

Money Control

Aviation | India's airport security has many flaws. It needs an urgent review

In addition to stringent security screening of ground handling agency (GHA) staff entering the airport side, it may be time to review the security, and increase the restrictions imposed on GHAs whose origin is in a country that does not have cordial ties with India

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DECEMBER 02, 2021 / 04:17 PM IST



Representative Image

The aviation sector is highly prone to security issues. Over the last 90 years, there have been many instances where aircraft have been hijacked. But what stands out and sends shivers down the spine is the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in the United States where

four aircraft were hijacked, and flown into the Twin Towers in New York City, and the Pentagon in Washington DC.

Almost two years prior to that, on December 24, 1999, IC 814, an Indian commercial aircraft, was hijacked from Kathmandu in Nepal by Taliban terrorists, and taken to Kandahar in Afghanistan via Amritsar (India) and Dubai (UAE). India paid a heavy price to secure the release of the 100-plus hostages by freeing three terrorist from Indian jails who later were the masterminds behind several terror attacks on India.

In this context, **the recent news** on more security jobs being given to private agencies at India's airports needs greater consideration. One must remember that security at airports in the US were handled by private companies paid by airlines using undertrained staff when the 9/11 attacks occurred.

Aviation security is an ongoing process, which needs constant vigil, and technology upgrade. For example, drones are now a common, and easily available flying object. While the Union government is aware of its great advantages in the civil sector, its potential to cause harm is alarming. News of **arms and ammunition being dropped from across the border** from Pakistan using drones are disturbingly frequent. The **June 27 attack** on the Jammu Air Force Base by two small explosive laden drones has been a matter of grave concern. However, we have yet to install or develop or import anti-drone systems for our various airports, and other important structures across India.

Just as we need to guard against threats from outside, we must be vigilant about threats from inside the airport. A sabotage of an airport from within is a matter requiring great precaution, and scrutiny. While all persons working inside an airport need to be fully screened, and the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) is dedicated to it, ground handling at airports remains a matter of concern, and it could even a potential blind spot. Remember that workers of a Ground Handling Agency (GHA) have access to the inside of commercial aircraft for cleaning and cargo handling.

In addition to stringent security screening of GHA staff entering the airport side, it may be time to review the security, and increase the

restrictions imposed on GHAs whose origin is in a country that does not have cordial ties with India. It is an entirely different debate on whether to allow self-handling by airlines, or concentrate only on a few GHAs. Currently **100 percent Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in GHAs is allowed.**

While GHAs originating in Pakistan or China would certainly not pass the test, what about a GHA (Celebi) with its origin in Turkey that is now operating across airports in India; namely Mumbai, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Kochi, Kannur, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad?

Turkey, which was until recently considered a friendly country, is now adopting a hawkish approach towards India, especially to New Delhi's policies in Kashmir. Ankara has made **anti-India statements in the United Nations as well.** On this front, it has **joined hands with Pakistan and Malaysia.** Even more damaging are **the recent reports that it has worked with Pakistan and China to prop up Taliban in Afghanistan.** It is openly working in defiance to its membership of NATO. It is part of a group of nations of which India should be wary of.

Another reason for India to be concerned is that **in October Turkey was put under the infamous 'grey list' of the FATF (Financial Action Task Force).** The FATF is an intergovernmental organisation founded in 1989 on the initiative of the G7 to develop policies to combat money laundering. In 2001, the FATF's mandate was expanded to include terrorism financing. Turkey joins a group of 23 countries, including Pakistan. What should be of concern for India is the growing Ankara-Islamabad bonhomie, especially since Imran Khan took office as Pakistan's Prime Minister?

The question that needs to be asked here is whether it is safe for India to allow a company that originates from a country on the FATF's grey list to operate in a sensitive sector such as aviation.

While the company in itself has been cleared by the BCAS, should Turkey coming under the FATF grey list raise a red flag? As mentioned earlier in this article, there is little room for a lapse when it comes to security, especially in the aviation space. Put in other words, since Turkey is vociferously anti-India, and it is suspected/accused of money laundering and financing terror, can the ground handling operations of India's major airports be left to a company with its roots in Turkey?

This discussion opens up two other angles as well. One, is it time we review the 100 percent FDI clause in GHAs? As the dimensions of threats increase, should we rely on dedicated wings of our armed forces? Two, does India's airport GHA policy need an Aatmanirbhar Bharat push?

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