Back to the Future: How Russia’s War with Ukraine Impacts International Aviation Industry

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On August 31, 1983, Korean Air flight 007 set off on its way to Seoul after a quick fuel stop at Anchorage. Because the crew forgot to switch the autopilot system from magnetic heading to inertia navigation, the plane veered off its course and entered the Soviet airspace over Petropavlovsk. At 3:26 AM local time, Korean Air 007 reported severe decompression to the air traffic controllers in Tokyo and disappeared from the radar. 269 souls were killed by missiles shot from an SU–15 fighter jet. This accident was one of the most influential air crashes in the history of aviation. It took place during the peak of the Cold War and pushed the tension between the two sides of the Iron Curtain to a new height. Eventually, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, airplanes traveling across the Pacific were no longer subject to the strict airspace rules and could use Russian airspace freely. Airlines could save a hefty amount of fuel money by using the Russian airspace. Many more alternate airports also became available as more and more twin-engine jetliners utilized the ETOPS
rule to fly over oceans.\(^1\) However, the circumstances changed drastically over the last few years as Russia’s war with Ukraine progressed.

On February 27, 2022, right after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, all member countries of the EU closed their airspace to Russian-registered, owned, and/or controlled aircraft. A similar decision was adopted by other Western countries as well. Thus, flights from Moscow or St. Petersburg to Kaliningrad could no longer use the airspace of EU countries. They had to take a long and arduous detour over the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea, using international airspace to reach this territorial enclave. Likewise, Russia immediately closed its airspace to all aircraft from “unfriendly” Western countries as well, terminating the operation of many air routes such as the United Airlines flights from the U.S. to New Delhi.\(^2\) Overnight the commercial aviation industry seemed to have time-traveled to 40 years ago, strictly avoiding the borderline of Russia. Essentially, all Western carriers lost the first freedom of the air over Russia. Along with Ukraine, over 18,553,000 square kilometers of airspace suddenly became unavailable to most Western aircraft.

However, there are still exceptions to this restriction. Those countries that are considered “friendly” to Russia, such as China, India, Türkiye, and the UAE, could continue to operate their flights using Russian airspace. Air carriers from these countries could take advantage of Russia’s airspace and fly a much shorter route compared to other airlines. For example, on June 9th, the British Airways flight 88 from Beijing to London recorded a flight time of 12 hours and 32 minutes while Air China flight 937 recorded a flight time of only 10 hours and 40 minutes. This not only means shorter flight time for passengers but also means lower costs and more competitive pricing. This has caused a lot of disputes between carriers in different countries. On average, flight time of flights from Europe to East Asia after the war increased by 22.1% and the flight time increased by 28.7%. Japan and South Korea were influenced most heavily among all the countries. Over 12% of international flights from Japan and over 19% of flights from South Korea used Russian airspace before the conflict. The carriers from these two countries had to take the most arduous detour after Russia’s closure of

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\(^1\) “Korean Air Lines Flight 007 | Missiles, Investigation, & Facts.” Encyclopedia Britannica

\(^2\) “Ukraine Invasion: EU Shuts Airspace to Russian Planes.” BBC News
airspace. Routes such as Helsinki to Tokyo operated by Japan Airlines ceased operation completely.³

While the EU did not mandate airlines to avoid Russian airspace, the United States, beginning in 2022, required all new routes operated by Chinese carriers to avoid Russian airspace to maintain a fair business practice over the Pacific. This has been a huge point of dispute between China and the U.S. as using the Russian airspace was a common practice before the war. While Chinese carriers use Russian airspace most extensively, none of them were influenced by the war. Only 7.25% of international flights operated by Chinese carriers were forced to detour, and almost all of them were concerned with the war zone in Ukraine only.⁴ In April of 2024, U.S. carriers and labor unions continued to urge the U.S. Government to cease approval of new flights between China and the United States, citing concerns regarding unfair advantage.⁵ This not only included freedoms of the air. The U.S. carriers also cited the lower salary paid by Chinese carriers to their crew members, meaning that it's easier for them to make money compared to U.S. carriers at a given fare price. The Chinese government strongly opposed the decisions from the U.S. government and cited that the

³ Chen Chu et al. “Assessing Impacts of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on Global Air Transportation: From the View of Mass Flight Trajectories.”

⁴ Chen Chu et al. “Assessing Impacts of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on Global Air Transportation: From the View of Mass Flight Trajectories.”

⁵ “US Airlines Ask the Biden Administration Not to Approve Additional Flights between the US and China.”
market should determine the outcome of competition rather than policies. This has gradually become one of the significant components of trade disputes between the U.S. and China right now and no outcome is foreseeable as the tension between the two countries continues to rise.

Overall, Russia’s war with Ukraine is nevertheless a black swan moment for the global commercial aviation industry. It has presented an unprecedented challenge since the end of the Soviet Union. This shows the fragility of globalization and indicates that it could be reversed drastically in just one day. Companies that operate around the globe are more and more vulnerable to political tensions, something that you can’t do anything about.

