

Lessons from Entebbe and Kandahar Leadership and Strategic Capability

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The hostage release operations at Entebbe (Uganda, 1976) and Kandahar (Afghanistan, 1999) are studies in contrast from the point of view of classic phases in hostage crises and the respective responses of the state actors. The strategic centrality of the hostage takers' demands is emphasized as the key dynamic that sets a series of option-searching and decision-making acts in motion. The various preconditioning factors determining the interests of hostage takers and state actors in the developing crises are traced out, in addition to an analysis of why the Indian response to Kandahar was operationally and strategically flawed, with a long-term impact on India's hostage doctrine.

Two Crises, Two Outcomes

July 4, 1976, and December 31, 1999, are crucial dates that changed the way two important democracies facing the most

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protracted and destructive territorial disputes (Palestine and Kashmir) respectively faced their 'moment of truth' with different strategies, styles, tactics, capabilities and end results. These divergent challenges, decisions and responses had dramatic and lasting impact on the two nations' counter-terror doctrines and on their popular psyche.

The first of these incidents ended in Entebbe in Uganda with the forced storming, extraction of hostages and execution of all directly involved terrorists by Israeli commandos.

The second ended in Kandahar in Afghanistan, marked by the negotiated release of hostages with the exchange of crucial previously arrested terrorist assets, including motivationally and doctrinally important leaders.

Both events deeply affected post-incident national attitudes: the first marked by dynamic optimism and progressive though prolonged negotiations towards a political solution for the underlying problem; the second tainted by low morale, open drift and weakness in the political leadership, escalated terrorist violence, including attacks on audaciously demonstrative targets such as the Indian Parliament using suicide squads, successful strikes at numerous chosen targets by militants, and a state of general pessimism, lack of confidence and indignity amongst the responding (security) community.

Both, therefore, were rare instances of crucial successes: one from a State's point of view and the other from an anti-State actor's point of view. Entebbe reflected the military and strategic supremacy of Israel, which could not possibly be regionally challenged any further, at that stage, by Palestinian capabilities; while Kandahar brutally reminded India that all its strength in conventional and strategic forces did not necessarily add up to overcome the leadership challenge which – combined with a series of real-time tactical errors characterized by an intensely risk averse and bureaucratic decision-making process, and by the extreme lack of accountability of systems – established a legacy of capitulation and extreme willingness to accept soft options. The Indian response demonstrated unambiguously that strategic goals tended to be ignored or pushed to the background by posturing and ephemeral, rhetorical, highly questionable and

whimsical policies unfortunately thrust upon the nation arbitrarily.

Entebbe successfully demonstrated the effectiveness and reach of Israel's swift military capability. Kandahar once again exposed India's faction ridden political mosaic, incoherent and uncoordinated policing and public service system, weaknesses in in-country and foreign intelligence coordination, poor development of strategy and tactical apparatus , and, overall, an unaccountable and capricious leadership at the moment of crisis.

Worse, the manifest failures to arrive at timely decisions and the faulty decisions taken by senior executives and political leaders in India were never systematically examined *post facto* by any suitable public investigation, and no accountability was ever fixed. The 'lessons not learnt and refused to be learnt' further exposed India's aviation sector, which is a key national asset for terrorist takeovers and even catastrophic attacks like September 11, 2001.

This paper explores eight crucial aspects of the Entebbe and Kandahar crises and looks for learning points from the Israeli and Indian experience.

Aviation hostage crises in history

After the September 2001 attacks in New York, the issue of aviation security in the context of terrorist takeovers of civilian aircraft has assumed new significance. The 9/11 attack also marked a profound tactical departure from conventional hostage-taking, which was defensive, to the new and deadly combination of human shields, aircraft fuselages as missiles, huge quantities of aviation fuel as warheads, and the tactical choice of high visibility targets, to enhance the damage potential to the level of weapons of mass destruction.

The first wave of hijackings in the post-World War II era was mostly done by convicts or refugees escaping from communist countries, or political dissenters, fleeing hostile regimes. An analysis of all hijacking incidents since 1947 shows that 61 per

cent of these were committed to facilitate refugee escapes.¹ Hijackings exploded between 1968 and 1969, at the peak of the Cold War – nuclear deterrence was, paradoxically, threatening civil aviation security. In 1969, there were 82 hijack attempts in the World, more than the total number of attempts in the preceding two decades between 1947 and 1967.² After 1968, a majority of hijackings were executed by US's criminals fleeing for Cuba or in attempts to escalate the Israel–Palestinian conflict, where terrorists used hijacking as a political weapon to publicize their cause and to secure release of key Palestinian terrorist assets from prisons.

