

How a Lightly-sourced AP Story Almost Set Off World War III

A deadly explosion in Poland kicked off hours of near-gleeful speculation about whether NATO would join the fight against Russia.

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At approximately 1 pm EST yesterday, reports emerged that a pair of rockets had slammed into a quiet farming town in Poland. The tragic blast killed two locals, marking the first time that the war in Ukraine bled over into NATO territory.

Western officials now widely agree that the Russian-made S-300 rockets were launched by Ukrainian forces as part of their ongoing effort to counter Russia's attacks on their infrastructure. But that conclusion came after a long day of finger-pointing, with many leaders in politics and media using the blast as an opportunity to condemn Moscow and call for a swift response, up to and including the invocation of NATO's collective defense pledge.

To put it more bluntly, a lot of people spent yesterday calling for war between the world's two largest nuclear powers.

The incident gives a unique glimpse into how moments of crisis, which are often marked by limited information and strong emotions, create the conditions for rapid escalation, according to George Beebe of the Quincy Institute.

"We're all walking close to the edge of a disaster, and the United States should not be confident that we won't be pushed over that edge by forces we can't control," said Beebe, who previously led the CIA's Russia Analysis Group.

In order to better understand this dynamic, it is helpful to take a closer look at yesterday's events.

The first indication that something had gone wrong in Poland came at 12:38 pm EST, when Reuters [reported](#) that Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki had called an emergency

meeting of his national security team. Shortly after 1 pm, a flurry of Polish media outlets [revealed](#) that the rockets were the reason for the emergency gathering.

The first images of the blast quickly started to emerge, prompting some analysts to [point out](#) that the debris looked an awful lot like an S-300 rocket, part of a Soviet-era missile defense system that Kyiv continues to use today.

[#BREAKING](#): Suspected missile hits village in Poland, killing 2 people
pic.twitter.com/wAFbZBHjgH

— Amichai Stein (@AmichaiStein1) [November 15, 2022](#)

But at 2 pm, just as it had started to become clear that Russia was an unlikely culprit, AP News [published](#) a one-sentence, one-source story that would prove remarkably consequential: “A senior U.S. intelligence official says Russian missiles crossed into NATO member Poland, killing two people.”

Within minutes, prominent media personalities had already started to call on NATO to invoke Article V, which mandates that member states meet to determine a collective response whenever one of them is attacked. (It is worth noting that, contrary to popular belief, Article V does not prescribe a rapid response, and Congress would likely have to approve such a move.)

At 2:10 pm, Nika Melkozerova, a Ukrainian journalist with a significant following in the West, [tweeted](#) “So.. article 5?” Melkozerova softened her comment 20 minutes later, calling on concerned parties to “wait for official information.”

But Lesia Vasylenko, a member of Ukraine’s parliament, had no such compunction. The lawmaker simply [tweeted](#) out the phrase “Article 5” at 2:29 pm, [adding](#) later that Russian President Vladimir Putin was “testing the limits” with the strikes and that “reaction=appeasement.”

Paul Massaro, a prominent American supporter of Ukraine and member of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, [said](#) around the same time that “Russian terrorism” had reached Poland, [adding](#) shortly after that it was “[h]ard to believe this was an accident.”

Some NATO leaders seemed to follow in Massaro and Vasylenko’s footsteps. “Very concerned by Russian missiles dropping in Poland,” [tweeted](#) Slovakian Defense Minister Jaroslav Nad at 2:46 pm. “Will be in close contact with [NATO allies] to coordinate [a] response.”

A “senior European diplomat” [echoed](#) Nad in a Politico piece, saying that it was “appalling to see a desperate regime attacking critical infrastructure of Ukraine and hitting allied territory with victims.” (The diplomat did hedge by noting that the author of the attack was not yet confirmed.)

The Pentagon’s spokesman had the misfortune of having already scheduled a press conference for 2 pm, when little was known about the blast. “I don’t want to speculate when it comes to our security commitments and Article 5,” Patrick Ryder [said](#), noting that he

could not confirm AP's report. "But we have made it crystal clear that we will protect every inch of NATO territory."

The boilerplate promise to defend "every inch of NATO territory" earned an outsized response.

Given Russia's purported senseless attack on NATO, nothing less than the organization's very credibility as a collective defense organization was at stake.

Or at least that is what Anders Aslund of the Atlantic Council [argued](#) at around 3:30 pm. In a message aimed directly at President Joe Biden, Aslund [said](#), "You have promised to defend 'every inch of NATO territory.' Are you going to bomb Russia now?" He added that Biden's first move should be to establish a no-fly zone in Ukraine before "clean[ing] out the Russian Black Sea fleet."

At the same time, Sergej Sumlenny, a prominent European policy expert, [implied](#) in a viral tweet that the attack was an intentional extension of Russia's assault on Ukrainian infrastructure.

Shortly after, Mykhailo Podolyak, one of the top advisors to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, [declared](#) that the strikes were "not an accident, but a deliberately planned 'hello' from [Russia], disguised as a 'mistake.'"

Russia [denied](#) the claim, saying that "[n]o strikes on targets near the Ukrainian-Polish state border were made by Russian means of destruction." But, somewhat understandably for many of Ukraine's supporters, Russia's word no longer holds much purchase.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba [responded](#) at 4:35 pm that Moscow "promotes a conspiracy theory that it was allegedly a missile of Ukrainian air defense" that hit Poland. "No one should buy Russian propaganda or amplify its messages," Kuleba added. Around the same time, Zelensky [tweeted](#) that the "Russian attack on collective security in the Euro-Atlantic is a significant escalation" of the conflict.

Luckily, the Biden administration didn't take the bait. Despite the sharp words from Kyiv, U.S. and Polish officials [maintained](#) that the origin of the missiles was unclear and insisted that they needed more time to investigate the incident. At 7 pm, Biden, who is currently in Bali for the G20 conference, offered "full support" for Warsaw's investigation following a call with Polish President Andrzej Duda.

Speculation and calls for escalation continued to run rampant as officials from across the West held emergency meetings. It took until nearly midnight for AP News to finally [report](#) that "[t]hree U.S. officials said preliminary assessments suggested the missile was fired by Ukrainian forces at an incoming Russian one amid the crushing salvo against Ukraine's electrical infrastructure Tuesday."

Even after this news emerged, Podolyak [maintained](#) that NATO should enact a no-fly zone in Ukraine, which would likely require Western pilots to fight their Russian counterparts directly, putting four nuclear-armed nations at war. Kyiv continues to deny that it fired the missiles.

This morning, Biden [disputed](#) Ukraine's line, saying it was "unlikely" that the missiles came from Russia. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also [declared](#) that there is "no

indication this was the result of a deliberate attack” but added that Russia holds ultimate responsibility for the attack given Moscow’s invasion and continued attacks on Ukrainian cities.

The trajectory of events starting from the initial report about the missiles hitting inside Poland highlights the difference between U.S. and Ukrainian interests when it comes to direct NATO involvement in the conflict, according to Beebe.

“There is a clear divergence of interests on that score, and the Biden team was appropriately cautious about gathering the facts about what happened and not rushing to judgment about potential retaliation,” he said.

In the end, the voices calling for calm won out over their more hawkish counterparts. But the incident serves as a stark reminder that misinformation spreads fast in moments of crisis, which can result in dangerous escalation. This makes it all the more important that major outlets like AP News get the story right the first time, as journalist Ken Klippenstein [argued](#) on Twitter.

“This is why journalists are supposed to verify information before they report it,” Klippenstein wrote.

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