perspective as well, keeping the channels of communication open was essential. This factor was also dictating our position on the Ukraine crisis. On my reference to the upcoming Extended Troika meeting in Beijing, Don replied that there were still ongoing discussions in Washington on whether the U.S. should attend the Extended Troika meeting or the upcoming Antalya meeting on Afghanistan with Russian representatives in attendance, as the U.S. focus right

now was to discuss only Ukraine with Russia. I replied that this was exactly what we were afraid of. We did not want the Ukraine crisis to divert focus away from Afghanistan. Don did not comment.

I told Don that just like him, I would also convey our perspective in a forthright manner. I said that over the past one year, we had been consistently sensing reluctance on the part of the U.S. leadership to engage with our leadership. This reluctance had created a perception in Pakistan that we were being ignored and even taken for granted. There was also a feeling that while the U.S. expected Pakistan's support on all issues that were important to the U.S., it did not reciprocate and we do not see much U.S. support on issues of concern for Pakistan, particularly on Kashmir. I said that it was extremely important to have functioning channels of communication at the highest level to remove such perception. I also said that we were surprised that if our position on the Ukraine crisis was so important for the U.S., why the U.S. had not engaged with us at the top leadership level prior to the Moscow visit and even when the UN was scheduled to vote. (*The State Department had raised it at the DCM level.*) Pakistan valued continued high-level engagement and for this reason the Foreign Minister sought to speak with Secretary Blinken to personally explain Pakistan's position and perspective on the Ukraine crisis. The call has not materialized yet. Don replied that the thinking in Washington was that given the current political turmoil in Pakistan, this was not the right time for such engagement and it could wait till the political situation in Pakistan settled down.

I reiterated our position that countries should not be made to choose sides in a complex situation like the Ukraine crisis and stressed the need for having active bilateral communications at the political leadership level. Don replied that: **"you have conveyed your position clearly and I will take it back to my leadership."**

I also told Don that we had seen his defence of the Indian position on the Ukraine crisis during the recently held Senate Sub-Committee hearing on U.S.-India relations. It seemed

that the U.S. was applying different criteria for India and Pakistan. Don responded that the U.S. lawmakers' strong feelings about India's abstentions in the UNSC and UNGA came out clearly during the hearing. I said that from the hearing, it appeared that the U.S. expected more from India than Pakistan, yet it appeared to be more concerned about Pakistan's position. 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."*

I expressed the hope that the issue of the Prime Minister's visit to Russia will not impact our bilateral ties.

Don replied that: *"I would argue that it has already created a dent in the relationship from our perspective. Let us wait for a few days to see whether the political situation changes, which would mean that we would not have a big disagreement about this issue and the dent would go away very quickly. Otherwise, we will have to confront this issue head on and decide how to manage it."*

We also discussed Afghanistan and other issues pertaining to bilateral ties. A separate communication follows on that part of our conversation.

### Assessment

Don could not have conveyed such a strong demarche without the express approval of the White House, to which he referred repeatedly. Clearly, Don spoke out of turn on Pakistan's internal political process. We need to seriously reflect on this and consider making an appropriate demarche to the U.S. Cd' A a.i in Islamabad.

### **ARGUMENTS DEVELOPED, BOTH SIDES:**

The text of the Pakistani cable, produced from the meeting by the ambassador and transmitted to Pakistan, was not previously published due to provisions of '*Pakistan Secret Act*'. The cable, known internally as a *cypher*, revealed both the carrots and the sticks that the State Department

allegedly deployed in its push against Mr Khan, promising warmer relations if Khan was removed. That (so called?) SECRET document was basically an account of the meeting between State Department officials, including Assistant Secretary of State Mr Donald Lu and Asad Majeed Khan, the then Pakistan's ambassador in Washington. The **Intercept** claimed that the said cypher was provided to the organization by an anonymous source in the Pakistani military.

The dynamics of the relationship between Pakistan and the US described in the cable were subsequently proved by events. In the cable, the US objected to the then prime minister's foreign policy on the Ukraine war. Those positions were quickly reversed after his removal, which was followed, as promised in the meeting, by a warming between the US and Pakistan. The diplomatic meeting came two weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine - launched as Imran Khan was en-route to Moscow, a visit that had infuriated Washington.

Filed through Barrister Salman Safdar, a petition before the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SCP) named the state as a respondent and alleged that the cypher case had been filed against Imran Khan **'with malafide intentions'** and termed it of bogus nature. The plea stated that the only remedy available to avoid unjustified, illegal and straightaway arrest was by invoking Article 10 (safeguards as to arrest and detention) of the Constitution.

{Earlier, **on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2022**; just days before the meeting, Lu had been questioned at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing over the neutrality of India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan in the Ukraine conflict. In response to a question from Sen. Chris Van Hollen, about the decision by Pakistan to abstain from a UN resolution condemning Russia's role in the conflict, Lu said: **"Prime Minister Khan has recently visited Moscow, and so I think we are trying to figure out how to engage specifically with the Prime Minister following that decision."**}

During last days of March 2022, Imran Khan addressed a rally, thundered to the crowd and responded directly to European calls that Pakistan could rally behind Ukraine; see the tone:

**"Are we your slaves? - What do you think of us? That we are your slaves and that we will do whatever you ask of us? We are friends of Russia, and we are also friends of the United States. We are friends of China and Europe. We are not part of any alliance."**

The document said that in the meeting Lu spoke in forthright terms about Washington's displeasure with Pakistan's stance in the conflict while saying:

***"People here and in Europe are quite concerned about why Pakistan is taking such an aggressively neutral position (on Ukraine), if such a position is even possible. It does not seem***

