MISSILES AND JETS ARE "OPERATING ON VERY DIFFERENT ALTITUDES": CATHAY'S DECISION TO CHANGE HONG KONG-EUROPE ROUTE DISPUTED BY OTHER AIRLINES

News / Airlines, Airports / Routes

A gulf has emerged among airlines flying between Hong Kong and Europe on routes over the Middle East that may become vulnerable as Russia fires missiles on war-ravaged Syria.

Lufthansa, Swiss International Air Lines and Turkish Airlines continue to operate flights over the Caspian Sea despite warnings from air safety agencies last week - issued soon after Moscow escalated its military involvement in the civil war.

In contrast, Cathay Pacific Airways, which flies to Frankfurt and Zurich like Lufthansa and Swiss

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International, promptly rerouted its European flights to cruise over northern China and Russia instead of the Middle East.

The change came after the International Civil Aviation Organisation and the European Aviation Safety Agency released safety bulletins concerning possible threats to passenger jets. The warnings covered Iraq, Iran and the Caspian Sea.

In response to the bulletins, Hong Kong's aviation safety authority, the Civil Aviation Department, said it issued "Notices to Airmen" and "Flight Operations Notice" advisories to foreign and local carriers "to draw [the] attention of airline operators and urge them to evaluate the flight safety risks".

But the Sunday Morning Post tracked flights on Friday and found Lufthansa's Frankfurt and Munich-bound planes, Turkish Airlines' Istanbul-bound jets and Swiss International's Zurich-bound aircraft all flew over the Caspian Sea.

Sophy Zheng, a Lufthansa spokeswoman for greater China, acknowledged precision weapons crossed air routes between Europe and the Middle East, but believed it was safe to fly because the missiles and jets were "operating on very different altitudes".

"Safety is the highest priority for Lufthansa," she said, noting that the guidance from the two international agencies did not include a requirement to terminate or plan alternative routes.

Swiss International said it did not see the need to change its routing at present based on intelligence shared between authorities and its parent company Lufthansa Group.

A Turkish Airlines spokesman could not be reached for comment.

Airlines have taken greater caution flying over conflict zones following the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 last July over Ukraine at 33,000ft en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, killing all 298 people on board.

On Tuesday, Dutch investigators released conclusions of their probe, finding a Russian-made Buk missile had brought down the plane.

Immediately thereafter, Cathay Pacific diverted its Italian and Switzerland-bound flights to Zurich, Rome and Milan to avoid passing over Iran and the Caspian Sea. The new flight paths add an hour of flying time.

The airline said it already had a policy of not flying over Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine and Syria.

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