

Lessons from a tragedy: Case of MH 370

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The Malaysian airline's Boeing 777-200ER (MH 370) went missing on March 8, 2014. The last known position of the aircraft, as seen on civilian air traffic controller's screen, was off the north-eastern coast of Malaysia. The airliner on a scheduled flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing with 239 passengers on board disappeared 40 minutes into the flight. The search under the stewardship of Malaysia was launched on March 8 itself though delayed by almost four hours. Many nations subsequently joined in the search operation. The approach, coordination and cooperation of the Malaysians and the neighbouring countries in the search operations have exposed certain short comings in the regions internal, bilateral and multilateral relationship whilst handling the situation.

In the initial response the countries provided hard assets in the way of ships and aircraft towards the search operations. The challenge for Malaysia, the coordinating country, was overwhelming in the initial stages, with the focus being dissipated due to the sheer magnitude of the assets, non-assimilation of information and lack of a centralised command and control infrastructure. Precious time was lost in internal verification of data from military primary radars which had tracked the ill fated airliner in reallocating resources to different search areas. It also highlights the slow flow of information between the military and civil aviation setup in Malaysia. During the initial stages of the investigation as to the plausible reasons for the tragedy, the system of integrating of a global verification system of passengers entering the country needs to be highlighted. At present the countries in the region where immigration officials manning airports are not connected to a central database whether regional or global where verification of the passengers coming from different countries can be done in terms of whether the passports are stolen or the person has any criminal history. At the bilateral level, Thailand, after a good ten days, brought out that its military had tracked the aircraft deviating from its flight path. The reason for the delay in sharing the information was that nobody had asked for it. As for the flow of information, in one instance the satellite agency of China forward images of a likely location of debris, resulting in allocating of resources away from the then focus area. This report was subsequently negated by the Chinese government by stating that it was not verified and the agency should not have sent it.

The Chinese government from the beginning of the search operations, besides providing a number of military assets, tried aggressively to guide the Malaysians in seeking information on military radar pictures and by sending a high level delegation to camp in

Kuala Lumpur. The objectives of this assistance being at three levels: the first to demonstrate to its domestic population of its complete involvement in the search; second to provide leadership in the region by putting its will and assets for a common cause and third to demonstrate its ability to safeguard and dominate the area in the South China Sea. The last two objectives at a certain level touched upon concerns of sovereignty in the South China Sea though not hampering the search but definitely not optimising the resources. In the Strait of Malacca concerns over military radar capabilities acted as inhibitors in the search mission. Thus the whole exercise at the multilateral level was sub-optimised – more as individual state efforts than as a team force multiplying the effort.

There is quite clearly reluctance all around to sharing data or at least in negating the sighting of the airliner on the radar by countries in the region for security concerns as well as the lack of a centralised regional command and control centre for coordinating and monitoring the operations. The MH 370 incident also brings into focus the requirement of strengthening the primary and secondary radar surveillance infrastructure at the regional level in light of the ever expanding civil aviation sector and with reported aim of ASEAN to have an open sky policy from the year 2015.

There is a definite need in the Asian region, especially over large areas of the ocean, to have continuous coverage of civil aircraft automatically without any requirement of human interface from the aircraft. The open sky policy will lead to increase in traffic for business as well as tourism in the region due to increased competition resulting from greater accessibility, penetration and reduced regulatory framework. The hindrance to fully implement the policy particularly the lack of physical infrastructure in terms of airports as well as supporting infrastructure, i.e., radars, trained personnel, complementing laws and security.

The ASEAN grouping has in the recent past taken steps for HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) but with the premise that they know where the relief is required. As for rescue coordination the ASEAN grouping have largely focused on maritime disasters only. In the MH 370 incident, the role of the military as first responders has become evident due to the resources at its disposal thus highlighting the need for greater cooperation between the civil and military and between militaries of the region. The political leadership needs to take this aspect into account and work on better coordination internally as well as at the multilateral level. The lessons from this tragedy are for all nations and not only Malaysia or ASEAN.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.