*such a neutral stand to us. Also, that he had held internal discussions with the US National Security Council and that it seems quite clear that this is the Prime Minister's policy."*

Referring to the daily **DAWN** dated 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2022, Prime Minister Imran Khan claimed that the opposition's no-trust move was part of an alleged **"foreign-funded conspiracy"** hatched against his government over his refusal to have Pakistan's foreign policy be influenced from abroad. He made these allegations at his party's power show titled *Amr Bil Maroof* (en-join the good) and billed as a historic event at Parade Ground in Islamabad. PTI leaders, their party workers and supporters had assembled at his call. His speech lasted almost two hours; the climax of his speech was:

*"Attempts are being made to influence our foreign policy from abroad. We have been aware of this conspiracy for months. We also know about those who have assembled these people (the opposition parties) but the time has changed. This is not the era of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.*

*This is the era of social media. Nothing can be hidden. We will not accept anyone's dictation. We will have friendships with everyone but we will not submit ourselves to anyone. Attempts are being made through foreign money to change the government in Pakistan. Our people are being used, mostly inadvertently....."*

PM Khan had claimed to be in possession of evidence (and said):

*"— a letter — that would prove my point. I am placing the case of Pakistan's independence before you.....we have to decide for how long we will have to live like this. We are getting threats. There are many things about foreign conspiracy which will be shared very soon.*

*The nation wants to know who the man sitting in London is meeting with and whose directions the characters based in Pakistan are following? I am revealing the proofs we have. I cannot talk more in detail because I have to protect the interest of my country....*

*[in the last he said] First of all, I thank my nation. The way you turned up on my call .... I also pay tribute to my team of parliamentarians as you were offered money and attempts were made to bribe you but you made me happy and I am proud of you."*

Earlier, Shah Mehmood Qureshi had said in his speech that there was an external interference in Pakistan ... but would speak about it later. Firstly, you must understand that we wouldn't become a nation until we stand by our core ideology.

PM Imran Khan then listed a series of policy decisions taken by his government which he said benefited the country greatly and would continue to

do so in future. He urged TV anchors to invite economic experts on their shows and conduct a comparison of his government's performance with the previous ones. At the same occasion, PTI leader Murad Saeed addressed the crowd and said that: *'Rally's message is not just for opposition but also for foreign powers.'*

**On 27<sup>th</sup> March 2022;** tens of thousands of activists from Pakistan's ruling party and opposition groups descended on the capital, Islamabad, ahead of a parliamentary vote seeking to topple the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan. PTI leaders expected more than a million people to attend the rally, even though some say the venue was not spacious enough to accommodate more than 30,000. Addressing the rally Mr Khan said that:

*"A foreign conspiracy was behind the no-confidence motion and that funding was being channeled into Pakistan from abroad. We have been threatened in writing but we will not compromise on national interests (providing no details or evidence)."*

However, the PTI faced criticism for not allowing media cameras at that rally, citing security reasons. Outside the parade ground, a number of stalls were set up overnight. Among them was a 40-year-old vendor from Karachi, came to sell T-shirts printed with 'ABSOLUTELY NOT' – Khan's response on giving Pakistani bases to the United States for Afghanistan operations after the Taliban's takeover in Kabul. Most held the opinion that: *'Khan will defeat the looters [opposition groups] and we have come to support him irrespective of his shortcomings.'*

Also, see an immediate media comment:

*"[Khan] has the courage and ability to withstand foreign pressures and have an independent foreign policy but the PTI, which has a razor-thin majority in the National Assembly, has been losing allies – with a number of defections ahead of the confidence vote."*

The intelligentsia held that Mr Khan was correct in understanding the CY-PHER LANGUAGE but, might be, it was not a justified moment to openly confront with America through public meetings – especially when the establishment was trying to calm down the situation. Recall the minutes of the meeting dated **7<sup>th</sup> March 2022** in US between the Pak-Ambassador and the US policy makers; as given above in Cypher communication. Then, Baloch leader Shahzain Bugti was probably the first to announce his resignation as a PTI minister and joined the opposition. Simultaneously, America's Donald Trump bluntly raised the issue of a no-confidence vote, as quoted in above paragraphs about Cypher:

*"I think if the no-confidence vote against the Prime Minister succeeds, all will be forgiven in Washington because the Russia's visit is being looked at as a decision by the Prime Minister - Otherwise, I think it will be tough going ahead,.....I cannot tell how this will be*

*seen by Europe but I suspect their reaction will be similar. Imran Khan could face isolation by Europe and the US should he remain in office."*

When State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller was asked about quotes from Lu in the Pakistani cable, he said he would not comment on private diplomatic discussions. However, the Pakistani ambassador responded by expressing frustration with the lack of engagement from US leadership while saying:

*"This reluctance had created a perception in Pakistan that we were being ignored or even taken for granted. There was also a feeling that while the US expected Pakistan's support on all issues that were important to the US, it did not reciprocate."*

The discussion concluded; Lu told the Pak-Ambassador that the damage was real but not fatal, and with Khan gone, the relationship could go back to normal. *'Let us wait for a few days to see whether the political situation changes, which would mean that we would not have a big disagreement about this issue and the dent would go away very quickly. Otherwise, we will have to confront this issue head on and decide how to manage it - Mr Lu emphasized.*

**On 8<sup>th</sup> March 2022**, Khan's opponents in Parliament moved forward with a key procedural step toward the no-confidence vote. Evidently, Mr Khan's fate was NOT sealed at the time when that meeting took place, but the Biden administration was sending a message to the people – also messaging to Pakistan's real rulers that things would be better if he [Mr Khan] be removed from power.

