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Australia's Search for MH370: Regional Leadership through HADR and Search and Rescue Efforts

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Malaysia Airlines flight 370 (MH370) is presumed to have crashed into the southern Indian Ocean, "about as close to nowhere as it's possible to be, but . . . closer to Australia than anywhere else," according to Australian prime minister Tony Abbott. In response, Australia's formidable humanitarian assistance and disaster relief/search and rescue (HADR/SAR) machine has sprung into action. While Kuala Lumpur is formally leading the investigation into what went awry with MH370, Australia has assumed responsibility for the search efforts at Malaysia's request.

Australia's response to the MH370 tragedy has bolstered its standing in the region and underscores why HADR/SAR should be a cornerstone of Canberra's foreign policy and military posture. In contrast to Malaysia, which earned criticism for its early handling of the search for MH370, Australia has been seen as a capable coordinator. On April 7, Australia confirmed that its ships, using U.S. equipment, had detected signals consistent with the flight's black box. Two days later authorities announced they were narrowing the search area considerably after detecting further signals.

Former Defense Force chief Angus Houston has been appointed head of the Joint Agency Coordination Center overseeing the search. He is responsible for coordinating the efforts of seven countries, with up to 12

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Australian prime minister Tony Abbott (speaking) and Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak (left of Abbott) address the media concerning missing Malaysia Airlines flight 370. While Malaysia is formally handling the investigation, Australia has taken over the day-to-day search for the plane. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/compacflt/13617358483>

planes, 14 ships, and a submarine scouring the area daily. The center provides daily updates to families and media and, more importantly, has served to stabilize and organize the search amid considerable confusion.

Australia's prominent role in HADR/SAR operations—likely second only to the United States in the Asia Pacific—is an unqualified good for the country. It highlights Australian hard power, offers valuable experience for its military, and garners valuable goodwill in the region, all while making a real difference and helping to promote a safer, more stable Asia Pacific. But the search for the missing plane should not only remind Australia that HADR/SAR is an effective arrow in its foreign policy quiver; it should serve as a wake-up call that such efforts must be elevated above regional politics.

Australia's laudable role in the MH370 search stands in contrast to many of its recent setbacks in the region. The Abbott government's hardline approach toward asylum seekers has upset many, especially in Indonesia, which has seen its waters breached by the Australian Navy during efforts to turn back asylum-seeker boats. Revelations of intelligence-gathering activities around the region have also ruffled feathers, especially in Indonesia and Timor-Leste.

These political and diplomatic disagreements have resulted in strained relations and suspended cooperation, including on HADR/SAR. Ships from 17 nations participated in the biannual Exercise Komodo HADR/SAR exercises in Indonesian waters from March 28 to April 3. All 10 ASEAN members took part, along with China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. Of the major regional players, only Australia was absent because its participation had been canceled in January amid the spying scandal and asylum-seeker dust-up with Indonesia. This is exactly the type of outcome that policymakers in Canberra must avoid.

Diplomatic and political disagreements will occasionally strain ties between nations, even those who are close allies. But multilateral cooperation on issues like HADR/SAR must be elevated to a level above politics. Institutionalizing multilateral cooperation, especially in the

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military-to-military sphere, is a prerequisite for a peaceful Asia Pacific. HADR/SAR represents the best starting point for such cooperation, as evidenced by the recent focus it received at the first-ever U.S.-ASEAN Defense Forum and its being chosen as the subject of the inaugural ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus multilateral exercise in June 2013.

Australia's HADR/SAR role in the region is well established, both in East Asia and in the South Pacific. Preserving that prominent role is in the best interests of Australia, the United States, and the Asia Pacific at large. Canberra and Washington are natural partners in this respect. Their military cooperation and coordination is already close, and both are actively working to improve interoperability. Working alongside Australia in HADR/SAR can also reassure people of the United States' earnest commitment to a more safe and stable regional order.

The two countries have an impressive record of cooperation on HADR/SAR, including after Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar in 2008, the Padang earthquake hit Indonesia in 2009, and the Tohoku earthquake devastated Japan in 2011. In the latter case, Japan, recognizing their unique capabilities, specifically requested the assistance of Australia and the United States, both of which quickly mobilized military assets. During the current search for MH370, the United States has provided intelligence support and, perhaps most importantly, the pinger locator that picked up the signals discovered this week.

HADR/SAR operations are an effective way for Australia and the United States to demonstrate both hard and soft power. Deploying assets around the Asia Pacific is an unquestionable show of military capability, but one done in service of a humanitarian goal. The goodwill that such efforts garner is not quickly forgotten.

