

Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 may have veered off course

By Peter Symonds
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A week after air traffic controllers lost contact with Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, an intensive search involving 57 ships, 48 aircraft and 13 nations has failed to locate any wreckage. Sightings of oil slicks and possible debris along its intended flight path from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing have all been discounted, including three large indistinct objects on Chinese satellite images released on Wednesday.

The search is now focussed hundreds of kilometres to the west of the plane's last known position, indicating that it veered sharply off course shortly after its satellite-based transponder and data transmissions stopped. A series of electronic signals received by satellite from the plane suggest that it continued to fly for at least four hours, possibly following a known airline route to the Middle East and Europe. This would vastly expand the radius of the search area to 3,700 kilometres or more.

In a short statement yesterday, the British satellite communications provider, Inmarsat, acknowledged that "routine, automated signals" had been registered on its satellite network from MH370. The signals involve a simple check to ensure that the aircraft equipment is functioning. Inmarsat executives told the media that the signals did not include altitude and location, but the direction and timing could be used to approximate the plane's position.

The Inmarsat data, which has not been publicly released, only compounds the mystery surrounding MH370 and the fate of the 239 people on board. The aircraft took off from Kuala Lumpur at 12.40 a.m. on Saturday March 8, heading north to Beijing. Its last known position was at 1.20 am, roughly 150 kilometres off Malaysia's east coast. The crew sent out no distress call.

The Inmarsat data is reinforced by Malaysian military

radar sightings of an unknown aircraft, which could have been MH370, last detected at 2.15 a.m. about 300 kilometres off Malaysia's west coast. Citing unnamed sources, Reuters reported yesterday that military radar—possibly from other countries—continued to track the aircraft as it headed northwest toward India's Nicobar and Andaman Islands.

While the Reuters story has not been confirmed, search operations have shifted to the Andaman Sea and the wider Indian Ocean. US navy spokesman Commander William Marks said all US search efforts, including by the destroyer USS Kidd, would concentrate on the Indian Ocean. The Chinese government announced that the Haixun 31, a civilian patrol ship, would also move its search to the western side of the Malaysian peninsula.

The Indian navy has increased its search in the area surrounding the Nicobar and Andaman Islands, using six ships and five aircraft. However, in comments to *Bloomberg.com*, a navy official questioned the idea that the plane had entered the area undetected. The Indian military has been expanding its joint command in the island group, which is strategically located close to the northern end of the Malacca Strait.

The latest version of events suggests deliberate decisions to turn off MH370's electronic signalling devices and change course, raising the possibility of a hijacking by a passenger or crew members. However, as reported by the *Wall Street Journal* today, no criminal investigation has been opened and "an international team of investigators hasn't ruled out the possibility that some type of catastrophic event, pilot error or mechanical malfunction was the cause of the plane's disappearance."

Earlier this week, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the US Federal Aviation Administration

(FAA) sent out a global alert last year warning of the danger of cracking in the fuselage skin of Boeing 777s, underneath the aircraft's satellite antenna. The MH370 was a Boeing 777-200ER. It also noted a theory posted on the Professional Pilots Rumour Network explaining that such a flaw could have rendered the aircraft's satellite communications systems inoperable and led to a slow decompression that caused the crew to slip into unconsciousness. Such a theory is less likely, however, if a number of course changes were made along a route headed toward the Andaman Islands.

The Malaysian and US authorities have not commented on the hijack theory, other than to say nothing has been ruled out. According to the *Wall Street Journal* article, the US FBI has examined the backgrounds of all the passengers and crew listed on the MH370 and found no known connections to terrorist or extremist groups. Malaysian authorities have identified two passengers travelling on stolen passports as Iranians who were seeking to live in Europe.

Malaysian investigators have examined the backgrounds of the two pilots—captain Zaharie Ahmad Shah, 53, and co-pilot Fariq Abdul Hamid, 27—and unearthed nothing suspicious. Zaharie was a highly experienced pilot. He joined the airline in 1981 and has more than 18,000 flight hours.

The fact that it has taken a week for investigators to piece together the possibility that MH370 did not crash immediately highlights the conflicting interests at stake. Bridget Welsh, a Singapore Management University associate professor, commented to Agence France Presse (AFP): “There are clearly communications problems on multiple levels. There is an underlying lack of trust in these matters. The issues of protecting territory, security intelligence and interests are starting to win over the common goal of finding the plane and closure.”

With MH370's transponder turned off, military radar systems were one of the few means of tracking the aircraft. Singapore-based aviation expert Terence Fan told AFP that countries are reluctant to share such data because it could expose their capabilities. “The rate at which they [radar installations] can take the picture can reveal how good the radar system is,” he explained.

The most sophisticated electronic intelligence gathering systems in Asia are operated by the US

military and spy agencies, with the collaboration of their allies, such as Australia. The lack of close intelligence sharing between the US and Malaysia became apparent when unnamed US officials briefed the American media that MH370 might have kept flying for hours. Malaysia's Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein, who is in charge of the search operation, initially dismissed the accounts and only later announced that the search area had been greatly expanded.

Malaysia knew from its own military radar that MH370 could have shifted course to the west and last Sunday asked the Thai navy to begin searching the Andaman Sea, but beyond that it appears to have been in the dark until yesterday. That raises the question: how long have US authorities been aware that the aircraft might have flown on for hours?

As part of the US “pivot to Asia” aimed against China, the Pentagon is building up and restructuring its already huge air and naval presence across the Indo-Pacific, undoubtedly equipped with highly advanced systems for detecting unknown aircraft and missiles. That leads to another obvious question: what else does the American military know about the fate of MH370?

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