### **GEN BAJWA DEPARTED:**

**On 27<sup>th</sup> March 2022:** exactly 20 days after the meeting described in the cable, and just days before Khan was removed from office, the then-Pakistan army chief Gen Bajwa publicly broke with Khan's neutrality and gave a speech calling the Russian invasion a '*huge tragedy*' and criticizing Russia; **VOA** dated 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2022 is referred.

The military's remarks aligned the public picture with Lu's private observation, recorded in the cable that Pakistan's neutrality was the policy of Mr Khan only - not of the Pak-Army. Thus, Pakistan's foreign policy changed significantly since Mr Khan's removal, with Pakistan tilting more clearly toward the US side. Abandoning its posture of neutrality, Pakistan then emerged as a supplier of arms to the Ukrainian military; images of Pak-made shells and ammunition regularly turned up on battlefield footage.

The fact remained that US President Mr Biden was personally angry with former PM Imran Khan. In a brief **assessment section** at the bottom of the report, the document states:

*"Don could not have conveyed such a strong demarche without the express approval of the White House, to which he referred repeatedly. Clearly, Don spoke out of turn on Pakistan's internal political process. (...recommended) to seriously reflect on this and consider making an appropriate demarche to the US Cd' A a.i in Islamabad"*

A diplomatic protest was later issued by Khan's government. On 8<sup>th</sup> March 2022, Foreign Office Islamabad had handed a demarche to the American Embassy, telling them that the US had interfered in the no-confidence vote; the former Prime Minister Mr Khan had got delivered the diplomatic note to the US Embassy in Islamabad. No media report on record that what happened in Pakistan-US communications during the weeks that followed the meeting reported in the cable. However, the political winds shifted and on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2022, Mr Khan was ousted in a no-confidence vote in the parliament.

It has been an open secret that Imran Khan was brought in power in 2018 by the military establishment. Mr Khan's removal from power in April 2022, after falling out with the COAS Gen Bajwa, the same institution had thrown him out to end political and economic turmoil; see an article of Murtaza Hussain published in foreign media pages **on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2023**:

*"This is a country of 220 million people, with nuclear weapons and serious internal conflicts and divisions..... If the economy remains in a moribund state, and there are shortages of goods and energy leading to a political crisis on the streets of major cities, that would also allow the Pakistani Taliban and other terrorist groups to begin hitting at the government more directly. We could see a significant weakening of the state and its capacity to impose order."*

Protests against Khan's dismissal and suppression of his party had swept the country and paralyzed its institutions, while Pakistan's leadership struggled to confront an economic crisis triggered in part by the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on global energy prices. The chaos resulted in staggering rates of inflation and capital flight from the country.

Referring to **Ryan Grim** & others' media report published in INTERCEPT.COM dated 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2023:

*"The Pakistani military invited the owners of the country's major media organizations to Islamabad this week for a secret meeting to discuss coverage of the ongoing political and constitutional crisis, Pakistani journalists familiar with the gathering told The Intercept. The invitation was not one that could be refused, and the message*

*was equally direct: **Cease all kinds of coverage of Imran Khan vs the military.***

*Following the meeting... top editors at news organizations across Pakistan issued directives to their journalists to pause coverage of Khan.... An inspection of Pakistani media sites reveals a stark change – he (Mr Khan) has been effectively vanished from the news. The ban was confirmed by more than a half-dozen Pakistani journalists.”*

Pakistan’s new Prime Minister, Shahbaz Sharif, eventually confirmed the **existence of the cable and acknowledged that some of the message conveyed by Lu was inappropriate.** See a little detail - speaking in National Assembly, the (new) prime minister – for the first time – acknowledged that:

*“....**the threat letter from the US was genuine, but ‘where was this element of conspiracy and treason conjured from.’***

*The then ambassador of Pakistan to the US himself admitted that threatening language was used in the letter but where this element of conspiracy and treason appeared.*

*The PTI chairman’s comments [against State institutions] are very dangerous and terrifying...he has directly linked Pakistan’s institutions to Mir Jafar and Mir Sadiq.*

*The poison he (Mr Khan) spewed about the institution yesterday is a conspiracy against it and Pakistan. If this is not stopped through the law and the Constitution, God forbid! This country will become a hideous reflection of Syria and Libya where cities present scenes of graveyards today.”*

### **AMERICA’S INNOCENCE (?)**

**On 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022:** After Khan alleged there was a cable proving his claim of US interference, State Department spokesperson Jalina Porter said: *‘Let me just say very bluntly there is absolutely no truth to these allegations,’* The State Department had previously and on repeated occasions denied that Lu urged the Pakistani government to oust the prime minister. However, the wording of the Cypher (given in the initial pages of this chapter) clearly indicated that it was a THREAT to Mr Khan’s survival in the government then.

*[Later, in early June 2023, Mr Khan, in an interview with **The Intercept**, again repeated the allegation and the State Department replied while referring to their previous denials - at least three*

*times in press conferences referring to the claims as 'propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation.'* ]

As per international media reports, while the drama over the cable was played out in public and in the press, the Pakistani opposition leadership and media had successfully launched an assault on Pakistani civil society to silence whatever dissent and free expression had previously existed in the country. In later months, allegedly the military-sponsored PDM government cracked down not just on dissidents but also on suspected leakers inside its own bunkers, passing a law that authorized warrantless searches and lengthy jail terms for whistleblowers.

Allegedly '*shaken by the public display of support*' for Mr Khan — expressed in a series of mass protests and riots [ **CBSnews.com** dated 10<sup>th</sup> May 2023 is referred] — the military successfully expanded the institution's role in the country's economy, and gave its leadership a permanent significant veto over political and civil affairs – because the politicians, belonging to both PDM and the PTI had collectively pushed the country into the disaster and adversity.