Australia cannot afford to let politics interfere with its regional HADR/SAR leadership. Other states in the area naturally look to its expertise, as highlighted by the search for Malaysia Airlines flight 370. And with U.S. support, Australia can make good use of HADR/SAR efforts to fulfill its humanitarian and foreign policy goals, including the development of a more cooperative regional order in the Asia Pacific. ▲



Australian soldiers help build a water catchment in Vanuatu. Australia is a recognized and trusted regional HADR/SAR leader. http://www.flickr.com/photos/aus_defence_force/5734740337/

The Month That Was

AUSTRALIA

Australia takes over search for MH370. Australia's government established a Joint Agency Coordination Center in Perth on March 30 to manage the search for Malaysian Airlines flight 370, presumed to have crashed in the Indian Ocean west of Australia. Air Chief Angus Marshal Houston announced on April 7 that a U.S.-towed locator had detected two signals consistent with the plane's black box recorder. The search is now focused on trying to narrow the search area and then deploy an underwater vehicle to search for wreckage.

Abbott leads trade mission to Asia. Prime Minister Tony Abbott is leading a trade mission to Japan, South Korea, and China from April 5 to April 12, seeking to advance a campaign promise to sign a free trade agreement with all three countries in 2014. Abbott and his Japanese counterpart, Shinzo Abe, announced on April 7 that they had reached agreement on the key points of a trade agreement, with Tokyo agreeing to cut tariffs on Australian beef, sugar, and wine. The following day, Abbott and South Korean president Park Geun-hye officially signed a free trade agreement that the two countries reached in 2013.

Australia wins whaling case against Japan. The International Court of Justice on April 1 ordered Japan to halt its controversial whaling program in Antarctic waters. The judges in the case brought by Australia ruled 12 to 4 that the scientific output of Japan's program, which it insists is not commercial, has not been proportionate to the number of whales killed. The ruling came less than a week before Prime Minister Tony Abbott visited Tokyo. Japanese authorities said they were "disappointed" but will respect the ruling.

Ruling party set to lose Senate seat in Western Australia election rerun. Preliminary results indicate that Prime Minister Tony Abbott's Liberal Party will lose at least one Senate seat after an April 5 rerun election in Western Australia. The September election in the state, in which the Liberals won three of six seats, was declared void after more than 1,000 votes vanished during a recount. The Liberals now appear to have won two seats, with Labor, the Greens, and the Palmer United Party winning one each. The final seat remains undecided. The results mean that Abbott's Liberal-National coalition will need votes from three other senators to pass any legislation.



Activists from the Sea Shepherd anti-whaling group confront a Japanese whaling ship in Antarctic waters. The International Court of Justice has ordered Japan to cease its annual Antarctic whale hunts. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/quano/3264147579/>

Australia to purchase Triton drones for \$3.6 billion. Australia on March 12 committed to buying an undisclosed number of MQ-4C Triton unmanned aircraft from the United States for \$3.6 billion. Prime Minister Tony Abbott said the drones will be used to secure energy resources and protect Australia's rights in its large exclusive economic zone. The vehicles can cruise at 20,000 feet for up to 30 hours. They will be based in Adelaide, South Australia, and will complement the eight Boeing P-8 Poseidon surveillance planes Australia purchased in February.

More than 1,100 marines to arrive in Darwin. More than 1,100 U.S. marines will arrive in Darwin in northern Australia in early April, according to a March 26 report by the Australian. The troops will join the 200 marines already on rotation in Darwin. U.S. president Barack Obama and Australian prime minister Julia Gillard agreed in 2012 to have a 2,500-strong U.S. Marine Corps presence in Darwin on a rotational basis by 2016. The marines will train with Australian and regional forces and provide disaster relief. They will rotate through Darwin for six months at a time.



Australian troops and U.S. marines parade through Darwin, Australia. More than 1,100 U.S. marines are set to arrive in Darwin in April, bolstering the 200 already there. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/us-pacific-command/7113738637/>

Government to sell publically owned insurer Medibank. Finance Minister Mathias Cormann announced on March 26 that the Australian government will sell state-owned insurer Medibank via an initial public offering in the 2014–2015 fiscal year. Analysts with Japan's Nomura Holdings have valued Medibank at about \$3.7 billion. The government has reassured policyholders that their premiums will not increase and indicated it will spend the revenue from the sale on infrastructure projects.

