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The U.S. Withdrawal from Open Skies: Implications for the Arctic

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From 22-27 July 2019, a Russian Tupolev Tu-154M LK-1 surveillance aircraft conducted an overflight of the Canadian Arctic, using its onboard imagery systems to “observe and verify objects of interest or concern, such as military installations, industrial complexes, population centres and transportation facilities” along its flight path.¹ There were no Canadian media stories decrying that this activity encroached on Canadian sovereignty or threatened Arctic security (like Russian Bear or Blackjack bomber flights into North American air defence identification zones). Instead, the Russian inspection team conducted the overflight in accordance with the provisions laid out in the Open Skies Treaty. This treaty, established on 24 March 1992 and entered into force on 1 January 2002, was designed to increase confidence and transparency by allowing unarmed surveillance flights over member countries (currently 34) to and thus reduce the risk of surprise military attacks.²

Canadian Strategic Joint Staff Arms Control Verification (SJS ACV) observers accompanied the Russian team after a thorough Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) inspection of the plane in Trenton (a treaty-allowed entry point to Canada) on 22 July. Flying out of Iqaluit, Nunavut, the Open Skies flight was limited to less than 6150 km (as prescribed by the treaty), and adhered to a pre-determined flightpath.³ “The Russian aircraft will fly along the route agreed with the observed party, and Canadian specialists on board will monitor the application of surveillance equipment and compliance with the provisions of the treaty,” [Krasnaya Zvezda \[Red Star\]](#), the official magazine of the Russian Ministry of Defence, informed readers. “Observation flights under the treaty are carried out in order to promote greater openness and transparency in the military activities of the States parties, as well as to enhance security.”⁴

While the Russian observation team flew over the Canadian Arctic, three members of the Canadian Arms Control Verification Team overflew Russia as co-leads of a joint Open Skies Treaty mission with the United States and Hungary. Russian experts pre-inspected the Hungarian aircraft at the Kubinka airfield, and Russian representatives accompanied the observation mission as it flew over Russian territory. “Canada is a signatory to several security treaties, including those dedicated to the elimination, reduction or control of weapons of mass destruction and conventional armaments,” an earlier Canadian Department of National Defence news release had explained. “The Treaty on Open Skies is one example of how Canada exercises its commitment to reducing the threat of armed conflict by increasing trust and confidence through developing greater openness and transparency between states.”⁵

On 21 May 2020, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that the United States is pulling out of the Open Skies treaty on the pretext that [Russia has repeatedly violated the terms of the pact](#). Although senior Russian officials denied these allegations,⁶ they are clearly using the Treaty as a means to bolster some revisionist claims:

refusing access to observation flights within a 10-kilometer corridor along Russia's border with Russian-occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and designating an Open Skies refueling airfield in Crimea to "advance its claim of purported annexation of the peninsula, which the United States does not and will never accept."⁷ In 2018, Russia imposed program flight limitations over its military epicenter, Kaliningrad, located in Northeastern Europe, as well as parts of Odessa and Georgia.⁸ The United States reciprocated with similar restrictions over military installations in Hawaii. While reasoning behind the decision seems established, the merits and impacts of the U.S. exit remain to be fully understood.

The value of the Open Skies treaty comes from nearly three decades of evidence-based assessments and significant normative endorsement.⁹ Our focus in this short piece is on implications for northern North America, and we offer a simple assessment with regard to the Arctic: the U.S. decision to withdraw from Open Skies significantly favours the Russian Federation. We outline three main reasons for this assessment: 1) degraded visibility of the so-called 'Russian militarized Arctic', and uncertainty about Russian defence capabilities along the Northern Sea Route; 2) impacts on deterrence and defence spending strategies, and 3) erosion of Arctic security cooperation and strategic stability.

