

US Intelligence Stands Pat on MH-17 Shoot-down

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Almost eight months after Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine – creating a flashpoint in the standoff between nuclear-armed Russia and America – the U.S. intelligence community claims it has not updated its assessment since five days after the crash, reports Robert Parry.

Despite the high stakes involved in the confrontation between nuclear-armed Russia and the United States over Ukraine, the U.S. intelligence community has not updated its assessment on a critical turning point of the crisis – the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 – since five days after the crash last July 17, according to the office of the Director of National Intelligence.

On Thursday, when I inquired about arranging a possible briefing on where that U.S. intelligence assessment stands, DNI spokesperson Kathleen Butler sent me the same report that was distributed by the DNI on July 22, 2014, which relied heavily on claims being made about the incident on social media.



Russian-made Buk anti-missile battery.

So, I sent a follow-up e-mail to Butler saying: “are you telling me that U.S. intelligence has not refined its assessment of what happened to MH-17 since July 22, 2014?”

Her response: “Yes. The assessment is the same.”

I then wrote back: “I don’t mean to be difficult but that’s just not credible. U.S. intelligence has surely refined its assessment of this important event since July 22.”

When she didn’t respond, I sent her some more detailed questions describing leaks that I had received about what some U.S. intelligence analysts have since concluded, as well as

what the German intelligence agency, the BND, reported to a parliamentary committee last October, according to Der Spiegel.

While there are differences in those analyses about who fired the missile, there appears to be agreement that the Russian government did not supply the ethnic Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine with a sophisticated Buk anti-aircraft missile system that the original DNI report identified as the likely weapon used to destroy the commercial airliner killing all 298 people onboard.

Butler replied to my last e-mail late Friday, saying “As you can imagine, I can’t get into details, but can share that the assessment has IC [Intelligence Community] consensus” – apparently still referring to the July 22 report.

A Lightning Rod

Last July, the MH-17 tragedy quickly became a lightning rod in a storm of anti-Russian propaganda, blaming the deaths personally on Russian President Vladimir Putin and resulting in European and American sanctions against Russia which pushed the crisis in Ukraine to a dangerous new level.

Yet, after getting propaganda mileage out of the tragedy – and after I reported on the growing doubts within the U.S. intelligence community about whether the Russians and the rebels were indeed responsible – the Obama administration went silent.

In other words, after U.S. intelligence analysts had time to review the data from spy satellites and various electronic surveillance, including phone intercepts, the Obama administration didn’t retract its initial rush to judgment – tossing blame on Russia and the rebels – but provided no further elaboration either.

This strange behavior reinforces the suspicion that the U.S. government possesses information that contradicts its initial rush to judgment, but senior officials don’t want to correct the record because to do so would embarrass them and weaken the value of the tragedy as a propaganda club to pound the Russians.

If the later evidence did bolster the Russia-did-it scenario, it’s hard to imagine why the proof would stay secret – especially since U.S. officials have continued to insinuate that the Russians are guilty. For instance, on March 4, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland fired a new broadside against Russia when she appeared before the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

In her [prepared testimony](#), Nuland slipped in an accusation blaming Russia for the MH-17 disaster, saying: “In eastern Ukraine, Russia and its separatist puppets unleashed unspeakable violence and pillage; MH-17 was shot down.”

It’s true that if one parses Nuland’s testimony, she’s not exactly saying the Russians or the ethnic Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine shot down the plane. There is a semi-colon between the “unspeakable violence and pillage” and the passive verb structure “MH-17 was shot down.” But she clearly meant to implicate the Russians and the rebels.

Nuland’s testimony prompted me to submit a query to the State Department asking if she meant to imply that the U.S. government had developed more definitive evidence that the ethnic Russian rebels shot down the plane and that the Russians shared complicity. I

received no answer.

I sent a similar request to the CIA and was referred to the DNI, where spokesperson Butler insisted that there had been no refinement in the U.S. intelligence assessment since last July 22.

But that's just impossible to believe. Indeed, I've been told by a source who was briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts that a great deal of new information has been examined since the days immediately after the crash, but that the problem for U.S. policymakers is that the data led at least some analysts to conclude that the plane was shot down by a rogue element of the Ukrainian military, not by the rebels.

Yet, what has remained unclear to me is whether those analysts were part of a consensus or were dissenters within the U.S. intelligence community. But even if there was just dissent over the conclusions, that might explain why the DNI has not updated the initial sketchy report of July 22.

It is protocol within the intelligence community that when an assessment is released, it should include footnotes indicating areas of dissent. But to do that could undermine the initial certitude that Secretary of State John Kerry displayed on Sunday talks shows just days after the crash.

Pointing Fingers

Though the DNI's July 22 report, which followed Kerry's performance, joined him in pointing the blame at the Russians and the ethnic Russian rebels, the report did not claim that the Russians gave the rebels the sophisticated Buk (or SA-11) surface-to-air missile that the report indicated was used to bring down the plane.

The report cited "an increasing amount of heavy weaponry crossing the border from Russia to separatist fighters in Ukraine"; it claimed that Russia "continues to provide training - including on air defense systems to separatist fighters at a facility in southwest Russia"; and it noted the rebels "have demonstrated proficiency with surface-to-air missile systems, downing more than a dozen aircraft in the months prior to the MH17 tragedy, including two large transport aircraft."

