



# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Threats to Civil Aviation—Options for Terrorists



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### Prologue

Recently the author made an air trip to Kabul, Afghanistan for a seminar. The knowledge that anonymous air marshals must be on board was reassuring. With the Taliban again reasserting in Afghanistan such thoughts were obvious, especially at a time when the year was drawing to an end. It was 18 years ago on December 24, 1999 that IC-814 was hijacked on a Kathmandu-Delhi flight to finally land in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan at Kandahar. It led to a searing experience for the country which ended on New Year's Eve on December 31, 1999. This article is to keep us alive to the terrorist danger to aviation, lest non-occurrence of such an event make us complacent to its dangers.

### Introduction

General Giulio Douhet who wrote the classic "Command of the Air" saw military bomber aircraft, bombing an enemy state into submission, as the future of warfare. Even his futuristic imagination could not foresee that a civil aviation airplane itself would one day be used as a weapon and the "enemy" would be a non-state. For the world, and especially for Americans, terrorism will forever be

### Key Points

1. Warfare's new face—terrorism, which aims to outwit a stronger foe—has successfully used threats to civil aviation to advance its goals.
2. The two main security threats to civil passenger aircraft are hijacking or a bomb being detonated on board.
3. The weapons that a hijacker requires are only limited by imagination.
4. An aircraft lends itself to be used as a pawn. It is expensive, it is relatively fragile, it is much easier to keep the passengers under control in the restricted aisles, and in case a hijacking is prolonged, food, water and toilets are on board.
5. Threat of harm to air passengers brings to bear powerful public pressure upon democratic governments who have to juggle electoral politics with national interest.
6. There is a vicious cycle to alertness and complacency. Alertness creates deterrence which leads to decline in threats to aviation security. Non-occurrence fuels complacency.
7. It is important that India which is beset by insurgencies or non-state terrorists takes preventive measures and not be hampered by the cost factor of security measures.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an independent think-tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

## Threats to Civil Aviation ...

associated with threats to civil aviation, etched into memory through the video images of airliners slamming into the World Trade Centre Towers. So far the only known attacks of this type were the *Kamikaze*, attacks by desperate Japanese in World War II, who were willing to carry out suicide attacks to save their home islands. But, in that case, it was military aircraft attacking military targets. But now, warfare's new face—terrorism—which aims to outwit a stronger foe has successfully used threats to civil aviation to advance their goals.

The two main security threats to civil passenger aircraft are first, being hijacked, and second, a bomb being detonated on board an aircraft. The first threat is logically with the aim of gaining something through blackmail. The aircraft and its passengers are the valued items threatened to be harmed if the demand is not met. The demand could have a political purpose or be purely personal. It could be to secure asylum, get comrades released from incarceration, make a political statement or to gain a ransom. The second is again for political and personal reasons, the political reason is to punish a government, a people or even to obtain an insurance payout. This article studies hijackings and bombings of civilian airliners with the aim of keeping the security agencies alert, who may become lax in case no incident has taken place for a long time.

### Why Civil Aviation is a Good Target for Terrorists

Civil aviation is a good target because an aircraft lends itself to be used as a pawn. It is expensive, it is relatively fragile, it is much easier to keep the passengers under control in the restricted aisles, and in case a hijacking is prolonged, food, water and toilets are on board. The aircraft has communications, it can travel long distances, the air travellers are relatively more affluent people in society—middle class and above. Threat of harm to them brings to bear powerful public pressure upon democratic governments who have to juggle electoral politics with national interest. The restriction in the movement of hostages (in the case of a hijack) means that far lesser number of hostage takers are required. If a terrorist organisation wants to convey a message to the country they are opposing, their act will have a greater media and psychological impact if they target the flag

carrier of its opponent. Air India is a preferred target for the enemies of India than, say, Jet Airlines or Go Air. The weapons that a hijacker requires are only limited by imagination. An orange disguised as a grenade, a toy pistol, paper knives and real weapons and bombs all have been used to successfully hijack aircraft. In 9/11 the aircraft itself became a "Kamikaze" to convey a message to the USA. Which was, "get out of our land or face similar consequences."

### Hijacking

Hijacking is almost as old as the history of aviation. In legal terms hijacking is the unlawful seizure of an aircraft by an individual or a group. Most aircraft hijackers intend to use the passengers as hostages, either for monetary ransom or for some political or administrative concession by authorities. The first recorded aircraft hijack took place on February 21, 1931 in Peru. A Ford Tri-Motor cargo aircraft was taken over on ground by armed revolutionaries. The event was defused peacefully without any fatalities.

The first hijacking of a commercial flight was of the Cathay Pacific "Miss Macao" on July 17, 1948. Four "Pirates"—the term hijacker came later—attempted to take over the aircraft to rob the rich passengers flying from Hong Kong to Macau. The crew put up stiff resistance in which the pilot was shot and the plane crashed. The only survivor was one of the pirates, a Chinese. Unclear piracy rules and the involvement of multiple countries, the UK (Hong Kong), Taiwan, Portugal (Macau), resulted in only the deportation of the surviving "air pirate" to China.

