

Article REVIEW

James J. Marquardt. “Transparency and Security Competition: Open Skies and America’s Cold War Statecraft, 1948-1960.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9.1 (Winter 2007): 55-87. doi:10.1162/jcws.2007.9.1.55. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1162/jcws.2007.9.1.55> .

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“OPEN SKIES” IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Come with us, James Marquardt, myself, and the other participants in this forum, to those thrilling days of yesteryear when the Cold War was hot, the sides circled around each other like wary wrestlers, and fears of the adversary were fanned into fire, magnified by ignorance and uncertainty—of what means the other side possessed and what they might do with what they had. Marquardt educates us on one aspect of this history in his paper “Transparency and Security Competition.” Here the author does some interesting things with the story of “Open Skies,” essentially a series of schemes whereby key Cold War opponents would quell their fears by means of aerial photography, legalized spying as it were, enshrined by an international pact. Dr. Marquardt is to be congratulated for a useful and provocative encapsulation of this history.

“Open Skies” is not simply a generic term, it was the name for the best-known of these schemes, initiated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower and proposed to leaders of the Soviet Union at a summit conference at Geneva in 1955. One contribution Marquardt makes here is to locate Open Skies along a continuum of the 1950s, the 1940s less convincingly, and then with a fast-forward to the 1990s, when international negotiations actually produced a treaty legalizing activities of this type. Eisenhower’s proposal made concrete the generalized intention expressed in U.S. policy documents as early as the Truman administration, and despite its rejection by the Soviets would be followed by a succession of proposals with the same purpose, some of them brought by the Russians themselves. The paper also has the virtue of paying more attention to the Soviet side of this Cold War issue than is often the case in similar treatments.

By including the eventual success of the sides at reaching norms to legalize aerial spying during the first Bush administration the author is able to set his subject within a general theoretical context. Thus, Dr. Marquardt discusses “Open Skies” (the generic concept here, not the Eisenhower scheme) as evidence for theories of confidence building, as a product of democratic cultural predisposition toward transparency, as a set of events partially explained by realist theories of state action, and so on. This theoretical contribution is one of the most interesting aspects of the piece and by itself merits reading. Marquardt, however, concludes that most of the theories fall short in

accounting for specific sets of events such as those encompassed in the history of “Open Skies.”

For example theorists argue that transparency reduces the fears of actors and their uncertainty about others’ motives, and makes aggression more difficult to conceal—particularly in an era of advanced mechanisms for intelligence collection. But as Marquardt notes, widespread sharing of information is not, in fact, common in world politics. The theoretical fit is also not perfect here. In the specific case, Open Skies would *not* have represented real transparency since it represented not the provision of information but the accordance of approval for other states to gather that information on their own. In Eisenhower’s version the United States had the most to gain, since Russia very zealously guarded almost *all* information concerning Soviet military capabilities. On the other hand, though much American defense information was publicly available, the Soviets also stood to benefit from Open Skies, since they would have been afforded the facilities (which they lacked) to directly surveille the continental United States, ascertaining for themselves the exact locations, composition, and readiness status of U.S. forces on a frequent basis. Soviet leaders, in particular Nikita Khrushchev, rejected that benefit when they chose to focus on Open Skies as an American spy scheme. Conversely, in the 1990s when an Open Skies framework was actually elaborated, both former Cold War adversaries already had the unilateral means to gather the information on offer. Transparency could not have been a major motivator this time around. If there is a quibble with this paper it concerns the author presenting this theoretical framework and then not directly applying it to his case study.

An exception resides in another function of transparency, as a cultural force in democratic nations that, in part, served as driver to lead American administrations to conceive proposals that appeared to go in this direction. I have less confidence in the argument that the cultural value attached to transparency really drove Open Skies proposals. Data presented here clearly shows U.S. policymakers and planners expecting they could give away very little while obtaining much. On the other hand, Marquardt argues with some plausibility that transparency proposals could be exploited to reassure allies and coerce the adversary. Analysts, including myself, who have presented Eisenhower’s Open Skies as a psychological warfare gambit have not usually offered propositions to explain *why* policymakers should have expected that the scheme could yield psywar advantage. The cultural affinity of Americans for transparency has explanatory value here.

Confidence-building theory is a better mechanism in accounting for the eventual acceptance of Open Skies in the 1990s. As an historical matter it is worth noting that by then, and beginning with the Helsinki agreements of 1975, which introduced a variety of security-related observation measures that would previously have been considered intrusive (such as the observation by the other side of NATO and Warsaw Pact military maneuvers), the sides had gained a modicum of confidence that such techniques could be utilized without yielding excessive advantage to the opponent. In addition the Mutual

and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) talks between NATO and the Warsaw Pact had begun by then and eventually led to a 1990 treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, and the Soviet Union, motivated by its economic and structural troubles, had begun a large-scale withdrawal of forces from Eastern Europe. The security competition of Marquardt's title had been considerably muted by then. The Open Skies case in its final phase thus offers empirical evidence for the value of confidence-building measures—but would not an even more fruitful field of inquiry be the initiatives undertaken after Helsinki?

It is reasonable to ask why similar confidence-building measures would not have been of greater value in the 1950s when the security competition was hot and the peace of Europe threatened by the succession of crises over Berlin. Here one of the Soviet proposals is instructive. In 1956 and 1957 the Russians offered proposals to permit aerial reconnaissance within a band extending for 400 miles on each side of the inter-German border. For Americans, who feared above all a Soviet/Warsaw Pact offensive across the North German Plain, such a capability should have been hugely attractive, since a Pact offensive could not have been mounted without activities in this zone being readily observable from the air. But the Russians coupled the framework to general and complete disarmament, which the Eisenhower administration rejected out of hand. Still, Washington made no effort to explore the possibility Moscow could accept a variant as a confidence-building measure. This lends additional weight to arguments that the Open Skies proposals were about psychological warfare.

