

# THE MH17 CRASH: AN OPEN SECRET OR A HIDDEN CONSPIRACY?

By

Ms. Debangana Chatterjee

Intern

Global India Foundation

Malaysia was yet to demystify the inexplicable evaporation of Flight 370 of Malaysian Airlines en route to Beijing from Kuala Lumpur, which disappeared on the Indian Ocean on March 8 this year. Continuing with its stigmatic airline experiences the air crash of Flight 17, a civilian aircraft carrying 283 passengers along with 15 crew members, left it further bewildered. However, besides the tragic loss of these 295 lives, the significance of the incident penetrated thoroughly the delicate areas of international politics. This incident shortly became the hotspot of the ongoing debate over the Ukrainian crisis.

It is reported to have been shot down with a Buk surface-to-air missile. The aircraft went down near Hrabove, in Donetsk Oblast of Eastern Ukrainian region. The area is almost about 40 km from the Ukraine–Russia border. The civilian aircraft crashed in the turmoil zone of the enduring unrests, where the pro-Russian rebel groups are demanding secession from Ukraine in favour of their Russian counterpart.

The recent crisis in Ukraine can trace its roots in February 2014 following successive conflicts in the Ukrainian capital Kiev in the aftermath of the ousting of the then democratically elected Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich. His decision of signing a treaty with Russia repudiating the association agreement with the European Union sparked off the chaos. Russia conceived it as illegitimate to throw Yanukovich out of power and refused to recognise the interim government. In no time after the Crimean referendum, Russia annexed Crimea and the port city of Sevastopol, deploying thousands of forces near the border of eastern Ukraine and accused the West for inciting the Ukrainian revolution. As time passed the waves of the unrest also touched some of the Eastern Ukrainian cities like Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv. Those were also demanding a referendum.

Naturally immediately after the tragedy a blame game has commenced across countries. Both the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian rebels who have been fighting in the region have denied shooting MH17 down and pointed at each other. As per the New York Times reports, American officials expressly suspected a Russian-made missile to hit it down. America and its all weather friend Britain instantly declared to tighten sanctions against Russia to facilitate its complete isolation. On the other hand Russia accused Ukraine saying America is falsely alleging Russia even before conducting a proper investigation. The European Union also is stern about reconsidering its approach towards Russia. Evidently there has been tremendous international pressure on Russia.

Since there is no strong evidence to justify the reason behind the crash, certain factors can be speculated in this regard. One of the foremost possibilities would be simply to lay the burden on Russian shoulder. It needs no proof that Buk missiles were one of the prime inventions of Soviet Union during the Cold War era succeeded by the Russian Federation to ensure aerial protection. In fact already in June 14 a Ukrainian Air force

Aircraft was shot down by the separatists near Luhansk region. Moreover the intercepted phone conversations between the Russian-induced separatists and the Russian Intelligence services provided by the Ukrainian intelligence agency further crystallised the apprehensions of direct Russian involvement. In fact a British news network has claimed that a tapped telephonic conversation amongst the Russian separatists indicated that the civilian aircraft was by mistake shot down by those protesters confusing it with a Ukrainian Air force Aircraft. Most importantly the region where the plane was shot down was under clear control of pro-Russian protesters. Ukraine and other Russian rivals charged further that the pro-Russian rebels are not cooperating with the officials at the site to carry out a successful probe even after promising so. These rationales are quite enough to raise fingers against Russia. Still until an accurate probe is conducted, there is no clear marker to accuse Russia as the same technology now-a-days has considerably spread in the era of weaponry development. However as of now if a neutral investigation of the matter suggests Russian involvement in gunning the plane down, it would become nothing more than 'an open secret' as a large segment of international community has already accepted this precision.

Another possibility of an act of revenge by the Ukrainian Government as indicted by their Russian rivals should also not be fully ignored. This could even be assumed as a tit-for-tat reaction of the newly appointed Ukrainian Government to give an answer of the deliberate Russian operation devised to craft legal, political, and military disorder throughout the country. Nonetheless, this possibility seems highly unlikely because already Ukrainian economy and politics is in an incredibly shattering position. Thus it is in their interest unquestionably not to persuade the instability even more.

But again one cannot be oblivious about a conspiracy theory. There could be a probability of a third party involvement to incite further quarrel between these two

rivals. This third party can be a state actor with specific interest in intensifying the crisis and not to let the two rival parties arriving at a resolution. It can also be the non-state actors like certain terrorist groups. Even if we assume the pro-Russian rebels being responsible, it does not necessarily mean a Russian instruction to do so. The technology might have been supplied by Russia to these rebels to increase their influence over Eastern Ukrainian region. Notwithstanding that it is also unnatural to presume Kremlin provoking such an act which could further ostracize it both politically and economically in the midst of an ongoing isolation over its Crimean annexation. In fact the June 25 resolution by the Duma has already terminated the use of Russian forces in Ukraine initiating a stabilizing effort, although the government of Ukraine has objected several times the lack of Russian condemnation for these pro-Russian protesters. These rebels will surely not urge Russia to befriend with Ukraine and its supporters cutting off all the possible benefits they get from the Russian government. They might have targeted a civilian aircraft only to draw more international denunciation for Russia holding it back on their side. Thus a theory of 'hidden conspiracy' should not be neglected concerning MH17 crash.

Interestingly just the day before this incident the sixth BRICS summit was successfully conducted in Brazil where all the Heads of BRICS countries had agreed to ensure their cooperation. In addition to the fact reportedly the flight of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was to take the same route while returning from the summit itself in about an hour of the crash. Already during the Crimean crisis all these Russian partners viz. China, India, Brazil and South Africa had maintained a consistent ambivalence showing an implicit support for the Russians. Till now these countries have cunningly avoided being critical of Russia while expressing their grief for the dreadful loss of lives.

Different scenarios can be imagined vis-à-vis the situation. But if it really involves those pro-Russian protesters, it is no doubt going to further intensify the Ukrainian crisis and invite additional sanctions for Russia. All these critical questions can only be answered once the Black Box of MH17 gets found. Till then all these speculations will be aired along with the continuing blame game without actually being able to recompense a huge loss of humanity.

This is thus high time for both Russia and their rivals not to go on with this mud throwing activities further stimulating the volatility. An apt neutral probe must be accomplished and the United Nations and its Secretary General must be in charge with it as the representative of the international community. And on the other side as per the need of the hour Russia should pressurize those pro-Russian rebels not to get stigmatised even more and to a certain extent legitimize its own position. The Western countries along with Ukraine are also needed to be patient enough in order to initiate a peace process through incessant diplomatic discussions and communications.

---