

India's cooperation needed for Afghan peace: Pakistan foreign minister

SHUBHAJIT ROY

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 11

A MONTH after India attended a dialogue process with Taliban in Moscow, Pakistan has said that India's cooperation would be needed for bringing peace to war-torn Afghanistan.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said on Monday that although Pakistan was committed to facilitate a negotiated end to the 17-year-old Afghan war, it could not do the task alone and that other regional countries, including India, needed to play their part, Pakistan's leading daily, Dawn reported.

Speaking on a point of order in the National Assembly, he said Pakistan alone could not bring peace in Afghanistan as it was a "shared responsibility" of regional countries including India, Iran, Tajikistan and China.

"Since India is present in Afghanistan, its cooperation in this regard will also be required," said Qureshi, according to Dawn.

"Some meetings have taken place [among key stakeholders] for establishment of peace in Afghanistan. India also has stakes in Afghanistan and its cooperation will also be needed," Qureshi said, Pakistan's daily *Express Tribune* reported.

He said Prime Minister Imran Khan had said that peace could not be established in Afghanistan through military power. Today the US, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Taliban also wanted a solution through dialogue, he added.

While this is the first time Islamabad, which has always looked at India's role in Afghanistan with suspicion, has said that India's "cooperation" is "needed", South Block is not impressed. Though there was no official comment from the Ministry of External Affairs, government sources in Delhi were sceptical about the sincerity of Pakistan's statement.

Sources in Delhi said that this seems to be another outreach towards India under "international pressure". "They want to engage with India in some manner or another, like Kartarpur, this could be another bait," a source told The Indian Express, and said that he was sure that they would not like to discuss Afghanistan with India.

Another source, requesting anonymity, said, "Frankly, if I am naive, then I would think that better sense has prevailed. But, it could just mean international pressure."

Qureshi's comments belie Pakistan's narrative so far that India is trying to strategically encircle it, by making inroads into Afghanistan.

In September last year, Pakistan had objected to the US plan seeking greater role of India in Afghanistan, accusing New Delhi of playing role of a "spoiler" in the war-torn country.

Briefing media in the backdrop of visit by US Defense Secretary James Mattis to New Delhi, then Pakistan Foreign Office spokesperson Nafees Zakaria had said that India, under the garb of development assistance, had used the Afghan soil to carry out subversive activities inside Pakistan. New Delhi has always denied these charges.