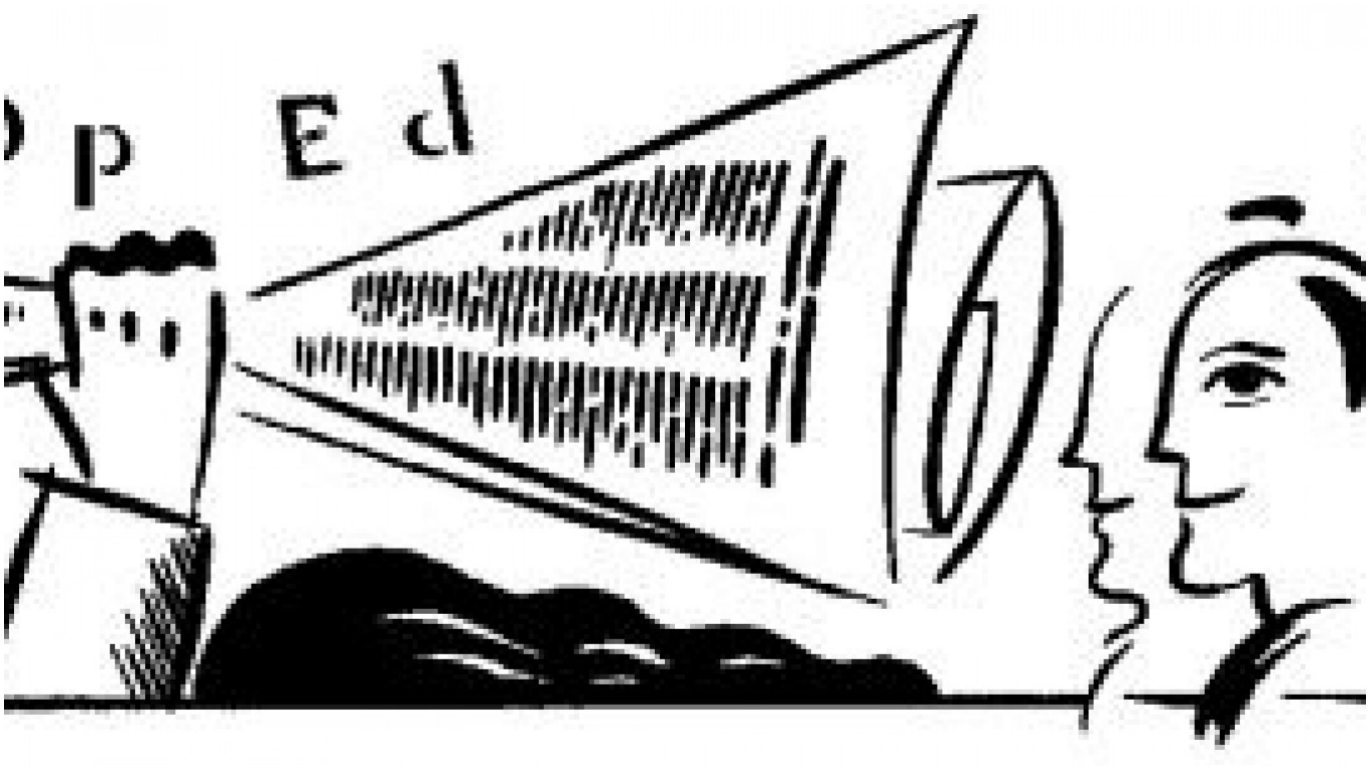
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30 Years After the Cold War Tragedy of Flight 007

By Ronan Thomas

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It was one of the nastier incidents of the Cold War. Thirty years ago on Sunday, 269 people aboard Korean Airlines Flight 007, flying from Alaska to Seoul, died in the freezing skies over North Asia. On Sept. 1, 1983, a Russian fighter jet shot the airliner down after it entered Soviet airspace over Sakhalin island.

The world recoiled. On board Flight 007 were a majority of South Koreans, 61 Americans — including U.S. Representative Lawrence McDonald — and 28 Japanese citizens. In response, President Ronald Reagan called it "an act of barbarism."

But the truth that later emerged was more complex. It was not, as many believed, entirely the action of a trigger-happy Soviet pilot. Korean Airlines Flight 007 had been seriously off course. A later United Nations investigation concluded that the airliner was downed after a catastrophic error made on its own flight deck, as well as by Soviet air defenses.

The fate of Flight 007 shows what happens when military and civil calculations fail and get

out of hand. In 1983, those closest to the action thought they knew best and acted on the principle of "shoot first, ask questions later." With the Syrian civil war expanding into a larger regional crisis, this tragic chain of events has baleful current relevance.

