



Deadly Missile Strike in Poland Exposed Tension Between NATO Allies, Ukraine

Description

Some U.S., European officials question whether Kyiv saw incident as chance to bind alliance tighter into war

Ukraine's initial claim last month that a strike fired by Russia—and not by its own forces—was responsible for the death of two Polish citizens revealed one of the sharpest public divergences between Ukraine and the U.S. since Russia's invasion of its neighbor in February.

The incident caused a moment of dangerous high drama, as the world watched to see if Russia had attacked Poland, a NATO alliance member, a possibility that was quickly discarded.

Nonetheless, what happened that night exposed a tension that has been present since the start of the war: While Kyiv hopes to increase the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's role in combating Russia in Ukraine, Washington and its European allies are determined to avoid steps that could trigger direct conflict between the alliance and Russia.

The missile incident on Nov. 15 came as strains had already emerged between Ukraine and Washington over calls by some U.S. officials for Kyiv to start to think about the terms of peace negotiations with Russia.

In the weeks since the incident, Western and Ukrainian diplomats say, Kyiv and Washington have smoothed over the tensions. But some Western officials remain rattled by Ukraine's response, which appeared an attempt to prod NATO a step closer to direct conflict with Moscow.

Within hours of a missile landing less than 5 miles inside Poland, the U.S. had determined that the strike was the result of a Ukrainian missile-defense munition, using signals, radar and other intelligence, U.S. defense officials said.

Washington was quick to share its conclusions with Poland, which had started investigating the incident. In Bali, on the sidelines of the Group of 20 leaders meeting, President Biden told leaders from other advanced democracies that Washington believed Russia hadn't fired the missile.

The missile strike hit the Polish town of Przewodow around 9:35 a.m. EDT. By that afternoon, the U.S. began sharing its assessment that a Ukrainian missile was responsible for the incident with the Ukrainians and Poles, according to U.S. officials. Army Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke to the Polish Defense Ministry at 4 p.m., to the Ukrainian defense attaché at 4:30 p.m. and to his Ukrainian counterpart at 5 p.m.

But by then, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had delivered his nightly video address, directly blaming Russia for the attack. That was in contrast to Polish officials, who were showing caution in attributing blame for the incident.

“Hitting NATO territory with missiles... This is a Russian missile attack on collective security! This is a really significant escalation,” he said. “Action is needed.”

Mr. Zelensky’s address prompted another round of calls between the U.S., NATO allies and Ukraine about the information they had.

Ukraine’s response to the incident reflected a longstanding feeling in Kyiv that, by defending themselves from Russia, the country is protecting the eastern flank of NATO, even as the alliance tries not to be pulled further into the war.

In the hours after the attack, Ukrainian officials, whose country isn’t a member of the alliance, called for a series of NATO responses.

Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba urged a “tough and principled” response to Russia, dismissing Kremlin claims that it was a Ukrainian missile that landed in Poland as a conspiracy theory.

He called for an immediate NATO summit with the participation of Ukraine “to craft further joint actions.” They should include, he said, providing Ukraine with modern F-15 and F-16 fighter aircraft and air-defense systems, and he suggested Kyiv should join with NATO to defend its eastern flank so that “we will be able to protect both Ukrainian skies and skies of our neighbors.”

The following morning, even as Polish officials made clear they wouldn’t press for a collective NATO response, senior Ukrainian officials doubled down on claims that Russia was behind the attack. Mr. Zelensky repeated his claim that Russian missiles hit Polish territory and called for a quick response.

After discussing the situation with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Mr. Kuleba said on Twitter on Nov. 16 that he had “stressed the response to what happened in Poland must be stiff and principled.”

It was only later that day that Mr. Zelensky and his officials started to dial back their narrative. Mr. Zelensky said that he was relying on information from his military in saying the missile that fell in Poland had been fired by Russian forces. He added, however, that if an investigation showed it was a Ukrainian missile that caused the damage, Kyiv would apologize.

Russian officials exploited the divergent narratives, with Russia’s ambassador at the United Nations saying Ukrainian and Polish officials were trying to spark a war between Russia and the West.

By Nov. 17, Ukraine was seeking to close down any rift with Poland. Warsaw invited Ukrainian officials

to join its official investigation. They arrived the next day.

Meanwhile, Western officials were stressing that Ukraine wasn't to blame for the incident, given the missile barrage they were under from Russia.

"This is not Ukraine's fault," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said. "Russia bears ultimate responsibility."

Ukrainian and European officials described Kyiv's response as a predominantly emotional one, an instinctive response to blame Russia for the incident after months of Russian aggression and attacks. Moscow had fired nearly 100 missiles into Ukraine in the hours before.

Yet some U.S. and European officials still question whether Mr. Zelensky and his top aides saw the crisis as an opportunity to bind NATO tighter into the war, something they say Kyiv has attempted at various junctures of the conflict.

Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's national security and defense council, declined to comment on whether Ukraine was trying to pull NATO deeper into the war. He said that when Mr. Zelensky makes a statement, he does so only after consulting the relevant people.

"The question of this rocket is for us a difficult one," he said, declining comment on the incident until the end of the probe. "Everyone can make a mistake, the main thing is that it isn't a fatal mistake."

Twenty-four hours later, after arriving back at the White House from Bali, Mr. Biden moved to close debate on Russia's role in the drama.

After stepping off Marine One, Mr. Biden was asked about Mr. Zelensky's claims earlier that day that the missile wasn't Ukrainian.

"That's not the evidence," he said.

Story by Nancy A. Youssef, Laurence Norman, Drew

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