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China offers to mediate in stalled Afghan Taliban peace talks

By Maria Golovnina

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China offered on Thursday to mediate in stalled efforts to engage the Afghan Taliban in peace negotiations, reflecting its desire to play a more active role in a region it sees as part of its sphere of influence.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made the announcement as he arrived in the Pakistani capital on a two-day visit aimed at cementing traditionally warm ties between communist China and conservative Islamic Pakistan.

Afghanistan and its Western backers have been trying to bring moderate Taliban figures to the negotiating table to end years of war in the country. Pakistan is key to the process because of its historic ties to the Taliban leaders, who have used the Pakistani border region as a safe haven.

"We will support the Afghan government in realising reconciliation with various political factions including the Taliban," Wang told reporters.

"China is ready to play its constructive role and will provide necessary facilitation at any time if it is required by various parties in Afghanistan."

Wang said he had a "strong sense" that Pakistan had a "strong will to take a constructive part in the resolution of this matter."

In Washington, the White House said President Barack Obama and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif spoke by phone on Thursday about counterterrorism and other issues, and agreed to meet "at a mutually convenient time."

Obama "welcomed the improved relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and noted appreciation for Pakistan's efforts to combat terrorism," the White House said.

Obama is trying to wind down the role of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, which were sent in to topple the Taliban in 2001 but have failed to end their insurgency.

China and the United States are growing rivals in Asia but share a common concern about Islamist militancy.

A senior U.S. State Department official said Washington supported any role China could play in stabilizing Afghanistan but it was unclear what leverage China could use to persuade the Taliban to resume meaningful negotiations.

"The U.S. and China have agreed to work together to support Afghanistan's government of national unity, security forces and economic development to ensure that Afghanistan can never again be used as a safe haven for terrorists," said the official, who asked not to be identified.

Global powers have tried to breathe life into the stalled talks for years. They finally collapsed in 2013 after Taliban representatives angered the Kabul government by trying to open an embassy-style office in Qatar.