

OPEN SKIES BACKGROUNDER

The Open Skies proposal was launched by President Bush in May 1989. The proposal called for a treaty to allow short-notice overflights of participating countries for confidence-building purposes. During the period leading up to the President's announcement, Canadian officials had urged their American counterparts to launch it as a negotiation involving all of the countries of the two European security alliances.

The Canadians were motivated by several factors. They believed that an Open Skies treaty would have a democratizing effect on relations between the two alliances by allowing the smaller states to develop an independent capability to monitor events of concern. They believed that an Open Skies treaty would enable the North American members of the NATO alliance to demonstrate to their European partners, who would soon be asked to accept on-site inspections in the context of European arms control negotiations, a willingness to accept intrusive inspections in the interest of better East-West relations. Finally, they believed that Open Skies provided a means of quickly translating the atmosphere of increasing goodwill in East-West relations into a concrete treaty. Moreover, aside from its utility as a confidence-building measure, an Open Skies treaty was viewed as a useful adjunct to the verification provisions of several arms control treaties either in place or under negotiation.

Two rounds of negotiations have been held; in Ottawa in February 1990, and in Budapest in April of that year. The negotiations opened in Ottawa with a three-day meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the 23 states of the two alliances. Following their departure, officials began the task of translating their broad direction into a treaty text. It had been hoped that a treaty could be agreed in time for the first anniversary of President Bush's speech, but differences over a variety of technical issues resulted in the delegates leaving Budapest without an agreement.

Since the Budapest Conference, the NATO Allies have been re-examining their position. In April of this year, Canada presented a new compromise position to the Soviet Union on behalf of the Allies. By early August, the Soviets had replied, and had shown some flexibility themselves. It was decided that a one-week meeting of senior officials should be held with the aim of identifying further areas of potential compromise.

The Open Skies talks will reconvene for one week on September 9, 1991, in Vienna. If sufficient progress is made, negotiations will continue throughout the autumn.