Russian Militarization of the Arctic

For nearly a decade, scholars and the media have dedicated substantial effort and time offering perspectives on Russia's militarization of "the Arctic." Since 2014, Russia has planned, operationalized, mobilized, and deployed a robust and sophisticated military presence and capability throughout the Russian Arctic, including components of the new-generation on- and off-shore air defence network.¹⁰ Furthermore, Russia continues to enhance and expand its offensive military capabilities in the North. For example, in mid-November 2019, Russia test fired an aviation-adapted Kinzhal hypersonic ballistic missile from a MiG 31K north of the Kola Peninsula. It has announced plans to station and further test these capabilities throughout its Arctic, and Franz Joseph Land in particular.¹¹

Open Skies represented a key ability for the West to monitor and detail developments in Russian military and dual-use infrastructure. Considering the diminished geosynchronous satellite coverage at high latitudes, as well as the limitations of Polar-orbiting constellations, the withdrawal from the treaty becomes even more concerning. Russian military strategy is considerably different from Western doctrine and practice. For example, the concept of anti-access / area denial (A2/AD) does not exist in the Russian military lexicon or thinking. Arguably, Russian defence strategy does not even plan against the notion of preventing adversarial intrusion in the way that Westerners strategize around defensive access 'bubbles.' Russian concepts continue to confound military allies in the West, necessitating close observation to provide high fidelity data to support planning efforts. Withdrawal from Open Skies severely degrades the resolution the United States gained from aerial surveys – and it conducts far more flights over Russia than the Russians fly over U.S. territory.¹²

Detriment to Deterrence

The two basic schools of deterrence are deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. While the first reduces stability by incentivizing the adversary to attempt to close the gap created by denial systems, the latter

seeks to maintain or improve stability through mutual vulnerability. In both cases, the purpose of deterrence is “to reduce the probability of enemy military attack by posing a sufficient prospect of suffering a net loss as a result, or at least a higher net loss / lower net gain resulting from no attack.”¹³ Traditionally, deterrence can be readily understood by considering two prime examples: the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD),¹⁴ and the principle of NATO Article 5: Collective Defence. Deterrence targets geopolitical, military, and fiscal decision-making cycles. Whether in pursuit of strategic stability involving nuclear arsenals and arms control or reducing chances of miscalculation, misperception or confrontation, effective deterrence requires enormous amounts of information.

Russia’s Arctic militarization efforts represent the fastest and most robust increases in military footprint and capability in the circumpolar region, prompting more military-related discourse around the implications of resurgent great power competition for Arctic relations and stability.¹⁵ In order for the North American allies to effectively pursue deterrence in the North, access to the best possible information is not a luxury – it is essential to success. Open Skies contributes to deterrence through transparency and communicative processes. “Access to Russian airspace and military installations continues to be an important tool to monitor and constrain Moscow’s further aggression in the post-Soviet space,” an analyst with the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory [recently noted](#). Withdrawing from the Treaty also inhibits the United States’ ability to accurately assess Russian Arctic military infrastructure and deployments¹⁶ and, in turn, to construct and prosecute an effective deterrence strategy with its allies.

A Retreat from Security Cooperation and Stability

While the emerging Arctic regime since the end of the Cold War has never lived up to the liberal “exceptionalist” dreams espoused by many commentators, the Circumpolar Arctic has been, and continues to be, a relatively peaceful and cooperative region. This does not deny intensifying competition, however, and commentators now frequently point to the potential for “spillover” from major power competition and conflict in other parts of the world to undermine regional relationships and stability. For both Russia and NATO, the Arctic represents a strategic space in which to base capabilities in support of power projection and strategic deterrence. In the absence of a distinct regional “hard security” architecture encompassing the entire Circumpolar North, preserving what Oran Young characterized as a “dramatic shift from the status of sensitive theatre of operations for the deployment of strategic weapons systems” to a “mosaic of cooperative arrangements emerging in the Arctic”¹⁷ requires careful attentiveness to broader international drivers and processes.