The anti–Hijack measures initiated in the US from 1973 and diplomatic initiatives such as the US–Cuba hijack pact substantially reduced hijacks after the 1967 – 1976 period, when total incidents peaked, with 385 events world wide.³ Between 1977 and 1986, the phenomenon declined, with 200 incidents, a level roughly maintained in the succeeding decade, with 212 incidents between 1987 and 1996.⁴

Between 1980 and 1990, however, terrorists shifted attention to larger transport aircraft as 'stunt terrorism' targets. The Air India bombing in 1985 near Canada and the Pan Am bombing over Lockerbie (UK) in 1988 demonstrated this trend. However, hostage-hijacks continued as an instrument to coerce state actors to give concessions to prisoners. The TWA hijack to Beirut in 1989 and the Kuwait Airways hijack of 1988 were successful from the terrorist point of view. On the other hand, the December 1994 hijacks by the armed Algerian Islamic Group (GIA) resulted in French Gendarmerie storming the aircraft and releasing all passengers and troops in Marseilles.

When suicide hijackers gain control of an aircraft, it is critical that the information regarding its flight path and possible target or destination is conveyed as rapidly as possible to crisis decision makers and that air traffic control, civilian and military authorities coordinate all emergency action. Post 9/11, aircraft

¹ Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response*, London: Frank Cass, 2001, p. 161.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

have become potential weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Countries like France have deployed surface to air missiles around key political targets to provide swifter responses than interception by fighter aircraft. Countries including India are also establishing 'no fly zones' and well rehearsed plans to prevent 'suicide sabotage' scenarios. With these, combined with a high degree of boarding gate and in-flight security, aviation experts hope to contain the challenge.

An interesting technological innovation which would prevent purposeful sabotage is a computer programme called Robolander which will allow the ground air traffic controller to override the manual aircraft landing system and land the craft safely, despite manifest control by the pilot, thus avoiding the incentive for the hijackers to harm passengers or pilots. Adoption of this system will, however, be time-consuming and demands a high degree of international coordination and standardization. The chance of the Air Traffic Control (ATC) itself becoming the target of hijack, subterfuge and takeover cannot, moreover, be ruled out once such a system is established.

The Kinetics of Entebbe and Kandahar

Both Entebbe and Kandahar have all the classic phases of an aviation hostage crisis. Though separated by more than 23 years in time, and by radical intervening changes in the polarity of global political arrangements, a quantum jump in military hardware, the digitization of signals and warfare, internet and more sophisticated satellite and human intelligence systems, they broadly conform to established patterns in the tricks, tactics and strategies of a hostage taker.

Centrality and dynamics of objective and aggressors' demand

The primary attribute of the hostage taker/hijacker is the absolute clarity of his/her objective and stake in the process. The sophisticated scheming and tactics adopted by them follows a doctrine which is established at fairly high levels of the terror organization's hierarchy. The strategic objective of the Entebbe hostage takers, the People's Liberation Front of Palestine (PLFP)

and the Kandahar hijackers, the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) with the support of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's external intelligence agency, was to secure the release of some of their key leadership and operatives jailed in the States fighting the terrorist organizations.

The Entebbe incident involved Flight 139, an Air France Jet carrying 256 passengers and 12 crew members, flying from Tel Aviv (Israel) through Athens (Greece) to Paris (France). Here, the hijackers demanded the release of about 50 terrorist leaders and supporters jailed in many countries, including Israel, France and Kenya. In retrospect, by this tactical blunder in demanding an internationally unattainable objective, the hijackers forced Israel to seriously consider, plan and finally execute the military operation at Entebbe. The successful IC 814 hijacking involved an Indian Airlines plane with 178 passengers and 11 crew members aboard. In this case, the hijackers exhibited great flexibility and political awareness to narrow their tactical objective down to the release of just three key militants jailed within their target country, India, down from the release of 36 terrorists originally demanded. The hijackers also showed willingness to drop two possibly difficult demands – the recovery of the dead body of a terrorist and demands for a ransom (stated at USD 200 million), in addition to tactical concessions exchanged with national authorities during the flights interim halt at Dubai (release of some women and some children for food and fuel). With military support from the then Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and overt support from the ISI, eventual negotiated settlement ended the game very much on the hijackers' terms.

