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U.S. Disrupts Afghans' Tack on Militants

By MATTHEW ROSENBERG

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A bungled attempt by the Afghan government to cultivate a shadowy alliance with Islamist militants escalated into the latest flash point in the troubled relationship between Afghanistan and the United States, according to new accounts by officials from both countries.

The disrupted plan involved Afghan intelligence trying to work with the Pakistan Taliban, allies of Al Qaeda, in order to find a trump card in a baroque regional power game that is likely to intensify after the American withdrawal next year, the officials said. And what started the hard feelings was that the Americans caught them red-handed.

Tipped off to the plan, United States Special Forces raided an Afghan convoy that was ushering a senior Pakistan Taliban militant, Latif Mehsud, to Kabul for secret talks last month, and now have Mr. Mehsud in custody.

Publicly, the Afghan government has described Mr. Mehsud as an insurgent peace emissary. But according to Afghan officials, the ultimate plan was to take revenge on the Pakistani military.

In the murk of intrigue and paranoia that dominates the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Pakistanis have long had the upper hand. A favorite complaint of Afghan officials is how Pakistani military intelligence has sheltered and nurtured the Taliban and supported their insurgency against the Afghan government.

Now, not content to be merely the target of a proxy war, the Afghan government decided to recruit proxies of its own by seeking to aid the Pakistan Taliban in their fight against Pakistan's security forces, according to Afghan officials. And they were beginning to make progress over the past year, they say, before the American raid exposed them.

Although Afghan anger over the raid has been an open issue since it was revealed in news reports this month, it is only now that the full purpose of the Afghan operation that prompted the raid has been detailed by American and Afghan officials. Those officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss secret intelligence matters.

The thinking, Afghan officials said, was that the Afghans could later gain an advantage in negotiations with the Pakistani government by offering to back off their support for the militants.

Aiding the Pakistan Taliban was an "opportunity to bring peace on our terms," one senior Afghan security official said.

From the American standpoint, though, it has exposed a new level of futility in the war effort here. Not only has Washington failed to persuade Pakistan to stop using militants to destabilize its neighbors — a major American foreign policy goal in recent years — but its failure also appears to have persuaded Afghanistan to try the same thing.

Worse still, for American officials, was the Afghans' choice of militant allies. Though the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban are operationally distinct, they are loosely aligned; the Pakistani insurgents, for instance, pledge allegiance to Mullah Muhammad Omar, the founder of the Afghan Taliban. In the estimation of American officials, support for one invariably bleeds into assistance for the other.

At the same time, the Pakistan Taliban shares its base in the tribal areas of Pakistan with a number of Islamist groups that have tried to mount attacks in the West, including the remnants of Al Qaeda's original leadership. The Pakistan Taliban have also showed a willingness to strike beyond the region, unlike the Afghan Taliban. Mr. Mehsud, for instance, is suspected of having a role in the foiled plot to detonate a car bomb in Times Square in 2010, American officials said.

American officials said they were also worried that the Afghan actions would give credibility to Pakistani complaints that enemies based in Afghanistan presented them with a threat equivalent to the Afghan insurgency. No one in the Western intelligence community believes the comparison to be anywhere close, given that the Afghan Taliban insurgency, with help from its Pakistani allies, has killed tens of thousands of people in Afghanistan in the past 12 years, including more than 2,000 Americans.

"What were they thinking?" said one American official of his Afghan counterparts.

Both Afghan and American officials said the Afghan plan to aid the Pakistan Taliban was in its preliminary stages when Mr. Mehsud was seized by American forces. But they agree on little else.

American officials interviewed about the raid say they saved Afghanistan from folly. Pakistan's use of militants has left that country torn by violence with group after group spinning out of the

government's control — the Pakistan Taliban being Exhibit A. The Americans also said it was not clear how much help the Afghans could actually provide the Pakistan Taliban.

In the Afghan telling, the theft of their prized intelligence asset is an egregious example of American bullying, and President Hamid Karzai remains furious about it. Afghan officials assert that Mr. Mehsud's continued detention could still derail a pact to keep American troops here beyond next year, despite the progress toward reaching a deal made during talks this month between Mr. Karzai and Secretary of State John Kerry.

Aimal Faizi, a spokesman for Mr. Karzai, said that Mr. Mehsud had been in contact with officials from the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan's intelligence agency, for "a long period of time."

The Pakistan Taliban leader "was part of an N.D.S. project like every other intelligence agency is doing," Mr. Faizi said in an apparent reference to the support provided to the Afghan Taliban by Pakistan intelligence. "He was cooperating. He was engaged with the N.D.S. — this I can confirm."

Mr. Faizi did not elaborate on the nature of the cooperation. But two other Afghan officials, when asked why they were willing to discuss such a potentially provocative plot, said Mr. Mehsud's detention by the United States had already been exposed — it was first reported by The Washington Post — ruining his value as an intelligence asset and sinking their plan.

As a consolation, the Afghan officials said they now wanted Pakistan to know that Afghanistan could play dirty as well. One said they would try again if given the opportunity.

Afghan officials dismissed American admonishments about the dangers of working with militants as the kind of condescension they have come to expect. No one in Mr. Karzai's government was naïve enough to believe they could turn the Pakistan Taliban into a reliable proxy, said a former Afghan official familiar with the matter.

"I would describe what we wanted to do was foster a mutually beneficial relationship," the former official said. "We've all seen that these people are nobodies — proxies."

Another Afghan official said the logic of the region dictated the need for unseemly alliances. The United States, in fact, has relied on some of Afghanistan's most notorious warlords to fight the insurgency here, the official tartly noted.

"Everyone has an angle," the official said. "That's the way we're thinking. Some people said we needed our own."

Afghan officials said those people included American military officers and C.I.A. operatives. Frustrated by their limited ability to hit Taliban havens in Pakistan, some Americans suggested that the Afghans find a way to do it, they claimed.

So Afghanistan's intelligence agency believed it had a green light from the United States when it was approached by Mr. Mehsud sometime in the past year.

After months of negotiations with Mr. Mehsud, the intelligence agency struck an initial deal, two Afghan officials said: Afghanistan would not harass Pakistan Taliban fighters sheltering in mountains along the border if the insurgents did not attack Afghan forces.

Still, the Afghans decided to keep their relationship with Mr. Mehsud a secret and did not tell American officials.

An American official briefed on Mr. Mehsud's case said there was "absolutely no way" any American would encourage the Afghans to work with the Pakistan Taliban or do anything that could result in attacks on Pakistani forces or civilians, the official said.

"If they thought we'd approve," the American official added, "why did they keep it a secret?"