The U.S. intention to pull out of Open Skies amplifies uncertainty at a time when indicators suggest widening fissures and micro-fractures in what has been a generally stable (but fragmented) post-Cold War Arctic security regime. In the wake of Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014, the Arctic/Northern Chiefs of Defence no longer meet, the Arctic Forces Security Roundtable no longer includes Russian representation, and military-to-military interactions are minimal. (Arctic state coast guard cooperation remains strong, however, through the Arctic Coast Guard Forum). Despite popular misconceptions that continue to point to climate change, continental shelf “claims,” shipping lanes, and resources¹⁸ as sources of tension, it is international relations more generally – not Arctic issues or interests – that explain these fissures or fractures. Thus, while [Secretary of State Michael Pompeo justified](#) the U.S. withdrawal as a demonstration of its unwillingness “to perpetuate the Treaty’s current problems

of Russian-engendered threat and distrust simply in order to maintain an empty façade of cooperation with Moscow,”¹⁹ it sends a strong strategic message alongside the U.S. retreat from other international agreements and institutions. While Arctic state national self-interests mean that the region is unlikely to see military conflict in the foreseeable future, the erosion of American confidence in international arms control, non-proliferation, and disarmament agreements and commitments is likely to heighten uncertainty, encourage great power competition, and have spillover effects that test Arctic cooperation and regional stability.

Final Reflections

The U.S. exit from Open Skies has global and regional implications, including the monitoring of Russian Arctic militarization, protecting U.S. intelligence gathering methods that support deterrence, and security cooperation in the Arctic. It is yet another example of deteriorating U.S. faith in, and commitment to, established confidence- and trust-building measures designed to create a broad international security regime that promotes stability and predictability. In his [press conference statement on 21 May 2020](#), Pompeo suggests that Russia’s “approach to Treaty implementation has fatally undermined the very intent of the Treaty as a confidence- and trust-building measure, far from allowing Open Skies to contribute – as it was intended to do – to building regional trust and goodwill, Moscow has increasingly used Open Skies as a tool to facilitate military coercion.” In the Trump Administration’s view, “Rather than using the Open Skies Treaty as a mechanism for improving trust and confidence through military transparency, Russia has, therefore, *weaponized* the Treaty by making it into a tool of intimidation and threat.” As part of broader strategic messaging identifying Russia as a revisionist actor globally and [a threat to North America](#), the prospect of conceptualizing it as a reliable Arctic partner committed to circumpolar cooperation and stability becomes increasingly difficult.

In his press statement, Pompeo suggested that the United States may “reconsider our withdrawal should Russia return to full compliance with the Treaty.”²⁰ During the six-month exit period, analysts and commentators will continue to discuss and debate potential implications, as well as solutions to address the void opened by the U.S. withdrawal from the Treaty. First, the problem needs to be defined – the critical step that requires 90% of the effort in problem solving, according to former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis.²¹ What military-related impacts will result in the United States withdrawing from Open Skies? How should diplomatic officials factor this event and the impending gap into geopolitical thinking and efforts? How might adversaries leverage advantages or even succumb to potential disadvantages? How will this affect allies and alliances? With Russia no longer permitted to conduct flights over the U.S., will they reorient their flights towards the European and Canadian Arctics? And for Arctic states like Canada, what does the erosion of U.S. trust and commitment to international agreements, such as Open Skies, mean for our assumptions about Arctic stability predicated on the spirit of the [2008 Ilulissat Declaration](#): that extensive, existing international frameworks ensure, or at least promote, the orderly, peaceful settlement of disputes between regional actors?