Thus, in addition to the worsening situation for ordinary citizens, allegedly a regime of extreme censorship was also put in place, with news outlets effectively barred from even mentioning Khan's name, Thousands of members of civil society, mostly supporters of Khan, were detained by civil administration and judiciary for illogical and unprecedented penal actions. The crackdown was intensified after Khan was arrested and held in custody for endless time opening new police files every day. Credible foreign reports had emerged of party workers' torture by police, with reports of several deaths in custody but never substantiated. The crackdown on Pakistan's once-robust media and press had taken a dark turn, in short.

### **YOU TOO – BRUTUS**

#### **Principal Secretary Azam Khan's ROLE:**

In June 2023, amid the PDM vs PTI tussles, Khan's former top bureaucrat, Principal Secretary Azam Khan, was arrested and detained for a month. While in detention, Azam Khan reportedly issued a statement recorded with a member of the judiciary saying that the cable was indeed real, but that *the former prime minister had exaggerated its contents for political gain.*

Referring to a write-up from **THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE** dated 19<sup>th</sup> July 2023:

The Cypher saga suddenly changed its colour and complexion when an ostensible '*confessional statement*' attributed to ex-principal secretary Azam Khan landed on the political landscape of Pakistan with a bump,

prompting the government to seize on what it called a 'charge sheet' as the rationale for immediate criminal proceedings against PTI chief Imran Khan. *Following leak of supposed confession, Azam Khan had returned home after having been missing for over a month.*

Secretary Azam Khan, in his confessional statement, accused his former boss of using the Cypher from Pakistan's mission in the US to gain political mileage and build an 'anti-establishment narrative' on the back of the confidential document. The alleged '*disclosures*' from the former bureaucrat were quickly followed by a presser of Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah, who said the government would open criminal proceedings against former PM Imran Khan on charges of exposing official secrets.

[The unmarked statement attributed to Azam Khan stated that:

**'On 8<sup>th</sup> March 2022,'** *[the] foreign secretary approached Mo-hammad Azam Khan and informed [him] regarding [the] cipher... [and] that [then] foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi had already discussed the cipher with the Imran Khan...*

*Imran Khan was allegedly 'euphoric' after seeing the cipher and decided to use it to build an 'anti-establishment narrative' on the back of a 'blunder' committed by the US. The Cypher-copy was retained by Imran Khan and the next day (March 10) when he asked for it, Imran Khan replied that he has misplaced it; .... that the PTI chief did not return that cipher-copy, despite repeated requests. ... that the former PS to the PM had advised his boss not to disclose the contents of the cipher since it was a confidential document. ']*

Interestingly, the development was picked up by the Lahore High Court which allowed FIA after it withdrew a stay order against the call-up notice to Mr Khan by the agency in an inquiry into an audio leak relating to the cypher controversy. The court recalled the stay, allowing an appeal of the federal government challenging the stay secured by the former PM. Federal Interior Minister Sanaullah told that the statement got recorded by Azam Khan before a judicial magistrate under Section 164 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) and Section 161 of the CrPC on the notices issued to him by the Federal Investigation Agency [FIA]; the agency summoned the ex-PM on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

The statement said that a US diplomatic encrypted letter was manipulated by Imran Khan in March 2022 to serve his political goals; the principal secretary also testified that Imran Khan told him he had lost the copy of the letter when he was asked for its return. The Interior Minister urged before the media that:

*'It is a crime to expose an official secret; the state will be filing the charges in the court against Imran. I don't think he lost the copy.*

*He still has it. It has to be recovered from him. He didn't believe his former secretary could testify against him. I will not accept it as long as I don't hear it from him directly.'*

The interior minister said a case would be registered against Imran and his accomplice former foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi under the Official Secrets Act for making a classified document public. Eventually he would have to appear before the court as his case would be tried in the special court. The minister shared with the media that Azam Khan reportedly admitted that he had told Imran Khan that using a classified document for political gains was a criminal act under the Official Secrets Act.

The Interior Minister indicated that cypher was still in his custody and he would remain a criminal until the classified document is returned or recovered by an investigation agency from him. The 9<sup>th</sup> May 2023 incidents were also in the continuity of the PTI chief's conspiracy against Pakistan and its institutions as it had been proved that the group led by him was involved in anti-state activities.

Later, the PTI chief shifted the blame from the US to the former army chief Gen Bajwa, saying he wished to mend fences with the former. Meanwhile, a petition seeking the recovery of Azam Khan was also pending before the IHC. However, the circumstances were such that for the PTI chairman, the said confession was hard to digest. The statement of the bureaucrat was reportedly recorded under Section 164 CrPC before a magistrate.

*[In Pakistan, a witness, an aggrieved person, or an accused records such a statement under oath and before a magistrate – called statement under 164 CrPC. While, under Section 161 CrPC, the investigation officer records the statement of a witness, which does not even require the signature of the witness.]*

After the statement went public, the interior minister held that this case was similar to the proceedings initiated against former US President Donald Trump for mishandling classified documents. The minister further alleged that:

*"While Imran told Azam that the cipher had gone missing, my assessment is that he (Imran) still has it. ...So the cypher is with him. He has not just committed the crime of making it public, but he continues to be guilty of a crime by keeping it in his possession until he is arrested in this case and the cipher is recovered.*

*The law department's opinion would be the final [decision] on this, but I think the Official Secrets Act is more relevant [in this case]. The case would also be referred to a 'special court' as others being conducted under the Official Secrets Act;" Daily **DAWN** dated **20<sup>th</sup> July 2023** is referred.*

The former PM Imran Khan, however, claimed he would share *uncensored details* of how this conspiracy unfolded to overthrow his government; adding that the National Security Committee (NSC) had twice authenticated the message given in the cipher in its two meetings held under his premiership and Shahbaz Sharif. ***The NSC comprising civil and military leadership had termed the cipher an 'interference into Pakistan's internal matters'*** and the US was handed a demarche. The federal cabinet had also reviewed the cipher ahead of the NSC meeting and declared it as a declassified document.

