

**MH370's disappearance exposes global air safety flaws, says paper**  
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This aerial picture taken from aboard a Soviet-made AN-26 used by Vietnamese Air Force to look for the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, shows a boat sailing past oil spills on the surface of the water off the southern seas of Vietnam, yesterday.

The mysterious disappearance of Malaysia Airlines (MAS) flight MH370 over a busy part of Southeast Asia has exposed flaws in global air safety, from usage of stolen passports and outdated black box technology, the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported today.

It said that as a search for clues to the fate of the Boeing 777-200ER aircraft resumed in the waters off Vietnam, air safety and anti-terror authorities on two continents appeared equally stumped about what direction the probe should take.

The passenger jet was cruising over the Gulf of Thailand with 239 people on board when it suddenly dropped off air traffic radar screens, less than an hour after takeoff from Kuala Lumpur, early Saturday morning. None of the Beijing-bound plane's transmitters appeared to signal distress before shutting down.

In a massive international investigation, no early theory has emerged about what transpired on the airplane, which was traveling in good weather at cruising altitude of 35,000 feet. The known sequence of events includes elements that seem different from anything in the annals of recent jetliner accidents, the business daily said.

"For now, it seems simply inexplicable," said Paul Hayes, director of safety and insurance at Ascend Worldwide, a British advisory and aviation data firm.

"There's no leading theory," he noted, but jetliners "simply don't vanish or disintegrate" and fall out of the sky without warning, unless there is sabotage or some catastrophic structural failure.

So far, investigators have not hinted that they have firm leads on either front, WSJ reported.

A Vietnamese search-and-rescue plane spotted suspected fragments of the plane as night fell Sunday evening, about 100 miles west of the jetliner's intended route, and officials said the search would resume today.

The fragments were believed to be a composite inner door and a piece of the plane's tail, Vietnam's ministry of information and communication said.

Over the weekend, family members and loved ones desperate for information about the flight camped out in hotels near the airports in Beijing and Kuala Lumpur.

As night fell Sunday, many were increasingly distraught over the lack of news.

"We're actually prepared for the worst," said Che Yutian, a relative of a 24-year-old Chinese passenger. "We just want to know what happened. We need answers."

But the plane's disappearance has already exposed flaws in global air safety, said WSJ, adding that the disclosure of stolen passports by two passengers led Interpol to warn that few countries are rigorously checking its database to foil that practice.

The probe is also expected to reignite debate over upgrading so-called black box technology to better track problems with flights as they develop, it added.

Some answers could come as pieces of the wreckage are retrieved, WSJ said.

But some of what is known, air safety experts said, underscores how unusual this probe will take shape.

Normally, a range of electronic transmissions help investigators and controllers track a plane's altitude, direction and speed. But those so-called transponders aboard the Boeing 777 apparently didn't report anything amiss, until they stopped working altogether.

Big jets also carry sturdy emergency transmitters to identify an aircraft's location in the event of a mishap, so rescue teams can quickly reach the site.

These devices, designed to be activated by impact on land or water, have not sent any signals that were picked up by searchers, Malaysian aviation regulators said over the weekend.

"Never have I seen an aircraft losing control and losing all communication" simultaneously, said Mark Martin of aviation consultancy, Martin Consulting.

Even in the crash of an Air France flight in the Atlantic Ocean in 2009, the emergency beacon directed rescuers to the site of impact, though strong currents had dispersed the debris across a wide area.

Malaysian military radar readings indicated the plane may have reversed course, the air force chief said yesterday, and investigators were examining whether the plane attempted to turn around after encountering a problem.

Against this backdrop of uncertainty, US counterterrorism officials were still puzzled over the mysterious details and were hesitant to say terrorism could be involved. But they also didn't rule it out.

In recent weeks, US officials have been tracking possible airliner terrorist plots, such as ones involving toothpaste bombs.

"That's why we're so concerned," a senior US official said. "We are tracking several airline plots."

The official was quick to note there was no evidence of terrorism in the case of the missing MAS flight.

Republican US congressman Mike Rogers, who chairs the House Intelligence Committee, told ABC's "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" that the US military didn't detect any type of midair explosion.

"There is nothing that... I have seen that would indicate anything of the sort, which is certainly adding to the mystery," Rogers said.

“They’re going to have to find some part of the wreckage somewhere in order to start making those determinations, if it was mechanical or something else.

US intelligence and law-enforcement officials were working to identify two passengers who checked-in using stolen passports, scouring airport surveillance video and hunting for evidence such as fingerprints or other biometric identifiers, the senior US official said.

One of the most immediate questions to be answered was which nation would conduct an accident probe, the paper said.

The role typically falls to the country where the bulk of the wreckage is located, but search teams are still trying to verify that.

If it turns out to be Vietnam, air safety and industry experts say there is a good chance local investigators relying heavily on their US and Malaysian counterparts for testing and technical advice.

A team of American aviation accident investigators, which includes technical advisers from Boeing and the Federal Aviation Administration, led by National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) experts, were dispatched Saturday to Southeast Asia to provide assistance.

The NTSB’s decision, according to air safety officials, indicates that at least at this point, US aviation regulators and safety watchdogs are treating the plane’s disappearance as an accident rather than an act of terrorism.

NTSB investigators, rather than US law enforcement or national security officials, are the public face of America’s response.

Even small pieces of wreckage can yield significant insights about what transpired before a crash. In the case of Air France Flight 447 five years ago, French investigators used fragments from the plane’s tail fin, storage units from a galley and some cabin crew seats to determine – quite accurately, it turned out – what happened.

The fractures on the tail and bending of galley shelves indicated the direction and strength of forces, indicating the plane hit the water at great velocity and largely intact. The fact that the crew seat was not folded down and the seat belt wasn’t used indicated there was no sense of crisis on the plane.

Once debris is collected from the Malaysia flight, investigators will likely begin to painstakingly analyse the condition of each of the pieces.

In one of its most exhaustive investigations, the NTSB combed the floor of the Atlantic Ocean off Long Island in July 1996 for the remains of Trans World Airlines Flight 800 which exploded shortly after takeoff from John F. Kennedy International Airport.

The Boeing 747 was reassembled piece-by-piece in an NTSB hangar, and investigators ultimately were able to pinpoint how frayed wiring touched off volatile vapors in one of the jet’s fuel tanks.

Radar data of the Gulf of Thailand will also play an important role in understanding what may have happened to flight MH370.

Hijackers aboard the four aircraft commandeered during the 9/11 terrorist attacks deactivated each jet's transponders that transmit identifying data to air-traffic controller.

That did not make the aircraft invisible, however, and air traffic control was still able to follow each jet's position on radar.

Radar data can illustrate if an aircraft has broken into multiple pieces, each providing unique signatures for investigators to analyse. – March 10, 2014.

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