

# OPEN SKIES

**Thirty-four nations participate in a treaty that offers reciprocal aerial inspections of military installations**

By *per Concordiam* Staff

In October 2013, an unarmed Russian military Tupolev aircraft lifted off from Travis Air Force Base in California on an inspections mission spanning 4,250 kilometers of the western United States. It was one of dozens of Russian observation flights over the U.S. and other NATO countries in 2013.

In return, NATO sponsored dozens of flights over Russian territory on similar missions. By late 2013, Americans, Finns, Germans, Estonians and Italians had all piloted aircraft through Russian airspace to verify nuclear arms control treaties and otherwise monitor military activity.

Such military transparency among nations that used to be Cold War rivals is a tribute to the Treaty on Open Skies, which took effect January 1, 2002, under the guidance of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The 34 signatories of the treaty celebrated their 1,000th unarmed aerial observation mission in August 2013.

“With the 1,000 flights carried out over the past 11 years, the Open Skies Treaty is a true success story of the joint efforts of diplomats, civilian and military experts, and the on-site personnel who have been involved in the implementation of the treaty,” said Ambassador Dr. Miklós Boros of Hungary, chairman of the OSCE’s Open Skies Consultative Commission.

Though mutually beneficial aerial arms verification is a proposal dating back to the 1950s, international distrust left the idea dormant until the end of the Cold War. Almost all of the 34 treaty adherents are European, but the Caucasus is represented by Georgia, Asia by Turkey and North America by the U.S. and Canada.

Flights access the entirety of a country’s land mass and territorial waters. None can be denied for reasons of “national security,” and only 24 hours’ notice is necessary between submission of a mission plan to the host country and the start of the observation flight. Data and imagery collected by national observation teams must be shared at the request of any other treaty state.

“We think that the Treaty on Open Skies is a well-functioning tool in the system of confidence- and security-building measures from Vancouver to Vladivostok,” Anton Mazur,



OSCE

This Ukrainian An-30B is among the aircraft used on the more than 1,000 unarmed observation flights that have occurred under the Treaty on Open Skies.

a member of the Russian Federation’s OSCE delegation, said in 2013.

The treaty has evolved from being a purely arms control regimen to include multinational cooperation not envisioned at its inception. For example, countries routinely pool aircraft and sensing equipment. The U.S. has leased observation planes from Ukraine, Sweden, Hungary and Bulgaria. Sometimes two nations conduct missions aboard the same aircraft, as was the case with Russia and the United Kingdom sharing flights over Georgia, and Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina over Ukraine.

Some have proposed broadening flights to help monitor “frozen conflicts” that have troubled countries such as Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Moldova (Transnistria) and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh). Monitoring the environment, including natural and man-made disasters, is another possible use for the regimen set up by the treaty.

In a 2012 article co-authored for *The New York Times*, former U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz proposed the treaty extend to track greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation and nuclear power accidents. “Cooperative aerial monitoring can play a key role in addressing these challenges,” Schultz wrote.

Supporters also hope to expand the number of countries covered by the treaty. The Kyrgyz Republic has signed the treaty but not yet ratified it. For countries without state-of-the-art satellite networks, Open Skies could be the only effective way to acquire up-to-date aerial data to ease international tensions.

Open Skies has provided a level of routine military verification unimaginable throughout most of last century, when monitoring rival forces usually fell under the preserve of spying. Said the OSCE: “Open Skies is the most wide-ranging international effort to date to promote openness and transparency of military forces and their activities.” □