

Possible black box signals detected in search for Malaysia Airlines plane

By Tom Peters
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Thirty-one days after the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, the plane still has not been found.

More than a dozen aircraft and a similar number of ships from several different countries are continuing to search a remote part of the southern Indian Ocean about 1,040 kilometres (650 miles) off the Western Australian coast. Search efforts have been guided by numerous satellite images of the ocean, the first of which was released on March 20, showing indistinct floating objects.

On March 24, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak declared that analysis of satellite data showed that the plane, which was travelling from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, had diverted from its flight path and travelled for eight hours before crashing in the Indian Ocean. However, no debris from the plane has been recovered or sighted in more than two weeks of searching. It is the longest search in aviation history without any sighting of debris.

On Saturday and Sunday, sophisticated equipment on the Australian navy ship Ocean Shield reportedly detected “pings” which might have been from the missing plane’s black box. A Chinese patrol ship, Haixun 01, also reported that it detected signals on Saturday.

Search coordinator Angus Houston, Australia’s former Defence Force Chief, initially declared that the signals detected by Ocean Shield were “consistent with transmission from both the flight data recorder and the cockpit voice recorder” and were “a most promising lead.” Houston has since reported that Ocean Shield picked up two more signals, yesterday afternoon and overnight. It is not yet confirmed that these are from the black box, but Houston explained: “Hopefully with lots of transmissions we’ll have a tight, small [search] area and hopefully in a matter of days we will be able

to find something on the bottom that might confirm that this is the last resting place of MH370.”

The signals picked up yesterday lasted for just over five minutes, but are becoming weaker because of the expiring black box batteries that last only around 30 days. Authorities have not stated whether the search will be scaled back if no further leads are found.

The circumstances of MH370’s disappearance remain extremely unclear. Investigators from Malaysia have claimed that the plane must have been deliberately diverted from its flight path by someone familiar with the aircraft. Civilian contact with the plane was lost when its civilian transponder was switched off somewhere over the South China Sea. The Malaysian military apparently tracked the plane veering west over the Malaysian peninsula and towards the Indian Ocean—although this information was not made public until four days into the search. The Thai military also withheld radar data for more than a week.

According to the official version of events, the plane then flew for seven hours without being tracked by any country, before crashing in the ocean. Malaysia’s Defence Minister and acting Transport Minister Hishammudin Hussein, who is in charge of the country’s search effort, says authorities have not ruled out “terrorism, hijacking, personal and psychological problems, or technical failure.” The CIA and the British spy agency MI6 are also involved in the investigation.

Several family members of the 239 people on board the flight have expressed anger and frustration over the lack of information and conflicting messages from Malaysian authorities since the start of the investigation.

On Sunday, CNN reported that an unidentified “senior Malaysian government source” said that after

reviewing radar data from “neighbouring countries”, investigators had concluded that the plane “skirted” Indonesia’s airspace in an attempt to avoid radar detection. This would appear to support theories that the plane was hijacked. Hishammudin, however, declared that the report was “untrue.” He offered no further explanation, merely stating that Indonesian radar had not detected the plane.

The leak and Hishammudin’s denial are a further indication that critical information about the flight is being withheld. In an interview published by the British *Telegraph* on April 3, Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim said he had overseen the installation of “one of the most sophisticated radar” systems in the world when he was the country’s finance minister in 1994. He said it was “not possible, not feasible” that the plane’s change of course was not immediately detected, and it was “baffling” that the air force did not take action.

Malaysia’s military may have delayed releasing its data in order to avoid revealing its capabilities. The government has since declared that as a result of the information being released it will have to buy a new radar system.

While Houston has declared that “no one is holding anything back” in the search for the plane, the search operation has been marred by strategic rivalries and an unwillingness to share information gathered by military and intelligence facilities. A senior Malaysian official involved in the investigation told the *New Straits Times* last week that US satellites could “‘tag’ anyone, no matter how remote the location”, and that both US and Chinese satellites “can pick out a newspaper heading from geosynchronous orbit.”

The official added that the top secret US spy base in central Australia, Pine Gap, and the Australian military’s Jindalee Operational Radar Network could have tracked the plane as it flew over the Indian Ocean.

While the Australian government has declared that there is a high level of collaboration between the militaries involved in the Indian Ocean search, the *Washington Post* noted that China’s vessels had a “confused status.” While other crews are reporting their findings directly to the Australian-run coordination centre, Chinese vessels are reporting to Beijing first. The Haixun 01’s detection of possible black box signals over the weekend was reported by the

Chinese media before Australian authorities were informed.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott last week trumpeted his government’s spending on the search, declaring that it was “only reasonable that we should bear this cost—it’s an act of international citizenship... [W]e are happy to be as helpful as we can to all the countries that have a stake in this.” But on Monday Mark Thomson, senior analyst of defence economics at the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute, told the Australian Associated Press: “we’ve got to pay for the boats and the planes and the pilots and the sailors anyway, and they’re out there doing some stuff which is good training and reflects well on us internationally.”

Australia and its allies, including the UK and US, view the search as an opportunity for joint training, which they do not want China to intrude on. Australia is a key US ally and an integral part of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia”—a diplomatic and military strategy to encircle and prepare for war against China.

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