

Air search called off for missing Malaysia Airlines plane

Tom Peters
2 May 2014

Almost two months after the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, no wreckage of the plane has been found. Australian search coordinators this week called off the six-week aerial search over a remote part of the southern Indian Ocean. Prime Minister Tony Abbott declared on Monday it was “highly unlikely” that any debris from the plane would still be floating on the surface.

Also on Monday the US navy submersible Bluefin 21 finished a two-week search of the ocean floor within a 10-kilometre radius without finding any trace of the plane. The search began after an Australian navy ship detected four “pings” in the area early last month, which search coordinator, former Defence Force chief Angus Houston, described as “consistent” with signals from MH370’s black box and “a most promising lead.” No more “pings” have been received, however, and their source remains unconfirmed.

The underwater search has now been expanded to a vast stretch of seabed 700km long and 80km wide—covering the entire area where searchers say the plane could have crashed. Houston warned that it could take eight months to search the area “if everything goes perfectly.”

The Australian government is proceeding with the massive search, despite the lack of any hard evidence of a plane crash, in part to curry favour with Malaysia, and particularly China. Most of the 239 people on board MH370 were Chinese. Australia is currently pursuing a free trade agreement with China, its largest export market.

At the same time, Canberra clearly sees the ongoing search as a useful joint navy training exercise, involving its close allies the US and Britain. The new phase of the search is expected to cost \$US56 million, but Abbott indicated that he will seek “some

appropriate contribution from other nations” to fund it—most likely China and Malaysia.

The events of March 8, when the plane went missing while en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, remain shrouded in mystery. According to Malaysian authorities, the plane must have been deliberately diverted and its civilian transponder disabled by someone familiar with the technology. Police in Malaysia, China and elsewhere have not revealed anything to implicate any of the plane’s passengers or crew in a hijacking attempt or terrorist action.

The Malaysian government yesterday released a five-page “preliminary report” on the investigation, which raises further questions and fails to shed any new light on what happened.

The report reveals a confused and uncoordinated response to the disappearance. At 1:21 a.m. the flight vanished from civilian radar screens, somewhere between Vietnamese and Malaysian air space. Seventeen minutes later, Ho Chi Minh City Air Traffic Control officers asked their counterparts in Kuala Lumpur where the plane had gone. It took four more hours before a search and rescue operation was finally launched. During this time, Malaysian air traffic controllers frantically contacted their counterparts in Hong Kong, Singapore and Phnom Penh to try to determine whether anyone had contacted the plane.

According to the report, the controllers did not ask Malaysia’s military if its radar was tracking the plane. In a statement, Defence and Acting Transport Minister Hishammuddin Hussein said he was only informed at about 10:30 a.m. that the military had tracked MH370 turning around and flying back across the Malaysian Peninsula. The search, which began in the South China Sea, was then extended to the Straits of Malacca.

Hishammuddin said the military took no action when

it first saw the plane because it was categorised as “friendly,” but this hardly explains the five-hour delay in making the information available once the search had started. One possible explanation is that the military did not want to reveal its detection capabilities to other countries. Thailand’s military waited several days before releasing information that it had also tracked the plane.

The government’s report includes a map of the flight path that MH370 supposedly took into the Indian Ocean, apparently based on information provided by British satellite firm Inmarsat.

The map suggests that MH370 flew over part of Sumatra in Indonesia—contradicting previous leaks from Malaysian government officials who said it skirted Indonesia’s air space. This raises questions about whether Indonesia’s military detected the plane.

The search shifted to the Indian Ocean after the Malaysian government confirmed on March 15 that Inmarsat received signals from the plane for another seven hours after it disappeared. On March 24, Prime Minister Najib Razak declared that further analysis of the satellite data showed that the plane must have crashed in the southern Indian Ocean.

But the failure to find any debris from the plane, despite an extensive search, has raised doubts about this scenario. On April 21, the *New Straits Times* reported that Malaysian officials involved in the search had not discounted the possibility that MH370 crashed somewhere else. An unnamed official said Malaysia had “mainly been provided with selective data” from other governments, which did not want to share raw military and intelligence information that would reveal their capabilities.

The search takes place amid soaring tensions produced by the Obama administration’s military build-up in Asia, which is aimed at containing and preparing for war against China. US allies throughout the region, including Australia and Japan, are re-arming and taking a more belligerent stance against China.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on March 22 that US and British intelligence “provided key information” leading searchers to focus on the Indian Ocean, but the nature of this information has not been revealed. The US and Australia jointly operate the powerful Pine Gap spy base in Central Australia, which is used to detect targets for drone assassination across the Middle East,

Afghanistan and Pakistan. Australia’s military radar also reportedly covers a significant part of the Indian Ocean. Malaysian investigators have asked to view data gathered by the facilities, but have been refused by the US and Australia.

It cannot be ruled out that MH370 ended its flight elsewhere. Adelaide-based company GeoResonance claims to have found evidence of a plane wreck in the Bay of Bengal. The firm specialises in surveys for oil, gas and underground uranium, using sophisticated sensor technology. The company passed on its findings to Malaysian and Chinese embassies on March 31, and to the Australian search leaders on April 4. In a statement to the media this week, the company said it was “surprised by the lack of response from the various authorities.”

Australian authorities have dismissed GeoResonance’s information on the grounds that the location in the Bay of Bengal is inconsistent with Inmarsat’s satellite data. Bangladesh yesterday dispatched frigates to search the area.



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