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Afghanistan Loya Jirga will determine whether US troops remain after 2014

Member of convening commission says assembly of tribal elders will start between 19 and 21 November

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A national meeting to discuss the fate of a future security deal with the United States will be held in the third week of November, Afghan officials said on Saturday. The key gathering will decide if America and its allies will keep troops in Afghanistan after 2014 or pack up and leave.

Sadeq Mudaber, a member of the convening commission, said the consultative assembly of tribal elders, or Loya Jirga, will start at some point between 19 and 21 November and could last as long as a week. He expected up to 3,000 people may attend.

A week ago, the US secretary of state, John Kerry, and President Hamid Karzai reached an agreement in principle on the major elements of a deal that would allow American troops to stay after combat troops serving with a Nato-led international military coalition depart at the end of 2014. But in making the deal, Karzai said a potentially deal-breaking issue of jurisdiction over those forces must be debated by the Loya Jirga before he makes a decision.

"In our recent negotiations with the US, we also discussed another important topic, and it was the topic of immunity for US troops in Afghanistan," Karzai said Friday in his weekly radio address. "The decision in this respect is beyond the capacity of Afghan government, and only the Afghan

people maintain the authority to decide on it, and the Loya Jirga reflects the will of the Afghan people."

If the Loya Jirga decides to tell Karzai that it is against American demands that US military courts and not Afghan ones have jurisdiction over any crimes committed by its forces serving there, then it is extremely unlikely that Karzai will sign the deal. If they agree, then the bilateral security agreement will be sent to parliament for approval.

The US wants to keep as many as 10,000 troops in the country, to train and mentor Afghan national security forces and go after the remnants of al-Qaida, but if no agreement is signed all US troops would have to leave by the end of next year. President Barack Obama said in an interview with The Associated Press he would be comfortable with a full pullout of US troops.

Many American allies have also indicated they will not keep troops in the country if there is no US presence. Billions of dollars in funding for Afghan forces and development will also likely be at stake.

In Iraq, a similar deal fell apart after US officials were unable to reach an agreement with the Iraqis on the same issue that would have allowed a small training and counterterrorism force to remain there. The US completely pulled out of Iraq after the deal collapsed.

Although they are holding their own against the Taliban, the Afghan security forces are generally considered to be not yet fully prepared to go at it without further foreign training and international funding. Violence has already escalated following the steady withdrawal of foreign troops. An insurgent suicide bomb attack Friday against a foreign military convoy in Kabul killed two civilians.

The Loya Jirga will also take a close look at the entire 32-page deal, Modaber said, with each section being examined by separate committees.

The commission that will organize the Loya Jirga is headed by former Afghan president Sebgatullah Mujadidi, who told reporters he initially disagreed with holding one because the basic points had already been covered by a Strategic Partnership Agreement that Karzai signed with Obama last year. He was convinced to go through with the meeting, however, because of the importance of the deal.