The paper's specific elucidation of the planning and purposes of the Open Skies proposals is a strong feature. Dr. Marquardt goes far in linking Eisenhower's approach to Harry Truman's, and also in connecting the 1955 version of Open Skies to related proposals as the years moved on. There is only one aspect lacking but the gap is a significant one. Ike was not playing a straight game when he proposed Open Skies at Geneva in July 1955. He was not facing an either-or proposition of obtaining Soviet approval or foregoing intelligence on Russia. Eight months earlier the president had approved secret development of the CIA's U-2 spy plane, the prototype of which was in its final stages of construction as Eisenhower went to Geneva. President Eisenhower could surveil the Soviet Union legally, if the Russians agreed, or would do so anyway if they did not. His real choice was comprehensive aerial coverage under agreed norms versus the limited coverage possible with the U-2. The United States would gain either way.

Propaganda advantage plus limited coverage—the actual outcome—was preferred to the huge reductions in uncertainty that would have flowed from a comprehensive aerial verification program. It is instructive that U.S. records (at least those uncovered so far) lack any indication of detailed planning for how Washington would facilitate or accommodate Russian reconnaissance aircraft carrying out their side of the Open Skies verification program. Eisenhower also *did not* do what he could have to induce Soviet leaders to retreat from their suspicions of Open Skies as a spy program—tell Moscow that the United States would peer over the Iron Curtain whatever happened and that *its* real

choice lay between freedom to surveille the United States or no coverage at all. Had Khrushchev known this, his own calculations might have been different. Or not. The Soviets were at this time far along the path of developing their intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and may have elected to attempt preserving the secrecy of that technological development. But absent knowledge that the Americans were coming anyway, Moscow never had the choice.

The U-2 first flew that August, and Eisenhower held Oval Office meetings to consider how the aircraft might be used operationally at that time, before Moscow had even delivered its official response to Open Skies. This entire interplay is absent from the paper but arguably had an important effect on United States diplomatic positions regarding aerial verification proposals throughout the decade. With an active overhead surveillance program Washington could afford to be cavalier about initiatives in this area. It is also noteworthy that the Russians tabled their first proposal incorporating provisions for legal aerial reconnaissance (the Central Europe zone plan mentioned earlier) a few months after their radars detected the U-2 over their territory.

What this says about theoretical frameworks should be explored in greater depth than Dr. Marquardt offers in this paper. In effect President Eisenhower was accepting a given level of uncertainty—at a time when the U.S. feared a “Bomber Gap,” a Soviet superiority in air breathing nuclear strike forces—to score a propaganda victory. The choice was to pursue the Cold War rather than seek transparency. This point is sharpened by the fact that Eisenhower, the former general, undoubtedly knew the U-2 aircraft alone did not offer the possibility of a sufficient pace and scope of coverage as to afford tactical warning of an offensive concentration of Soviet bomber forces. As a theoretical proposition the Open Skies case suggests that the potential for transparency is inversely proportional to the degree of tension existing in the international system. Agreements become more possible as the sides are, anyway, moving away from hostility.

Aerial surveillance as a confidence-building measure was also being rejected. The U.S. had a massive B-52 heavy bomber force coming on line and was racing toward its own ICBM. It was a moment of technological optimism. The confidence-building measures agreed at Helsinki came at a time when the technology race had pretty much played out and it was becoming evident on both sides of the Atlantic that force-building was not adding to security but merely making the consequences of failing to maintain the peace more dire. The suggestion here would be that confidence-building measures are more likely in a climate of frustration with the status-quo, as a gambit to step off the treadmill of suspicion.

James Marquardt argues that “a system of aerial observation had the potential to make important contributions to confidence-building between the two countries” and that Open Skies did in fact generate a dialogue between the superpowers on security cooperation (p. 84). I would be more confident in those conclusions had Open Skies been an exclusive initiative rather than a stratagem playing alongside the disarmament

talks occurring under the auspices of the United Nations Disarmament Commission, which the author correctly credits as a driver leading to the idea of holding a summit conference at Geneva but does not cover in any detail. In fact, most of the subsequent exchanges on aerial verification proposals that the paper does cover took place within the disarmament commission and not as direct bilateral talks. The security dialogue thus predates and succeeds the Open Skies proposal itself. And that dialogue led to parallel contacts and fresh talks on atmospheric nuclear testing that eventually yielded the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963. The dialogue never produced general and complete disarmament but it is that negotiation rather than Open Skies, I think, that enshrined the security dialogue, of which Open Skies was the byproduct, not the other way around.

Marquardt's central conclusion is well-founded. He maintains (p. 86) that "those who see systems of transparency as the answer to current-day competitions for security between bitter rivals in the Middle East, South Asia, or Northeast Asia are bound to be disappointed." The paper does not circle back to analyze the case study in terms of the theoretical framework, or advance the propositions made here, but I suspect the author would agree with them. It is precisely high tensions that militate against transparency today, and determination to prevail rather than give in to frustration that blocks confidence-building. One need go no further than the repeated failure of efforts to institute confidence-building schemes in the Israeli-Palestinian case to see how the whole enterprise is compromised as one or another actor pursues measures that lie outside the agreed areas for building confidence. Realism would be drawing the correct conclusions from that empirical evidence.

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