Pentagon says Australia could become regional F-35 hub. Lieutenant General Chris Bogdan, executive officer for Australia's F-35 program office, suggested on March 27 that the country could become a regional service hub for the U.S.-built F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. Australia has ordered 14 of the fighters, the first two of which will be delivered in 2014, and is interested in purchasing up to 100 in total. The F-35s have been beset by delays and cost overruns, and becoming a regional service hub could help Australia defray some of the jets' ongoing maintenance costs.

NEW ZEALAND

Reserve Bank raises benchmark interest rate. The Reserve Bank of New Zealand raised its benchmark interest rate by 25 basis points to 2.75 percent on March 13. The move saw mortgage rates and the value of the New Zealand dollar increase. New Zealand is the first developed economy to raise its benchmark interest rate since the depths of the global recession in 2008. Reserve Bank governor Graeme Wheeler said that the bank is raising rates to dampen inflationary pressure as economic growth picks up steam. The bank expects to raise the benchmark rate to 4.75 percent by 2015.

Elections scheduled for September. Prime Minister John Key announced on March 10 that New Zealand's next general elections will be held on September 20. Elections are normally held in November, but with New Zealand invited to attend the Group of 20 Summit in Australia that month, Key said holding the polls earlier would ensure that a prime minister can attend the summit. It will also raise the chances that some world leaders in Australia for the summit will decide to visit New Zealand as well.

Government to hold flag referendum after elections. Prime Minister John Key announced on March 11 that New Zealand will hold a referendum on changing the national flag after the 2014 elections. Key plans to establish a multiparty working group to recommend the best way to hold the referendum. The prime minister said he did not want the flag debate to distract from election issues. Many New Zealanders argue that the flag is too similar to neighboring Australia's, which also features the Union Jack and Southern Cross constellation, and does not adequately reflect New Zealand's unique history and culture.

Key visits China, sets new trade goal. Prime Minister John Key met with Chinese president Xi Jinping in Beijing on March 19 and announced that the two countries intend to boost two-way trade to \$26 billion by 2020. The ambitious goal will require the two nations to increase bilateral trade by two-thirds over the next six years, from \$15.5 billion in 2013. To help achieve that goal, New Zealand will boost its diplomatic presence in China, spending \$35 million on a new embassy and adding more staff.

Kim Dotcom launches Internet Party. Controversial Internet millionaire Kim Dotcom, a German émigré to New Zealand, launched the Internet Party on March 27. Dotcom, who currently faces extradition to the United States on charges of massive online piracy, said he established the party to protect online freedom. Dotcom cannot run for office because he is not a New Zealand citizen, but he says that his party has recruited a current lawmaker, allowing it to take up a seat in Parliament.



The New Zealand Parliament building. Prime Minister John Key announced that elections for a new Parliament will be held on September 20. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/pluckytree/5177683356/>

PACIFIC ISLANDS

Fiji elections set for September 17. Fiji's military government on March 28 issued a decree scheduling long-awaited elections for September 17. Interim prime minister Voreqe "Frank" Bainimarama also unveiled his new political party, Fiji First, which he said will promote equality for all Fijians irrespective of race. Bainimarama stepped down as commander of Fiji's military in early March in order to contest the elections. Critics raised concerns over some rules in the March 28 decree, including a provision allowing the government to monitor citizens' communications for 48 hours before polls open.

Australia, New Zealand lift travel sanctions on Fiji. Australia and New Zealand lifted travel bans on senior members of the Fijian regime on March 31 in response to the country's progress toward democracy. The bans were instituted in 2006 after a military coup brought Commodore Voreqe "Frank" Bainimarama to power. Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop said that removing the sanctions aligns with Australia's policy of reengagement and normalization of relations with Fiji.



A low-lying island in the Marshall Islands, which will be hit hard by climate change. Representatives from 40 nations met in the Marshall Islands on April 4 to build momentum for a binding climate change treaty. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cmichel67/40325910/>

Forty nations meet to discuss climate change in Marshall Islands. The Cartagena dialogue opened in Majuro, Marshall Islands, on April 4, bringing together ambassadors and climate negotiators from 40 countries. Marshall Islands foreign minister Tony deBrum urged delegates to see the realities of climate change on the ground. Participants in the dialogue hope to build momentum for a binding climate change treaty ahead of a UN Climate Summit in New York in September 2014 and a new round of UN climate negotiations in Paris in 2015.