The lesson for all future possible hijackers from the limited and precise nature of the HuM demands is that demands which tend to be successful have a borderline status of possible political acceptability, with the target Government being able to make an explicit case that the outcome does not amount to a major setback or an outright military defeat. Demands, consequently, need more than amateur consideration; they need to be weighed for tactical superiority, objective, morale, possibility of compliance by the state actor, and flexibility to scale down to essentials. The demands should never be set at a level that compels military action as the only option left for key decision-maker in the target

country. The outcome must be politically marketable, and must not cross the threshold into a 'no go' situation, forcing a radical military response. Steeper demands can only be supported with much weightier stakes, such as VIP hostages or WMD, to force the target State to play the game on the terrorists' terms.

Choice of space and time

In both Entebbe and Kandahar, the hijackers used a third territory, where the threat perception to stage and board the aircraft was lower. In the Entebbe case, Athens was much less guarded as a target airport and the metal detector was not even manned. The hijackers showed initiative and imagination in striking at the point of least resistance. For Entebbe, the four 'muscle hijackers' – two Arabs and two terrorists for hire who were German nationals – transferred in transit from Singapore Airline flight 763 from Bahrain. In the IC 814 case, which ended at Kandahar, the transfer of five hijackers was from a Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) aircraft again through transit at Kathmandu (Nepal). In this critical event at Kathmandu, the complicity of an ISI officer has been established beyond doubt by local authorities.⁵ However, some complicity of the security details in Kathmandu cannot be ruled out. In addition to the hand guns and Kalashnikovs the hijackers brandished at onset of the crisis, they also subsequently accessed a large cache of ammunition stowed in the baggage hold of the aircraft, once the flight landed at Kandahar.

Flight 139 was hijacked immediately after departure from Athens. Flight IC 814 was hijacked after a short delay, about 20 minutes into the flight, after entering Indian territory. The hijackers waited tactically for the cockpit hatch to be opened for beverage services so establishing control over the pilots could be easier. Both takeovers were rapid: less than a minute long and executed very quickly, with full coordination, precision and role clarity. Kinetic analysis reveals repeated rehearsals. Hijackers typically sprung to the aisles and brandished weapons, attacked

⁵ Praveen Swami, "Bowling to Terrorism," *Frontline*, Chennai, vol. 17, no. 01, January 8-21, 2000.

some closer passengers with bare hands or the butt of weapons and ensured that the entire passenger cabin received the shocking message loud and clear. It is likely that the hijackers rehearsed this phase repeatedly, since the potential for resistance or violence at this point during the crisis tends to be at a maximum.

Neutralizing any potential resistance at the very beginning, if necessary, by hurting a passenger or two who show poor or late compliance to orders, is a stunning tactic used by many hijackers. Subjugation to the fear of brandished weapons and taking cover from possible bodily hurt is the key theme in the minds of the hostages and they barely think about the medium term outcome or finale of the unfolding drama. The tactical objective of hijackers is to dominate the aisles and segregate passengers, with military-aged males (MaM) securely tied up and at close gunpoint. In most instances, they are the first targets of 'humane' execution.

Choice of staging for negotiation

The first onset phase usually ends with the hijackers securing and positioning the craft and hostages for negotiation and easy selective targeting, in case they resort to execution. Family members are segregated from each other and males, females and children seated separately. By the time the craft is positioned or stabilized, the key issue in the demands would be exchanged between the hostages and negotiators or/and state party involved. In this phase, the hijackers would vehemently try to evade the state party's territory, particularly after the well publicized positioning of anti-hijack squads in striking distance from most important civil airports in strategic locations. In the Entebbe case, the hijackers, with the help of their political masters, chose Libya and Uganda as successive interim locations, where no hostility to their political cause was to be expected. Landing in Libya was planned for refueling. The Libyan, Pakistani (Lahore) and Dubai leaderships behaved similarly. They allowed refueling and replenishment of food and cleaning, but refused to entertain the other demands, such as extended stay. The choice of Uganda under dictator Idi Amin, who helped the Palestinian hijackers overtly, and of Kandahar, where the anti-Indian hijackers expected and promptly received military, logistical and political

support from the Taliban, with whom India was yet to establish any diplomatic relationship after their take-over of the country in 1996, demonstrate this point. Israel also had no direct diplomatic relations with Uganda and Amin's enmity to Israel and his support to the Palestinian cause at that time was well known.

