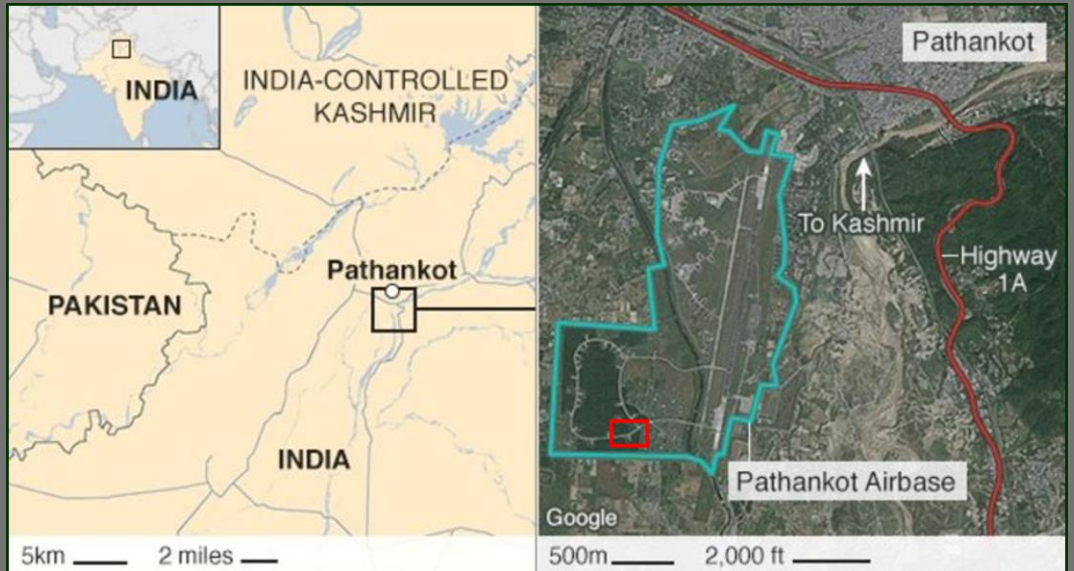


Pathankot, India, Airbase Attack



TRADOC G-2 ACE Threats Integration

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Purpose

- To inform the Army training community of the attempted attack on the Pathankot Air Force Base in India by Pakistani-based militants.
- To report on the actions taken by the Indian security forces upon the receipt of intelligence about a possible impending attack.
- To describe some of the deficiencies in the relationship between the local and national police and the interagency squabbles that possibly compromised safety.
- To demonstrate the connectivity among the techniques used in the attack, threat doctrine, and conditions described in training materials such as the [Training Circular 7-100 series](#).

Executive Summary

- The militants planned to a level of detail that included two different cells to conduct the attack and a possible associated attack in another country.
- Because the local police failed to take seriously the kidnapping of a district police officer due to his prior work history, delays ensued in the search for the attackers.
- Indian interagency conflict caused various security forces to attempt to take the lead in the operation, and may have increased the casualties among Indian security force personnel.
- After the initial contact, the Indian security force personnel assumed that all the intruders were dead, when in fact two more actually remained alive and subsequently inflicted additional casualties.

This (U) **Threat Action Report (TAR)** was produced in accordance with (U) *Intelligence Community Directive Number 203: Analytical Standards* (Effective: Jan 2015). This TAR was coordinated with:

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- HQDA DCS G-2—Mr. Peter J. Tedford
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Comments and feedback are welcome.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jon S. Cleaves'.

Jon S. Cleaves
Director, ACE Threats Integration

Cover photo: Map of the Pathankot Airbase with the most likely entry point in red. Maps from the [BBC](#) and modified by ACE-Threats Integration, 18 February 2016.



Introduction

On 2 January 2016, six militants attacked the Pathankot Air Force Base in the Indian state of Punjab, with the intention of destroying the airplanes and helicopters on the tarmac. Before the intruders could reach the runway or aircraft, base personnel confronted the infiltrators and alerted security personnel of their presence. After a cook killed one of the militants with the attacker's own rifle, security personnel cornered and killed three other intruders. The remaining two attackers hid in an unoccupied barracks while security forces rushed to protect the airfield, any remaining aircraft, and other high-priority targets. Many hours later, the two remaining militants ambushed unsuspecting base personnel, leading to an assault on the two-story barracks by specialized Indian military and security personnel. Due to this second surprise attack, Indian security forces then conducted a thorough search of the entire base to ensure no other intruders were still at large. In addition to the six attackers killed, ten Indian military personnel were killed in action and another 22 people were wounded. Indian governmental officials claimed the Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorist group conducted the attack.

Operational Environment Background—Northwest India

Northwest India faces several major challenges, mainly due to border disputes involving territory claimed by India, Pakistan, and/or China. These disputes most often revolve around the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir. In 1947, with the withdrawal of Great Britain from the Asian sub-continent, the primarily Muslim areas were assimilated into the country of Pakistan, while the majority Hindu areas joined together to form India. The maharaja (ruler) of Jammu & Kashmir—a Hindu who governed a majority Muslim state—was permitted to remain independent or join either country. When Pakistani forces invaded, the Maharaja chose to join India and the region has been contested since that time. Pakistan has attempted to alter this territorial decision ever since. India defeated Pakistan in three wars (1947–48, 1965, and 1971) over this disputed territory, with little change in the status quo.¹

