



Centre for Air Power Studies

Downing of MH17

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In the heat of the latest war hysteria in Ukraine, the downing of the Malaysian BA 777 Passenger Jet¹ in Eastern Ukraine killing everybody on board has propelled countries around the world to strongly criticize Russia's role in the ongoing crisis in Kiev. Russia has been facing the ire of international community ever since its accession of Crimea and for its role and supply of weapons to pro- Russian supporters in Eastern Ukraine. Ironically, this incident has also widened the scope for tussle between the West and Russia as the blame-game is on.

Backed by Russia's support and arms supply, the separatists were alleged of possessing a missile system capable of downing a civilian airliner at their disposal. Anatoly Geraschenko, an adviser to Ukraine's Interior Minister, said in an update that the system cited as responsible for the downing of flight MH17, was the sophisticated Buk radar guided, tracked-vehicle mounted, anti-aircraft missile system.² But, the Donetsk People's Republic claimed that its self-defense forces do not possess an air defense system with that kind of capability to reach such an altitude. Neither have they been known to have shot down any Ukrainian military aircraft flying above 6000 meters.³ But, they claim to have MANPADs (portable anti-aircraft missile complex) which hit targets at 3-4 kilometers and have claimed that one or perhaps two of Ukraine transport planes and helicopters were shot down at near 2500 to 4000 meters. 4,000 meters is 13123.4 feet, a far cry from 33,000 feet altitude of passenger jets.⁴

There is also the question of whether the fighters are well-trained to maintain and operate the Buk missile system. Even if Russia was arming fighters in Eastern Ukraine, it would not be with Buk systems as it would be traced directly back to Moscow during their first use regardless of what they fired at.⁵ In addition, Ukraine government was involved in a similar incident in 2001 when the only other civilian airliner to have been shot down over Ukrainian airspace was the Siberia Airlines Flight 1812 that crashed over the Black Sea on 4 October 2001, en route from Tel Aviv, Israel to Novosibirsk, Russia. The plane, a Soviet-made Tupolev Tu-154, carried an estimated 66 passengers and 12 crew members. No one on board survived. Ukraine did admit its handiwork of a poorly-coordinated air defense exercise later.⁶

In the past half year of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, the US spy satellites alleged the trucking of several large Buk anti-aircraft missile systems from Russia to warzone Ukraine and then back to Russia. It was also alleged that attempts were made to move them back across the Russian border after the 17 July shoot-down of a Malaysian jetliner. Although there are limitations to what U.S. spy satellites can detect, the Buk missiles are about 16 feet long and they are usually mounted on trucks or tanks, therefore, it is hard to believe that it didn't show up somewhere. MH17 went down during the afternoon, not at night, meaning the missile battery was not concealed by darkness. Instead of pressing for more information on the incident, US has hyped the role of President Putin in the event as propaganda against Russia. The question that arises here is whether the U.S. is withholding evidence that the separatists were not the perpetrators.⁷

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Source: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/malaysian-airlines-mh17-was-ordered-to-fly-over-the-east-ukraine-warzone/5392540>

An important argument made here is that the Ukrainians had officially closed the airspace near the warzone over Donetsk and Lugansk since 8 July. The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) also declared Ukrainian airspace off limits to all aircraft under its jurisdiction; although it appeared other airlines continued flying over what has been a warzone for months.⁸ Therefore, on that fateful day, the passenger jet was allowed to fly over the warzone area. Malaysian Airlines also confirmed that the pilot was instructed to fly at a lower altitude by the Kiev air traffic control tower upon its entry into Ukrainian airspace. MH17 filed a flight plan requesting to fly at 35,000ft throughout Ukrainian

airspace. This is close to the 'optimum' altitude. But it was instructed by Ukrainian air traffic control to fly at 33,000ft. There was also a change in the flight path for Malaysian Airlines MH17 on July 17. MH17 was diverted from the normal South Easterly route over the Sea of Azov to a path over the Donetsk oblast⁹ as shown in the map below.



