

## Prediction from the Financial Times list of challenges for 2012.

Financial Times, 22/12/2011

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### **Afghanistan in 2012: escalating violence and a stampede for the exit**

The collapse of relations between the US and Pakistan and between Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2011 will become much worse in 2012 and will jeopardise the western withdrawal from Afghanistan, as well as the stability of both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Pakistan army's orders to treat the US as an enemy and attack any planes intruding into its territory indicate what could happen in 2012 - a serious fire fight on the border between the two sides; Pakistan turning a blind eye as the Afghan Taliban based in Pakistan continue to attack the Afghan government; more spectacular terrorist attacks in Afghanistan by the Haqqani network; possible terrorist attacks in Europe or the US, which will be traced back to the Pakistani Taliban hideouts in Pakistan's tribal areas; the assassination of top leaders in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The list of ways in which the situation could worsen is endless.

The first casualty of escalating violence will be the peace talks between the Americans and the Afghans. At present it is also difficult to see how or on what terms the US and Pakistan can renew their relationship.

The US relationship with Pakistan will become a hot foreign policy issue in the US elections and loose statements by Republican candidates will further widen the divide between the two countries. The US will pledge to seek an even stronger partnership with India, which will further annoy Pakistan.

Afghanistan faces difficult days in 2012 as the transition to Afghan forces takes place: the Taliban will step up violence and conduct an assassination campaign that will further unnerve Afghan officials and force many to send their families out of the country. The global economic crisis will mean that future aid and cash to support the Afghan economy and armed forces will not be easily forthcoming.

The US will have a hard time rallying international support for Afghanistan at the Nato summit in Chicago in May. Several countries will start withdrawing their troops from Afghanistan early, possibly led by the US - which could set off a stampede resulting in the 2014 exit date being brought forward by a year. That will further demoralise the Afghan government.

*The writer is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, most recently 'Descent into Chaos'*