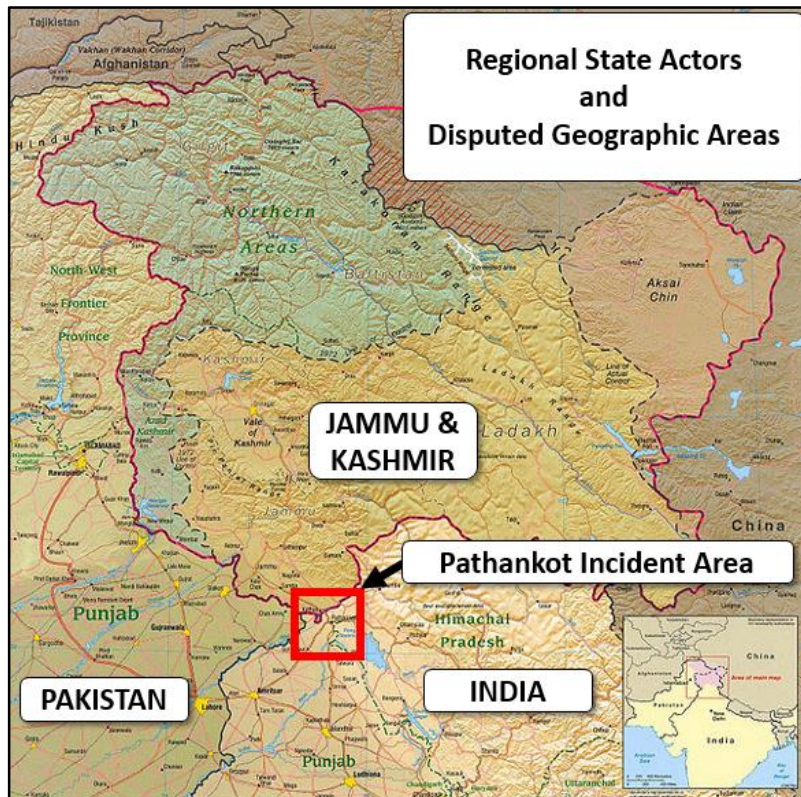


Figure 1. Disputed areas between China, India, and Pakistan



Pathankot is a city and district location in Punjab state, one of the three states in the primarily Muslim area of northwest India. (There is also a Punjab province in Pakistan). The other Indian states where Islam dominates are Jammu & Kashmir (one single state) and Himachal Pradesh.

Jaish-e-Mohammed

Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) is an Islamic militant group based in Pakistan. Its aim is to unite the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir with Pakistan and to expel all foreign troops operating in Afghanistan. JeM has also declared war against the US. JeM, translated as the Army of Mohammed, was outlawed by Pakistan in 2002, but continues to operate under other names such as Khuddam ul-Islam (KUI) and Tehrik ul-Furqaan. JeM has various splinter groups, including Jammaat ul-Furqan (JUF)—also known as the Maulana Abdul Jabbar Group (MAJG)—headed by Abdul Jabbar.²

JeM continues to operate in defiance of the Pakistani government's prohibition. Indian officials previously jailed both JeM founder Masood Akhar and Abdul Jabbar for their work with insurgent groups, but the Indian government later released them in 2000 and 2003, respectively. JeM or its splinter groups are considered likely suspects in the Srinagar, India, bombing in October 2001 that killed 30 people; the 2002 abduction and murder of US journalist David Pear; and the March 2009 attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore, Pakistan. JeM supporters are primarily Pakistanis and Kashmiris, but also include Afghans and Arab veterans of the Afghan war against the Soviet Union. In 2001, the US State Department formally designated JeM as a foreign terrorist organization. JeM attacks targets both outside of and within Pakistan that are supportive of groups counter to its beliefs.³

Masood Azhar, a Pakistani citizen, founded JeM in the early 2000s after serving with Harakat ul-Mujahedeen (HuM), another US-designated terrorist group. It is believed that Azhar worked with al-Qaeda (AQ) and fought US troops in Somalia with a HuM cell under guidance from Osama bin Laden. On 14 January 2016, the Pakistani government placed Azhar under protective custody and he has been in detention ever since. The Indian government claims that Azhar masterminded the Pathankot attack.⁴

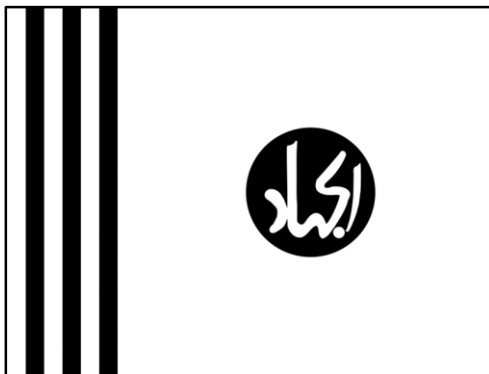


Figure 2. JeM Flag

JeM normally operates only within the Indian states of Jammu & Kashmir or Punjab, or within Pakistan itself. Prior to the Pathankot airbase attack, JeM's only other confirmed operation outside these areas occurred on 13 December 2001, when it struck the parliament in New Delhi, India. While the United Jihad Council (UJC)—an umbrella of Pakistan-based, Kashmir-focused militants—took almost immediate credit for the January 2016 Pathankot Airbase attack, some Indian intelligence analysts believed the evidence pointed toward JeM, a UJC member, as the specific perpetrators. The UJC later claimed that Kashmiri militants carried out the attack on the airbase. Some Indian intelligence analysts, however, suspect that the UJC is just trying to divert suspicion from the specific culprit, JeM.⁵



JeM Attacks in India and Pakistan

JeM has carried out a number of attacks in India and Pakistan over the last two decades. Many of the attacks took place in Northwest India. The following is a list of major attacks, not all-inclusive, where JeM claimed responsibility or Indian government officials alleged active JeM involvement:

- 19 April 2000: JeM conducted the first suicide bomb attack in India when a suicide vehicle borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) exploded outside the 15 Corps headquarters building in Badami Bagh, Jammu & Kashmir State, India, injuring seven people. The only person who died was the suicide bomber.⁶
- 4 June 2000: JeM gunmen killed police officers at bus stops in Srinagar and Wazirbagh cities in the Indian-administered Kashmir (IAK) region, causing four casualties that included three dead.⁷
- 11 December 2000: Militants that claimed to belong to JeM planted a mine on the main Srinagar-Barmamulla road and detonated it when a Border Security Force vehicle passed over it, killing one person and injuring eight others.⁸
- 25 December 2000: A vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) exploded outside an IAK Indian Army headquarters, killing eight people and injuring 23 others. Both JeM and another militant group, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, attempted to take credit for the attack.⁹
- 1 October 2001: JeM carjacked a government jeep and converted it into a VBIED before ramming it into the main gate of the Srinagar Legislative Assembly complex prior to detonation. Additional assailants then entered the complex and fired indiscriminately with their rifles, threw grenades, and set fires before the battle ended several hours later. The attack killed at least 31 people. Srinagar is the summer capital city of Jammu & Kashmir. JeM initially claimed responsibility for the attack, but then denied responsibility a few days later.¹⁰
- 13 December 2001: In coordination with the Pakistani-based militant group LeT, JeM members participated in an attack on the Indian Parliament in New Delhi, killing at least 14 people and injuring at least 22 others. The five JeM/LeT attackers entered the building using fake identity stickers and wore military-style uniforms.¹¹
- 23 January 2002: Daniel Pearl, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, was abducted while visiting Pakistan; he was beheaded several weeks later. JEM is one of several Islamist groups suspected of being involved.¹²
- 14 February 2002: JeM was the likely culprit behind the death of Indian National Conference activist Abdul Hafeez Mirza, as JeM previously warned people to not participate in an upcoming election in Jammu & Kashmir.¹³
- 5 August 2002: Four JeM gunmen attacked a Christian school near Murree, Punjab Province, Pakistan, killing six people and wounding two others. None of the 150 children attending the school were injured.¹⁴
- 9 August 2002: JeM members threw grenades into a Christian missionary hospital in Taxila, Punjab Province, Pakistan, killing three nurses and injuring 20 others. One of the attackers died when his grenade exploded prematurely.¹⁵
- 25 December 2003: JeM was likely behind two suicide bombing attempts to assassinate Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. JeM launched a second attack just 12 days after an initial attempt, by attempting to add two SVBIEDs to Musharraf's convoy—one at the front end, and one at the back. Although both SVBIEDs exploded, Musharraf escaped



harm. At least 15 people died. Approximately 46 others, mostly civilian passers-by caught within the bursting radius of the explosions when the bombs detonated, were injured.¹⁶