Stabilisation Phase

Once the status quo between the hijackers and the hostages is established and the rules of engagement are clear to both parties, the hijack could be considered to be stabilised or poised for resolution or escalation, depending on the next strategic moves by the actors. The instances under present analysis entered the phase of stabilization as soon as the craft touched down in Entebbe and the hostages were secured in the old terminal block there; and, in the Indian case, as they were securely held in the cold aircraft on the Kandahar tarmac, freed from any risk of assault from Indian Forces. This phase demonstrated the clear domination of, and control of the tactical initiative by, the hijackers. They held the bargaining chips the option of declaring and altering the deadlines and specific threats of execution of or harm to hostages at frequent intervals.

The idea is to allow domestic pressure on the hostage community to escalate and counter-balance the apparent political inconvenience of the decisions demanded. Deadlines of less than 24 hours are counter productive here. Sufficient time is allowed for media to expand story as well as concentrate attack on the state actors, usually for their presumed indecision and inaction. Since there is no exigency on their part on account of immediate threat and since they are well defended by friendly national troops, the key choice left before the state actor is to choose between negotiated processes or the option of military force. Apart from debating the particular concessions sought, this is the central dilemma of the state actor in any air hostage crisis. The constraints on state actors in such cases include the total lack of control in the territory where stabilisation has been engineered, possible problems with international law of aggression, and air traffic access; and the potential of full casualty, which may domestically be perceived as a political and military defeat.

The Non-choice of No-negotiation

There are two negotiation models in vogue (1) the US / Israel professed model of no negotiations with terrorists; and (2) the pragmatic model of talking formally to avoid/delay harm, and simultaneously explore force or political options, as frequently adopted by India and many other countries. The engagement of negotiators is however inevitable in either case. Even US and Israel negotiate through the national party in the holding territory or through third parties, at least for the level of logistics and supplies. Entirely cutting off communications with the craft or the hijackers is never an option, since they can always sacrifice a token hostage to force the reopening of the doors of negotiation or take even more drastic actions.

Once negotiators from, or representing, the target country are positioned and engaged, the onus of problem solving is shifts to the target country. The highest executive authority will have to consider the often politically damaging demands, while the military option may resurface if a credible plan is offered and mounted at this stage. Here, the military leadership, if consulted right from the beginning, can explore windows of professional opportunity.

One clear rule to be kept in mind, from classic negotiation theory is that the negotiators mandate must be fixed hourly or even more frequently by the political advisors and key functionaries in charge. The force option, if planned, must not be known at all to the negotiators. If the storming is planned it must be done by a separate team and the principal negotiator must be given the mandate of distracting the lead terrorist. Before the storming action is initiated, no word of it must even be contemplated in the negotiation room. Even the slightest hint of the option of force being explored in the voice or tenor of the negotiator can provoke a catastrophic ending.

Clearly, in both the Entebbe and the Kandahar instances, the stabilisation phase started on day three and four, respectively. In the Israeli case, the hijackers exchanged French and non-Israeli passengers for food and services, met the demanded release of some other hostages and also set a 48 hour first deadline. In Kandahar also, after December 27, 1999, a little too late

according to some observers, the civilian team led by an Indian diplomat engaged the hijackers in negotiations and finalized the demand for release of three terrorists, leaving roughly 72 hours for the Indian Government to consider all their options. Both aircrafts and hostages remained in captivity for almost eight days, Indians reaching freedom on the eve of the millennial New Year in Delhi.

The reason why Israel considered the military operation early and actively can be attributed to its freshly sanguinary history as a targetted nation; a persistent hostage and victim consciousness, which prompts retaliation; a strong resonance of the harsh memories of the holocaust; and a determination in the political leadership that the horrors of the past would never be repeated at any costs, (As the then highest ranking officer of the Israel Defence Forces IDF expressed it, “What good is Israel if Israelis are selected and slaughtered?”);⁶ and the early realisation that the demands of the hijackers were unrealistic, amateurish and practically impossible to meet.

