

(National Interest)



[We don't yet know the details behind the tragic downing of the Malaysia Airlines jetliner over eastern Ukraine on July 17](#) , but in one sense, the details aren't going to matter very much in the global scheme of things. The geopolitical outcome is already known. World outrage has focused on [Russian president Vladimir Putin](#) to such an extent that Putin has suffered a huge loss of moral authority. That, in turn, lessens his range of actions in his ongoing confrontation with the West over Ukraine and increases the likelihood that Russia will lose its traditional dominance over that split country that straddles Russia and the West.

If that happens, prospects for a rapprochement between Russia and the West will be dead for a considerable period. And the watchword in U.S.-Russian relations will be hostility.

Thus, the downing of the Malaysian airliner is likely to be one of those hinge points that historians look back on as having deflected the course of world events. In these spaces the other day, [Jacob Heilbrunn suggested a possible correlation between the Malaysia Airlines disaster and the assassination of Austria's Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, Bosnia, which set in motion events leading to World War I](#) . It's worth pondering, particularly an element of the Sarajevo story that could prove pertinent to our own time—namely, the mushrooming of seemingly isolated events into major geopolitical confrontations.

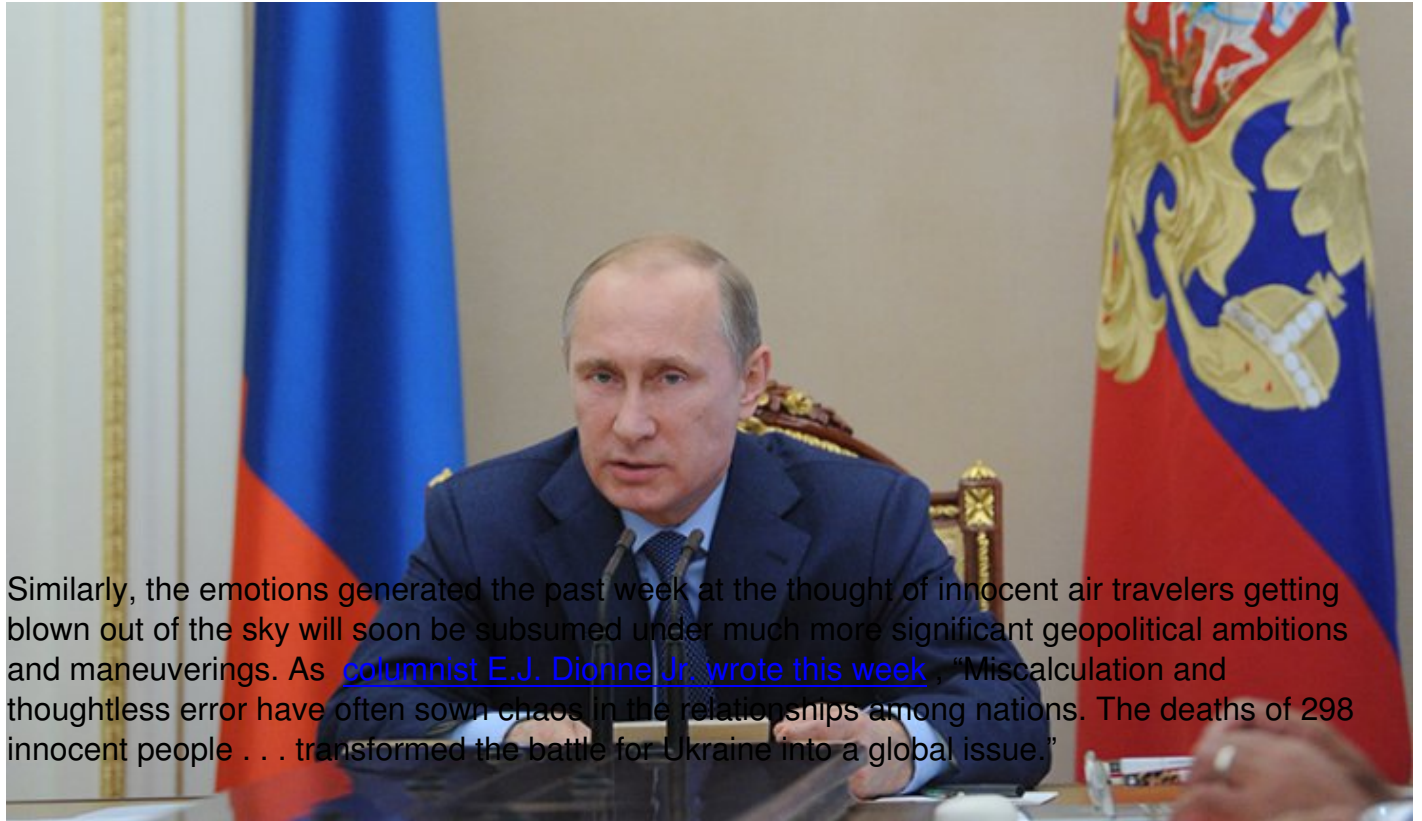
It is noteworthy how quickly the political passions leading to the Sarajevo assassination were overwhelmed by much larger and more profound geopolitical realities and tensions. The fate of

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Пише: Robert W. Merry  
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the Serbs and their struggle against their Austrian overlords, a matter of intense political anguish in the Balkans at the time, evaporated in significance as Europe's great powers grappled with complex alliance structures, far-reaching foreign-policy imperatives, internal political threats, and the exigencies of national honor.



