

Malaysia Airlines Disaster Tragic, But Not Unprecedented

By [Ivan Nechepurenko](#)

July 21, 2014



Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko and Dutch ambassador to Ukraine Kees Klompenhouwer commemorate victims of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 outside the Dutch embassy in Kiev.

Though the Malaysia Airlines crash that claimed 298 lives in war-torn eastern Ukraine last week was a tragedy, it was not unprecedented, analysts told The Moscow Times on Monday.

Countless innocent lives have been lost in recent decades to mistakes made by warring factions amid intensifying conflicts. Analysts pointed out that the most recent such tragedy bore striking similarities with the downings of civilian aircraft by Soviet and U.S. forces in the 1980s.

In 1983, Soviet troops shot down a Korean passenger jet. In 1988, the U.S. downed an Iranian one.

"In all three cases, the perpetrators thought that they were shooting down a military target,"

said Sergei Rogov, director of the Russian Academy of Sciences' U.S. and Canada Institute, told The Moscow Times on Monday. Each episode "was the result of increasing tension between the sides," he said.

Analysts also drew parallels to a highly lethal chemical attack launched in Syria just last year, as well as to the accidental downing of a Russian flight by Ukrainian forces in 2001, which, rather than demonstrating misplaced intentions, demonstrated a general lack of responsibility, The Moscow Times was told.

Korean Air Lines Flight 007

In September 1983, a Korean Airlines Boeing 747 was shot down by a Soviet Su-15 interceptor while en route from New York City to Seoul.

Due to an autopilot failure, the plane had deviated from its planned course, flying into the restricted airspace of the Soviet Union. The catastrophe occurred west of Sakhalin island.

The Soviets scrambled fighter jets without first taking care to ensure that the aircraft was not a civilian one.

Even the eventual realization that the aircraft had the general appearance of a passenger jet made no difference, according to interviews subsequently conducted with Soviet officers involved in the operation. It was believed at the time that the intruder could be a spy plane disguised as something more innocent.

Of the 246 passengers and 23 crew members on board the aircraft, none survived. The incident sparked an uproar in the West, creating one of the tensest points in the history of the Cold War.

Iran Air Flight 655

In 1988, 290 lives were lost when an Iranian Air Airbus A300 traveling from Tehran to Dubai was destroyed by a surface-to-air missile fired by U.S. missile cruiser Vincennes.

The cruiser had incorrectly identified the civilian airliner as a fighter jet preparing to attack.

Iran predictably lashed out, refusing to view the tragedy as an accident, instead categorizing it as a reckless international crime.

Rather than being punished for the incident, however, the crew was honored with combat action ribbons upon completion of their tour. The anti-warfare coordinator on board received a Navy commendation medal.

The incident occurred after years of tensions that followed the 1979 revolution in Iran, a tension that has retained a role in guiding Iran-U.S. relations in the ensuing decades.

Ghouta Chemical Attack

According to Vladimir Yevseyev, director of the Center of Social and Political Studies, the Malaysian airliner controversy also bears similarities to the Ghouta chemical gas attack

in Syria, which claimed at least 281 lives in August 2013.

Following the attack, Russia and the West traded accusations over who had executed it.

In December 2013 a United Nations fact-finding mission charged with investigating the incident failed to pinpoint the perpetrator of the attack, which had occurred within the framework of a highly politically charged conflict.

"In Syria, both warring sides used the attack to pursue their own political ends. The international actors that backed each side were also supporting one version of events over the other, making it similar to the airliner controversy in Ukraine," Yevseyev said in a phone interview.

The Ghouta attack prompted U.S. President Barack Obama to make a case for a military intervention into the Syrian civil war.

A Russia-brokered deal to push Syrian President Bashar Assad to give up the country's chemical weapon supply has diminished public support for a U.S. intervention. By September 2013, Obama's lofty rhetoric had begun to dim.

"This sort of large-scale military standoff always produces these massive losses of civilian lives. I hope that this tragedy will make all sides realize how far they have gone," Alexei Arbatov, scholar in residence at Carnegie Moscow Center, told The Moscow Times on Monday.

According to Arbatov, the Syria chemical weapons attack ultimately had an impact, resulting in the relinquishment of an enormous stockpile of chemical weapons, and changing the character of the war itself.

Siberia Airlines Flight 1812

In 2001, Ukrainian forces accidentally shot down a Russian Tu-154 airplane with an S-200 missile strike as the passenger jet flew over the Black Sea, while en route from Tel Aviv to Novosibirsk.

The ill-fated shot, fired during a standard military training exercise, killed all 78 people on board.

Though the incident was purely accidental, it serves as an illustration of how irresponsible the Ukrainian authorities can be, Rogov said in the phone interview.

"In 2001, Ukraine did not even realize that it had shot down a civilian plane. This time with the Malaysian airliner, they had failed to completely close off their airspace to civilian aircraft. This is one of the reasons why Ukraine's involvement cannot be totally rejected as a possibility," he said.

See also:

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Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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