It was, interestingly, the Israeli Defense Minister Shimon Peres who asked the Chief of Staff, Motuhai Motu Gaur, to prepare “the plans he did not have”. While General Gaur had initially recommended a negotiated political settlement, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Peres, who were political rivals by that time, with Peres known to be eyeing the chair of the Prime Minister, had detected the infeasibility of the political concessions the hijackers had demanded.⁷ This gave considerable committed time for making an ‘impossible’ rescue mission possible. The Entebbe mission has, of course, since become a staple of instructions in military schools for its precision, preparation, actionable, sharp and clear intelligence, leadership, sacrifice, surprise and technical prowess, even in that age of analog technology.

⁶ *Operation Thunderbolt: Entebbe*, film by Eyal Sher, (Director), 2000.
⁷ O. P. Sabharwal, *The Killer Instinct*, Delhi: Rupa, 2000, p. 109.

Key Gaps in the Indian Response

In Kandahar case, there was also a lag-time for the Indian response system to get its act together. Though the signal intimating the hijacking of the aircraft was available to the Delhi ATC at 4.40 PM on December 24, the Crisis Management Committee chaired by the Cabinet Secretary seems neither to have met nor communicated with candidate response airports, where the plane could be landing, in the succeeding two hours.⁸ Since the origin of the aircraft was Kathmandu, and since the ATC radar gave indications that it was moving North-Westwards, just two options were available, in the order of increasing gravity and risk. One was to identify the candidate airports the hijackers might choose and get at least local authority and force staged there, with a clear mandate, or at least sufficient forewarning. Why the cabinet crisis system failed to specify the mandate of local authorities (meaning the District Collector and Superintendent of Police/Commissioner/Inspector General of Police) of Ahmedabad, Amritsar, Mumbai or Jammu till 6.04 pm, when it was clear that Amritsar was to be the staging area, is not clear. At 6.04 PM, Amritsar received the aircraft's landing signals.

Clearly, the bureaucratic establishment did not conduct the basic intellectual exercise of projecting the possible destinations. Worse, despite the Cabinet Secretary being present in New Delhi, there were no orders available to the Amritsar local authority for the 40 minutes the aircraft stayed on tarmac. In fact, the Director General of Punjab Police was not contacted at all; he was left to collect the news from Television at 6.00 pm, by his own admission.⁹ That reflects also on his poor intelligence coordination. New Delhi was clearly out of character as a national capital responding to a national emergency: nobody assumed responsibility in these crucial two hours after which the Captain of IC 814 was forced to fly off across national borders to Lahore in Pakistan. The Flight Captain was the only one in charge from the Indian side at that point.

⁸ Swami, *Frontline*, vol. 17, no. 01, January 8-21, 2000.

⁹ *Ibid.*

It was at 6.40 pm that New Delhi told Amritsar to delay refueling as far as possible – the first signs of life in Delhi’s crisis ridden crisis management system. By this time, however, a decision for a no-decision could no longer be enforced – since the hijackers had started killing hostages. One hostage was mortally wounded and later died, upon which the pilot, was forced to take off at 7.45 pm. It was at the stage of intentional delay that the second option could have become operational, when a late decision in New Delhi, conveyed to the team in Amritsar, sought to instruct Punjab Police Commandos to shoot and deflate the tires of the AB 300 aircraft, which the local team had some training for. But this could have provoked direct retaliation from the hijackers in terms of the killing of more hostages, or even of the pilots, or a finale in total disaster. The reasoning in the New Delhi analyst’s mind was to prevent the aircraft being taken to hostile territory. But without a concomitant storming, neutralization and extraction plan (which Amritsar had executed successfully in 1994 against a lone, less trained, hijacker) this was a non -starter. In retrospect, the solitary act of disabling the tyres would have been extremely counter-productive in the absence of an effective plan for neutralizing the hijackers.