Similarly, the emotions generated the past week at the thought of innocent air travelers getting blown out of the sky will soon be subsumed under much more significant geopolitical ambitions and maneuverings. As [columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. wrote this week](#), "Miscalculation and thoughtless error have often sown chaos in the relationships among nations. The deaths of 298 innocent people . . . transformed the battle for Ukraine into a global issue."

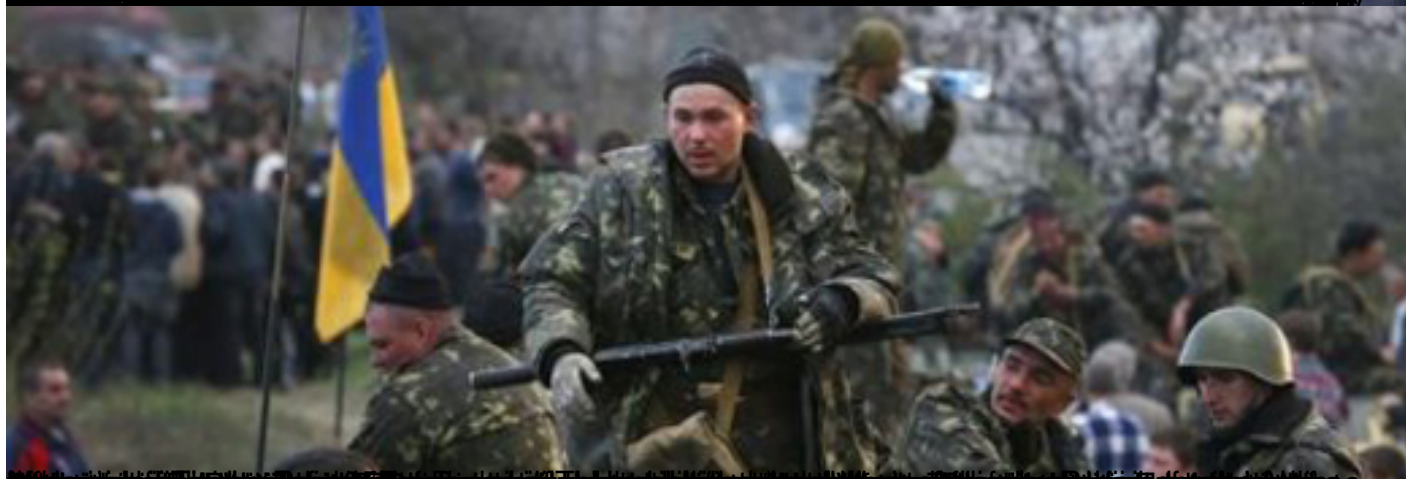
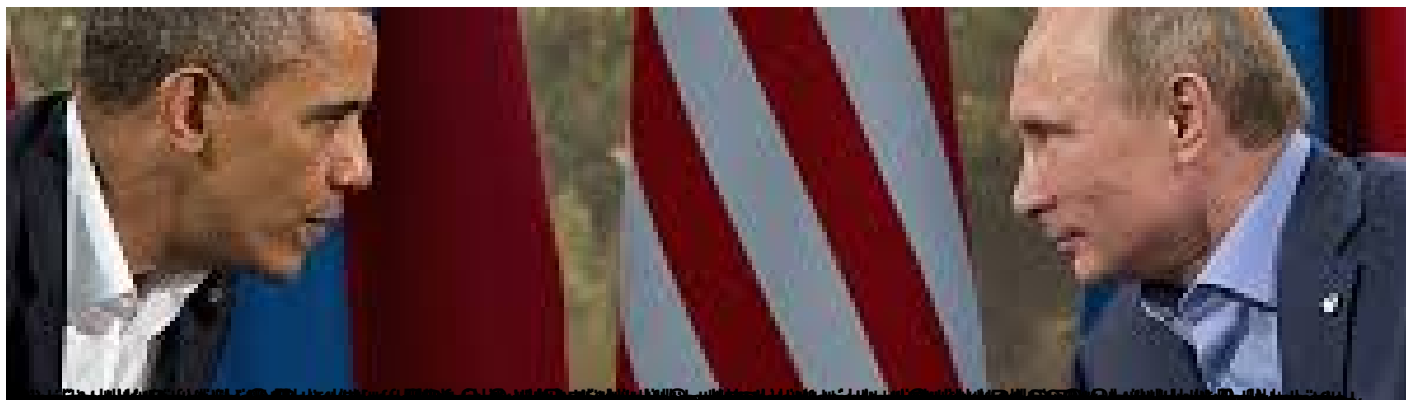
While nobody seriously believes the missile attack on the airliner was a purposeful effort to kill civilians with no stake in the fate of Ukraine, it appears that pro-Russian separatist elements in eastern Ukraine fired the missile that downed the plane and that they received the training for the weapon, if not the weapon itself, from Russia. And, since the United States considers the separatist insurgency in Ukraine to be illegitimate and Russia's involvement even more so, it was inevitable that the July 17 tragedy would be leveraged for broader geopolitical aims.

It will work. World opinion is turning powerfully against Russia and President Putin, with a lot of help from important world leaders such as President Obama and his ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, as well as many others throughout America and Europe. The result is that Putin will lose much of whatever leverage he had in the matter of the fate and future of Ukraine. Whatever prospect he had of negotiating an end to Ukrainian bloodshed on terms acceptable to him will be lost in the storm of anger generated by that airliner attack.

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[acknowledged substantial impediments](#)



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