

# U.S. Officials Threaten 'Severe Consequences' for Russia Over Crash

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Luggage and belongings are seen near the site of Thursday's Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777 plane crash, near the settlement of Grabovo in the Donetsk region July 18, 2014.

In the immediate aftermath of a passenger plane's tragic crash into Ukraine's conflict-riddled east, U.S. politicians on both sides of the aisle warned of severe consequences if Moscow is found to have been involved, but stopped short of explicitly blaming Russia.

The Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777 crashed into Ukraine's restive east on Thursday, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew members on-board. U.S. intelligence officials immediately blamed the incident on a surface-to-air missile strike, The New York Times reported. Citing satellite surveillance, officials interviewed by the Times said that a Russian SA-series missile was used to destroy the plane, though a point of origin had not yet been determined.

"Whoever did it should pay the full price," Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin, a Democrat from Michigan, said Thursday in comments carried by The Daily Beast. "If

[the act was carried out] by a country, either directly or indirectly, than it could be considered an act of war."

Senator John McCain, the top Republican on the Armed Services Committee, said in an interview with MSNBC that "to leap to conclusions could be very embarrassing and really inappropriate until we have more information." But if intelligence reveals that Russia or pro-Russian separatists were involved, "I think there's going to be hell to pay, and there should be," he said.

McCain was then quoted by The Washington Post as saying that if the separatists were responsible, they would only have had the capacity to down a plane traveling at an altitude of 10,000 meters through the use of Russian equipment.

Notably, the rebels from the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic tweeted on June 29 that they had taken possession of a Buk missile system, procured from a captured Ukrainian military base. This missile system can reach targets as high as 18,000 meters.

Head of the Senate Intelligence Committee Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat from California, also stressed that although it was still too early to assign responsibility for the crash, attacks on planes and helicopters by pro-Russian separatists in preceding months presented a disturbing trend.

Speaking about the surge in downed aircraft just last week, Tetyana Chyornovol of the Ukrainian government's National Anti-Corruption Committee said that Ukraine only has ten military helicopters left in its possession. At that point, pro-Russian insurgents had claimed responsibility for having shot down at least 15 Ukrainian military aircraft.

"Even before today's events, though, it's clear that Russia was escalating support for the separatists, which is obviously very concerning," Feinstein was quoted as saying by The Washington Post. "If evidence emerges that Russia was involved, that would be, obviously, extremely concerning."

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said the crash offered "an opportunity for Russia to play a constructive role in deescalating this conflict."

"They could shut down the border and prevent the transfer of heavy weapons and materiel to separatists. They have not done that," Earnest said in an official statement. "President Putin himself could intervene with pro-Russian separatists and encourage them to abide by the ceasefire. He has not done that."

If there was an opportunity to change Moscow's policy, Putin did not appear to have taken it Thursday, instead shifting the focus to Kiev.

"Undoubtedly, the state over whose territory this happened carries responsibility for this horrible tragedy," Putin said in a transcript released by the Kremlin Friday.

There is certainly precedent for leaders and military groups denying responsibility for downing passenger planes immediately following such tragedies.

The Pentagon did not initially acknowledge having shot down an Iranian airliner in 1988 —

though a confirmation of the incident and an expression of regrets followed within hours. Likewise, the Soviets initially avoided responsibility for having shot down a Korean Air Lines flight in 1983, as did Ukraine for having struck a Siberian Airlines flight en route from Tel Aviv to Novosibirsk in 2001.

U.S. President Barack Obama said Thursday, "the world is watching reports of a downed passenger jet," and that Americans want to understand what happened and why.

Earlier, when Obama spoke with Putin at Moscow's request on Thursday morning about sanctions imposed by the U.S. against Russia prior to the disaster, the U.S. president had noted "extensive evidence that Russia is significantly increasing the provision of heavy weapons to separatists in Ukraine," the White House said in a statement.

Both Republicans and Democrats warned of a tough response if evidence of Russia's involvement emerges.

In the U.S. House of Representatives, New York Congressman Eliot Engel, the top Democrat of the Foreign Affairs Committee, told The Daily Beast that "all the facts haven't come out yet... but what Putin is doing is very dangerous."

"I would be for stronger sanctions if it's proved that Putin had anything to do with this," Engel was quoted as saying. He also sided with Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko, referring to the crash an "act of terror," according to the report. Poroshenko said Thursday during a meeting of the country's security and national defense council: "This is not an incident, not a catastrophe, but a terrorist act."

McCain said that if the downing of the airliner was a result of an assault and not an accident, the U.S. should impose "real sanctions" against the assailants and provide Ukraine with defense weapons, CNN reported.

"If, if — I keep emphasizing if — it was a missile that was launched, either by Russia, or the ... separatists, which in my view are indivisible, it would have the most profound repercussions," he told CNN.

But a thorough investigation into the disaster seems to depend on Russia's cooperation, which foreign leaders urged it to help ensure, though it remained unclear how forthcoming Moscow would be.

"There is clearly a need for a full, transparent and international investigation," UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said.

Separatist leaders said Thursday they would hand over the aircraft's black box recorders to Moscow for analysis.

**See also:**

[Ukraine Releases Alleged Recording of Rebels Saying They Downed Malaysian Plane](#)

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