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Adapting Security To New & Emerging Threats In Foreign Relations: Aviation Security & Ground Handling Issues

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Aviation and foreign relations have been interconnected the world over. So many hijackings have taken place for a political cause worldwide. In India the two hijackings of 31st December 1999 of an Indian Airlines aircraft to Khandahar in Afghanistan and

in 1971 from Srinagar to Lahore, Pakistan are reminders. 9/11 incident in the US is also a reminder of the same.

In India Aviation security has been a high security issue ever since bomb explosion in the baggage hold of Air India flight from Toronto to London in 1985 killing all 329 persons on board and simultaneous abortive bombing of another Air India flight from Canada from its luggage in Tokyo airport. This was due to poor security of baggage handling at Canadian airports.

In order to tighten up security at Indian airports even the services State police forces, who were in charge of airport security, were dispensed with in the year 2000 and replaced by a uniform security force for all airports called the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF).

The second most sensitive area of aviation security is Ground Handling. However, on the issue of Ground Handling (GH) many airlines, both domestic and international wanted to do their own ground handling as they claimed that they are more efficient than the Ground Handling Agencies (GHA) available at the airports. This debate went up and down but looking at the international trends, increasing congestion at the Airports, it was felt that GHAs and not self handling by airlines was the answer.

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All GH and GHA need thorough security clearance. Airlines going in for self handling started using labour contractors whose employees were contractual and changing. Their security clearances was an issue as each employee entering the airport has to be security cleared which cannot be done quickly. Therefore, the security police want a labour force which is permanent in nature. The second issue was that of security clearance of the GHA management itself. As government had allowed FDI in GH upto 75% by automatic route and 100% with prior approval, new security issues with regards to the GHA itself has come up.

In 2002 all foreign GHAs were debarred from working in Indian Airports. This was when the issue of accepting a bid from Dubai based ground handler Dnata came up. It was found that Dnata had nearly 100 retired Pakistani Air Force officials on its rolls which became a matter of concern and therefore, permission was held back. Subsequently, FDI in GH was allowed upto 74% by automatic route and 100% with permission.

Under the existing FDI rules a Turkish GH company called Celebi is active in India. Çelebi Aviation, one of the largest independent ground handling companies in India, has been in the country for more than a decade now, carrying out ground handling operations at seven major airports of the country, including Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Kochi, Ahmedabad and Kannur. The company employs around 8,000 people in India and is planning to expand its operations to other airports as well. In addition to ground handling services, the company also started providing cargo and warehousing services in 2009 with the establishment of Delhi Cargo Terminal Management India, the terminal that was previously wholly run by the government.

Turkey, of late, has started making anti- India noises. It has raised the issue of Kashmir many times even in the United Nations. India has officially reprimanded Turkey for interfering in India's domestic affairs. Reports are emanating that it is funding ISIS abroad and funding Islamist groups in India from Kashmir to Kerala to radicalise India and create an Anti India posture within the Indian Muslims. Under these circumstances the issue of continuing the existing security clearance given to this Turkish company needs a review. As security concerns are dynamic, a change towards a hostile Turkish foreign policy towards India needs to constantly review its security approvals in the sensitive areas like ground handling. Chinese companies have been denied business in India too on these grounds through modification of FEMA rules. As a matter of fact, it has been reported that roadways contract to Turkish companies have been denied in recent past on these grounds. Why then a Turkish company has been allowed to work and expand in ground handling space in the Indian Airports- a critical security risk?

Considering the present hostile attitude of Turkey towards India, letting a Turkish company to go for Ground Handling in Indian Airports, that too Delhi, sounds not only dangerous but inviting a major security breach. Further while India has extended FEMA rules of investment in India to all countries sharing a land border under prior approval and not automatic to avoid Chinese takeover of Indian companies- this should be extended to other countries hostile to our policies. Incidentally, in 2019 Austrian government awarded license for ground handling to another company at the Vienna Airport forcing Celebi to terminate its contract with all airline customers for baggage, passenger handling they were doing. No specific reasons were given.

In view of the above, there is a definite need to reconsider foreign participation in sensitive areas of Aviation sector, especially in ground handling. In fact, there is a need to reconsider our FDI policy in this sector, specially as we have espoused Atmanirbhav Policy for the country.

Our existing Indian companies having matured are fully capable of providing such services at international standards and will meet our security concerns

also. Therefore, the need to reduce or even do away with FDI in ground handling, which is labour intensive, should be considered seriously on security grounds.

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