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Trump Takes Aim at a Critical Cold War Treaty With Russia

The Open Skies treaty has provided invaluable intelligence for its 34 signatory countries. Now Donald Trump reportedly wants out.

If you looked across the tarmac at the Great Falls, Montana, airport in April, you likely would have been surprised to see a fully marked Russian Air Force jet parked nearby. Its mission that week would have been even more puzzling: The unarmed Tupolev Tu-154M spent four days flying over some of the most sensitive military bases in the US, including the complex in the Nevada desert known as Area 51.

The surveillance flights, all announced and conducted with American personnel onboard to monitor them, were part of a lingering legacy of the Cold War. Authorization under the long-standing treaty known as “Open Skies” made them routine and uncontroversial—at least until Monday night.

That’s when House representative Eliot Engel, the Democrat of New York and the chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, sent a letter to White House national security advisor Robert O’Brien saying he was “deeply concerned” by reports that President Donald Trump was considering withdrawing from Open Skies. That would be the latest in the administration’s efforts to unwind many of the multilateral agreements, institutions, and treaties that have helped govern the world and keep peace since World War II.

“[I] strongly urge you against such a reckless action,” Engel wrote. “American withdrawal would only benefit Russia and be harmful to our allies’ and partners’ national security interests. ... The US should prepare for the challenge that Russia presents—not abandon mechanisms that provide the US with an important tool in maintaining surveillance on Russia.”

While the Trump administration and Capitol Hill allies like senator Tom Cotton, the Republican from Arkansas, have long expressed frustration with the deal, Monday’s movement seemed to blindside foreign policy and arms control experts, who quickly expressed puzzlement and outrage that Trump would unwind what’s been seen as a cornerstone of global defense. The former ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, tweeted “Please tell me this can’t be true.”

The treaty, which primarily focuses on the US and Russia, actually has a total of 34 signatories across Europe and North America, and allows for countries to conduct structured but almost unimpeded surveillance flights by specially outfitted aircraft to monitor each others’ militaries. Over the last 16 years, the treaty has enabled nearly 200 flights by the US over Russia and more than 70 flights by Russia over the US.

If the Trump administration does pull out, the collapse of the Open Skies agreement would be the latest in a series of little noticed but significant moves by the White House to undo the patchwork of arms control agreements that have kept at bay a new nuclear arms race between the two nuclear superpowers. Earlier this year, Trump withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which limited ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, saying that Russia no longer abided by the treaty anyway.

The Open Skies Treaty continues to have unmatched value.

The Russian Open Skies flights over the US often make headlines, as people wonder why Russian surveillance planes are flying overhead, but the US also conducts similar flights over Russia—and in 2018 actually had one such flight over Ukraine to monitor Russia’s military buildup in the territory it seized there in 2014. (America’s fleet of Open Skies aircraft—aging, problem-prone OC-135B planes—is based at Offutt Air Force Base outside Omaha, Nebraska.)

The flights are closely monitored and highly structured; as the State Department’s fact sheet explains, “The treaty limits all optical sensors, including electro-optical, to 30-cm resolution; a level that allows parties to distinguish between a tank and a truck and is of similar resolution to imagery available from commercial sources like Google Earth.”

The roots of the treaty stretch back to the days before satellite surveillance; President Dwight Eisenhower first proposed a version of Open Skies in 1955, an era when American hawks feared that the Soviet Union was racing ahead of the US militarily. Eisenhower believed that transparency was key to ensuring the peace—the more both superpowers knew about each other’s military, the more they could reassure themselves that the other wasn’t preparing for what Eisenhower then called the “great surprise attack.”

Eisenhower’s instinct was reinforced by one of the most daring and important US operations of the Cold War: secret surveillance flights over the Soviet Union by U-2 aircraft, whose powerful, rapid-fire cameras helped document the realities of the Soviet military capabilities by photographing airfields, missile bases, and Soviet war materiel. The covert U-2 surveillance flights—each of which was technically a dangerous and illegal incursion into Soviet airspace—actually helped defuse fears of the “missile gap” and the “bomber gap,” and led Eisenhower to downshift America’s own military buildup once his intelligence agencies realized that the Soviet Union possessed only a fraction of the ICBMs and bombers that the US feared. Then, in the years ahead, the rise of satellite technology by both the US

and the Soviet Union allowed the superpowers to monitor each others' territory more safely and thoroughly.

That original “open skies” proposal by Eisenhower sat dormant until President George H.W. Bush revived the idea, leading to a tentative 1989 agreement that finally went into effect in 2002. The treaty is overseen by a body known as the Open Skies Consultative Commission, part of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which works through disagreements and sets annual quotas about the overflights.

Execution of the agreement in recent years has not been entirely smooth. Russia has tried to limit flights around its Kaliningrad exclave—a detached part of the country on the Baltic Sea that houses some of its key missile bases. The US has in retaliation limited Russian flights over key Pacific Fleet bases. Most recently, the US and Russia tussled over Russia's latest iteration of its Open Skies aircraft, which had newly upgraded cameras (including infrared) aboard, and which Washington said appeared to cross the line from “confidence building” monitoring equipment to outright intelligence-gathering.

Last year, the Republican House chair of the Armed Services Committee tried to nix funding for new Open Skies aircraft—an odd way to punish Russia for its infraction. On the other side of the Capitol, Cotton said last fall: “The Open Skies Treaty is out of date and favors Russia, and the best way forward is to leave it.”

At the same time, the Open Skies Treaty continues to have unmatched value, its backers say, even in an age of satellite observation. As the Obama administration argued in 2016, “Although the US has imaging capability outside of the treaty, there are significant parts of Russia best imaged by treaty aircraft. The treaty provides valuable information, especially for our allies and partners that do not have the same imaging capabilities as the US.”

The Trump administration's inclination to break with the treaty would be consistent with its unwinding of other Cold War era agreements, but it's not clear that it has any desire or idea

to replace them with new arms control limits or monitoring agreements. Those moves collectively leave a potentially dangerous void at the heart of the strategic architecture that has kept peace between the nuclear superpowers for seven decades.