- 31 May 2005: Three JeM members wrested an automatic rifle from a police guard outside the Madinatul Iim Imambargah, a Shia mosque in eastern Karachi, Pakistan, then killed him with it. Other police killed two of the attackers, but the third reached the inside of the mosque and detonated an IED strapped to his body. Total casualties included five dead and 28 others injured.¹⁷
- 2 November 2005: JeM detonated a VBIED outside the home of the Jammu & Kashmir Chief Minister, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, in Srinagar, India. The explosion killed at least ten people and injured 18 others.¹⁸
- 30 May 2006: JeM operatives threw grenades at a police vehicle escorting a human rights commission convoy in Srinagar, India, causing eleven casualties including one death.¹⁹
- 26 September 2013: Militants attacked an Indian Army base in Jammu & Kashmir, making use of a truck VBIED. Despite the claim by the al-Shuda Brigade that it perpetrated the attack, Indian authorities suspected that JeM and LeT joined forces to conduct the raid.²⁰



Figure 3. Punjab district map

Historical Punjab Attacks

Militant groups have initiated terrorist attacks in Punjab state, India, for many years. The following attacks are just a sampling of various attacks that occurred between 2001 and 2016 in Punjab.²¹

- 1 March 2001: Indian government officials discovered a 125-meter tunnel that originated in Pakistan and ended in Gurdaspur district.
- 31 January 2002: An explosion on a Punjab Roadways bus in Patrana, Hoshiarpur district, killed two and injured 12 others.
- 31 March 2002: A bomb exploded on the Ferozepur-Dhanbad express train at Daroha, Ludhiana district, killing two and injuring 12 other civilians.



- 28 April 2006: A bomb blast killed at least eight people when a bus carrying 45 passengers exploded at the Jalandhar depot, Jalandhar district.
- 14 October 2007: A bomb exploded at a movie theater in Ludhiana, Ludhiana district, killing seven and injuring 40 others.
- 27 July 2015: Three individuals carried out an attack on a police station in Dinanagar, Gurdaspur district, killing seven people including a Punjab police superintendent. However, all three militants died in the attack. The perpetrators reportedly were on their way to attack the Pathankot Airbase, but because dawn was fast approaching, the cell diverted its attack to the police station in order to carry out the assault under cover of darkness.²²

Thawing of Indian and Pakistani Relations

On Friday, 25 December 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif as Modi was returning to New Delhi from Kabul, Afghanistan. This meeting took both nations, as well as the world, by surprise, as Modi only announced the meeting via Twitter that same morning. The two leaders met for approximately 2 1/2 hours and jointly announced afterwards that their countries would seek to open avenues leading toward peace, for the common good of both countries.²³



Figure 4. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during their 25 December 2015 meeting

This was only the second meeting between the two leaders. The first meeting had been very brief, at the Paris Climate Conference, when the two shook hands on 30 November 2015. The thawing in relations between the two countries had received another boost when Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj traveled to Islamabad, Pakistan, earlier in December for a multilateral conference. The two prime ministers at the 25 December meeting also agreed that their foreign secretaries would meet in Islamabad on 15 January 2016.²⁴

Whenever indications of rapprochement between Pakistan and India surface, one of the Pakistani-based militant groups typically perpetrates some outrage intended to derail any bilateral talks that could potentially reduce tensions between the two historical adversaries. Some Indian government officials believed that the Pathankot Airbase attack bore a marked similarity to previous attacks apparently intended to torpedo attempts by Indian and Pakistani leaders to find common ground for resolving their differences. Due to the attack on the Pathankot Airbase, the two countries decided to postpone the January 2016 meeting between the Indian and Pakistani Foreign Ministers until a later date.²⁵



Attack on Pathankot Airbase

The following recounts the sequence of events leading to the attack as well as the aftermath of the attack, all garnered from open sources. The actual physical location of the entry points on the Pathankot Airbase have not been publicly released, but an examination of the information available and the terrain provides a good approximation of the possible location. The techniques used by the attackers and lessons learned are valid even if the exact location/terrain is not known.

December 2015

On 27 December 2015, the Punjab police released a report of a possible New Year's Day LeT attack in India, to be carried out by fifteen well-trained individuals. Leaders at the Pathankot Airbase and other military installations in Northwest India paid little heed to the warning and took only nominal additional precautions. On 31 December, the Indian government issued a high alert announcing that 20 LeT operatives were on the loose in Northwest India, causing the Punjab police to mobilize and increase their border security. Late in the evening of 31 December 2015, the Punjab police received credible intelligence indicating that 15 LeT members had infiltrated into India from Pakistan. The infiltration was confirmed the following morning when Indian intelligence officials decoded a message about an impending attack in Pathankot district. Of note, while the Border Security Force (BSF) attempts to secure the border between Pakistan and India, each BSF company of 100 guards is charged with responsibility for patrolling a frontage of 2.75 km in Jammu & Kashmir and 5.6 km in Punjab. With round-the-clock operations required to accomplish this mission, security typically consists of widely-separated stationary posts augmented by limited roving patrols that traverse the BSF company's designated sector. A post-attack inspection later revealed that most of the BSF's ground surveillance radar systems and handheld thermal imaging devices were inoperable on the night of 31 December 2015.²⁶