Hijacking reached its maturity with the hijack of multiple airliners by one group the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) between September 6 and 9, 1970. The first hijacking was of an El Al Israeli flag carrier airliner which was foiled by the crew and air marshals on board, killing one and injuring the other hijacker who was a woman terrorist, Leila Khalid. The hijackings of two American airliners succeeded with one being flown to Cairo and one to Dawson's field in Jordan, a disused ex-RAF airstrip. Lastly, a Swissair airliner and a British Flag carrier (BOAC) were also hijacked and landed at Dawson's field. All aircraft on ground were blown up by the terrorists. All hostages

were safe, some were released straightaway and some others – mainly Jews – were released in exchange for jailed PFLP terrorists, including Leila Khalid.

The first hijacking of an Indian airliner was on January 30, 1971 when an Indian Airlines aircraft flying from Srinagar to Jammu, a Fokker Friendship aircraft “Ganga,” was hijacked by two Kashmiri separatists (the term terrorist was not being used in the world at that time), not without reason, because the deliberate killing of people which characterises terrorism had not become the norm. The aircraft landed in Lahore. The Pakistanis ostensibly negotiated release of the passengers but allowed wide international publicity to the incident. The aircraft was burnt by the separatists, an act that the Pakistanis had helped, to get international media attention towards the Kashmir dispute. Hijackings by Punjab and Kashmir militants and some isolated political hijackings took place subsequently till the very traumatic IC-814 hijacking to Kandahar which is very well known, and its circumstances will not be enumerated here. However, post IC-814 the nation geared up fully to tighten airline security. The conspicuous CISF that we see at our airports and the air marshals that we do not, are the result of that.

### **Bombing**

The first reported civil aviation bombing took place 85 years ago on October 10, 1933 when a United Airlines Boeing 247 carrying four passengers and three crew exploded over Chesterton (Chicago) killing all of them. An unproved Chicago gangland murder was suspected as the motive but is still an unsolved mystery.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to know that the first Indian incident (which was just the third incident in the world) and could be called the first terrorist action, was the bombing of a chartered Air India Lockheed Constellation carrying Chinese and East European delegates to the Bandung Conference. The Chinese in 2004 declassified some documents that this was an attempt to assassinate Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, albeit unsuccessfully because he was not on that airliner having changed his plans.<sup>2</sup> The flight was from Bombay to Bandung via Hong Kong where Zhou Enlai was to board. At about 18,000 feet, a time bomb detonated in the wheel bay of the plane, blowing a hole in the fuel tank. The flight engineer, the

navigator and the first officer escaped. The remaining 16 passengers died on crash-landing in the South China Sea.

Another bombing first for India was the Air India “Kanishka” Boeing 747 bombing on June 23, 1985. The “first” refers to it being the first proven act of air sabotage in commercial aviation. The plane flying from Canada to India was destroyed by a bomb in Irish airspace killing all 329 people on board. The bombing of this flight occurred at the same time that a bomb exploded in Narita airport, Japan while handling luggage meant to be loaded on an Air India aircraft. Canadian investigations spread over 20 years proved that this was the handiwork of Sikh extremists in retaliation for the Indian government’s actions at the Golden Temple in 1984. However only one terrorist was sentenced due to lack of evidence.

### **The New Mutations of Aviation Terrorism**

The most profound mutation was the 9/11 attacks in the USA. Four aircraft were hijacked without the intention of doing any negotiations. The hijackers on each aircraft had one member who could fly the aircraft and navigate it into a target building on a suicide mission. Hitherto there had been human bombs, car bombs and truck bombs used by terrorists for suicide bombings. These were fully fuelled airliners used as bombs. There was no need of explosives and no conventional arms were used to take over the aircraft in the manner it had happened hitherto.

The 9/11 attacks led to a panic revamping of airline security. Cockpits were given stronger doors and no provision to open them from the outside in case the digital lock was disabled from inside. Ironically, this security measure was used by a deranged co-pilot of a A320 Airbus Metrojet flight from Spain to Germany on February 2, 2016 to lock the pilot out when he went to the washroom, and then crash the aircraft in a mountain in the French Alps killing all 150 souls, including the perpetrator.

