

IN ONE OF HIS FIRST FOREIGN policy speeches since becoming president, George Bush proposed on 12 May 1989, that the US and the Soviet Union – along with their respective allies – enter into discussions on a system of “Open Skies.” Open Skies envisages an arrangement in which those countries involved have the right to carry out mutual, unarmed aerial reconnaissance of each others’ territory. The system gives those countries the opportunity to monitor the military activities and installations of other member countries. Unlike satellite surveillance, aerial reconnaissance can be carried out whenever necessary over a given area, thus providing greater flexibility and openness.

Open Skies was first proposed by President Eisenhower at a summit meeting in Geneva in July 1955, and was at the time seen as a way of testing the seriousness of the Soviet Union on disarmament, and an attempt to get around the heavy secrecy that surrounded Soviet military activities. The new Bush proposal is a confidence-building measure which aims to consolidate the new openness in Soviet society and new Soviet willingness to accept intrusive verification. It would also monitor the political and military changes in Europe that are occurring as a result of that openness.

The Canadian government provided very early support to the Bush proposal. At a meeting in Washington prior to the Bush speech, Prime Minister Mulroney encouraged President Bush to put forward the idea. Afterwards, Prime Minister Mulroney publicly announced his support for Open Skies and stated that Canada would be willing to open up its territory to such surveillance.

At the meeting between US Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze in Wyoming in September, the Soviet Union agreed to negotiations on the proposal. Multilateral negotiations involving the twenty-three member

states of NATO and the Warsaw Pact are due to be held in Ottawa in February 1990.

Historical Background

In preparation for a summit meeting in July 1955 involving France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the US, a group of American experts, known as the Quantico Panel, suggested that the US propose a system of unlimited aerial reconnaissance of US and Soviet territory as a way of testing whether the Soviet Union was serious enough about disarmament to implement the intrusive measures that would be needed for verification. The proposal received little support within the administration but was embraced by Nelson Rockefeller, a special advisor to the president, who made an effort to get the president and other officials on side.

The proposal was not approved until the night before Eisenhower was to make his speech. John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State, had been a final holdout but was won over by the “drama and substance” of the proposal in a situation in which it was highly unlikely the Soviet Union would agree to the idea. Indeed, Soviet officials quickly labelled Open Skies as a one-sided US attempt to spy on the Soviet Union and questioned the rationale for implementing inspection measures without any accompanying measures of disarmament.

The Soviet negative position remained firm until November 1956 when Khrushchev sent a letter to Eisenhower picking up on an earlier US idea to implement the system in a limited geographical zone and suggesting Europe as that zone. The Arctic was proposed by

the US as an alternative – an attractive area to begin because it contained relatively few sensitive military installations. With this shift in emphasis there was also a shift in goals. Open Skies was now being treated as a confidence-building measure whose main purpose was to ease fears of surprise attack, rather than testing verification methods and Soviet willingness to permit intrusive inspection.

However, there was tremendous difficulty in reaching agreement on the zone’s boundaries, and the negotiations, along with other issues at the UN Disarmament subcommittee, slid increasingly into stalemate. Open Skies enjoyed a resurgence of interest in the UN Security Council in 1958 when the US proposed an aerial inspection system to cover all of the Arctic (including Canada and the other Nordic countries). In spite of support from all other members of the Security Council, and an unusual intervention by the UN Secretary-General, the proposal was defeated by a Soviet veto.

Given Canada’s geographical location between the two superpowers, Canadian territory would be important to whatever arrangement might be made. Canada offered the Arctic and all of Canadian territory as part of an Open Skies system. The Canadian government also offered to help with training and equipment. After Open Skies faded from the superpower agenda in the late 1950s, Canada continued its interest in the idea. In private correspondence with Khrushchev at the time, Prime Minister Diefenbaker offered to undertake a reciprocal

inspection arrangement with the Soviet Union. However, this was never taken up by the Soviet Union.

Current Considerations

Several important issues relating to the details of the system to be established will need to be addressed before it will be clear how far the proposal will advance. A full Open Skies system involving all the territory of all twenty-three countries would mark a major change in thinking for both alliances. A less comprehensive system – with restricted areas or time frames – still offers the advantage of giving Canada and the US a chance to support their Western European allies in the kind of intrusiveness that would be required for verifying conventional force reductions in Europe.

At present the proposal suggests that the system will work on an alliance-to-alliance basis rather than bilaterally only between the US and USSR or in a twenty-three nation free for all. It is not yet clear what types of overflight arrangements individual countries might enjoy. The use and flow of information gathered will also be important: will information be available to all members of the alliance carrying out the inspection? How will the data be shared? What sort of restrictions will there be on its use? And of particular interest to Canada – will the Soviet Union require bases in North America in order to carry out its reconnaissance of the US?

Although the US is advocating an unrestricted Open Skies system, during the negotiations for the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty the US backed away from its own intrusive verification proposals once they had been accepted by the Soviet Union. Elements within the US administration, especially the intelligence services, were reluctant to accept the implications of Soviet inspectors at sensitive military installations. The type of intrusiveness involved in Open Skies may prove equally difficult to swallow. □

– JANE BOULDEN