The shooting down of MH17

Latest news on the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 by a missile over eastern Ukraine

Malaysia Airlines’ Flight MH17 was shot down in a war zone in eastern Ukraine, where Kiev is waging an increasingly deadly battle against separatists backed by Moscow. The task now is to channel the horror and outrage at the loss of nearly 300 innocent lives so as to de-escalate the conflict and put it on a path to a durable political resolution that recognises and guarantees the rights of all of Ukraine’s citizens.

That will not be easy. At a time of raw emotion and a bitter information war, it is likely that positions will harden and the conflict escalate, raising the risk of future tragedies.

Three tasks are urgent. First is launching as quickly as possible a “full, thorough and independent investigation”, as the UN Security Council has called for. The investigation needs to be seen as objective and above suspicion if it is to calm the situation. Moscow should refuse to accept the aircraft’s black boxes, as the separatists have offered, and insist that they be turned over without delay to the designated investigators. For their part, Washington, Brussels and Kiev should resist the temptation to make public intelligence that backs their version of events. If it is true the plane was shot down by separatists, the public confirmation will be much more powerful coming from a credible independent investigation.

Second is putting in place a durable, verifiable ceasefire, which all sides say they want. They can start with a local ceasefire to ensure a thorough investigation of the crash site. Next, effective border controls should be established – based on Russian and Ukrainian forces and a large contingent of monitors from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe – to stem the illegal movement of personnel and materiel from Russia into Ukraine. Support should also be given to people displaced by the conflict.

Last is making a concerted effort to negotiate an end to the crisis. Kiev has been loath to negotiate directly with the separatist leaders because they are Russian agents. But Kiev knows it will have to deal with Russians to resolve the conflict. It should accept separatist leaders as a party to the talks.

These steps will hardly suffice for many in the west who are pushing a more muscular approach aimed at defeating the separatists and punishing Russia with tougher sanctions. The tragedy, they believe, should finally shame the EU into going along with a tougher US approach. For all their moral fervour, their approach is misguided.

Whatever the long-term effect of more stringent sanctions might be, in the short term they will only do what the sanctions levied so far have done: rally the public around Putin; invigorate ultranationalist forces; and silence those in the elite increasingly uneasy with his policies. And an external threat helps the Kremlin draw public attention from the hardship that has arisen from an economy that has been stagnating.

While the sanctions may have played a role in deterring more aggressive Russian behaviour, much more decisive has been the Kremlin’s fears of the consequences of sending their troops across the border and its recognition, driven home by the annexation of Crimea, of the huge costs of accepting responsibility for Donetsk and Lugansk, in Ukraine’s rust belt. Even with further sanctions, Moscow will destabilise Ukraine until steps have been made to protect what it sees as a vital interest: ensuring that Kiev takes Moscow’s interests into account and does not embrace the west.

The more effective response would be to mount a major effort to rebuild the Ukrainian state and repair its economy. History shows that Russian expansion stops when it runs into well-organised, consolidated states. To do this, Ukraine needs help with political reform and building competent military and police forces.
Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine’s president, needs to build a political party of his own into an instrument of governance and a counterweight to corrupt oligarchic clans. The $20bn or so the west has pledged to help is but a fraction of what will be required to repair the economy.

Even if Kiev were able to defeat the separatists in the near future – a big “if” – Putin is betting that the west does not have the patience or resources to rebuild Ukraine. He may be wrong, but those who are calling for sanctions most loudly today have given him no reason to reconsider.

*The writer was senior director for Russia on the US National Security Council staff from 2004-07*

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