

Hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814

The Indian Airlines' Flight 814 was hijacked after it took off from Nepal's capital Kathmandu on December 24, 1999. Over the next eight days, as the aircraft was taken to various destinations in the region, it was revealed that the hijackers belonged to a Pakistan-based Kashmiri terrorist group. The objective of the hijack was to secure the release of its leaders and ideologues under captivity in India. The crisis ended on December 31, 1999 with the release of hostages in exchange for three terrorists from Indian captivity.

For the Crisis Management Group (CMG) designated in India to deal with the hijacking, it involved urgency with evident issues of risk to human lives and enforcing the law. Equally important were deeper issues such as countering threat to its national security, upholding India's sovereignty, and maintaining morale of its security forces. The crisis resolution had a significant aftermath that impacted regional security, the peace process between India and Pakistan, and the world security scenario. Several lessons emerge from the handling of this crisis that deserve incorporation in crisis plans for the future. Lok Ranjan has written a study focusing on the decision making process during the acute phase of managing the crisis of the hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814.

Historical Background

The roots of the crisis go back to Indian independence from British rule in August 1947, when Pakistan was created on the basis of religious identity, with Muslim majority areas. Accession of Kashmir, formerly a princely state, to India has been a source of dispute ever since. Its major land area is constituted now as the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. About one-third of its land area is termed as Pak-occupied (or Azaad - independent, actually in Pakistan control) Kashmir. Initially, the dispute was over which of the two nations had a justifiable claim over this territory. Subsequent developments resulted in a complex matrix of many significant players and



Taliban militiamen in pickup trucks arrive at the hijacked Indian Airlines plane as to beef up the security, Thursday, Dec. 30, 1999 at Kandahar airport in southern Afghanistan. (AP Photo/B.K. Bangash)

ideas, including proponents of its independence. The extreme militant school of thought advocates freeing and converting the Indian state into an exclusively Muslim region ; with assistance from Pakistan, other Islamic nations and fundamentalist groups and justifies the adoption of militancy and terrorism against its opponents—the Indian state, its security forces, its agents, and non-

Muslim citizen—as jihad or “holy war”.

Immediate Context

The Indian military and security forces had been deployed in Jammu and Kashmir for a long time to control militant and terrorist groups. They had gained considerable ascendancy and control over a long stretch of time in mid-nineties (1993-98) and militancy was on the wane. Several self-proclaimed militant leaders and fundamentalist ideologues of various jihad organizations had been arrested during that time. The cohorts of the arrested extremists had in the past pressed for their release by resorting to taking international tourists hostage. However, the Indian government had at that time taken a firm stand and refused to release the arrested militants. Some intelligence information immediately before the hijacking revealed the possible intent of Kashmiri militant groups to carry out a sensational strike as a show of strength. The hijacking of Indian Airline Flight 814, which triggered the crisis under study in this report, was such an act.

Challenges and Consequences

In coordinating the handling of the crisis, the CMG as the official body faced many important challenges.

- **Constraining the hijacked plane within India** was critical for better control of process and options in dealing with the hijackers. This required readiness for use of force and immobilization of the aircraft, but the commando team was not able to move for timely counteraction. Attempts to immobilize the aircraft without adequate force led the hijackers to resort to stabbing hostages in desperation, thus endangering human lives. Simultaneous under-estimation of the fuel reserves of the aircraft allowed the hijackers take the plane out of Indian territory, eliminating related options.

- **Identifying and commencing contact with hijackers** was necessary to end uncertainty over their demands and formulate response. The pre-requisite of detaining the aircraft was attempted initially at Lahore in Pakistan and later Dubai in UAE, by conveying requests through the External Affairs Ministry. The reluctance of Pakistani authorities to cooperate fully in the crisis management, though partly expected given the uneasy relations, helped form CMG's provisional identification of the hijackers as Islamic Kashmiri militants.

- **Detaining the plane in a moderate Islamic country,** less sympathetic to Kashmir militants was believed to put pressure on hijackers through the Islamic regimes to release passengers. The likely unwillingness of these regimes was countered through diplomatic channels, particularly the US. The strategy worked partially as United Arab Emirates (UAE) allowed the hijacked plane to land and negotiated the release of 26 hostages. While the landing at Al-Minhat military airbase had allowed the possibility of storming the aircraft if required, the concerns of UAE authorities on this potential embarrassment could not be sufficiently allayed; and they allowed the plane to refuel and leave for Kabul in Afghanistan.

- **Commencing direct negotiations with the hijackers and working with a rogue regime** that India did not recognize or have contact with became imperative for the safety of the hostages once the hijacked plane landed at Kandahar in Afghanistan. The identity disclosure and their first expression of demands made clear that the hijackers could rely on empathy from the radical Islamic Taliban. CMG decided to mobilize the international community and the UN humanitarian coordinator for Afghanistan, which elicited the cooperation of the Taliban towards the explicit humane demands for release of hostages and broad support for Indian negotiators over several days.

