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The AirAsia Search: Positive Precedent for Future Cooperation

By Henrick Z. Tsjeng

Synopsis

The search for AirAsia Flight 8501 has been largely commended as a success. While not without obstacles, the multilateral efforts led by host country Indonesia contributed to a smooth search. This success can be a positive precedent for future cooperation.

Commentary

THE MULTINATIONAL effort to locate the crashed Indonesia AirAsia Flight QZ8501 and recover victims has been largely commended as a success. Both “black boxes” – the cockpit voice recorder and flight data recorder – have been recovered and investigations are well under way as to what caused the tragic crash of the plane en route from Surabaya to Singapore.

Vessels and aircraft from several countries have participated in the search, with the Information Fusion Centre, located in Singapore’s Changi Naval Base, assisting in coordination efforts. Apart from the Indonesian Navy (TNI-AL) and the National Search and Rescue Agency (BASARNAS), the international contributors, other than Singapore, included Australia, China, Malaysia, the United States and Russia. The countries involved deployed maritime and air assets, including ships with sonar scanners and diving teams.

Factors in favour of QZ8501 search

The QZ8501 search operation has been relatively free from the mass confusion and finger-pointing generated during the search for Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 earlier last year, and is a positive step forward for future cooperation should the need arise again.

A major reason for the success of the search-and-locate (SAL) operation for QZ8501 and the ensuing investigation were the relatively conducive conditions for the recovery of debris and victims, not least the “black boxes” which contain information critical for ascertaining the cause of the crash. There were no known drastic deviations in flight path, and the last reported location of the plane was in an area of shallow waters and within a confined sea space. The circumstances surrounding MH370’s disappearance were exactly the opposite. Even if these factors were independent of the efficacy of the search efforts by various regional countries, they nonetheless contributed towards a relatively successful international effort.

This is not to say that the search operation has been without setbacks. For instance, bad weather and

rough seas slowed the operation, especially at the beginning phase of the search. Moreover, the TNI and BASARNAS were releasing conflicting data at the initial stage of the search as a result of internal coordination issues, which were addressed once President Joko Widodo took on a coordinating role. Nonetheless, the AirAsia search illustrates further the extent to which regional multilateral cooperation has improved since the disappearance of MH370 which lost contact on 8 March last year.

Effective coordination and transparency

Firstly, the SAL effort by Indonesia appeared to have been effectively coordinated and was transparent. The Indonesian authorities were quick to produce a search plan which also saw requests for assistance to Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and the United States, among others, and the country was also forthcoming with accepting international assistance.

The TNI and BASARNAS, after overcoming initial communication issues, closely coordinated with its foreign counterparts, who brought debris and bodies to the Indonesians when found. This was in stark contrast to the chaotic situation that prevailed in the first hours of the disappearance of MH370, which saw many actions taken that were eventually deemed counterproductive to the search, including searches in the South China Sea during the initial phases.

The QZ8501 search also saw more transparency, especially on the part of the Indonesian government. In contrast to the opacity and confusion that characterised the first several hours after MH370 was first reported missing, the Indonesian authorities were more forthcoming in providing information to the parties involved in the search, after the initial internal coordination issues were addressed.

No politicisation of search effort

Moreover, the search did not see any dramatic politicisation of the incident. In the case of MH370, the tragedy quickly became a thorny political issue, with blame-shifting rife on many sides. China was fiercely vocal in its criticism of Malaysia, particularly because the majority of the MH370 passengers were Chinese nationals. As a result, the incident became a sticking point in Sino-Malaysia relations, though Malaysia on its part was prudent not to escalate its differences with China.

In the multinational SAL effort for QZ8501, there was an incident that could have derailed the collaboration. About a week after the plane first disappeared, Indonesia deployed the KRI Usman Harun in the search. The vessel is controversial as it was embroiled in a political row between Singapore and Indonesia over its name. Nonetheless, Singapore's Ministry of Defence responded by saying that the Singapore Armed Forces will "continue to assist in this search effort professionally".

Both countries did not allow this issue to overshadow their close multilateral cooperation, which continued without any further notable incidents. Notably, the search was conducted wholly within Indonesian waters, which left Singapore with little reason to protest. The Singaporean vessel, MV Swift Rescue, eventually went on to locate the main fuselage of the wreckage. This demonstrated an important point – that political goodwill can overcome contentions and ease the way for greater multilateral cooperation, whether in the maritime sphere or elsewhere.

The presence of American, Chinese and Russian vessels dispatched to assist in the SAL operations demonstrated the willingness of the involved countries to set aside political differences and disputes during cooperation, contribute their assets in the search for the downed plane, and in doing so build goodwill with host nation Indonesia and the other countries involved.

Way forward

The search for QZ8501 marks a break from past experiences in the region in which considerations over sovereignty, national security and political differences dampened such willingness among certain parties to cooperate or accept international assistance, as was seen in the search for MH370, as well as the multilateral relief operations for Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar.

The search for QZ8501 is a significant step forward for the region towards deeper maritime

engagement and cooperation in search operations. It is particularly helpful for building the ASEAN Community, as well as for overcoming obstacles such as the lack of regional support for the Search-and-Rescue Convention and the need to harmonise international air and maritime search-and-rescue regimes.

Even though national considerations that may hamper multilateral cooperation are unlikely to vanish overnight, the goodwill arising from the multilateral search for the AirAsia plane will likely set a positive precedent for future SAL operations.

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