This raises the key question, why was the storming decision not left to the local authorities at Amritsar, who could have acted legally under the mandate of the District Magistrate, provided the local capabilities existed? It is now known that New Delhi wanted the National Security Guard (NSG) commandos to take on the storming, but they failed to reach Amritsar before the aircraft took off for Lahore at 7.45 pm. These failures indicate a key strategic and operational gap in New Delhi’s response system. Given three hours and five minutes of lead time, it is astonishing that New Delhi could not decide and mount a commando operation in a city as close as Amritsar. This was at least six times off the NSG’s stated response standard of 30 minutes. The other stark deficiency in India’s response to Amritsar was the total absence of military planners or of the Army or Air Force in mounting the response. In retrospect, even the then Home Minister, L.K. Advani, and Defense Minister, George Fernandes, traded charges, each claiming that they were not adequately consulted, and that the Foreign Ministry monopolized the response, especially during the

stabilization phase. Clearly, the Cabinet Secretariat and Home Ministry, along with civil aviation controllers (the Civil Aviation Safety Bureau) failed to remain in full communication, compare options, predict outcomes and mount a quick response. Worse, we have no evidence that any of the airports in the episode had a quick response Force back-up which is airlifted and actionable even after 1999, like the successful Groupe d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale (GIGN, the French counter-terrorism unit) which stormed the hijacked Air France aircraft successfully at Marseilles in 1994.

Further, there was no readiness to involve the operational command of the Air Force or alert the Army, since the civilian establishment was clearly determined to handle this key development alone, with far-reaching consequences, when handled as a Police crisis. The Defence Ministry was almost entirely out of the picture from beginning to end, except for Cabinet-level discussions. There is hardly anything in the public domain even now, to determine whether the Army, which had sufficient paratroopers and aircraft, was preparing an operational plan in those four crucial days – forget rehearsals or execution, for rescue and extraction, if needed, in Kandahar.

The fact of the matter was the Indian Army's did not have the ready capacities for operational force projection beyond its western frontier, in a remote locale like Kandahar. The country had neither set superior ambitions nor trained extensively in trans-border operations in the near abroad. The Force had entirely missed tactical transformation, beyond sporadic acquisitions, which were themselves bogged down by logistic and corruption linked quagmires. Even Army lacked neither operable plans nor a feasible extraction unit which could storm and retrieve the passengers, even with collateral damage. Caught in a fight for survival on the country's borders and the Kashmir Valley, ambient, offensive, city specific capabilities simply did not exist, despite the availability of necessary technologies.

In sharp contrast, at Entebbe, the military and not the domestic crisis team handled the problem right from the beginning. With the IDF Chief sitting in Cabinet, the viability of a distant and risky operation was always present before the decision makers. The distance of Force commanders from key decision-

making bodies and their replacement by civilian foreign policy experts and civilian negotiators cost India dearly in the final count.

India's diplomacy-based plan in the negotiations at Kandahar was also flawed in its basic assumptions, right from the beginning. The Foreign Service officer, who led the team comprising internal and external security experts, as well as his political leaders, were convinced that India had considerable concessions to offer the Taliban, and hence some leverage. They, for instance, regarded recognition of the Taliban regime by India as a major concession. The diplomat's team was very skeptical about the Taliban offering any hard on site cooperation in exchange for unilateral recognition, and this, in fact, is exactly what happened. Leverage just did not exist. Neither could sufficient track-two pressure be exerted by the covert establishment to elicit cooperation from the Taliban. India was playing for high stakes without any cards to back the gamble. Concessions of a monetary nature to the Taliban would have been fully justified to neutralize their response, particularly to secure the withdrawal of their offensive armored vehicles which had been deployed visibly to preempt Indian forces from storming of the craft. The option of neutralizing the defensive Taliban Force guarding the aircraft was not explored at all.

The Final Faux Pax

Finally, the negotiators established working relationships with the hijackers and succeeded in eking some concessions. They had started working through stable communications and, with Taliban mediation, secured some key results from the hijackers, when New Delhi did the final *volte face*, unilaterally accepting all the hijackers' demands at one go. This is known to have been a decision that surprised everyone in the loop, including the negotiators. The perception was that it came at a moment when the situation had stabilized and pressure was building on the hostage takers to offer further counter-concessions. Assessments suggest that India could have retained two of the 'target assets' out of the three demanded, when New Delhi abruptly and dramatically gave up the battle of wits.

