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The Guardian

Afghanistan and US agree on strategic partnership document

By Emma Graham-Harrison

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A spokesman for the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, has said a deal has been reached, subject to final consultation

Afghanistan and the United States have agreed the contents of a long-awaited deal to define their relationship after most foreign troops leave at the end of 2014, although the document sidesteps some of the thorniest questions about the US military presence.

Negotiations on the strategic partnership deal have dragged on for over a year, initially held up by two demands from the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, that he said were critical to restoring national sovereignty: for Afghan control of jails and an end to night-time raids on Afghan homes.

Western officials argued for months that the first demand was not practical and the second could undermine the military effort, but eventually agreed compromises on both.

The main US prison is now in the middle of a six-month handover, and Afghan forces have taken control of night raids, under two separate agreements signed within a month of each other, paving the way for the strategic partnership deal.

"Today Afghanistan and the US initialled and locked the text of the strategic partnership agreement," said Karzai's spokesman, Aimal Faizi. "This means the text is closed, and both sides will now review the document and do a final consultation. In the US it will go to the houses of

Congress and the president; in Afghanistan the president will consult with national leaders plus both houses of parliament."

But both sides agreed to set aside difficult questions about long-term US access to military bases and the status of any US forces that do stay on in Afghanistan, which will be negotiated in a separate deal some time before 2014.

Washington and its allies wanted to have the US-Afghan strategic partnership agreed before May, when a Nato conference in Chicago is expected to pledge long-term help to Kabul with finances and military training.

By opening the way for a smaller but longer-term US presence in Afghanistan, the agreement would give western leaders a rationale for supporting Kabul after combat troops are withdrawn in 2014.

It also aims to reassure Afghans the west will not cut and run, and is critical to Afghanistan's financial stability. The World Bank forecasts the country will have a \$7bn (£4.4bn) hole in its annual budget after 2014.

"We are expecting the signature some time before Chicago, although there is no date yet," Faizi said.

Earlier this week it looked as if the pact might have been thrown back into question when Karzai demanded that the US write a pledge for funding of the Afghan security forces into the document.

"They are providing us with money, there is no doubt about that. But they say they will not mention the amount in the agreement. We say: give us less, but mention it in the agreement. Give us less, but write it down," Karzai was reported by the Associated Press to have said in a speech in the capital commemorating a revered Afghan writer.

The international community has informally agreed to spend around \$4bn a year supporting the Afghan police and army, with the bulk of that coming from the US, some from European allies and around \$500m a year from the Afghan budget.

Karzai said he wanted a written commitment of at least \$2bn, rather than a verbal promise of a higher figure, but the deal does not contain any firm figures. The US government were not available for comment.