The all-pervading presence of the computer and Internet means that airlines have no means to ban laptops and phones from flights if they are to remain appealing to travellers, especially business travellers. On February 2, 2016, Daallo Airlines (a private Somali airline) flight

159 departed Mogadishu bound for Djibouti. Shortly after departure, a passenger, seated in a window seat in the sixteenth row, detonated, either knowingly or unwittingly, the improvised explosive device concealed within the laptop computer he had brought on board. It was given to him, after the screening checkpoint, by airport-based employees. The blast ripped a hole in the Airbus' fuselage and sucked the bomber out of the aircraft. But the explosion had taken place at relatively low altitude and the pilot was able to maintain control of the aircraft and return to, and safely land in, the Somali capital.<sup>3</sup> The Somali terrorist group AlShabab confirmed their responsibility; however their target was a Turkish airliner which was cancelled and its passengers moved to the Daallo aircraft. Possibly the bomber who was the only fatality as he was sucked out of the aircraft may not have known when to detonate the bomb. The bomb was detonated as the person put on the laptop at 11,000 feet. Had it exploded at the cruising altitude of over 30,000 feet, the result may have been more catastrophic. The incident has led to greater scrutiny of laptops, smartphones and power-banks while checking in.

### Conclusion

While concluding it is pertinent to bring out the fact that air travel continues to be the safest method of travel as a percentage of fatalities in aviation accidents or terrorist acts. This is because of the strict standard operating procedures in flying that pilots follow and the institutionalised arrangements for carrying out security checks. The Indian Railways carried 8,397 million passengers in the period 2013-14 and had 602 passengers killed and 450 injured in accidents. As per the International Air Transport Association (IATA) there are 504 deaths per year in normal air accidents (figures of a 5-year average).<sup>4</sup> There are no worldwide figures of train accidents available.

Air travel in the past 50 years has grown by leaps and bounds especially in the developing world. Along with that has grown the threat to aviation security from hijackers or bombers. There is a vicious cycle to alertness and complacency. Alertness creates deterrence which leads to decline in threats to aviation security. Non-occurrence fuels complacency; and when a successful terrorist attack happens—especially in the aviation

sector—the impact is always of strategic surprise. Writing on Strategic Surprise, Professor Michael Handel of the US Naval War college has stated that “[Strategic] surprise is almost always unavoidable—and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future—despite all efforts to the contrary.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Professor Richard Betts, a senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations, USA, “Strategic surprise occurs to the degree that the victim does not appreciate whether, when, where, or how the adversary will strike.” He goes on to say that “The key to mitigating the effects of surprise, if not avoiding surprise altogether, is thus seen to lie in more effectively in managing the problem of uncertainty.”<sup>6</sup> In the case of aviation security the uncertainty is the form of threat. Which form of action against civil aviation is preferable to the terrorist perpetrator in the current times? It is important to know this answer to reduce the risk of strategic surprise. With the detailed screening of passengers in the post 9/11 world, getting weapons and large bombs on board are difficult for perpetrators. Passengers are also more prone to taking on hijackers after the 9/11 incident because of the earlier apathy of individual safety interests having been rudely shaken after that incident.

India's most traumatic aviation moment was the December 1999 Kandahar hijacking. Jaswant Singh, the Indian Foreign Minister at that time, who flew the three terrorists being released in exchange for the passengers, has described the incident as “the most trying and searing of experiences ...”.<sup>7</sup> Jaswant Singh does not spell it out, but the “searing” part was the humiliation of the nation. A hijack is a great leveller. A nuclear weapon armed democratic state feels helpless before it. The same is not the case when an airliner of a totalitarian state is the target. Hijackers are less confident of being able to carry out a hijack and negotiate with a dictatorial regime which can overlook public outcry in national interest. The passengers also take on more responsibility because they know that their government will give priority to national interest. Russian and Chinese hijackings have mostly been by asylum seekers. An exception was the Tianjin Airlines Flight 7554 between Hotan and Ürümqi

## ... Options for Terrorists

which was hijacked by six Uighur militants on June 29, 2012. The crew and passengers resisted—killing two and wounding two militants, and overpowering the balance two; 11 passengers and crew were injured.

It is likely that democratic states which have been “soft” and let their guard down will be targeted more by hijacking, and totalitarian states by bombs. It is important that countries like India which are beset by a number of insurgencies or non-state terrorists must take preventive measures and not be hampered by the cost factor of security measures. With Indian civil aviation expected to grow very rapidly it is essential that India’s sky marshal programme, manned by the NSG, remains robust and is not watered down on the altar of profitability by airlines who do not want to bear the cost of the

programme. So also, the checks at airports by the CISF should not become lax if passenger growth overtakes the number of personnel provided for security checks. Passenger traffic has doubled in the past four years and is expected to triple by 2020 as per statements of the Aviation Minister in various fora.<sup>8</sup> Security measures must keep pace.

The counter-terrorism expert Walter Lacquer writing in 1996 said, “Terrorist operations have changed somewhat. Airline hijackings have become rare, since hijacked planes cannot stay in the air forever, and few countries are willing to let them land.... Terrorists [are also] seeing diminishing returns on hijackings.”<sup>9</sup>

Three years later the Kandahar hijacking took place and five years later – 9/11.

### Notes

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