But what the public report didn't say - which is often more significant than what is said in these white papers - was that the rebels had previously only used short-range shoulder-fired missiles to bring down low-flying military planes, whereas MH-17 was flying at around 33,000 feet, far beyond the range of those weapons.

The assessment also didn't say that U.S. intelligence, which had been concentrating its attention on eastern Ukraine during those months, detected the delivery of a Buk missile battery from Russia, despite the fact that a battery consists of four 16-foot-long missiles that are hauled around by trucks or other large vehicles.

I was told that the absence of evidence of such a delivery injected the first doubts among U.S. analysts who also couldn't say for certain that the missile battery that was suspected of firing the fateful missile was manned by rebels. An early glimpse of that doubt was revealed in the DNI briefing for several mainstream news organizations when the July 22 assessment was released.

The Los Angeles Times [reported](#), “U.S. intelligence agencies have so far been unable to determine the nationalities or identities of the crew that launched the missile. U.S. officials said it was possible the SA-11 was launched by a defector from the Ukrainian military who was trained to use similar missile systems.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[The Mystery of a Ukrainian ‘Defector.’](#)”]

The Russian Case

The Russians also [challenged](#) the rush to judgment against them, although the U.S. mainstream media largely ignored – or ridiculed – their presentation. But the Russians at least provided what appeared to be substantive data, including alleged radar readings showing the presence of a Ukrainian jetfighter “gaining height” as it closed to within three to five kilometers of MH-17.

Russian Lt. Gen. Andrey Kartoplov also called on the Ukrainian government to explain the movements of its Buk systems to sites in eastern Ukraine and why Kiev’s Kupol-M19S18 radars, which coordinate the flight of Buk missiles, showed increased activity leading up to the July 17 shoot-down.

The Ukrainian government countered by asserting that it had “evidence that the missile which struck the plane was fired by terrorists, who received arms and specialists from the Russian Federation,” according to Andrey Lysenko, spokesman for Ukraine’s Security Council, using Kiev’s preferred term for the rebels.

Lysenko added: “To disown this tragedy, [Russian officials] are drawing a lot of pictures and maps. We will explore any photos and other plans produced by the Russian side.” But Ukrainian authorities have failed to address the Russian evidence except through broad denials.

On July 29, amid this escalating rhetoric, the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, a group of mostly retired U.S. intelligence officials, [called](#) on President Barack Obama to release what evidence the U.S. government had, including satellite imagery.

“As intelligence professionals we are embarrassed by the unprofessional use of partial intelligence information,” the group wrote. “As Americans, we find ourselves hoping that, if you indeed have more conclusive evidence, you will find a way to make it public without further delay. In charging Russia with being directly or indirectly responsible, Secretary of State John Kerry has been particularly definitive. Not so the evidence.”

But the Obama administration failed to make public any intelligence information that would back up its earlier suppositions.

Then, in early August, [I was told](#) that some U.S. intelligence analysts had begun shifting away from the original scenario blaming the rebels and Russia to one focused more on the possibility that extremist elements of the Ukrainian government were responsible, funded by one of Ukraine’s rabidly anti-Russian oligarchs. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Flight 17 Shoot-down Scenario Shifts](#)” and “[Was Putin Targeted for Mid-air Assassination?](#)”]

German Claims

In October, Der Spiegel reported that the German intelligence service, the BND, also had concluded that Russia was not the source of the missile battery – that it had been captured

from a Ukrainian military base – but the BND still blamed the rebels for firing it. The BND also concluded that photos supplied by the Ukrainian government about the MH-17 tragedy “have been manipulated,” Der Spiegel reported.

And, the BND disputed Russian government claims that a Ukrainian fighter jet had been flying close to MH-17, the magazine said, reporting on the BND’s briefing to a parliamentary committee on Oct. 8. But none of the BND’s evidence was made public — and I was subsequently told by a European official that the evidence was not as conclusive as the magazine article depicted. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Germans Clear Russia in MH-17 Case](#).”]

When the Dutch Safety Board investigating the crash issued an interim report in mid-October, it answered few questions, beyond confirming that MH-17 apparently was destroyed by “high-velocity objects that penetrated the aircraft from outside.” [The 34-page Dutch report](#) was silent on the “dog-not-barking” issue of whether the U.S. government had satellite surveillance that revealed exactly where the supposed ground-to-air missile was launched and who fired it.

In January, when I re-contacted the source who had been briefed by the U.S. analysts, the source said their thinking had not changed, except that they believed the missile may have been less sophisticated than a Buk, possibly an SA-6, and that the attack may have also involved a Ukrainian jetfighter firing on MH-17.

Since then there have been occasional news accounts about witnesses reporting that they did see a Ukrainian fighter plane in the sky and others saying they saw a missile possibly fired from territory then supposedly controlled by the rebels (although the borders of the conflict zone at that time were very fluid and the Ukrainian military was known to have mobile anti-aircraft missile batteries only a few miles away).

But what is perhaps most shocking of all is that – on an issue as potentially dangerous as the current proxy war between nuclear-armed Russia and the United States, a conflict on Russia’s border that has sparked fiery rhetoric on both sides – the office of the DNI, which oversees the most expensive and sophisticated intelligence system in the world, says nothing has been done to refine the U.S. assessment of the MH-17 shoot-down since five days after the tragedy.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America’s Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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