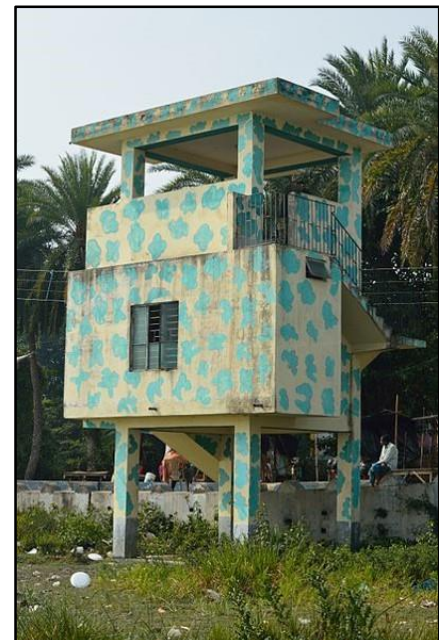


Figure 5. Unoccupied BSF watchtower on the India-Pakistan border

Wednesday, 30 December 2015

Kashif Jan, a key JeM handler, dropped off at least four militants on 30 December in the Shakargarh tehsil (country) area of Narowal district, Pakistan, across from Bamiyal village in India. After dropping off his passengers, Jan made at least 17 calls to other JeM members. At least one of the Pathankot attackers called Jan during the operation.²⁷

Threat Action Report



Thursday, 31 December 2015

Border Infiltration

Despite the high alert, four (some initial reports said five) individuals crossed the Pakistani-Indian border using a handheld GPS in almost the same exact location as the operatives who previously conducted the Gurdaspur attack on 27 July 2015. The militants probably entered India through an infiltration tunnel frequently used by drug smugglers near Bamiyal, a village of about 700 people, in Pathankot district near the Pakistani border. Bamiyal is located near a point where the districts of Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh meet. The village is also situated near a major highway that connects Jammu & Kashmir to the rest of India, an ideal location for infiltration. After the July attack, an investigation revealed damaged border fencing near Bamiyal; that nearby floodlights were inoperable, primarily due to heavy rains; and that the breach in fencing had persisted for at least a year prior to the July 2015 infiltration. On 1 January 2016, a farmer named Jaspal Singh Pakko, after learning that a police officer had been kidnapped, told National Investigation Agency (NIA) personnel that he had discovered prints in his garlic and wheat fields that were not there the previous afternoon. Authorities subsequently determined that the prints matched those of boots produced by the East Pakistan Chrome Tannery, hardly a location where local Indian citizens would purchase their footwear. The farmer's field lies only about 400 meters from a stationary BSF post. Less than three weeks after the Pathankot Airbase attack, BSF personnel shot another infiltrator near Bamiyal.²⁸

Sometime after their crossing into India, the infiltrators changed into Indian Army uniforms—either taken from a cache or brought with them across the border. By that time, they had also procured some small arms. According to media reports, by the time they reached the airbase the attackers were carrying AK rifles, some with under-barrel grenade launchers attached; 52-mm mortars; and GPS devices. The exact time when the attackers gain possession of all their weapons remains a matter of speculation.²⁹

Taxi Ride

Between 2130 and 2330 local time, a Bamiyal taxi driver received seven phone calls from a Pakistani phone number regarding picking up a fare—the four infiltrators—in Pathankot province. Exactly when the driver, Ikagar Singh, picked up his passengers, and the amount of time they remained in his vehicle, has not been determined. Relatives of the driver later asserted that the JeM members carjacked the taxi while Singh was changing a flat tire. While the exact circumstances regarding how Singh met the four men in military uniforms may never be known, it is clear that Singh ended up dead in a field near the roadside where police found his abandoned vehicle. From GPS history, the carjackers forced the driver to avoid main thoroughfares and instead follow an unpaved route, which possibly made the driver suspicious. Forensic evidence suggests that Singh purposely crashed his taxi into a tree on an isolated road about 30–35 km from Pathankot Airbase, perhaps after discerning his passengers' nefarious intentions. Two flat tires rendered the taxi, a Toyota Innova, inoperable after the crash. Finding themselves without transportation, the JeM cell members sought another means for reaching their target.³⁰

Carjacking

At about midnight on New Year's Eve, the JeM cell flagged down Salwinder Singh, an unarmed Gurdaspur district police superintendent in civilian clothes, as he traveled home from a religious shrine, accompanied



by his cook, Madan Gopal, and a friend, Rajesh Kumar. The four individuals used their rifles to take control of Singh's multi-utility vehicle, a Mahindra USV X500, near the town of Dinangar. After covering the eyes of the hostages with tape and detaining them for about an hour, the kidnapers either threw Singh and Gopal out of the vehicle or released them (media reports conflict). In any event the JeM members continued to hold Kumar captive. Singh concealed his identity from the carjackers, who up to that point had apparently not noticed the inoperable blue police beacon on the vehicle. The carjackers also confiscated their victims' cell phones. After releasing the two men, the kidnapers must have discovered that one of their former captives was a police officer, because they later returned to the area and searched for Singh and Gopal. Both the police officer and cook remained hidden in the vegetation until their former captors finally left the area a second time. While with their kidnapers, the three men overheard their captors speaking on the phone with their Pakistani handlers. The JeM handlers urged the team to hurry up, since the other team was already in position. Kumar said that the carjackers later told him that the impending attack was revenge for the hanging of Afzal Guru, one of the individuals charged with the December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament. The kidnapers slit Kumar's throat when the vehicle was stopped, but miraculously he lived to tell about it. Kumar was later found unconscious near the Punjab-Himachel Pradesh border.³¹

Friday, 1 January 2016

Following release by their kidnapers, Singh and Gopal walked for an hour before reaching a police sub-station. There, in the early morning hours of New Year's Day, Singh called his superior, the Gurdaspur Senior Police Superintendent, at his home. At first the Punjab police discounted Singh's report, partly because of his dubious professional history as a police officer. Singh's superior told him to go home and report to work later in the day. When Singh returned to his jobsite on Friday, he related news of his experience to other Indian law enforcement agencies, but because the area had already been alerted to the possible terrorist threat, few if any additional measures were taken, and the information was never sent up the chain of command.³²

The intruders' activities throughout the ensuing 20 hours is a matter of speculation. Actions taken by Indian security agencies, however, are known. Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval met with representatives of the defense and home ministries, the Indian intelligence services, and other agencies on Friday morning. After the meeting, during which authorities notified attendees of a possible impending attack on a military base in Pathankot, the Indian government flew in 50 National Security Guard (NSG) commandos from New Delhi to Pathankot district. These commandos, however, operated out of another military post in Pathankot. The NSG commandos, informally called the Black Cats, began a major search operation for the individuals that kidnapped the Gurdaspur police officer.