Papua New Guinea uses sovereign wealth fund to pay for stake in oil company. The government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) plans to use a \$1.2 billion loan from Swiss bank UBS to purchase a roughly 10 percent stake in the country's largest company, Oil Search. The government will use its planned sovereign wealth fund as collateral. That fund will be created using revenues from a \$20 billion ExxonMobil liquefied natural gas project that will begin exporting gas from PNG in 2014. Paul Parker, executive director of PNG's Institute of National Affairs, has criticized the government for "[jeopardizing] the fund's effectiveness" with the "extra burden of interest payments" on the loan.

Papua New Guinea to resettle asylum seekers from Australia. The Papua New Guinea (PNG) government agreed on April 4 to accept for resettlement all asylum seekers confirmed as refugees at Australia's Manus Island detention

facility in PNG. Those among the more than 1,200 at Manus Island who do not qualify as refugees will be either sent back to their countries of origin or resettled elsewhere. Australian immigration minister Scott Morrison anticipates the first group of refugees will begin moving into temporary accommodations in PNG as early as June.

USAID launches \$24 million climate adaptation fund for Pacific. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on March 26 launched a \$24 million fund to help communities in the Pacific adapt to climate change. The USAID Pacific American Climate Fund (PACAM) is a five-year program that will provide funds to civil society organizations helping Pacific Islands cope with changing climate conditions. The USAID fund will target the needs of individual communities across the Pacific. The fund will be based in the Philippines and implemented in 12 countries, including Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, and Tonga.

Dengue outbreak spreads across Pacific. The Secretariat of the Pacific Community said on March 7 that the Pacific is experiencing an “unprecedented” outbreak of dengue fever. Fiji’s Ministry of Health has recorded 10,000 cases since October, and the Solomon Islands has seen 7,500, its highest number of cases since World War II. New Zealand has documented 54 cases, a fivefold increase from the same period in 2012. Wellington has issued a travel advisory, warning New Zealanders visiting the Pacific Islands to cover their skin and carry insect repellent. The World Health Organization says the outbreak may have peaked, but resources around the region have been severely strained. ▲

Discussion on the South China Sea and Trans-Pacific Partnership. The Wilson Center will host a talk by Australian journalist Hamish McDonald on April 10 about likely changes to the status quo in the South China Sea disputes, the roles of the United States and China in Southeast Asia, and the domestic difficulties in pushing the Trans-Pacific Partnership forward. The event will be held from 4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. at the Wilson Center, Ronald Reagan Building, 1300 Pennsylvania, Ave., NW. For more information and to RSVP, please [click here](#).

Conference on chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense in the Asia Pacific. Banyan Analytics will host a daylong conference on April 14 to discuss regional capabilities for responding to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear threats and obstacles for capacity building in the Asia Pacific. The discussion will focus on case studies of previous disasters, considerations for developing regional responses, industry perspectives on remediation, and planning. The event will take place from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Capital Hilton Congressional Room, 1001 16th St., NW. For more information, please [click here](#).

Luncheon discussion on challenges in Australian national security. Georgetown University will host a brown-bag lunch with Australian Brigadier Andrew Smith on April 15 to discuss Canberra's changing security policy after 12 years of military operations in the Middle East. Smith will examine the changing security environment in the Asia-Pacific region and Australia's response. The talk will take place from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. at Georgetown's Edward B. Bunn, S.J. Intercultural Center, 37th and O Sts., NW. [Click here](#) for more information.

Report launch on cybersecurity and global risks. The Atlantic Council and Zurich Insurance Group will host a launch event on April 16 for a new report on how the public and private sectors can endure inevitable cyber shocks in the future. Zurich Insurance CEO Michael Kerner, Steve Crocker of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, the Atlantic Council's Jason Healey, and Zurich North America's Catherine Mulligan will speak. The event will be held at 8:30 a.m. at the Atlantic Council, 1030 15th St., NW, 12th floor. To register for the event, please [click here](#).

Australia and New Zealand Army Corps Day. The Embassy of Australia will host a dawn service, "gunfire breakfast," and church memorial service on April 25 in honor of Australia and New Zealand Army Corps Day. The dawn service will take place from 5:45 a.m. to 6:15 a.m. at the Korean Veterans War Memorial, 900 Ohio Dr., SW. The "gunfire breakfast," an ANZAC Day

tradition that consists of coffee with rum, will be served from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. at the Embassy of Australia, 1601 Massachusetts Ave., NW. The church service will be held from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. at Washington National Cathedral, 3101 Wisconsin Ave., NW. Please [click here](#) for more information. ▲

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