Flight 007's loss was magnified by a Cold War paranoia. In the early hours on Sept. 1, 1983, three Soviet Su-15 fighters scrambled from the Dolinsk-Sokol airbase on Sakhalin. They intercepted an unidentified aircraft, illuminated by blinking navigation lights. The mystery aircraft was Korean Airlines Flight 007. It had entered Soviet airspace over the Kamchatka Peninsula, in Russia's Far East region, flown on over the Sea of Okhotsk and was approaching Sakhalin.

The Soviets believed their target was a Boeing RC-135 spy plane that belonged to the U.S. Navy, because it had a similar radar signature to a commercial jet. Hours earlier, an RC-135 had patrolled outside Soviet airspace off Sakhalin on a U.S. exercise. The Soviet pilots thought they had sighted a brazen military intrusion from their archfoe.

Yet the Soviet interception was chaotic. Several MiG 23 fighters first attempted to make contact. Then the Su-15 fighters were badly vectored in. The lead aircraft, piloted by Gennady Osipovich, overshot his target. He fired a burst of cannon fire to gain the other pilots' attention. No response from the plane ahead.

Osipovich then watched the aircraft climb away. Interpreting this as evasion, he fired two air-to-air missiles at 3:26 a.m. In chilling tones that echoed around the world, Osipovich radioed that "the target is destroyed." Korean Airlines Flight 007 took 12 harrowing minutes to hit the water not far from the southwest corner of Sakhalin Island. There were no survivors.

Immediately, the Cold War froze over. Reagan called it a "massacre" and "a crime against humanity." His words followed his speech of March 8, 1983, in which he famously described the Soviet Union as "an evil empire." He suggested the Soviets knew the target was a civilian airliner.

The Soviet response was ham-fisted. For more than a week, the Kremlin denied responsibility. Tit-for-tat condemnation continued for months. Soviet leader Yury Andropov denounced the U.S. for a "sophisticated provocation." The Soviet Union was condemned by the world's democracies.

The Korean Airlines incident occurred at a moment of high Cold War tension. The loss of Flight 007 added further fuel to a toxic geopolitical brew. The NATO alliance was facing the Soviets down. From March 1983, Reagan promoted his new Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly known as "Star Wars." In October 1983, the U.S. invaded Grenada to put down a pro-Cuban Communist coup, which was followed in November by Reagan's decision to ultimately deploy more than 100 Pershing nuclear missiles in Western Europe from November against the threat posed by Soviet SS-20 mobile missiles.

In November, the Soviets also walked out of missile talks in Geneva. Declassified Soviet documents, released only in May, show that the Soviets were convinced in 1983 that a U.S. nuclear strike against them was likely, which would mean the end of the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1980s, the Soviet Union's inefficient and ideologically bankrupt political and economic system could not keep pace with U.S. military spending. Ailing Soviet leaders

Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko came and went, as the Soviet Union's economic arteries hardened beyond saving. After the arrival of reformist Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 and revolutions in Eastern Europe from 1989, the Soviet Union gasped its last breath in December 1991.

Ever since, more details on Flight 007 have gradually seeped out. Today, expert consensus is that the pilot and flight crew made a critical error in their own cockpit. After they flew from New York to Anchorage to refuel, they departed for Seoul at 4 a.m. Soon after, the pilot put the aircraft on autopilot. But the Boeing 747 immediately drifted 19 kilometers off course. This drift continued until the plane was 160 kilometers off its original route. This put it directly on track toward the Soviet Union. In 1993, the United Nations International Civil Aviation Authority issued its own report. It was based on the plane's flight recorder data retrieved by the Soviets years before, which was released only nine years later, after the Soviet Union had collapsed. Critically, the analysis suggested that the flight crew had not activated the correct inertial navigation system switch after its departure from Anchorage — or, perhaps, the switch had malfunctioned.

Instead, Korean Airlines Flight 007 flew on for five hours until it was mistaken for a U.S. spy plane. The South Korean crew appeared oblivious to the danger throughout. The loss of Flight 007 has been the subject of conspiracy theories and technical analysis ever since.

In the intervening years, Russia has consistently defended the Soviet pilots' actions as tragic but necessary, given Flight 007's incursion. Perhaps this is because memories of this period remain uncomfortable in President Vladimir Putin's Russia.

In turn, the U.S. acknowledges that its spy plane had been in the area but was not directly involved. Notably, Boeing redesigned its 747 autopilot system after the tragedy. Today, the U.S.-designed GPS, or Global Positioning System, holds sway over the world's airline navigation routes.

The South Korean flight crew were for years blamed for incompetence. The jury is still out on their precise actions and will likely remain so forever.

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