



CSIRD

Airport and Aviation Security in India: An imperative

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It is reported that the demand for domestic flights is ballooning due to decreasing prices of air-travel, resulting from an increase in competition among airlines as well as rising Indian middle class aspirations. Entry of private aviation players in India after repeal of Air Corporation Act in March 1994 also served to offer new choices for customers¹. However, with rising trends in terror attacks at the airports worldwide, the security of civil aviation in India not just needs a high alert but a firm 'security attitude'.

On 23 June, 2016 while briefing the delegates of United Nations Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee, Secretary-General of International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) Dr. Fang Liu stated the exploitation of international civil aviation by terror groups and foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) for travels². As Islamic State (IS) continues to gain traction and control in Syria and Iraq, the threat to international civil aviation sector routinely pressed on the vulnerability of airport with high volumes of international tourists. The fear and suspicion arises from the agenda of 'Global Jihad' that has been established by terrorist groups such as IS and Al-Qaida.

Regardless of an increasing government crackdown on terrorist cells, a question that remains unanswered is to what extent India can mitigate the terror threat at civil airports? Illicit trade has been the problem since long time in India as airports gives easy facilitation to smuggling and trafficking. Coupled with terror attacks Indian airports were put on high alert on several occasions such as Istanbul and Brussels. As a quick assessment of the situation, threats like a) a self-motivated cyber-radicalised attack b) hijacking for ransom c) random firing and d) suicide attacks comes in picture.

The incidence of threat calls written inside Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport in January this year and repeated threat calls made via telephone at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport reminds the vulnerability of Indian airports towards terror links. Later in July-August, 2016 National Investigation Agency (NIA) raided the IS cell in Hyderabad³. This coincided with Dhaka terror attack in Bangladesh by well-to do and radicalised youth claiming affiliation to IS. In India too such kind of self-motivated cyber-radicalised youth-led attack amounts to definite certainty rather than mere possibilities.

India's Parliamentary Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture⁴ did a thorough review of civil aviation and the report came in December, 2015. It has clearly reported that due to lack of funds and on the basis of 'risk and threat' basis, Indian airports are given a security level under 'Hyper-Sensitive', 'Sensitive' and 'Normal' categories. This shows a lack-lustrous attitude as this flawed categorisation does not clearly have any logic as all the airports possess same vulnerability to terror related incidents. Though it is mandatory to provide a security cover by Central Industrial Security

Forces-Airport Security Group (CISF-ASG) to all 98 operational civil airports, only 59 are currently manned by this specialised group. Remaining comes under respective state police.

The idea of providing two Sky-Marshals on-board to every domestic and international flight to handle the crisis of hijacking and to negotiate with the terrorists does not seem plausible. What if the hijacking takes place in other countries with private and foreign-based airline? Instead, providing negotiation skills to all cabin crew and pilots will help to reduce casualties, if crisis escalates further. One of the ways to negate terror related phenomena at first instance is to have a resilient check-in at entry level.

Bringing Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) with the cover of any passenger vehicle near airport complex entry-point also render possibilities. For example, at Pune airport (a defence cum civil airport) anybody can bring guns up to the ticket counter. Security check-in at the entry during my visit on 22 May 2016 en-route to Bangalore was concentrated on checking an identity proofs. Moreover, despite repeated warnings to negate photography at airport premises many passengers were taking videos and photographs. Entering the airports via fraudulent identity or passports has been reported previously⁵.

While discussing the aviation security informally with an intelligence official in New Delhi, the performance, need and language issues of CISF-ASG personnel came in picture. The reason being argued is their inability to fend cordial communication with international tourists and non-Hindi, non-English speaking passengers. It is argued by many security analysts that instead of CISF-ASG, state police apparatus should be given the task of handling airport security. They are well versed in native language, culture and intelligence collection. This will need large resource mobilization and refinement of aviation administration.

The scientific and technological know-how is important to decrease the threat. Unless India employs indigenous technology, especially cyber components, security arrangements will remain unprotected and subject to misappropriation. As argued by B. Raman, former Additional Secretary in India's Cabinet Secretariat, India's weakness in crisis management and prevention competence needs revocation⁶. This calls for changing the aviation security infrastructure in its earnest sense.

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