

Open Skies: Challenge for the 1990s

Background

Introduction

The Right Honourable Joe Clark cautioned, in an article in the New York Times on 5 June 1989, not to dismiss the Open Skies proposal made by President Bush as an offer from the past. The thrust of his observations was not so much in reference to technology changes but rather to the radically different negotiating atmosphere of the 1980s as compared to the 1950s. While space-based remote sensing technologies of the 1980s did not exist when President Eisenhower proposed "Open Skies" in 1955, a significantly effective airborne capability did. The Eisenhower proposal was indeed revolutionary. So much so that it seemed to be rejected at the outset because of the penchant on the part of the USSR for secrecy. In those days, verification was equated by the USSR with legalized espionage.

Today, of course, that cloak of secrecy has long been removed by satellite sensing. The revolutionary factor which makes Open Skies a challenging concept today is the professed acceptance by the USSR of any method of verification on a reciprocal basis. The Open Skies initiative, endorsed in the NATO summit declaration of 30 May 1989, provides a concrete method of bringing a greater degree of openness to the military activity of member of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. It is a positive way of testing glasnost in a quantifiable manner. The President's approach provides a dramatic variant to the initial proposal by throwing open to virtually unrestricted aerial surveillance the territories of North America, Europe and the Soviet Union. The significance of the proposal, which is not tied to any particular treaty scenario, lies as much in its confidence building aspects as in the capabilities to be employed.

The Eisenhower Proposal

President Eisenhower's proposal, apparently like that of President Bush some 34 years later, was the product of the White House apparatus rather than of the Administration. A panel of experts, convened by Nelson Rockefeller, then special assistant to the President, undertook to generate some innovative ideas which might be considered by the United States for use at the 1955 Geneva Conference of Heads of Government. To some degree, the "open skies" proposal was seen as a means of testing the seriousness of the Soviet Union on disarmament. The idea of mutual aerial inspection seemed to be a good test to determine the willingness on the part of the USSR to accept intrusive inspection. Speaking in Geneva, on 21 July 1955, partly from notes and partly off the cuff, President Eisenhower outlined the core of the "Open Skies" proposal in a number of steps. He said:

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