Figure 6. India NSG Black Cat commandos



Later the same day, the Indian military deployed another 110 Black Cats to the Pathankot district. About 2130 hours local time, the Indian Air Force (IAF) ordered all flyable planes and helicopters at the Pathankot Airbase transferred to other airbases geographically removed a safe distance from the border. About the same time, the Indian Army mobilized nine “columns” of local Army units and IAF Garud commandos to augment the search operation. The Punjab police, having spent the previous day investigating the abandoned Toyota Innova—found near the Kathlore bridge, about 30–35 km from the Pathankot Airbase—were also placed on high alert. Apparently either the Pathankot Airbase commander, or his superiors, did not choose to replace or at least augment the Defense Security Corps (DSC) guards that provided perimeter security to the facility. The DSC is comprised of older individuals, typically Indian military retirees. The Punjab police did not treat theft of the police car as a terrorist incident until 12 hours after it had occurred. Actually, the Punjab security agencies failed to locate the police officer’s vehicle for about 10 hours; until the attack on the Pathankot Airbase was imminent. Although the four carjackers drove straight to the Pathankot Airbase and abandoned their vehicle, it was not found until 1100 hours on 1 January 2016.³³

Saturday, 2 January 2016

More is known about the team’s activities on Saturday thanks to eyewitness accounts—often given long after the fact—and electronic signatures of the attackers.

Perimeter Penetration

Most likely in the early morning hours of 2 January 2016, the four team members climbed a eucalyptus tree to reach the top of a wall, cut the barbed wire at its top, and then dropped a nylon rope to allow the others to climb over the wall. The entire perimeter of the over 2,000-acre Pathankot Airbase—24 km—is protected by this wall, but there is no closed-circuit television covering any part of the base. Guard towers are placed sporadically every 100–200 meters along the trace of the wall’s interior and manned by DSC personnel armed with light weapons. At times lax security prevailed along the perimeter. Reports suggest that civilians would bribe some of the guards with 20 rupees (approximately 30 US cents) to allow their cows to graze on the luscious grass located on the base. A maintenance road paralleled the wall on the interior side of the base. After breaching the perimeter wall and crossing the road and a drainage ditch, the intruders initially hid in the high elephant grass, prevalent in several locations on the base.³⁴

Phone Calls

Using phones stolen during the previous kidnapping of Singh and the other two victims, the carjackers made four calls in the early morning hours of Saturday, 2 January 2016. Three of them discussed the impending attack, but the final call was personal in nature. Indian intelligence services monitored a 55-second phone call at 0030 hours from one of the team members to a Pakistani phone number under electronic surveillance. The caller talked to three different handlers; all four spoke Punjabi with a Multani accent. The team made a second call to the same Pakistani number at 0052 hours that lasted 32 seconds. One, possibly two, handlers provided final instructions related to the attack. The third and most lengthy call of 87 seconds was made to the same phone number at 0110 hours. The handler at the other end gave the final go-ahead to the cell to enter the target area and blow up the planes and helicopters. With the mission a go, one of the intruders made a 70-second personal phone call to his mother at 0158 hours,

Threat Action Report



twice saying that although he was on a suicide mission, Allah would take care of all of them. His mother merely responded by advising her son to consume a good meal before he died.³⁵

Faulty Link-Up

Sometime before 0300 hours on Saturday morning, the four carjackers may have unsuccessfully attempted to meet with two additional perpetrators who had been on location for a considerable period, waiting for the second team. This made a total of six attackers. It is likely that these two additional attackers brought most of the weapons and ammunition to the link-up site. The munitions may have been

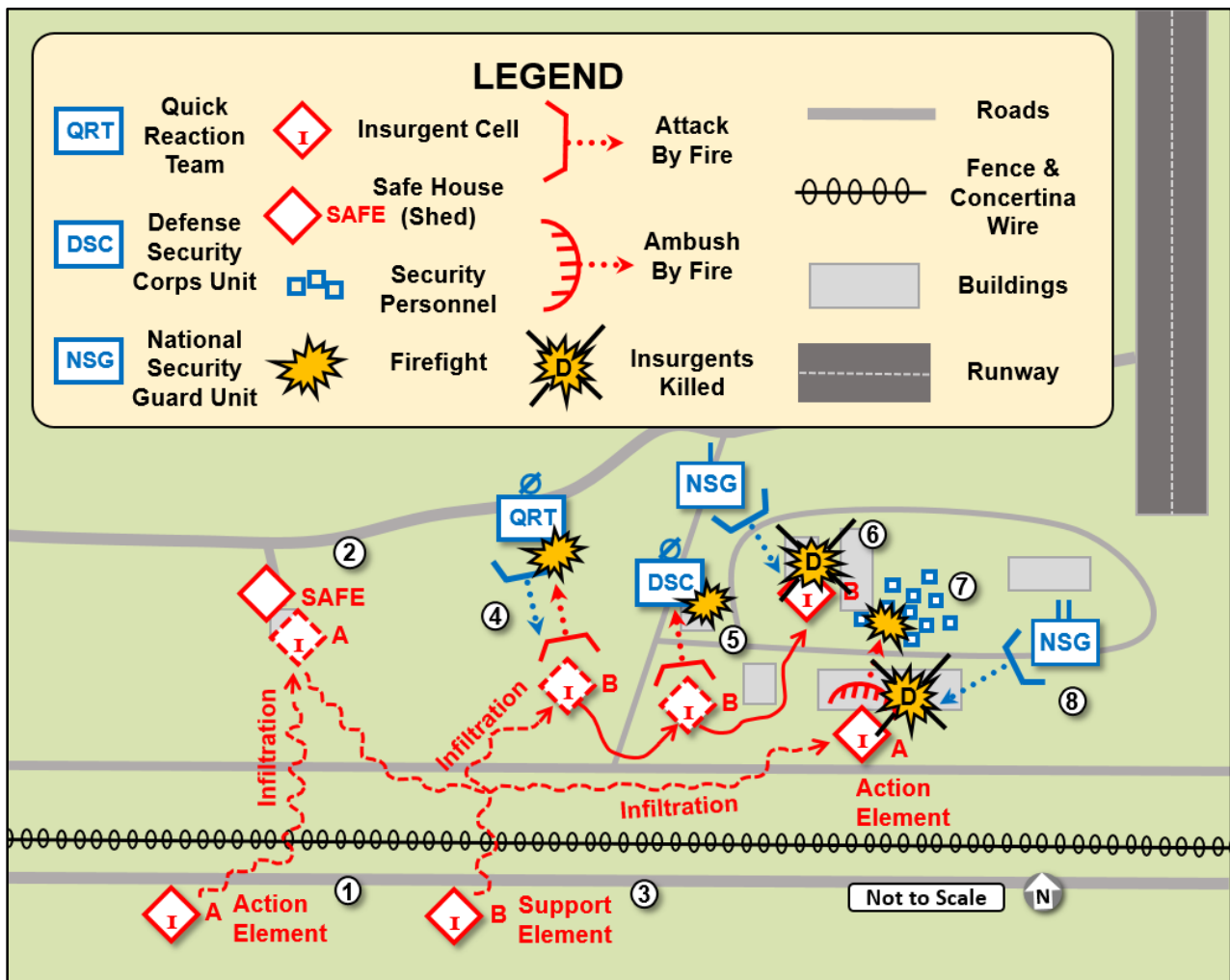


Figure 7. Pathankot Airbase attack

hidden in a cache; however, since the two groups did not appear to link up either outside or inside the airbase. The carjackers accidentally left a walkie-talkie with very limited range in the police car, and therefore could not communicate with the second team of two attackers. Before entering the base, the



