

Australian prime minister demands apology from Russia on MH17

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Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday held a 15-minute private meeting with Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, at which the main issue was the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17. Without any conclusive evidence, Abbott has repeatedly accused Russia of being responsible for the tragedy.

The brief discussion, held on the sidelines of the APEC meeting in Beijing, was the first exchange between the two leaders since Abbott last month threatened to “shirtfront” Putin over MH17 at the upcoming G20 Leaders’ Summit in Australia. “Shirtfront” is the term for a particularly violent tackle in Australian Rules football.

The official Australian government statement following the Abbott-Putin encounter underscores the highly provocative role being played by the Abbott government for the US in its confrontation with Russia over Ukraine. Within hours of the crash, Abbott began making the unsubstantiated claim that Russia bore responsibility for the deaths of 38 Australian citizens and residents on MH17.

The Australian statement reported: “The Prime Minister told Mr Putin that Australia was in possession of information suggesting that MH17 was destroyed by a missile from a launcher that had come out of Russia, was fired from inside eastern Ukraine and then returned to Russia.”

Then, according to the statement, Abbott told Putin that Russia should accept responsibility for the crash as the US had done when it “inadvertently shot down” an Iranian airliner in 1988. Washington, Abbott claimed, had “duly apologised and made appropriate restitution” and Russia should follow that precedent.

Abbott’s assertions can only be described as outrageous. No credible investigation has been

completed into how and why MH17 was brought down. A preliminary report has found that the aircraft was likely destroyed by a high velocity projectile, but who fired it or even what the projectile was, is the subject of heated contention. Theories abound, but none has been substantiated. For Abbott to therefore demand that the Russian Federation apologise—in other words publicly admit guilt for the mass murder of civilians—is, among other things, a staggering breach of diplomatic norms.

Abbott’s confrontational comments are in sharp contrast to those of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak when he met with Putin. Malaysia, which presumably possesses as much “information” as Canberra, lost 43 of its citizens in the crash. Nevertheless Najib declared yesterday in Beijing: “Malaysia has always taken a very objective position. Instead of finger pointing, we would rather wait for the final investigation report to conclude what has really happened to MH17.”

Najib directed his criticisms to both the Ukrainian government and the Russian-speaking separatists in eastern Ukraine for ignoring calls for a cease fire to allow investigation teams secure access to the crash site.

As for Iran Air Flight 655, the circumstances of its downing are completely different from that of MH17. From the day of the incident on July 3, 1988, there was never any doubt that the Iranian aircraft, carrying 290 crew and passengers, was shot down as it flew over the Persian Gulf by missiles fired by the US warship Vincennes. The plane was correctly transmitting codes identifying it as civilian and it was attacked while the American guided-missile cruiser was illegally in Iranian territorial waters.

The US government never formally apologised or admitted guilt for the atrocity, and treated the victims,

their families and Iran with utter contempt. Its allies in the UN Security Council combined to block any condemnation of the US and instead blamed the disaster on the tensions produced by the Iran-Iraq war. In 1996—eight years after the event—Washington refused in the International Court of Justice to accept legal liability and agreed only to a statement expressing its “deep regret over the loss of lives”. It paid token ex gratia compensation of \$61.8 million.

Abbott was certainly playing to a domestic audience, seeking to use claims he was “confronting” Russia over the death of Australian civilians to channel social tensions outward and garner support for his deeply unpopular government.

At the same time, Abbott’s actions are entirely in line with the confrontational stance being taken against Russia by the Obama administration. During his brief meetings with Putin in Beijing, Obama reportedly issued demands that the Russian government stop supporting Ukrainian separatists as well as the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and the Iranian regime.

That Putin agreed to meet with Abbott and listen to his allegations indicates that Russia is on the defensive amid the impact of US- and European-dictated sanctions and diplomatic isolation. The official Kremlin response to the Abbott meeting was low key. It described the encounter as “proper” and stated that Putin had “stressed [that] from the very beginning Russia consistently demanded that the investigation be unbiased, quick and effective”.

The Dutch government, which is in charge of the international investigation into MH17, reported on November 11 that forensic teams have been able to return to the crash site in eastern Ukraine. With heavy fighting again flaring in the nearby Donetsk region between Ukrainian government forces and separatists, it is likely they will be quickly withdrawn, further delaying any progress in establishing the cause of the disaster.



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