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## Afghanistan and the American presence: How long? Attempting both to leave by 2014 and stay perhaps for ever

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IN A minibus it takes fully 20 minutes from the helicopter landing strip at Camp Dwyer to the base's main administrative area. Crossing this vast dusty chunk of the Helmand desert you pass a giant new runway capable of accommodating the American air force's biggest cargo planes. Out in the distance a huge plant spews out cement and aggregate for yet more construction. The facility has sprung up from nothing in the past 18 months. In theory it will be redundant in three years, when NATO combat troops are meant to have put themselves out of a job.

Afghanistan is supposedly ploughing ahead with a "transition" strategy in which the national government will be in charge of securing its entire territory by the end of 2014. The process kicked off this week when President Hamid Karzai announced those parts of the country to be handed over entirely to Afghan forces this year. No surprise that Mr Karzai has picked the least war-torn areas. The provinces of Bamiyan and Panjshir have always been anti-Taliban strongholds. Also on the cards for handing over are the relatively calm cities of Mazar-i-Sharif in the north, Herat in the west, Mehtarlam near Kabul and Lashkar Gah in Helmand province. All of Kabul province will be transferred (the city is already in government hands), except the troublesome district of Sarobi.

That is the easy part. Finding other provinces to take charge of will get ever harder. Much depends on the Afghan army and police. They have recruited prodigiously, and NATO countries have spent much on their training. Yet discipline is poor, and the attrition rate high.

Much depends, too, on how the coalition does against the Taliban-led insurgency as the clock runs down. No one believes such a resilient and protean enemy can be completely snuffed out by

2014. In Ghazni last week a senior American official took it as a given that American troops will be patrolling the south-eastern province, now possibly the country's most dangerous, for years to come—though embedded as “advisers”, admittedly, in an overwhelmingly Afghan force.

Afghan officials hold similar views. And so much is phoney in the public debate over “permanent” American bases in the country. As part of negotiations for a long-term “strategic partnership deal”, Mr Karzai says America is demanding bases it can indefinitely call its own. Many Afghans believe America craves such bases to keep Iran, Russia and other regional powers in check. Although America denies that it has aspirations to lodge permanently in Afghanistan, it certainly wants bases for as long as it needs. And though Mr Karzai needs the Americans, anti-Americanism in Afghanistan feels as if it is at an all-time high, after a botched air raid killed nine boys gathering firewood.

Members of Afghanistan's parliament are divided over a permanent American presence, and religious leaders are generally against. Mr Karzai has announced that a loya jirga, a traditional grand gathering of the country's power-brokers, will be convened to decide on the Americans' future. National support for their long-term presence is critical for Mr Karzai. Even so, one high diplomat in Kabul reckons the president won't get it.