A controversial unilateral decision was taken, allegedly at the highest level, to accede to all the remaining demands at once, and arrangements were made to release the key targets of the terrorists' demands, including Maulana Mazood Azhar, from Kot Balwal jail in Jammu, where he was lodged. The express reason: the functionary did not want hostages "to spend New Year in captivity".¹⁰

One express rule in such negotiation under duress is that the stressor must have full discretion in setting all deadlines. Setting arbitrary and external deadlines is suicidal in terms of outcome, since this forecloses the possibility of further reductions of the aggressor's targets.

Maulana Masood Azhar was flown to New Delhi by a RAW jet and transferred to an IA aircraft in which the External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh escorted the terrorist ideologue and two other 'terrorist assets' – Mushtaq Ahmed Zargar and Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh – to Kandahar.¹¹ While one camp in the establishment justified this act of the Foreign Minister, as a caring and sensitive gesture towards the super-stressed hostages, which also helped contain the pressures on the Government exerted by the families of the hostages, the move was widely portrayed as capitulation of the highest order. This, indeed, was Masood Azhar's subsequent and vehement projection in Pakistan.

Home Minister L.K. Advani, who had criticized both the Rubaiya Saeed episode, when V. P. Singh was Prime Minister,¹² as well as the trading of food with hostage-takers at Hazratbal,¹³ was not in agreement with the final decision on Kandahar. It would later transpire that the hijackers' tactical objective in

¹⁰ IC 814 Film, © National Geographic.

¹¹ Swami, *Frontline*, vol. 17, no. 01, January 8-21, 2000.

¹² The then Union Home Minister Mufti Mohammad Saeed's daughter, Rubaiya Saeed, was abducted by militants of the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) on December 8, 1989. The negotiated release of extremists was seen a surrender on the part of the Government, tremendously weakening India's anti-terror doctrine and spurring an escalating insurgency in the State..

¹³ The Hazratbal Mosque, considered among the holiest because of its association with the Prophet's relic, was brought under siege in October 1993, after Pakistan backed terrorists occupied it. In one of the longest and most incoherently managed operations lasting over a month (October 15 to November 16), State Forces eventually conceded, and the terrorists were given safe passage from the shrine.

insisting on the Foreign Minister accompanying the released terrorists was intended to preempt any possible Indian misadventure, such as crashing the plane carrying the key terrorist assets. In effect, the presence of the Minister completely ruled out the force option.

It was also lost on the Indian covert establishment to plant a satellite linkable transponder to the persons of the released hostages, in order to locate and recapture or eliminate through a retaliatory strike by a crack team after a few hours of the flight's return to safety. It is not known whether such a capability existed at that time, or whether such capabilities have even been acquired today.

In stark contrast, the Israeli commandos had the forethought to destroy the radar at Entebbe and the few jets that Idi Amin had, in case they pursued the rescue aircraft.

The termination model

The classic termination phase described in the literature on such crises also throws light on the Entebbe and Kandahar cases. While the negotiators successfully or unsuccessfully manipulated the relationships developed through the standoff phase, the termination follows the acceptance of negotiated settlements or, in their absence, the exercise of the force option.

There are only three logical real world outcomes:

1. Partial or full acceptance of demands / hijackers surrenders peacefully and are arrested and tried.
2. Force option: Police/commandos storm the craft and kill, maim or arrest hijackers with or without harm to hostages.
3. Partial or full acceptance of demands and hijackers are given some lead time for escape, with complicity of the host country and they disappear to live in safe havens, which are pre-negotiated with host or state party.

In any eventuality, the onset phase and the termination phase hold maximum risk for the hostages, and it is in these phases that maximum casualties are recorded. The Entebbe operation, which took 72 hours of planning and an imperfect Sinai desert exercise for night landing, which was a limited success, left four dead and

one seriously injured. The commander of the Israel Defence Force raiders, Lt. Col. Yonatan Netanyahu, and three hostages were killed. Nevertheless, the Israelis and the world accept the operation as a total and exemplary success, and these sacrifices were perceived as necessary for the objectives achieved. In other words, the operation reduced a near total damage scenario to fewer than 3 per cent casualties, a proportion entirely acceptable and politically saleable domestically, when balanced with the huge strategic and political success at Entebbe. Collateral damage was overwhelmingly balanced out by the doctrinal and political gains. The real criterion of success is the strategic and political balance secured through the end game.

