

Search for missing Malaysia Airlines plane enters third week

Tom Peters
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Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced in parliament on Thursday that he had received “new and credible information,” based on satellite images of floating objects in the southern Indian Ocean, that the pictures might show debris from Malaysia Airlines flight 370.

Military planes from Australia, the US and New Zealand have searched the area over the past two days but have found no trace of MH370, which went missing on March 8 carrying 239 passengers and crew. Yesterday, Abbott defended his high-profile announcement in parliament but told the media that the debris “could just be a container that has fallen off a ship. We just don’t know.”

Oceanographers pointed out that the objects may well have sunk since the pictures were taken, reportedly on March 16. The area being searched is extremely remote, with waters that are rough and around four kilometres deep.

Flight MH370 was en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. Malaysian and US investigators say the plane lost contact with civilian air traffic control when its civilian transponder was disabled somewhere over the South China Sea. Malaysia’s military then tracked the plane as it veered back over the Malaysian peninsula toward the Indian Ocean.

British satellite firm Inmarsat reported that it received “pings” from the plane which indicated that it continued to fly north over Asia or south over the Indian Ocean for about seven more hours. Inmarsat passed on its information to Malaysian authorities on March 12 and suggested that the plane may have crashed in the ocean west of Australia.

Malaysian authorities did not publicly acknowledge the new information until March 15, when the search finally shifted away from the South China Sea and

Malacca Strait.

The emergence of satellite images on Thursday, four days after they were reportedly taken and 12 days after the plane’s disappearance, raises further questions about the way the search is being handled.

The US private company DigitalGlobe said its satellites took the pictures. The Australian Maritime Safety Authority, which is coordinating the search in the area, attributed the delay in bringing the images to its attention to “the volume of imagery being searched, and the detailed process of analysis that followed.”

The reported source of the satellite images cannot be taken at face value. On Wednesday, the *New Straits Times* reported that Malaysian Defence Minister Hishamuddin Hussein, who is the country’s acting transport minister and leading its search effort, had appealed to the US and Australian governments to share information from their top secret bases in Australia, including Pine Gap, and the Jindalee Operational Radar Network (JORN). He said the US had “possibly the best ability” to locate the plane.

The exact capacities of the highly sensitive Pine Gap base, near Alice Springs in central Australia, are not known. But it can locate phone and radio signals from the Middle East right across Asia to China, North Korea and the Russian Far East. Fairfax Media last year exposed its use to pinpoint targets for drone assassinations in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

JORN is used by the Australian Defence Force to monitor air and sea movements across an estimated 37,000 square kilometre area, which stretches as far north as Singapore and north-west across a large stretch of the Indian Ocean.

Former military intelligence officer and Australia Defence Association head Neil James told the *Australian Financial Review* on Thursday that

Malaysia was “trying to shift the blame over its handling of the investigation on to Australia and the US.”

However, Dr Andrew Davies, from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute think tank, told the paper it was “plausible” that “satellite data from Pine Gap has been looked at.” He added: “If it was too sensitive to reveal where it came from, intelligence agencies can usually find a way to fudge its origin.”

This raises numerous questions. If the satellite images were supplied by US or Australian intelligence agencies, when did they first know that the plane may have entered the Indian Ocean? How long would it have taken to “fudge” the information’s origin, and what else do they know about the flight that is deemed too sensitive to release?

The search operation continues to be marred by tensions between China and the US and its allies. Two thirds of the passengers on the plane were Chinese, but other countries are reluctant to cooperate with the Chinese military.

The Indian government has refused to allow Chinese ships to search near the Nicobar and Andaman islands, over which MH370 may have passed. An unnamed military official told the *Times of India* yesterday: “The Andaman and Nicobar command is our military outpost in the region, which overlooks the Malacca Strait and dominates the Six-Degree Channel. We don’t want Chinese warships sniffing around in the area on the pretext of hunting for the missing jetliner or anti-piracy patrols.”

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This comment underlines the strategic importance of the islands, located near a key trade route for China. India has strengthened its military partnership with Washington as part of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” which is aimed at encircling China and asserting US dominance over the Asia-Pacific region.

Media reports also suggest that Beijing’s decision to send naval ships and military aircraft to assist the southern Indian Ocean search could create problems for Australia. According to yesterday’s *Wall Street Journal*, Michael McKinley, a security expert at the Australian National University, “suggested the Chinese involvement was likely to raise serious concerns for Australia about the potential for disrupting relations

with the US.”

Canberra has been fully integrated into Washington’s plans for a potential war against China, with an agreement to station 2,500 US marines in Darwin, as well as allowing broad US access to Australian military bases and facilities. The US, Australian and New Zealand militaries clearly view the Indian Ocean search as a useful training exercise, which they do not want China to disrupt. Japan and Britain, key US allies, are also set to join the search.

What happened to flight MH370 remains unclear. Authorities in China, the US and Malaysia have reportedly not identified any links to terrorism among the plane’s crew or passengers, or other motives to hijack the aircraft. Yet, investigators say the plane must have been deliberately diverted from its route to Beijing by someone familiar with the flight technology.

French air accident investigator Rémi Jouty told yesterday’s *Financial Times* that the plane’s disappearance could have been avoided if the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), the UN agency that sets global aviation standards, had implemented recommendations from the investigation into the 2009 Air France crash.

Jouty said the ICAO proposed a requirement for all aircraft to transmit regular updates about their position, altitude, speed and heading. Planes could be fitted with an automatic system, broadcasting their whereabouts, that could not be overridden from the cockpit.

He said the recommendations were not implemented because of a lack of agreement among governments and the potential cost to airlines.



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