### **CYPHER-COPY's DILEMMA:**

Referring to the ***'The Intercept'*** dated 9<sup>th</sup> August 2023 again:

*"The disclosure of the full body of the cable, over a year after Khan was deposed and following his arrest in May 2023, finally allowed the competing claims to be evaluated. On balance, the text of the cypher strongly suggests that the US encouraged Khan's removal.*

*...while Lu did not directly order Khan to be taken out of office, he said that Pakistan would suffer severe consequences, including international isolation if Khan were to stay on as prime minister; while simultaneously hinting at rewards for his removal. The remarks appear to have been taken as a signal for the Pakistani military to act."*

However, it was also a reality that Mr Khan himself continued to be targeted over the handling of the secret cable by the new government. The new regime had to announce that *Mr Khan would be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act* in connection with the cable. Mr Khan had perhaps hatched a conspiracy against the state's interests and a case could be initiated against him on behalf of the state for the violation of the Official Secrets Act by exposing a confidential cipher communication from America – Pakistan's Godfather.

Referring to the Daily **DAWN** dated 10<sup>th</sup> August 2023; this daily's team and some other media persons were unable to independently verify whether the contents of the cable reported by the US-based publication THE INTERCEPT were indeed authentic. Pakistan's Foreign Office didn't comment; PMLN's Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb and Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal didn't respond to media requests for comment. However, the US State Department — while refraining from commenting on the veracity of the published cable — said its contents didn't show the US taking a position on who the leader of Pakistan should be.

As per the PDM's Interior Minister's version, the contents of the cable, the US had objected to Imran Khan's foreign policy regarding the Ukraine war.

Donald Lu referred to Pakistan's position on the Ukraine crisis and said that: *"people here and in Europe are quite concerned about why Pakistan is taking such an aggressively neutral position (on Ukraine), if such a position is even possible. It does not seem such a neutral stand to us. (In his discussions with the NSC) It seems quite clear that this is the prime minister's policy."*

However, the most disturbing part of the said Cypher for Imran Khan was the words Mr Lu had said ***'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.'***

The intelligentsia could understand that it was a direct threat in fact AND for a US top official to use these words was unacceptable – especially that ***'all will be forgiven if the vote of no confidence succeeds'***. Moreover, Pakistan's envoy in Washington had tried to dispel the impression that Mr Khan's visit to the Russia was anything but a bilateral one that shouldn't be seen as an endorsement of Moscow's action against Ukraine.

Pakistan's envoy had correctly assessed that: ***'Mr Lu spoke out of turn on Pakistan's internal political process. We need to seriously reflect on this and consider making an appropriate demarche to the US charge de-affairs in Islamabad'***.

The timing of the PTI Chief's trial was quite significant, as it was hyped in the wake of the ***imprisonment of Imran Khan*** over charges of graft in the *Tosha-khana* case.

[On 5<sup>th</sup> August 2023; former PM Imran Khan was declared guilty of corrupt practices by the competent court for hiding the benefits he accrued from the national exchequer willfully and intentionally. He cheated while providing information of gifts he obtained from *Tosha-khana* which later proved to be false and inaccurate. The court held that his dishonesty had been established beyond doubt.

*The PTI chief was convicted under Section 174 (Offence of corrupt practices) of the Election Act and sentenced to three years in prison.]*

As per protocol, only a handful of key officials had access to the confidential Cypher with the foreign office. These included the foreign minister, the prime minister and the army chief. After the document's existence was first revealed by Mr Khan in a public meeting in Islamabad, a meeting of the National Security Committee was held on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 in which the Cypher's contents were shared with the participants.

***It was also a fact that a copy of the cipher was provided to the former Prime Minister, NOT the actual Cypher.*** According to his for-

mer principal secretary Azam Khan, Mr Khan had 'misplaced' that copy of the Cypher, something the former PM also admitted. However, Mr Khan claimed in subsequent interviews that there was no question of such a sensitive document being misplaced, and that the Cypher was safe and sound at the Foreign Office. Later, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller confirmed that Washington did express concern privately to the government of Pakistan and then did the same publicly [when] the then PM Khan [went] to Moscow on that very day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To a media question he also explained that:

*"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. I think a number of people have taken them out of context to use them in political process."*

### **SHAH MAHMOOD QURESHI ARRESTED:**

**On 19<sup>th</sup> August 2023:** The ongoing investigation into the cipher case took a dramatic turn when PTI Vice Chairman Shah Mahmood Qureshi was picked up soon after he demanded that a level playing field be provided to the embattled party during the upcoming elections. The arrest was made in connection with an FIR registered on 15<sup>th</sup> August under the Official Secrets Act against PTI Chairman Imran Khan and the former foreign minister Mr Qureshi. The said case was registered after an American news outlet *The Intercept* had published the Cypher given in the earlier paragraphs. Mr Qureshi was arrested by a heavy contingent of police from his residence and transferred to the FIA headquarters.

