

## **Russia is India's 'tried and tested real friend' : Sushma Swaraj**

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**Moscow:** India and Russia today discussed key regional and bilateral issues including defence, civil nuclear cooperation and trade ties as External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj described Russia as India's "tried and tested" partner and a "real friend".

Swaraj and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, during their meeting, talked about the Russian government's joint venture to manufacture almost 200 Kamov 226T helicopters in India that will give a big boost to government's flagship programme of "Make in India".

Swaraj also raised the issue of liberalisation of visa regime for Indian tourists and businessmen during the talks which lasted for over an hour, according to External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Vikas Swarup.

The Minister also said she was very happy to convey that there was progress on all components of "Druzhba-Dosti", the vision document agreed upon during the meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Vladimir Putin last year.

"I want to tell you that Russia is India's tried and tested partner and a real friend. Our foreign policy towards Russia has always been the same," she said. Swarup said the two ministers talked ways to boost cooperation in civil nuclear sector and trade and investments. The two sides also discussed situation in Syria and UN Security Council reforms.

On his part, Lavrov said he was hopeful that Swaraj's visit will provide impetus to India-Russia ties. He also referred to India's entry into Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and said that its full membership will give boost to the efforts of the group in achieving its goals.

Russia has been favouring India's permanent SCO membership, saying joining of the group by the largest democracy will add weight to the organisation.

The SCO had set in motion the process of granting India a full membership of the grouping at its annual meeting in the Russian city of Ufa in July. And now, India has to ink 28 sectoral pacts with the SCO to attend the next meeting as full member.

India, one of the largest energy consumers in the world, was keen to get the membership of the bloc as it will help it play a major role in the SCO energy club which was set up to create a unified energy market as well as to ensure cooperation among major oil and gas companies from the member nations.

Three major suppliers of energy - Russia, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan - have been playing major roles in the SCO energy club and the Indian government feels getting membership of the bloc will give it greater access to a number of key energy projects in the region.

Lavrov also talked about India going to chair the BRICS (Brazil-Russia-China-South Africa) next year and said today's meeting was a good opportunity to recap the functioning of the grouping.

- PTI