four-man team armed itself with AK rifles (some with under-barrel grenade launchers), grenades, and ammunition. Each attacker carried six kg of RDX explosives for possible use against the aircraft.

The other team of two members was already inside the airbase for up to 48 hours before the attack began and was similarly armed. Two Pathankot airmen assisted these two original intruders by cutting open a part of the wall and supplying them with ammunition. These insiders also provided information on the number of hangers and indicated the number and location of operational aircraft, in return for 30,000 rupees—about \$438 US dollars—in compensation. The two would-be attackers broke into an isolated Military Engineer Services shed on the base, knowing no one would be in the area over the weekend. There they ate, slept, and waited for the arrival of the other cell from the relative comfort of the shed.³⁶

ACTION SEQUENCE

- 1 31DEC15: With insider help, two militants (Cell A) infiltrate through the Pathankot Airbase fence.
- 2 Cell A hides in engineer shed for almost 48 hours and then infiltrates toward the flight line to destroy the aircraft on the tarmac.
- 3 Approximately 0330 hours, 2JAN16, four militants (Cell B) climb the 10-foot wall topped with concertina wire.
- 4 An airbase QRT detects Cell B and fires at the intruders. Cell B retreats toward the buildings closer to the runway.
- 5 0340: Cell B enters a dining facility, but is confronted by the cooks. One cook chases down a militant, takes the infiltrator's rifle, and kills the intruder. The other militants then shoot and kill the cook.
- 6 Additional security forces arrive and corner three militants at least 700 meters away from the flight line, killing all three known intruders.
- 7 Due to the increased security, Cell A hides in a barracks because it cannot reach the flight line. Cell A ambushes unsuspecting military personnel walking by the barracks on Saturday night.
- 8 0730, 3JAN16: Security personnel assault the building where Cell A is hiding, killing the remaining militants.

Figure 8. Event sequence on 2–3 January 2016

Initial Confrontations

Lacking direct communication between their cells, the two groups initiated their plan—probably at a pre-planned time. Because an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) detected them climbing over the perimeter wall, the larger group of four members almost immediately—around 0330 hours—ran into an IAF Garud (commando) Quick Reaction Team (QRT) conducting a search operation. In the ensuing firefight, one IAF member was killed and another wounded. The QRT reported approximately four intruders heading towards the buildings on base. The base commander then ordered his IAF and NSG personnel to secure the MiG-21 jet fighters and Mi-25 attack helicopters unable to fly out the night before, and also to secure other strategic points such as fuel stations and ordnance bunkers. Before notification of the perimeter breach reached everyone on post, the larger group of intruders passed a DSC dining facility where preparations for an early morning breakfast were just getting underway. Some reports indicate that some of the intruders actually entered the facility. One of the DSC jawans (lower-ranking enlisted soldiers)



thought something was amiss when a group of men wearing army fatigues suddenly appeared, and the jawan confronted them. The attackers tried to escape, but the observant jawan chased one of them down and killed the intruder with his own weapon. Unfortunately, the other intruders then shot the jawan, killing him. The surviving cooks reported an estimated four intruders, all wearing military uniforms.³⁷

First Indian Security Operation

Soon after the dining facility incident, NSG commandos, IAF Garud commandos, and Indian Army special forces arrived on the scene and cornered three of the intruders. The Indian security forces used a combination of ground and aerial assets during the operation, the latter including both observation and attack helicopters. Over the next 12 hours, the Indian forces conducted an operation to neutralize the intruders. The situation ended, or so the Indian military thought, when security personnel discovered four corpses. Losses to Indian security forces at this point included two killed in action and six wounded in action. Some of the wounded would later succumb to their injuries.³⁸



Figure 9. Armored car moves to Pathankot to support the search for the militants

The Lull

Although the Indian security agencies then believed all the intruders had been killed, a systematic search of the base continued, with a special focus on the most vital targets. In fact, two intruders remained alive. This pair of attackers had abandoned its attempt to reach the flight line—over 700 meters from its location—and finally sought refuge in an unoccupied barracks building. Early on Saturday night, the Indian Defense Minister announced on social media that all the attackers were dead and the episode concluded. An additional 80 Black Cat commandos, raising that group's presence on the airbase to an aggregate 240 personnel, arrived on Saturday night to join their comrades at the Pathankot Airbase.³⁹

A Second Militant Attack

After hiding and sleeping intermittently for approximately 12 hours, the two remaining intruders sprang into action Saturday evening when they fired at Indian security personnel from the two-story barracks where they had taken refuge earlier that day. The Indian security forces, caught unaware, immediately began an operation to eliminate the final two attackers. Because their chain of command was unhappy with the number of friendly casualties incurred so far, this second operation proceeded in a slow and methodical fashion. All through Saturday night and well into Sunday morning, Indian air force helicopters equipped with night vision sights and thermal imaging devices made sure that no invaders escaped the security dragnet this time around. Indian security personnel discovered and, using hand grenades, eliminated what turned out to be the sixth and final intruder. By midnight, the Indian authorities believed that all the attackers were dead, but refused to release that information to avoid a second *faux pas* on their part.⁴⁰



Sunday, 3 January 2016

The combination of several Indian military and security groups continued to search the airbase for additional infiltrators in what their leaders described as a “combing” operation. During this operation, Lieutenant Colonel Niranjana Kumar, an NSG explosives ordnance disposal (EOD) commander, died when a hand grenade exploded as he searched an intruder’s corpse. Both groups apparently had rigged a number of explosives to detonate over a period of time, since 29 explosions (grenades and other types) occurred after the death of the sixth, and last, intruder. This created the false impression that additional attackers still remained alive and at large on the installation. Media located outside the airbase heard what they perceived to be sporadic gunfire after midnight on Saturday. The military brought in still more (an additional 80) Black Cat commandos to the Pathankot Airbase, bringing the total number of NSG special forces personnel involved in the operation to 320 soldiers. While authorities now thought all the intruders were dead, the government hesitated to make a formal announcement to that effect, based on the previous day’s premature declaration. About two days later, Indian authorities finally released an official statement announcing that all the attackers involved in the Pathankot Airbase attack were dead.⁴¹