To India's credit, it may be said that it chose wisely to concede just one casualty – that too, in the onset phase, and in a chance event. From the perspective of lives saved, the chosen option was a near-total success. In hindsight, however, the political and material costs of the release of dreaded and potentially highly destructive fanatical motivational leaders proved very costly. The complicity of Saeed Sheikh in the 9/11 attacks in the US and the Daniel Pearl killing, and of Masood Azhar's group – Jaish-e-Mohammed – in the attack on India's Parliament in December 2001, and in a rash of lesser, but devastating terrorist operations in Jammu & Kashmir and other parts of India, imposed an enormous strategic cost in India and beyond – a price that is still being paid. In one estimate, the loss of some 2,500 lives was attributed to direct acts of Azhar's outfit, just between 2000 and 2003.¹⁴

The aftermath of Kandahar

The US stance at the time of the Kandahar crisis was repeatedly critiqued by Indian leaders. The US apparently sought to dissuade from undertaking any military operation on Afghan soil, as Washington was then hoping to develop military and commercial relations with a 'moderate Taliban'. Post 9/11, it dismantled its oil pipeline plans for *Unocal*, a US oil giant, and

¹⁴ Praveen Swami, "The Kandahar Plot," *Frontline*, vol. 20, no. 24, November 22-December 5, 2003.

went all out after Taliban, who were then harboring Osama bin Laden. At that time, however, US inaction and failure to assist India politically and logistically in its moment of great need discredited Washington in the eyes of Indian strategic planners, for a considerable period of time. It is only now, after the renewed nuclear agreement and deepening cooperation on a range of other issues that that the quality of the relationship has been somewhat restored.

The strategic and tactical edge the IC 814 hijackers maintained throughout the operation needs special mention. The involvement of an immediate relative of one of the terrorist assets whose release they were demanding made the effort very emotional and direct (Mazood Azhar's brother, Ibrahim Athar, was one of the hijackers). The hijackers were able to pressure the onset and standoff phases effectively, and secure a termination at a port of their choice, and with local defense preventing any adventurism by any potential aggressor. The exit route they had pre-negotiated with the Taliban, with the support of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (they had an *iftar* party in Kandahar before being driven across to Quetta, capital of the Balochistan province in Pakistan) was also ingenious. Some observers believe that it was the convenience of the exit routes that prompted the successive choice of Dubai, Lahore and Kandahar as target ports for the hijackers.

As a near-total failure of its internal security apparatus and the exercise of the use of force option, Kandahar should have sent India's strategic planners back to their drawing tables. It established a precedent for future Governments to follow a weak 'negotiations and selective release of assets', even as it exposed deep infirmities in the Force capabilities of the purported 'regional hegemon'. India was seen to be a slow, pliant, elephantine giant, with a soft underbelly of un-crystallized political expression, poor civil-military coordination, deeply distrustful of empowering strategic military assets, of involving them in decision-making, and coordination with paratroopers, commandos and Force transport systems.

Terrorists are bound to exploit the windows of opportunity created by this, the fragmented civilian leadership, and

uncoordinated intelligence and Force capabilities, to further their objectives in future as well.

The 'path of least resistance' response to the Kandahar crisis did have one positive consequence: the Indian Penal Code was amended to make the death sentence mandatory for any convicted future hijackers.

Conclusion

The Kandahar and Entebbe episodes, in sharp contrast, demonstrate the distinguishing absence of relevant and effective strategic and tactical leadership in India. The Israeli national leadership at the time averaged the age of 50; the Entebbe mission was executed by a team which averaged an age of 30. India's traditional leadership, having stuck in around for far too long, was in no hurry to prove anything. For them, there were no legacies to be left in the fight for survival.

The leadership factor could become much more crucial in the foreseeable future, with India behaving like a tottering giant, with poor coordination and dexterity in maneuvering across the troubled and muddied waters of the simmering extremist and fundamentalist politics of South Asia. It is imperative that the leadership factor is addressed by intense capacity building across services and calling in the security apparatus for responding well to emergent situations, especially after the experience of the Mumbai attacks. The need to expose the intensely secretive covert apparatus to hold them accountable also is evident.