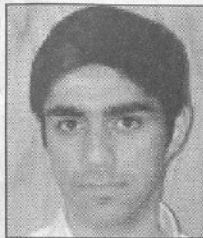


# Improving the president's security

## COMMENT



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*Two points need to be made. First, the idea of providing security to a high value individual is not to improve chances of survival in an attack. It is rather to ensure that no attack is allowed to materialise. For once an attack is successfully initiated, it is virtually impossible to guarantee that the target will escape unharmed*

FOLLOWING THE MASSIVE SECURITY failure during the December 25, 2003, assassination attempt on President Pervez Musharraf, a review of his security protocol was undertaken. Over the past month, I have analysed the reinforced security arrangements surrounding the president's road movement. My reliance for information is on my firsthand experience of being stopped in Islamabad for half a dozen times at roadblocks erected on account of his security. I propose here to highlight the fact that despite being extremely elaborate, the new protocol has fundamental flaws.

Two points need to be made before getting into details. First, the idea of providing security to a high value individual is not to improve chances of survival in an attack. It is rather to ensure that no attack is allowed to materialise. For once an attack is successfully initiated, it is virtually impossible to guarantee that the target will escape unharmed (this is especially true of suicide attacks). Therefore, any security arrangement that focuses on having the target escape, rather than stopping the attack from materializing, is flawed. It follows that an overriding dependence on technology (jam-

mers, etc) for safety is dangerous in that it seeks to prevent harm in an attack and not the attack as such. Second, preventing initiation of any attack translates, in essence, into depriving an attacker of the biggest advantage he has — the element of surprise. The security apparatus must somehow induce momentary hesitation/confusion in the attacker's mind.

That said, let me elaborate the ground situation. To begin with, all entries to the road that the President is to travel on (the 'target road') are blocked 7-10 minutes before his arrival. Streets leading to the target road are blocked using movable barriers, which are placed a mere 100-200 feet short of the target road. Any turnings (say for U-turns) and exits from all structures (buildings, filling stations etc) on the target road are also blocked using similar barriers or thick ropes hooked onto poles erected specially to prevent anyone from approaching the target road. Two or three *unarmed* policemen, facing the target road are stationed in front of the barriers/ropes. The traffic police instruct the pedestrians to stay away from the road. In Islamabad, this usually means requiring them to move to the greenbelts, which line most major roads of the city (at least ones on which Musharraf usually travels). On the greenbelt, they can remain stationary if they so desire. Finally, lining the target roadside and facing the target road, at varying distances (100-500 yards apart) from each other, are armed policemen.

Amidst this setting, the cavalcade arrives. The composition has varied somewhat in my experiences, but it usually consists of one or two army jeeps, carrying armed personnel, preceding the presidential vehicle. Then come three identical mini-cavalcades, the president's car (or what is potentially the car carrying the president; he is in any one of the three identical presidential vehicles) sandwiched between its escorts in each of the three batches (number of escort vehicles varies). The mini-cavalcades come 8-10 seconds apart and are followed by tail escorts.

While seemingly robust, the arrangement is a cause for concern. There are some shortcomings in the security design itself, and others in its implementation.

First, stopping all road movement by blocking entry to the target road 7-10 minutes in advance is self-defeating. The idea is to allow uninterrupted movement of the cavalcade. However, this inevitably leads to 30-50 cars being parked behind roadblocks on nearly all entry points on the target road. Most vehicle travellers, as well as cyclists/pedestrians gather behind the roadblocks, waiting for the cavalcade to pass. This makes any suspicious movement in the crowd much harder to detect. Any attacker in a car can position himself for a sniper attack (or open firing), well in advance. [A ready objection

*might be that a bullet-proof car would remain unharmed. But as I have already mentioned, the aim of any security arrangement is to foil an attempt before it is initiated. Once an attempt is made, any number of things could go wrong. Simultaneous fire from two or more attackers, for example could burst car tyres and cause a serious accident.]* This is especially so because all policemen manning the roadblocks are facing the target road (away from the crowd).