Aftermath

The Pathankot Airbase attack spawned several policy adjustments, although some bore little relation to increased security:

- The Indian government ordered additional security at tourist hubs, airports, and railway stations throughout the country.⁴²
- On 3 January 2016, Indian officials implemented increased security measures in Jammu & Kashmir state, especially on air force bases.⁴³
- On 4 January 2016, Indian authorities delayed several train departures due to potential bomb threats. These delays also impacted the New Delhi Railway Station, one of India’s major transportation hubs for civilian travel.⁴⁴
- By 4 January 2016, Indian security personnel announced that their security forces had identified all six of the deceased attackers, and were trying to retrace their infiltration route to the Pathankot Airbase. Evidently this was not the case after all, as on 21 March 2016, the NIA released the photos of four of the militants and asked the public for help in the identification of the attackers. A week later, the Indian government announced that the NIA would provide DNA samples of the attackers to the Pakistani Joint Investigation Team (JIT) in hopes of identifying the possible parents of the slain militants.⁴⁵
- The BSF committed additional personnel resources to patrol the Pakistani/Punjab border; additional measures included using boats to patrol wetland and river areas, especially during the hours of darkness.⁴⁶
- On 17 January 2016, the Indian government announced a plan to erect “laser walls” at 40 vulnerable points along the Pakistani/Punjab border. These invisible walls will be used mainly in riverine areas where conventional walls are not practical. Prior to the previous July 2015 attack, the Indian government had erected most of its laser walls only along the Pakistani/Jammu & Kashmir border, the primary transit point for infiltrators into India.⁴⁷



- The Indian military revised the NSG standard operating procedures for defusing bombs and IEDs to avoid a recurrence of the type of incident that cost the life of the EOD commander during the Pathankot operation.⁴⁸
- India had recently removed 600 NSG Black Cat commandos' VVIP (very, very important people) security duties, and Pathankot was this NSG unit's first antiterrorism operation. Some observers in the security field believed the Pathankot operation validated the change in mission for the former VVIP Black Cats. Others questioned the necessity of calling in this NSG unit to Pathankot when other qualified forces were stationed near the airbase and possessed a greater familiarity with the local terrain.⁴⁹
- Similar to the aftereffects of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the Pakistani government offered to help find the attackers. The Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, ordered an investigation into the leads provided by Indian officials. On 11 January 2016, after Pakistan provided members for a joint Indian/Pakistani investigation team, officials arrested three suspects connected to the Pathankot Airbase attack. Two days later, Pakistani officials arrested several JeM militants, but their role in the Pathankot attack is uncertain. After a couple more days, Pakistani officials raided a school run by JeM and arrested additional suspects. Again, their role in the Pathankot attack remained undetermined.⁵⁰
- India and Pakistan delayed a conference of high government officials scheduled for 15 January 2016 in Islamabad, and neither party has proposed a date for rescheduling the meeting.⁵¹
- On 13 April 2016, the Indian government issued a ban on building any kind of structure or planting of trees within 100 meters of the boundary wall of some Indian airbases.⁵²

Results

Between seven and ten Indian security personnel died in the Pathankot Airbase attack, along with the six intruders. The lack of specificity may be attributed to miscounting those who were mortally wounded and later died, or discrepancies related to naming conventions. Approximately 22 additional security personnel were wounded. Based on names listed in several sources, the dead belonged to four different military organizations.⁵³

- DSC: 7⁵⁴
- IAF Commando: 1
- IAF Garud Commando: 1⁵⁵
- NSG: 1⁵⁶

Minor building damage also occurred, but no aircraft were damaged during the attack.



Figure 10. A military honor guard pays final respects to one of the security personnel killed during the attack



Concurrent Attack on Indian Consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan

While Indian security personnel continued to search for additional intruders on the Pathankot Airbase, four armed militants attacked the Indian consulate on Sunday evening, 3 January 2016, in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan. Evidenced recovered after all four attackers died indicated that the attack on the consulate was also in retaliation for the hanging of Afzal Guru.⁵⁷

While most of the consulate personnel were watching the Afghanistan-India soccer game on television Sunday evening, four armed invaders fired rocket propelled grenade rounds and attempted to attack the Indian facility. The Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), whose members guard Indian diplomatic missions, fired back, engaging the attackers for over an hour. The initial ITBP counterattack killed two of the intruders, while the other two armed men fled across the street and took refuge in a house. Indian special forces personnel then surrounded the building while the attackers continued to fire at the consulate and the Indian security personnel. Before dying, the two individuals wrote in their own blood on the wall that their motivation for the attack was the hanging of Afzal Guru, the same claimed motive as the attack earlier in the weekend at the Pathankot Airbase. None of the Indian consular staff was hurt in the attack, but eight ITBP security personnel were injured. The Indian government has no doubt that the same group carried out both attacks—the one at Pathankot Airbase and the one in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan—but others disagree.⁵⁸

Analytical Assessment

While the attack in Afghanistan failed due to the IBTP's alertness, the attack at the Pathankot Airbase failed in spite of the lack of security of the facility and the initial investigation's ineptness. The actions of some retired military cooks may have caused the failure of the militants to achieve their objective at Pathankot.

Two cells, most likely from the same organization, attempted to attack two targets on the same weekend at locations several hundred miles apart and in different countries. One of the attacks—at the Pathankot Airbase—was a complex attack with two separate cells operating independently. Each cell failed to accomplish its assigned mission, albeit at a cost of several Indian security personnel killed or wounded. In the corresponding mission in Afghanistan, the four attackers never made it into the consulate due to the alertness of the IBTP providing security. This attack failed despite the distraction of a televised major sporting event that captivated the attention of most Afghans as well as most of the Indian consulate staff.

In the primary attack, at the Pathankot Airbase, the six infiltrators never made it closer than about 700 meters to the runway, where they hoped to destroy the IAF planes and helicopters. The IAF had flown all serviceable aircraft out of the airbase the night before, so there were very few targets left for the intruders to hit. Security personnel then guarded the remaining grounded aircraft and any other high-value targets on the airbase.