[...see the media news dated **17<sup>th</sup> August 2023**: *The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) interrogated PTI Chairman Imran Khan in Attock Jail a day before in a case related to the diplomatic cable that reportedly went missing from his custody. On 25<sup>th</sup> July instant, Mr Khan had appeared before a joint investigation team (JIT). It was presumed that Mr Khan himself had leaked the said Cypher to the US outlet **The Intercept**. The timing of the purported cable's publication was quite significant, as it came in the wake of Imran Khan's imprisonment over graft charges in the Tosha-khana case.*

*The FIA was initially investigating Mr Khan for revealing the contents of the confidential diplomatic cable and for keeping it in his possession. However, after the **disclosure of former principal secretary Azam Khan** that the cipher went missing from the custody of Imran Khan, the investigation agency also started looking into this aspect. Azam Khan had handed over the Cypher to the ex-*

*PM, who later told him he had misplaced it and did not return it to the state.]*

Addressing a news conference at National Press Club minutes before his arrest, Mr Qureshi called for the caretaker government, Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) and Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to allow to contact its supporters during the elections. Ever since 9<sup>th</sup> May riots, the PTI vice chairman Mr Qureshi had been arrested and re-arrested several times; was eventually released **on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2023** after the Lahore High Court set aside his detention orders.

**Differences within PTI?** At the presser, Mr Qureshi regretted that one of the media houses had tried to create a controversy about the party's core committee by alleging that there was a division within the committee and a struggle was going on to control the party. He said:

*"It is a deliberate attempt to create uncertainty and decrease the trust of people in the party. A number of things were linked to Secretary General Omer Ayub and me to create such impression. Mr Khan is the founding chairman of PTI and core committee has already passed a unanimous resolution that the ex-PM will remain the chairman as there cannot be any substitute to him. It is being said that elections would be delayed because of delimitation;"* media reports dated **20<sup>th</sup> August 2023** are referred.

Referring to the daily **THE PAKISTAN TODAY** dated **23<sup>rd</sup> November 2023**: A special court, hearing Cypher Case ordered the authorities to produce PTI Chairman and former foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi in court at the Federal Judicial Complex [FJC] in Islamabad five days after. Special Court Judge Abual Hasnat Zulqarnain presided over the hearing and wrapped it up within minutes. Following the Islamabad High Court [IHC] orders, the Cypher Case hearing had taken place at the Judicial Complex in G-11 instead of *Adiala* jail. He further ordered that the trial would begin from the position prior to 29<sup>th</sup> August 2023. *The former premier and his aide Shah Mahmood Qureshi, who was also behind bars, were indicted in the case on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2023. Both had pleaded not guilty.*

The trial was being held at *Adiala* Jail and four witnesses had already recorded their statements, with the fifth being cross-examined when the IHC division bench had termed the government's notification for jail trial 'erroneous' and scrapped the entire proceedings. **Point to remember:** that on 29<sup>th</sup> August 2023, the IHC had suspended the PTI chief's sentence in the *Tosha-khana* case, but a special court established under the Official Secrets Act had directed jail authorities to keep Imran in 'judicial lockup' in the Cypher Case.

A notification issued by Pakistan's federal law ministry the same day had stated that the Law and Justice Division had **'no objection to Mr Khan's**

***trial in the Cypher Case being held at Attock jail***. In September 2023, Imran Khan was shifted to Adiala jail. However, in its order of 21<sup>st</sup> November 2023, the IHC said the jail trial ***'vitiated the entire proceedings in the case'***. While declaring the proceedings void, the bench had said notifications issued for conducting the trial in jail were against the law and had spoiled the proceedings, including Imran Khan and Qureshi's indictment and the testimonies of four witnesses.

As a result of the high court judgment, the Special Court had to start a fresh trial while the prosecution moved a fresh application to conduct the trial in jail.

Referring to the **SAMAA TV** dated 13<sup>th</sup> December 2023; Former prime minister Imran Khan and former foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi were indicted in the Cypher Case; the proceedings in the said case against the two suspects were held in Adiala Jail, Rawalpindi, under the Official Secrets Act. Judge Abul Hasnat Zulqarnain read out the two-page charge sheet. The accused denied the charges, and the court summoned the prosecution's evidence. The charge-sheet included:

- The accused violated the Official Secrets Act as the prime minister and foreign minister. They waved the classified document in a public rally ***on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2022***.
- They deliberately used the Cypher for personal gains.
- The move damaged national identity, security, and foreign affairs.
- As prime minister, you got the Cypher, which was not sent back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs till today.

Shah Mahmood Qureshi denied the charges out-rightly in the court; Imran Khan, meanwhile, had a dialogue with Judge Zulqarnain. Mr Khan claimed he had exposed the national and foreign establishment, and that this *'cruelty'* should also be included as his crime. He said on one hand their government was overthrown, and on the other, they were also accused of the crime. ***'How is it possible that someone whose government has been overthrown is also the accused?'*** Imran Khan questioned the judge.

The court reprimanded Mr Khan, saying he should not say incorrect things and that his tone was not appropriate. The court silenced Imran Khan for speaking repeatedly despite being stopped.

**On 8<sup>th</sup> January 2024:** The special court issued release orders for the PTI's Imran Khan after his bail was confirmed by the Supreme Court of Pakistan in the Cypher Case. However, **the truth remained** that PTI's founding chairman remained in Adiala Jail despite bail as he had been arrested in *Tosha-khana* and in a 190 million pounds (AL-QADIR TRUST) Case.

**IMRAN KHAN SENTENCED:**

**On 30<sup>th</sup> January 2024:** Former PM and PTI Chairman Imran Khan and Vice Chairman Shah Mahmood Qureshi were sentenced in the Cypher Case. The special court established under the Official Secrets Act awarded the two top figures of the PTI 10 year's imprisonment in the high-profile cypher case. The court, presided by Judge Abul Hasanat Zulqarnain, announced the verdict during the hearing held within the premises of Rawalpindi's Adiala jail.

