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Come spy the friendly skies

Ann FLORINI
Singapore Management University, annflorini@smu.edu.sg

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Come spy the friendly skies

By ANN M. FLORINI

President Dwight Eisenhower's vision of "Open Skies" may finally become a reality by the end of this year. Last May, President George Bush resuscitated the 1955 proposal which would allow the superpowers to make unrestricted flights over each other's territory on short notice. In the 1950s, Nikita Khrushchev dismissed the plan as a pretext for U.S. espionage. But the new Bush version, which is open to all members of both alliances, is faring better in today's more auspicious climate.

NATO approved the idea late in May, and at the Jackson Hole, Wyoming, meeting between James Baker and Eduard Shevardnadze last September, the Soviets agreed to hold discussions. Formal interalliance negotiations just opened in Ottawa in February, and a treaty is expected to be completed at a second meeting in Budapest before the end of 1990.

The new Open Skies, like the old one, is intended primarily to build confidence. Even in the age of sophisticated satellite reconnaissance, the freedom of any participating nation to fly airplanes over the territory of any other on 24 hours notice is of great technical and political value. Aerial overflight has some distinct advantages over spy satellites: it is cheaper, more flexible, and within the technical capability of all members of both alliances. The speed with which the proposal has moved forward is an indication of its appeal to all sides.

A September 23 White House press release said the United States intended "to encourage reciprocal openness among members of NATO and the Warsaw Pact and to observe military activities and installations, so as to increase transparency, lessen danger, and relax tension." In other words, the proposal was a test of the limits of glasnost. The Soviets evidently wanted to pass that test.

Other alliance members have their own reasons for supporting the idea. Virtually all of Western Europe can already be observed by Soviet commercial flights, but West European airlines rarely fly over the Soviet Union east of the Urals, and they fly over the western Soviet Union far less often than the Soviets pass over Europe. In 1989, for example, Soviet flights over France outnumbered French flights over Soviet territory by 53–12. European NATO members see Open Skies as an inexpensive way to gain independent information on how Warsaw Pact forces will be complying with a conventional forces treaty.

Two important issues remain unresolved, however. One is the structure of an Open Skies regime. The United States favors a system of bilateral accords, with each country agreeing to accept a certain number of overflights from the other alliance. If one country wanted to send a plane over another, it would give notice directly to that country. Each country would use its own planes and sensing equipment, subject to inspection by the host state.

The Soviets, on the other hand, have proposed a multilateral organization to carry out the flights, using standardized equipment. They argue that the West's more advanced sensors give it an unfair advantage. Washington calls this idea a "showstopper," contending that it would unduly complicate Open Skies.

The other issue is flight quotas. No one argues against "passive" quotas—limits on the number of flights a country can be expected to accept. These quotas will be allocated on the basis of a country's size or the amount of military equipment it possesses, or some combination of these factors. The question is whether there should be "active" quotas as well, to prevent a dominant nation from doing all of the flying for its side.

Without such quotas, for example, if 10 flights were allowed over France each year, it would be up to the Warsaw Pact nations to decide which of them would conduct the flights. This seemed logical enough several months ago, but now there is no way of knowing what the status of the Warsaw Pact will be by the time the treaty is completed. In fact, some analysts believe that one of the strengths of Open Skies is that it provides a constructive activity which gives the alliances a reason to hold together a while longer.

In the long run, Open Skies may be much more than a confidence builder. It is much easier to negotiate than traditional arms control, which depends on stringent and perhaps unattainable standards of verification, and which becomes increasingly unwieldy as more countries participate in complex negotiations. And once in place, Open Skies could play an important role in arms control. At the least, it will set up valuable procedures and precedents for intrusive inspection. And it might replace arms control negotiations altogether, as unilateral cuts by any nation could be readily verified by any nation interested enough to send out a plane. ■

Ann M. Florini is a senior researcher at the Center for International and Strategic Affairs, University of California at Los Angeles, and a fellow in the Kellogg National Fellowship Program.