

If Ukraine Is Right, Russia Was Right

Recent U.S. statements risk prolonging the war in Ukraine.

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On January 14, Russia launched a series of missile strikes that targeted military and energy infrastructure across Ukraine. It was the first large-scale strike in two weeks. Although Russia's defense ministry [said](#) that "[a]ll designated targets were hit" in the attack, a powerful Kh-22 Russian missile [also struck](#) a nine-story apartment building, killing [forty-four](#) people.

Associated Press [called](#) it "the deadliest attack in one place since a Sept. 30 strike in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region." **Josep Borrell**, the European Union's foreign policy chief, [called](#) the missile strike "inhumane aggression" because it directly targeted civilians and said that "There will be no impunity for these crimes."

The only dissenting voice came from Ukraine, where **Oleksiy Arestovich**, then a senior advisor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, made the early suggestion that the missile may not have targeted the apartment building but may have struck it after being intercepted by Ukrainian air defenses.

Arestovich [said](#) in an interview that the incoming missile "was shot down. It apparently fell on the [apartment] block. But it exploded when falling."

A spokesman for Ukraine's high command says Ukraine lacks the ability to intercept Kh-22 missiles. Arestovich has now resigned as a presidential advisor, [saying](#) that his statement was "a fundamental mistake."

On Facebook, Arestovich wrote,

"Everybody understands perfectly that the tragedy would not have happened if it was not for the Russian strike."

"Nobody will blame Ukraine. Just like it was not blamed when our air defense missile fell

in Poland, killing two Polish citizens,” he added.

When the Russian missile landed in Poland, Ukraine dissented from the accepted analysis that the missile was shot down by Ukraine’s air defense system, risking an Article Five-triggered war with NATO; when the Russian missile struck the apartment building, Arestovich dissented from the accepted view that the missile was not shot down by Ukraine’s air defense system.

Whether Arestovich is right or wrong, the U.S. may want Ukrainian officials “to tread more carefully with how they were speaking,” as CNN reported National Security Advisor **Jake Sullivan** has [urged](#) them.

On January 10, Ukraine’s defense minister, **Oleksii Reznikov**, [told](#) a Ukrainian TV station that Ukraine has “already become a de facto member of the NATO alliance.” He added that Ukraine’s formal accession to NATO “is an absolutely realistic possibility.”

Five days later, Reznikov repeated that claim, [telling](#) the BBC that “Ukraine as a country, and the armed forces of Ukraine, became [a] member of NATO. De facto, not de jure (by law). Because we have weaponry, and the understanding of how to use it.”

Reznikov said that there was nothing controversial about his claim: “Why [would it be] controversial? It’s true. It’s a fact. I’m sure that in the near future, we’ll become member of NATO, de jure.”

Zelensky had previously [made the same claim](#), that “De facto, we have already completed our path to NATO.”

Yet despite Reznikov’s claim, those statements are controversial—and the U.S. may have particular interest in tempering them. Ukrainian statements risk escalation to a war between Russia and NATO, as well as feed the Russian concern that Ukraine will enter NATO. If true, they confirm the *Asia Times*’s [claim](#) that Russia is “now in a direct war with the US, that this is now an American war,” or, as Putin [said](#) on September 21, that Russia is fighting “the entire Western military machine.” On the same day Reznikov made his statement to the Ukrainian media, the Russian security council secretary, Nikolai Patrushev, [told](#) the Russia media that “The events in Ukraine are not a clash between Moscow and Kiev - this is a military confrontation between Russia and NATO, and above all the United States and Britain.”

Reznikov seems to have gone even further, lending credence to Russia’s concern that the U.S. and NATO are backing a war not to defend Ukraine but to weaken and defeat Russia. He has [claimed](#) that “in Madrid at the NATO summit, they clearly defined that, for the next ten years, their main threat is the Russian Federation. Today, Ukraine is removing this threat. We are carrying out the NATO mission today without losing their blood with the loss of our blood. That is why we need to spend their weapons for them.”

This statement is provocative for three reasons. First, it recasts the war as not a Ukraine-Russia war but as a NATO-Russia war, emphasizing Ukraine’s role as a territory on Russia’s border that is being flooded with NATO infrastructure and weapons. Second, Reznikov’s statements reaffirm Russia’s [fear](#) that, even if Ukraine isn’t de facto in NATO, NATO is de facto very much in Ukraine. Reznikov’s statement strikes at the key demand of Russia’s December 17, 2021 proposal on security guarantees: not just that NATO not

expand to Ukraine, but that there be no deployment of NATO weapons or troops to Ukraine.

Third and finally, it also recasts the war as a preemptive war to remove the threat of Russia rather than a defensive war against Russian aggression. It reinforces the Russian [fear](#) that Ukraine was being turned into an increasingly well-armed “bridgehead for confrontation with Russia” with the intent, as U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [said](#), of weakening Russia “to the degree that it can’t do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine.” It reshapes the war into an intentional, deliberate, and hostile NATO mission.

The U.S. may want Ukraine to speak more carefully because, despite Reznikov’s assurance, some of their recent statements are controversial. They risk not only prolonging the war, but potentially even escalating it.

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Featured image: View of a civilian sports club gym and sporting goods store damaged following a Russian rocket attack the city of Kiev, Ukraine. ([Drop of Light/Shutterstock](#))

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