Source: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/malaysian-airlines-flight-mh17-downed-over-warzone-ukraine-who-was-behind-it-cui-bono/5391840>

The audio records of the MH17 flight have been confiscated by the Kiev government; the order to change the flight path did not come from Eurocontrol. Moreover, British news reports acknowledged that there was a change in the flight path, claiming without evidence that it was to “avoid thunderstorms in southern Ukraine”. MAS operations Director Captain Izham Ismail also refuted claims that heavy weather led to MH17 changing its flight plan.¹⁰ The Black boxes claimed to have recovered from the crash site was handed over by the pro-Russian separatists to the Malaysian authorities. But the record of the conversation between the pilot and the air traffic control of Ukraine has not gone on public record.

Unfortunately, the tragic incident is more than what meets the eye as it is still ambiguous as to who was responsible for the dastardly act. World’s anger on Russia post the downing of MH17 passenger jet has only aggravated especially after pro- Russian separatists seized the crash site and the OSCE monitors were barred access to the site.

There was also widespread international suspicion that the rebels may have been attempting to restrict access to the site in order to destroy important evidence. International experts said that preserving the site intact was key to understanding what exactly happened to MH17.¹¹

Russia should play a key role as broker of peace in resolving the ongoing Ukraine crisis between the Ukraine government and the rebel forces. Moreover, bringing Russia in the forefront of such efforts would dispel miscalculations around the world that can lead to antagonizing Moscow - a fast re-emerging global power. Furthermore, US has long been struggling to gain support from all corners to 're-contain' Russia in former Soviet space especially after the accession of Crimea and also to foil Putin's plan for a Eurasian Customs Union. The EU on the other hand has been reluctant to press harder sanctions on Russia because of the region's heavy dependence on Russian energy markets while US has been struggling hard to take tough actions along with EU's support to contempt Russia. Meanwhile, Moscow should be more sensitive to Ukraine crisis and its support to the pro-Russian separatists.

Finally, the loss of lives in a politically motivated plan should be condemned and it is a bounden duty of countries to be more responsible in ensuring the safety of passenger jets flying over warzone areas and investigate any such event in a more unbiased manner so as to bring to light the real culprits.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Endnotes

¹ "Did Ukraine Shoot Down Passenger Plane? They Did Once Before: SA Flight 1812 Erroneously Downed by Ukraine in 2001", July 17, 2014 <http://globaleconomicanalysis.blogspot.in/2014/07/did-ukraine-shoot-down-malaysian-plane.html>

² Ibid. "The Buk missile system is a family of self-propelled, medium-range surface-to-air missile systems developed by the former Soviet Union and Russian Federation and designed to engage cruise missiles, smart bombs, fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, and unmanned aerial vehicles."

³ Ibid

⁴ <http://globaleconomicanalysis.blogspot.in/2014/07/did-ukraine-shoot-down-malaysian-plane.html>

⁵ Tony Cartalucci, “Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 Downed Over Warzone Ukraine. Who Was Behind It? Cui Bono?”, Global Research, July 17, 2014, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/malaysian-airlines-flight-mh17-downed-over-warzone-ukraine-who-was-behind-it-cui-bono/5391840>

⁶ “Did Ukraine Shoot Down Passenger Plane? They Did Once Before: SA Flight 1812 Erroneously Downed by Ukraine in 2001”, 17 July 2014 <http://globaleconomicanalysis.blogspot.in/2014/07/did-ukraine-shoot-down-malaysian-plane.html>

⁷ Robert Parry, “Is the U.S. Withholding Evidence that Ukrainian Troops Shot Down MH17? What Did US Spy Satellites See in Ukraine?”, Global Research, July 22, 2014 <http://www.globalresearch.ca/is-the-u-s-withholding-evidence-that-ukrainian-troops-shot-down-mh17-what-did-us-spy-satellites-see-in-ukraine/5392743>

⁸ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/malaysian-airlines-flight-mh17-downed-over-warzone-ukraine-who-was-behind-it-cui-bono/5391840>

⁹ Prof Michel Chossudovsky, “Malaysian Airlines MH17 Was Ordered to Fly over the East Ukraine Warzone”, Global Research, July 21, 2014

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/malaysian-airlines-mh17-was-ordered-to-fly-over-the-east-ukraine-warzone/5392540>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Shaun Walker, “MH17: World's Anger at Russia Grows as Bodies Pile on to Train at Crash Site”, 21 July 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/20/mh17-victims-crash-site-anger-russia-grows>