
An Open Skies Chronicle

The Birth of Open Skies

The original Open Skies proposal was conceived in 1955 by a group of analysts working for Nelson Rockefeller, then advisor to US President Dwight Eisenhower. Rockefeller had asked his colleagues to think of some bold initiatives that the President could put forth at the four-power (France, UK, USA, USSR) summit to be held in Geneva in July of that year. In June, the group spent five days at the US Marine base at Quantico, near Washington, D.C., and it was here that the idea of mutual, unarmed overflights was first advanced.

Aerial reconnaissance reached its zenith as an effective method of collecting data during World War II. It is therefore not surprising that in the early post-war period, this type of surveillance was seriously considered as a means of verifying possible arms control and disarmament agreements. Indeed, a 1946 plan for the international control of atomic energy suggested aerial surveillance as a means of policing an agreement.

The Quantico panel was attracted by the simplicity of Open Skies, and by the fact that it emphasized the Western value of openness, in contrast to the secretive nature of the Soviet Union. Moreover the plan, if adopted, would have been of tremendous benefit to US security. Satellite reconnaissance systems were not yet in operation and the Americans had little idea of the true state of Soviet military preparations. As this was during the pre-ballistic missile era, the main US interest was to determine the extent of the Soviet long-range bomber capability and identify the staging airfields for intercontinental bomber attack.

Open Skies did not enjoy a smooth passage through the US bureaucracy, however. Opposed by then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (as much because of his desire to remove Rockefeller as a foreign policy advisor as for substantive reasons), the proposal was not on Eisenhower's agenda when he left for Geneva.

As the summit proceeded, it became clear that Eisenhower's performance had not captured the public's imagination. In this context Rockefeller was able to catch the President's ear with Open Skies. Eisenhower was less receptive to Dulles' objections than he had been in Washington and, after consultations with his staff and British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, he rose on July 21 to make the following statement:

"Gentlemen, since I have been working on this memorandum to present to this conference, I have been searching my heart and mind for something that I could say here that could convince everyone of the great sincerity of the United States in approaching this problem of disarmament.

"I should address myself for a moment principally to the delegates from the Soviet Union, because our two great countries admittedly possess new and terrible weapons in quantities which do give rise in other parts of the world, or reciprocally, to the fears and dangers of surprise attack.

"I propose, therefore, that we take a practical step, that we begin an arrangement, very quickly, as between ourselves — immediately. These steps would include:

"To give to each other a complete blueprint of our military establishments, from beginning to end, from one end of our countries to the other: lay out the establishments and provide the blueprints to each other.

"Next, to provide within our countries facilities for aerial photography to the other country — we to provide you the facilities within our country, ample facilities for aerial reconnaissance, where you can make all the pictures you choose and take them to your own country to study; you to provide exactly the same facilities for us and we to make these examinations, and by this step to convince the world that we are providing as between ourselves against the possibility of great surprise attack, thus lessening danger and relaxing tensions.

"Likewise we will make more easily attainable a comprehensive and effective system of inspection and disarmament, because what I propose, I assure you, would be but a beginning."