The cell of four members fell behind schedule when one of their victims, a taxi driver, crashed his cab. This unforeseen event created a need to carjack another vehicle in order to continue the mission. Unluckily for the carjackers, the vehicle belonged to a police officer who began to alert authorities of the terrorist presence in the local area. A lost walkie-talkie prevented better coordination between the two groups, but the cells initiated their plan despite the communications breakdown. In stark contrast to the

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failure of the DSC guards, a UAV with a thermal camera spotted the group of four as the second group scaled the perimeter wall. Soon after this group began moving within the base, a QRT confronted it. The sudden appearance of intruders alarmed base personnel who observed them; especially DSC cooks who, as previously noted, took matters into their own hands and killed one of the intruders. Little time passed before additional security personnel arrived and cornered the remaining three individuals in that cell.

While the Pathankot airbase seemed to fail to take precautions, national-level intelligence agencies were aware of an impending attack in Northwest India. The deployment of the Black Cat commandos demonstrated the Indian government's realization of an upcoming militant operation against an Indian military facility. This information failed, however, to reach the lowest levels of the military and the police ignored possible signs of militants. The Indian security forces were unaware either of the number of intruders or the number of cells on the base. Authorities at first thought all of the intruders had been eliminated, since they had already broken into two separate groups before the first hostile contact. Two attackers remained at large, however, and took refuge in an unoccupied barracks that the Indian security personnel did not search immediately. The oversight occurred because of the commander's focus on protecting important buildings and infrastructure. After laying low for about 12 hours, the smaller element ambushed the Indian security forces from inside its two-story hiding-place. Then, based on guidance from their chain of command, Indian security personnel methodically eliminated the attackers to reduce the likelihood of incurring additional casualties, and painstakingly searched the entire airbase for any additional intruders.



Figure 11. Soldier standing guard at the Pathankot Airbase

Other lessons learned:

- The Border Security Force failed to seal off the infiltration point that the JeM cells used the previous July, enabling intruders who struck in January to cross the border at the same location. Once a security weakness is found, it must be immediately eliminated to prevent future exploitation by a threat actor.
- Each BSF company was charged with responsibility for protecting an expanse of terrain that exceeded the capabilities of 100-man units. Lack of manpower resulted in fewer roving patrols, rendering the border vulnerable to infiltration.
- Much of the night vision equipment for the BSF was inoperable. Proper maintenance of existing equipment and/or the purchase of additional equipment would allow the BSF to see the infiltrators during periods of limited visibility. Even after authorities learned of an impending border intrusion, at least four intruders found a way to elude the BSF and cross the border.
- The local police discounted a local incident report. The Punjab police failed to take the reported carjacking seriously enough, mainly because they doubted a colleague's professional judgement.



Even reports that may not seem credible need to be passed to higher headquarters, in this case to the Indian intelligence agencies, for review. The presence of a stolen police vehicle 500 meters from the Pathankot Airbase on 1 January 2016—almost 14 hours before the initial firefight—received insufficient attention by installation authorities and security forces.

- Upon report of possible terrorist activity, local security personnel require augmentation by qualified personnel equipped to handle the emergency. While the DSC is composed of retired military personnel, they are not trained to confront an organized militaristic group. Even though many of the DSC personnel displayed outstanding personal courage, too many lost their lives. The majority of the Indian security personnel killed at Pathankot belonged to the DSC.
- A single commander should be in charge of operations and resource coordination. There seemed to be no one commander in charge at the Pathankot Airbase. The Indian government sent in highly-trained commandos from New Delhi—possible to justify their recent change of mission from VVIP duties to an anti-terrorism mission—but the NSG commandos had no personal knowledge of the terrain and were not accountable to the local chain of command. Many local army units remained idle during the operation, leaving the underqualified NSG to fend for itself in guarding the remaining aircraft and other high-value targets at the airbase. Regular Army units stationed in the Pathankot area may have provided better security.⁵⁹

TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

While the actions of the attackers at the Pathankot Airbase exhibit some characteristics of a raid, the episode was actually an assault because the six perpetrators had no intention of exfiltrating the airbase after accomplishing their mission of destroying aircraft parked on the runways. The suicide factor is confirmed by the call one team member made to his mother, advising her that he would not come back alive.⁶⁰

- The cliché that a plan never survives first contact proved valid for the Pathankot episode. In this case, the taxi driver purposely wrecked his vehicle to deprive the cell of its planned mode of transportation. The militant cell were then compelled to carjack another vehicle in order to reach the airbase. While setting up a comparable set of circumstances might be difficult in a US training environment, the opposing force (OPFOR) could be given the latitude to adjust its plans, provided it continues to adhere to the intent of training objectives.
- In training US units, a small OPFOR cell could attempt to infiltrate a command post, logistics point, airfield, or other rear area element to destroy equipment. This would test out the security of not only the local units, but the military police conducting roving patrols in the rear areas.
- This attack contains parts of two examples found in the [TRADOC G2 Handbook No. 1.07 \(Change 3\), A Soldier's Primer to Terrorism TTP](#), published in August 2012. The two examples are titled "IED Bomb: Decoy and Primary" and "IED Bomb: Multiple Bombs," and are located on pages 59–60 of the handbook.
- This attack could be part of some events found in the [Decisive Action Training Environment \(DATE\)](#) for training at both home station and the combat training centers. These events include "Border Incidents Cause a Resumption of Hostilities Between Two Countries" on page 3-5, "Local Army Helicopter Shot Down by Insurgents" on page 3-30, and "Port Attacked" on page 3-52.

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While not identical, these events found in DATE could be modified to create a similar training activity to what took place at the Pathankot Airbase.

Related Products

Other examples of attacks by small units can be found in previous Threat Reports (TR) and Threat Action Reports (TAR) published by ACE Threats Integration. These include

- TAR—[Janaale al-Shabaab Attack](#) (Somalia)
- TR—[Camp Bastion Attack Oct 2012 Update](#) (Afghanistan)
- TR—[Benghazi Attack](#) (Libya)
- TR—[Attack at PAF Base Minhas Nov 2012](#) (Pakistan)

See also the [Red Diamond Newsletter](#), which contains current articles on a variety of topics useful to both soldiers and civilians ranging from enemy tactics and techniques to the nature and analysis of various threat actors.

For detailed information on weapons and equipment, see the [Worldwide Equipment Guide](#).

To see more products from ACE-TI, visit the Army Training Network (ATN) with CAC access: https://atn.army.mil/dsp_template.aspx?dpID=377

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Note: Not all references listed in this publication are readily available to the public; some require a government common access card (CAC) to view.

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