- **Using force to take charge of the situation without**

giving in to the hijackers' demands was a significant decision option for the CMG. It appears that CMG had suggested to the Taliban authorities—in the backdrop of the repeated threats from hijackers—to break off with negotiations and harm the hostages. Even while rejecting this course of action, the Taliban were constrained to strengthen their own forces around the aircraft and influence the hijackers to continue negotiations while scaling down the threat of use of force against the hostages

- Having a face-saving final settlement to the crisis became the focus once the use of Indian forces proved infeasible. The urgency for closure of crisis led to considering concessions to the hijackers' demands. A national political buy-in for release of imprisoned militants failed when the opposition boycotted the all-party meeting. The release of three militants was perceived as a much smaller concession than the hijackers' original demand. Handing over the terrorists to the Taliban, yet demanding that they and the hijackers be treated in conformity with criminal law, was done to dissociate India from any decision otherwise.

Crisis Resolution Aftermath

- **Security Forces Morale:** The Indian army, paramilitary, and intelligence agencies were critical of their comparative non-involvement and of the compromise inherent in the final solution. The solution considerable consternation to them since their personnel put their lives on the line to get these terrorists behind bars in the first place. To them, this solution revealed a differentiation in the life of a soldier and their civilian counterparts.

- **Provocation to Terrorism against India:** Maulana Masood Azhar, floated Jaish-e-Mohammad, a new radical outfit, after his release and traveled around in Pakistan to rejuvenate Harkat-ul-Ansar cadres; and Mushtaq Ahmad Zargar started preparing Pakistani youth both for jihad against India. These militant groups exploited their perceived victory in the hostage crisis, attracting more sponsors and recruits. Increased terrorist activities culminated in an attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, a serious symbolic challenge to the Indian state.

- **Regional / Global Security Threat:** The hijacking and subsequent increase in terrorism elicited strong Indian response in the form of military mobilization close to its border. Devised to assert sovereignty and to counter perceptions of India as a soft state, this mobilization derailed the India-Pakistan peace initiatives and increased the long-term threat to regional and world security. The networking of terrorists also intensified the threat to international

security beyond the visible elements of the immediate crisis. Support was provided by groups owing allegiance to Osama bin Laden. Those groups then emerged stronger in the eyes of their supporters and sponsors. International intelligence sharing was inadequate partially due to the perception of this crisis as one-off and less significant—an underassessment that eventually led to more tragic and heinous terrorist actions.

Lessons for the Future

• **Better Handling of Terrorist Cases:** The adopting and timely implementation of strict laws allowing conclusive justice and punishment of arrested terrorists and foreign mercenaries deserves serious consideration. Detention without conclusion of the judicial process undermines the efficacy of India to deal with the subversion of its interests. The portrayal of extremists' detentions as not legal acts as trigger for terrorist activities to demand their release and provide bargaining chips in terrorist blackmail situations.

• **Improved Intelligence:** Since the region is a hotbed of extremist movements, the importance of intelligence-gathering and prompt sharing needs to be emphasized. Possible support bases and sanctuaries for these extremists need to be mapped. The international activities of supporters and sponsors of these groups also need to be under better surveillance, in better coordination of intelligence agencies.

• **Higher Security Sensitization for Airlines:** Standards for checking and frisking airline passengers at entry points need to be made more stringent through deployment of security personnel. Frequent security audits of airport and airline security should be conducted, both within India and also throughout. The crew should be trained and equipped to disallow forcible entry of unauthorized persons into the

cockpit and to immobilize aircraft to enhance later bargaining leverage.

• **Preparedness for Handling Hijackings:** Frequent mock drills need to be carried out as per the contingency plan provisions. Use of fire engine and ambulances, for preventing subsequent take off by a hijacked plane should be a part of the drill. The planning should be carried out with attention to safety to avoid errors borne out of overconfidence. The presence of commando units should be ensured in the shortest possible time at the first possible site, independent of other agents.

• **Balancing Risk to Human Lives:** A clear policy needs to be developed on the sensitive issue of concessions to terrorists vis-a-vis risk to civilian lives, in accordance with international practice and convention. Serious incidents like hijackings should be handled with adequate firmness even if it is risking some lives. Resulting perceptions of illegitimacy and wider condemnation could deter perpetrators. The stand would however be weakened by each incident of compromise, which can result in much larger negative fall-outs at much greater costs.

• **Media and Information Management:** Proper, sufficient, official information should be given to the media for correct portrayal of the crisis situation. Inadequate reliable information leads media coverage to tend to sensationalize and portray the authorities poorly. Controlling access to operational areas is essential to avoid confidentiality violations and misreports. Adverse media reporting about the lack of progress or dissent within higher decision making agencies needs to be countered in a timely manner to avoid escalated public anxiety and pressure upon the government to compromise.



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