

Minimum Occupancy of the Flight Deck

BACKGROUND

The tragedy of Germanwings flight 4U9525 triggered a number of initiatives and interim measures within the aviation industry. These measures were not the result of a structured approach to flight safety and security which must have a thorough threat and risk analysis as its foundation. Considering the vast number of flights taking place safely every single day, this accident was clearly an extremely rare event.

“TWO CREW MEMBERS AT ALL TIME”

One such measure was the “two-persons-in-the-cockpit” recommendation, also known as the “four-eye-rule” or the “minimum occupancy” concept, which suggests that, when there are only two pilots in the flight deck and one of them has to leave for physiological needs or any other operational reason, another member of the crew (generally from the cabin crew) should be present with the remaining pilot.

The lack of consultation with all the relevant aviation stakeholders resulted in very mixed responses from the National Aviation Authorities and the airlines. Some airlines started implementing this recommendation immediately but did not carry out the necessary threat and risk assessment and the specific training. Other airlines applied it to passenger flights only, leaving non-revenue flights and cargo flights unchanged, whereas the Germanwings situation could very well have happened on either of these two categories of flight. The remaining airlines chose not to follow the recommendation at all, relying on their own threat and risk assessment. Some of these airlines even came to the conclusion that the recommendation actually had the potential to reduce the security of the operation. As can be seen, there was no consensus on the course of action.

PRACTICAL ASPECTS

This “minimum occupancy” concept is not new. However, when it was introduced, it was for practical reasons only and not to prevent a situation like the one that occurred on the Germanwings flight. For example, in many aircraft, there is no remotely-operated door-locking system in the cockpit, or CCTV/surveillance cameras to enable pilots to check who’s behind the door whilst remaining in their seat. When one of the pilots leaves the cockpit, the presence of a cabin crew checking on the door and operating the door lock ensures that the remaining pilot always stays at the controls.

SECURITY ASPECTS

IFALPA believes that the “minimum occupancy” concept will not prove effective against the reoccurrence of the Germanwings situation, and therefore will not support its worldwide implementation. Implying that flight crews require monitoring when they are on their own in the flight deck will reduce passenger confidence in the pilots that fly them. The “minimum occupancy” concept, and the presence in the cockpit of a person with no operational knowledge will not improve security. It might create new safety and operational concerns. For example, such persons would be unlikely to recognize, understand and let alone solve any operational issue such as a TCAS RA or an emergency descent and create distractions in the flight deck.

Moreover, the number of people now needed to participate in accessing and leaving the flight deck has the potential to seriously compromise in-flight security as there will be early indications of the door's opening, an increase in the number of times that the door will be operated and/or in the amount of time it will stay open.

COCKPIT DOOR SECURITY

Reinforced cockpit doors are designed to prevent people with bad intentions from gaining access. Their installation, following the 9/11 attacks, has significantly lowered the number of attempts to breach the flight deck, and to date none of these attempts has been successful. Any new design and/or procedure that would enable the flight deck door to be opened from the passenger cabin would greatly reduce the flight deck integrity. It would give a terrorist the option to force crew members to open the door.

IFALPA continues to support, for all commercial transport aircraft, the installation of a cockpit door designed to resist forcible intrusions by unauthorized persons, capable of being locked and unlocked only from either pilot's station, and equipped with a cockpit door surveillance system. Only such installation can provide an adequate level of security by allowing the flight crew members to assess who's being admitted to the flight deck and then operate the door whilst staying seated and in permanent control of the aircraft. The Federation stresses, however, that the security of cockpit doors should not be considered a substitute for proper and adequate ground security.

CONCLUSION

The "minimum occupancy" concept is NOT an effective security tool. IFALPA is extremely concerned that such a measure has the potential of introducing a risk higher than the one it is trying to prevent. IFALPA remains committed to contribute to the discussions taking place within the industry and to consider any future recommendations designed to improve aircraft security.