

TO: The President  
The Honorable Michael J. Pompeo  
The Honorable Mark Esper  
The Honorable Robert C. O'Brien

George P. Shultz  
*Thomas W. and Susan B. Ford  
Distinguished Fellow*

FROM: George P. Shultz  
William J. Perry  
Sam Nunn

DATE: March 5, 2020

SUBJECT: Open Skies Treaty

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We write to you in response to press reports that the administration may soon reach a decision on whether to remain party to the 1992 Open Skies Treaty. Our considered view, as we wrote in our joint op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* (attached) is that the Open Skies Treaty helps keep the peace with Russia and strengthen European security.

On February 20, 2020, Defense Secretary Mark Esper was asked by reporters whether the Trump administration still intends to withdraw from the treaty.

“The Russians have been noncompliant with the Treaty for years, specifically when it comes to their allowance of over-flights, or near-flights, if you will, of Kaliningrad and Georgia ...”, he replied. The Secretary added that: “we can’t continue to tolerate their noncompliance with the Treaty.” He said no formal, final decision has been made on withdrawal. “You know, in due course, we will be getting together to do that, decide the best path forward for our nation.”

Of course, all parties must fulfill their obligations under the Open Skies Treaty. As with any treaty, implementation disputes arise. Current disagreements are related to underlying territorial and political issues between Russia and some of its neighbors. But these problems can and should be solved through professional, pragmatic diplomacy, not by abandoning treaty commitments.

We were pleased to see through press reports that a recent U.S., Estonian, Lithuanian Open Skies observation flight successfully overflew Russian and Belarusian military sites, including in Kaliningrad.

At a time when tensions with Moscow are on the rise, the Open Skies Treaty serves as a very useful tool for the United States and our allies to monitor Russian military activities. Unilateral U.S. withdrawal from Open Skies would undermine American allies and friends in Europe.

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Page 2

As the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry said in a statement to *The Wall Street Journal* in October 2019, “Open Skies Treaty is one of the basic international treaties in the field of European security and arms control. Ukraine is interested in maintaining and implementing this Treaty.”

We hope the United States will remain a party of this Treaty and would welcome the opportunity for a further exchange of views with you on this important matter.

Attachment

# Open Skies Help Keep the Peace With Russia

**Ike's idea, codified in a 1992 treaty, is still a good one. The U.S. shouldn't abandon the pact.**

By George P. Shultz, William J. Perry and Sam Nunn

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/open-skies-help-keep-the-peace-with-russia-11571599202>

*Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 20, 2019 3:20 pm ET

International security isn't a given. Historically, peace among the great powers is a rarity. It's also a great accomplishment. Like trust, peace and security take a long time to build and only a moment to dismantle.

One of the pillars upholding international peace and security today is the 1992 Open Skies Treaty. Thirty-four nations, including the U.S. and Russia, have agreed to this treaty, which allows signatories to fly unarmed surveillance aircraft over one another's territory. This important tool, known as overflight, has been especially useful for the U.S. and our allies to monitor Russian military activities. Even when relations between Moscow and Washington are tense, the Open Skies Treaty helps preserve a measure of transparency and trust.

This great accomplishment of post-Cold War diplomacy could soon be erased if, as has been widely reported, some Trump administration officials have their way and the U.S. unilaterally exits the treaty. Such a withdrawal would be a grave mistake. It would undermine trust between the U.S. and Russia and endanger American allies.

Since the emergence of the superpower nuclear-arms race, leaders in Moscow and Washington have sought to avoid all-out war. They've had to overcome mutual distrust and negotiate agreements to manage military competition, reduce tensions, and lower the risk of surprise attack.

The idea for the Open Skies Treaty dates back to the 1950s. President Dwight D. Eisenhower realized that without better information about each side's capabilities, worst-case assumptions would drive decisions and exacerbate risks. In 1955 he made a bold proposal: The U.S. would permit unarmed Soviet aircraft to make unlimited surveillance flights over U.S. territory if the Soviet Union would reciprocate. U.S. allies, the American public and many congressional leaders backed the idea, but the Soviets were skeptical and the proposal was shelved. The two sides went on to negotiate a series of nuclear arms-control agreements, beginning in the 1960s, that verifiably capped and later slashed their enormous nuclear arsenals.

As the Cold War ended, President George H.W. Bush outlined a new vision for security that included a fortified version of Open Skies. Bush saw overflight as an effective way to verify the new limits on military forces established by 1990's Conventional Forces in Europe agreement. The idea was supported

by smaller European countries that believed it would be beneficial to have an independent ability to monitor events around the continent.

Moscow hesitated at first, but in 1992 the new Russian government agreed to open its entire territory to observation and overflight. The Open Skies Treaty was signed in Helsinki in 1992 and took effect a decade later.

The treaty has authorized [more than 1,426 missions](#), including more than 500 U.S. flights over Russia, which is by far the most overflowed and best-monitored country in the treaty. The flights, scheduled on short notice, provide valuable photographic evidence of major military movements across Europe, reducing uncertainty and worries about surprise attack. They add important information to what satellites provide.

The treaty stipulates that mission aircraft can be equipped only with specified sensors limited to an agreed resolution. By agreement of all parties, including the U.S., a process is under way to upgrade the sensors. These detailed, verifiable procedures allow observing parties to identify significant military equipment, such as artillery, fighter aircraft and armored combat vehicles. All imagery collected from flights is made available to any signatory.

As with any treaty, implementation disputes arise. Current disagreements are related to underlying territorial and political issues between Russia and some of its neighbors. But these problems can be solved through professional, pragmatic diplomacy, not by abandoning treaty commitments.

Today, Republicans and Democrats agree that Vladimir Putin's Russia poses serious international-security challenges. Rather than walk away from security agreements that help the U.S. and its allies manage the risks posed by Moscow, Washington needs to redouble its longstanding commitment to proven risk-reduction strategies and arms-control treaties advanced by successive presidential administrations. Unilateral withdrawal from Open Skies would damage the security of the U.S. and its allies.

We respectfully urge President Trump to reject calls to abandon the treaty. Congress also needs to approve Pentagon requests for upgrades to U.S. observation aircraft, as other Open Skies countries, like Germany, are already doing.

Open Skies has become what Eisenhower envisioned—a critical confidence-building treaty that improves Euro-Atlantic security with every flight. The U.S. should preserve this agreement, particularly in a time of renewed tensions with Russia.

*Mr. Shultz served as secretary of state, 1982-89. Mr. Perry served as defense secretary, 1994-97. Mr. Nunn, a Democrat, was a U.S. senator from Georgia, 1972-97, and was chairman of the Armed Services Committee.*

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