Notes

- ¹ "Russian Observation Aircraft Takes to Canadian Skies under International Treaty," National Defence and the Canadian Forces, updated 6 July 2018, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/news/article.page?doc=russian-observation-aircraft-takes-to-canadian-skies-under-international-treaty/hgq87xsz>.
- ² "The Open Skies Treaty at a Glance," Facts Sheets and Briefs, Arms Control Association, updated May 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/openskies>.
- ³ "Analog Vs Digital: Canada under Observation by Russian Open Skies Treaty Mission, While Multinational Mission Is over Russia," The Aviationist, updated 25 July 2019, <https://theaviationist.com/2019/07/25/russian-air-force-about-to-conduct-an-open-skies-treaty-observation-mission-over-canadas-arctic/>.
- ⁴ "Международные Инспекции С Пристальным Вниманием," [International Inspection With Close Attention], Красная звезда (Red Star), updated 22 July 2019, <http://redstar.ru/mezhdunarodnye-inspektsii-s-pristalnym-vnimaniem/?attempt=1>.
- ⁵ Government of Canada, "Russian Observation Aircraft Takes to Canadian Skies under International Treaty."
- ⁶ "Russia Says U.S. Withdrawal from Open Skies Treaty Will Affect All Members: Ria," Reuters, updated 21 May 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-openskies-moscow-idUSKBN22X2DL>.
- ⁷ Michael Pompeo, Press Statement: "On the Treaty on Open Skies," 21 May 2020, <https://www.state.gov/on-the-treaty-on-open-skies/>.
- ⁸ "The Open Skies Treaty Keeps America and Russia Honest About Their Weapons. Donald Trump Just Canceled It," Forbes Media, LLC, updated 21 May 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2020/05/21/the-open-skies-treaty-keeps-america-and-russia-honest-about-their-weapons-donald-trump-just-canceled-it/#6c4478872b81>.
- ⁹ "What the United States Loses by Quitting the Open Skies Treaty, in One Chart," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, updated 13 April 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/04/what-the-united-states-loses-by-quitting-the-open-skies-treaty-in-one-chart/>.
- ¹⁰ "Air Defense System S-400 Tests Preparedness in Novaya Zemlya," The Barents Observer, updated 18 March, 2020, accessed 22 May, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2020/03/air-defense-system-s-400-tests-preparedness-novaya-zemlya>.
- ¹¹ "Russia's Top General Indirectly Confirms Arctic Deployment of the Unstoppable Kinzhal Missile," The Barents Observer, updated 19 December, 2019, accessed 22 May, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2019/12/russias-top-general-indirectly-confirms-arctic-deployment-unstoppable-missile>. The practicality of fighter aircraft launching the Kinzhal remains under skepticism.
- ¹² See the data compiled by Alexander Graef and Moritz Kütt at <https://openskies.flights/>.
- ¹³ Glenn Herald Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense*, vol. 2168 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015). Thanks to Nancy Teeple for helping us to clarify our thinking on this.
- ¹⁴ Nancy Teeple, "Enhanced ISR and Its Effect on Strategic Stability," International Studies Association, Toronto, 28 March 2019.
- ¹⁵ "Russia Invests Heavily in the Arctic, Top Diplomat Denies Military Intentions," [Russland investerer tungt i Arktis. Toppdiplomat avviser at det ligger militære hensikter bak], High North News, updated 05 February, 2020, accessed 06 February, 2020, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-invests-heavily-arctic-top-diplomat-denies-military-intentions>.
- ¹⁶ For more on this theme, see Editorial, "Open Skies Treaty Allowed Eyes Over Russia; Trump Wants to Give Them Up," *New York Times*, 10 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/10/opinion/open-skies-treaty-trump.html>; and Anna Peczei, "Five Reasons why the US should not withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 11 December 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/12/five-reasons-why-the-us-should-not-withdraw-from-the-open-skies-treaty/>.
- ¹⁷ Oran R. Young, "Governing the Arctic: From cold war theater to mosaic of cooperation," *Global Governance* 11/1 (2005): 9.
- ¹⁸ For a recent, sobering reassessment from a Canadian perspective, see P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Suzanne Lalonde, and Elizabeth Riddell-Dixon, *Canada and the Maritime Arctic: Boundaries, Shelves, and Waters* (Peterborough: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 2020).
- ¹⁹ Pompeo, Press Statement.
- ²⁰ Pompeo, Press Statement.
- ²¹ Lindsay L. Rodman, "Defence Deconstructed," in *U.S. Military Strategies towards the Arctic*, ed. David Perry (Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2020).