Similarly, the practice of restricting pedestrians from moving alongside the road but allowing them to stay on the greenbelts is dangerous. The greenbelt makes detection difficult, especially at night.

From a security perspective, it is much more desirable to keep all traffic flowing (without indicating the anticipated arrival of any high value target) till about 2-3 minutes before the actual arrival, which is enough time to clear the traffic on the target road.

Next, consider the movement of the presidential cavalcade itself. An 8-10 second opening between 'presidential' cars is worrisome. Also, a certain distance between them is routine (my experience suggests that the three batches are roughly the same distance apart every time). This makes a sniper attack easier. Terrorists could monitor the president's movements to ascertain the precise interval between the three batches. On D-day, three snipers could position themselves at roadblocks or camouflage themselves in the greenbelts to simultaneously shoot at all three batches. The 8-10 second interval allows the snipers to be positioned a comfortable distance apart from each other.

Maintaining the 8-10 second interval makes sense with the presumption of a suicide attack. It will ensure that only one of the three mini-cavalcades would be affected. The probability of a strike being successful is thus cut down to a third. But providing individual security is not about trade offs. One cannot call a robust a security apparatus countering one kind of attack, while at the same time facilitating another.

The mini-cavalcades need to be much closer to each other (at 2-3 seconds interval). Also, the three presidential cars ought to be separated by at least 2-3 escort vehicles in between. The latter would minimise the probability of a suicide attack hitting all three cars. The strike ratio would thus remain at 1:3 and the possibility of a sniper attack would be minimised. Also, the distance between the three batches should vary. This will ensure that nobody can establish in advance the position of a vehicle relative to the others and make pre-positioning for a simultaneous attack on all three presidential cars impossible.

Finally, there is serious problem with the formation of security personnel manning the roadblocks as well as those lining the target road. They

have the most important role to play in detecting and foiling an attack before it is executed. In the present set-up they can make no contribution.

The fact that all policemen manning the barriers are unarmed and looking away from the crowd hands the aggressor the advantage of surprise and allows him more time to execute his plan. The cavalcade can be intercepted by simply driving a car past the security barrier!

The same goes for the armed personnel. They, too, face the target road. This means that they cannot detect any movement in the greenbelt, from where an attack could be initiated. Given that Islamabad's greenbelts have an affluence of trees, an attacker could easily go undetected (especially at night). Also, as mentioned, by looking away from the potential origin of trouble, security personnel are reinforcing the advantage of surprise for the perpetrator. Whether the policemen can gun him/them down before harm is brought to the cavalcade is a separate issue. The bottom line is, the attacker will have a clear window to take a shot.

Worse still, I found all armed security personnel extremely lax, merely looking on, awaiting the arrival of the cavalcade. In my experiences, most of them had their rifles pointing to the ground, thus requiring longer to aim and fire in case of trouble. I did not spot even one policeman actually making an attempt to detect trouble. Interestingly, as the cavalcade arrives, most of the security personnel start staring at it, as if trying to catch a glimpse of the president. This is a classic security blunder: letting your attention to be diverted from the task of detecting trouble.

The whole formation is designed for damage control, not premature detection. By focusing solely on the target road, armed policemen can, at best, try to gun down an individual or vehicle trying to intercept the cavalcade. There is no effort to secure the area from where the attack would potentially originate.

Instead of focusing only on the target road, at each barrier, two armed men should be placed next to each other, one facing the target (for damage control: a back-up function) and the other away from it (to detect trouble early: the primary objective). This should also apply to the personnel lining the target road. Such a formation will ensure early detection of trouble leading eventually to either successful deterrence or at the very least negating the advantage of surprise.

There is also dire need for focused training as far as handling of weapons is concerned. To deter or deny the advantage of surprise to the attacker, all armed personnel must be on hair-trigger alert. An elite unit can perhaps be especially trained to protect high value individuals.

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