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Pakistan wants Russian engagement in Afghan peace process

Mateen Haider

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Brushing aside the notion that Russian defence minister's recently concluded visit to Pakistan might annoy New Delhi and Washington, Defence Minister Khawaja Asif on Saturday said improvement in ties between Islamabad and Moscow are not at the cost of relations with other countries.

Speaking exclusively to Dawn.com, he termed it Pakistan's independent diplomacy and said, "Russia is a great regional power and Pakistan cannot ignore it".

"After US/Nato forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan, security would be a bigger challenge for Afghanistan... and Pakistan wants Russian engagement in Afghan peace process," he said.

"We must forget what Russia did in the past and look forward to a new beginning in the region."

"Pakistan terms Russia and China's presence in the region as source of peace and stability and that is why all three are getting closer on strategic matters," Khawaja Asif remarked pointing towards a major shift in Pakistan's foreign and security policy.

On relations with India, the defence minister said his Russian counterpart General Sergei Shoigu was briefed about the prevailing situation at eastern borders and relations with India in general. He said that the briefing given to Gen Shoigu was very important ahead of Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to India later this year.

In a major breakthrough after Russia lifted arms sales embargo to Pakistan earlier this year, Defence Minister Asif said that a “final go ahead” for the purchase of Russian MI-35 gunship helicopters has been given.

“The matter remained under consideration for many months... now we have given Russians final go ahead for the purchase of these helicopters,” Defence Minister Khawaja Asif said.

Know more: Deal to sell MI-35 helicopters 'politically approved': Russian envoy

The minister said that the gunship helicopters would be used in the ongoing war against terrorism by Pakistani security forces.

“Russia has moved up Pakistan in its category B from D for arms sales, which means that Pakistan can now buy weapons from Russian market,” he revealed.