Before sentencing Imran Khan, the judge asked the former premier one last time where the (original) cypher was. *"I have mentioned in my statement that the Prime Minister House's security was not my responsibility. I don't have the cypher,"* he stated.

The judge also provided the two PTI leaders with copies of the statement and the questionnaire under Section 342 and both accused were asked to record their replies in the questionnaire. After Imran and Qureshi recorded their statements, the court announced its verdict. Judge Abul Hasnat Zulqarnain, stated the main issues in the case as follows:

*"Whether cypher was received by the accused and retained unauthorizedly? Whether cypher was dealt with negligently? Whether its contents were communicated to unauthorized persons for the benefit of which directly or indirectly caused foreign powers? Whether the co-accused abated the commission of offence?"*

*The prosecution has proved its case beyond any shadow of doubt and both Khan and Qureshi are found guilty. It's confirmed that the cypher Khan presented at the 2022 rally was passed from Asad Majeed PW, to the then-Ambassador of Pakistan Noman PW, to SPM Azam Khan PW, who then handed the cypher to the former PM. The court also found that Azam Khan very rightly demanded the copy of cypher back, but Imran Khan refused to do so. He subsequently wrongly misused the cypher at his rally in a well-planned manipulative lie aimed at rousing populist sentiments in the masses with no regard of its consequences."*

The judge further held that Khan's actions damaged Pakistan's **"integrity, sovereignty and security"** as well as the country's relationship and trust with the US. He stated that in misusing the cypher, Khan *"compromised Pakistan's international standing, the credibility and standing of our diplomats and diplomacy with adverse implications for our future diplomatic reporting culture."* The judge also highlighted that Khan breached his duty as a PM by misusing the cypher, as the Constitution of Pakistan requires the Prime Minister to *"refrain from doing anything which undermines interests of Pakistan."*

In response to the judgment, Khan's legal team accused the court of breaching the Constitution by not allowing Khan and Qureshi's lawyers raised their defenses in court and cross examine witnesses during trial. However, the judgment stated that both representatives were given such opportunity and chose not to take advantage of them during trial. The judge stated: ***"[P]roper and due time was given to the defense to cross-examine the witnesses, but that the lawyers voluntarily deprived themselves from [this] valuable right."***

Furthermore, the judge criticized Khan and Qureshi's conduct in the build up to this trial. He accused them *of wasting time by playing hide and seek and filing different applications just in order to protract these proceedings*. The trial was delayed multiple times in November (2023) due to safety issues over having an open trial.

PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan said that the ***'reality of the bogus cases'*** could not be denied even if Imran and Qureshi were sentenced to death; it was an abrupt verdict. He urged PTI supporters to remain calm and peaceful.

PTI counsel Hamid Khan claimed that during the proceedings in the court, the party lawyers were taken to a small room where *'weapons were pointed at them'* – (also) that this is the worst example of justice being denied in history.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), reacted to the verdict by the special court and urged that *'such sham trials have their future written in dustbin'*. The verdict was a *"complete disgusting mockery of law"*; the fake cypher case would not last long, and the nation must not lose hope. The PTI founder then challenged the jail proceedings and the appointment of state defence counsel in the Islamabad High Court (IHC). The petition argued that the special court's January 26 order to appoint state counsels against Imran and Qureshi must be annulled. Party counsel Hamid Khan, while speaking to the media, opined that ***'since the IHC had nullified the cypher jail trial, (so) all subsequent proceedings against the PTI leaders are illegal'***.

The JURIST dated 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2024 noted that:

*"A Pakistani court found that as a result of the actions of Khan and Vice President of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pakistan has faced serious economic, diplomatic and political consequences.*

*The case concerned the actions of Khan and Qureshi following Khan's removal as PM in 2022. Khan held a rally shortly before his removal, during which he made a speech and held up a document which he claimed proved his removal was orchestrated by a foreign power, alluded to be the US. As a result, Pakistani authorities ar-*

*rested Khan and Qureshi and charged the two with communication of information to the public contained in a secret classified document sent by Pakistani Embassy in the US to the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both were charged under section 5 of the Official States Secret Act 1923, which states, **Cypher or any information which is sensitive and secret in nature cannot be shared to anyone.**"*

However, at the same time, the western media noted that the political struggle in Pakistan escalated when Khan was sentenced to three years in prison on corruption charges in *Tosha-Khana* Case and taken into custody for the second time since his ouster. Apparently, this move of 'sentencing' was to block Pakistan's then popular politician, from contesting coming general elections (of 2024) in Pakistan. Following the ex-premier's first arrest, widespread violent protests had erupted across the country, leading the government to approve the establishment of military courts to try protesters involved in anti-state activities. During the protests, at least 10 people had died and more than 4,000 were arrested on charges of vandalism and rioting – against whom still the criminal cases are being heard in various courts.

### **US-PAKISTAN: CYPHER CONTROVERSY**

**On 20<sup>th</sup> March 2024:** US Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu rubbished PTI's and Imran Khan's 'conspiracy theory' that the America supported the then-opposition's no-trust motion to topple his government in April 2022. Testifying before a Congressional panel, the top US diplomat said: '*I wanna be very clear on this point [that] this conspiracy theory is a lie [and] it is a complete falsehood.*'

The hearing titled 'Pakistan After the elections: Examining the future of Democracy in Pakistan and the US Pakistan relationship,' was announced by the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee where the assistant secretary was the key witness.

When asked about the allegations of the former prime minister, the US assistant secretary said he viewed the media reports regarding the alleged leaked cipher that Khan claimed contained the threat issued by Lu in a meeting with then-Pakistan's ambassador Asad Majeed in Washington in 2022 days before the ouster of the PTI-led government. However, '***At no point does it accuse the United States government or me personally of taking steps against Imran Khan. We respect the sovereignty of Pakistan; we respect the principle that Pakistani people should be the only ones to choose their leader through democratic process.***'

On the very next day, on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2024: PTI's Chairman Barrister Gohar termed the US assistant secretary of state's statement on the diplomatic cable '*controversy*' a lie, and demanded reopening an inquiry – into the fact that the US had engineered his ouster from power by supporting the then opposition's no-confidence motion in April 2022.

See a post appeared on media pages of the same day, titled as: ***Conspiracy or intervention, Donald Lou's lies\****

[In last evening's Congressional hearing (on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2024), Asst. Secretary of State Lu claimed that there was no conspiracy to the regime-change in Pakistan in April 2022. The fact is that Ambassador ***Asad Majid's cypher*** was discussed at two meetings of the National Security Council (NSC) that, among others were attended by three services chiefs, including Gen Bajwa & the Chairman, JCSC. The first meeting was chaired by the IK, while the 2nd, the beneficiary of the regime-change, Shahbaz. ***The first meeting termed Lu's threat as intervention in the internal affairs of Pakistan.*** NSC, therefore, decided to make a demarche on the US government, both in Washington & its embassy in Islamabad. The demarche was made at both places. A formal protest was launched.

We need to understand that a '***conspiracy always precedes intervention***'. An act follows a thought, a concept. Therefore, the act of intervention was based on a conspiracy. The former didn't come out of the blue. It was a well-orchestrated operation, initiated by Gen Bajwa with the blessings of Biden administration.

Shahbaz altogether denied the existence of the cypher as did apprentice Bilawal. Crown Princess Maryam announced that following this controversy, the 'other countries' had given up sending cyphers to Pakistan. Little did she know that the Inter-governmental communications are not done by cyphers. This is an exclusive system of secret communication between Foreign Ministries & their Embassies abroad. Obviously, she needed better schooling.

***Hence, the consummation of the regime-change operation. US is as much guilty of a criminal act as are its local collaborators in Pakistan.]***

#### **IMRAN KHAN & QURESHI ACQUITTED:**

**On 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2024:** in a major relief for the PTI, the Islamabad High Court acquitted PTI's Chief Imran Khan and his close aide, Shah Mahmood

Qureshi, in the cypher case — a decision that lawyers termed as a **logical solution**. The short verdict, announced by Islamabad High Court (IHC)'s Chief Justice Aamer Farooq and Justice Miangul Hassan Aurangzeb, came as the court took up Khan and Qureshi's appeals against their convictions in the case. The PTI leaders were, however, not expected to be set free due to incarceration in other cases.

The two politicians couldn't be released from prison due to Imran's sentence in the **Iddat Case** while Qureshi was arrested in cases related with 9<sup>th</sup> May 2023 events. The Iddat Case was transferred to another judge on the same day while Qureshi was on physical remand till 5<sup>th</sup> June 2024.

- *A special court, established under the Official Secrets Act, had handed both Imran and Qureshi 10-year jail sentences each in the case in January (2024) after Judge Abul Hasnat Zulqarnain appointed a state counsel for them. It was Imran Khan's second conviction as he was also convicted in the Tosha-khana case on August 5, and sentenced to three years' imprisonment. The IHC had suspended his sentence BUT a division bench later rejected Khan's petition seeking the suspension of the conviction.*
- *Imran Khan was later convicted in a separate Tosha-khana case in January 2024 but the 14-year sentence was suspended by the IHC in April 2024. He was convicted in the **Iddat Case** and sentenced to seven years in jail in February 2024.*

The Cypher Case pertained to a diplomatic document; the Federal Investigation Agency's (FIA) charge sheet alleged that the cypher was never returned by the then-PM Imran Khan, who long held that the document contained a threat from the US to topple his government. Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Omar Ayub and other PTI stalwarts held that:

*"A big day for the leader and the party. A fake, frivolous and fraudulent case is sent packing by IHC. The nation saw today that the just verdict came and the banner of justice was held high and that baseless case was eliminated in which Imran Khan spent around 10 months in jail and for which he was kept in jail all the time. Today is a day of happiness ... very soon the nation will see that Imran Khan will be outside."*

*... that the verdict is a victory for justice, even if it was delayed due to the prosecution's tactics. The decision is as per justice and the government should seek forgiveness from Imran Khan for imprisoning him in jail for an illegal and wrong case".*

In fact, the state had badly failed in proving its case and even its prosecutors had abandoned the case; hats off to the honourable judges. The two

leaders showed their patience and forbearance in the case and for not pestering the legal team about questions of release. The high court (IHC) declared that ***'there was no traitor here whose case was being heard. Whatever Imran Khan did was in the national interest.'***

**What's happening?:** While speaking to *Geo News*, senior journalist Hamid Mir, when asked where the government stands in this whole equation, said that the government does not stand anywhere and *"doesn't even know what's happening"*.

Questioned about the case proceedings and how they were handed, Mir said: "The fact is that so many cases were piled up against Imran, that even the three or four correct cases against him also lost their credibility. The government's weak strategy of having too many cases against Imran proved beneficial to him and that's why he was acquitted today."

Ref: social media dated 7<sup>th</sup> October 2024:

*"US presidential candidate Dr. Jill Stein has admitted that all the cases against Imran Khan were initiated by the United States. She stated that the purpose of these cases is to halt Pakistan's largest democratic struggle."*