

What Next if US Exits From Open Skies Treaty?

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President Donald Trump sudden or unexpected decision to withdraw from the 1992 Open Skies Treaty has posed unprecedented challenges, generated extensive debates among Russian politicians and experts, and equally worried are leaders in Europe and Asia.

Trump administration notified international partners on May 21 that it was pulling out of a treaty that permits 30-plus nations to conduct unarmed, observation flights over each other's territory - overflights set up decades ago to promote trust and avert conflict.

The administration explained that it wanted to fall out of the Open Skies Treaty because Russia has been violating the pact, and imagery collected during the flights could be obtained quickly at less cost from United States or commercial satellites. Exiting the treaty, however, is expected to strain relations with Moscow and upset European allies and some members of Congress.

President Dwight Eisenhower first proposed that the United States and the former Soviet Union allow aerial reconnaissance flights over each other's territory in July 1955. At first, Moscow rejected the idea, but President George H.W. Bush revived it in May 1989, and the treaty entered into force in January 2002. Currently, 34 nations have signed it; Kyrgyzstan has signed but not ratified it yet.

The Open Skies Treaty is the third important military pact that Trump has withdrawn from since coming to office in January 2017. He also dropped the 2015 JCPOA agreement to prevent Iran from advancing its nuclear weapons program and the 1988 Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia. In both cases, Trump accused the other side of violating treaty requirements.

Russian Foreign Ministry issued an official statement May 22, describing the exit decision a deplorable development for European security. That said, Moscow was not surprised by Washington's decision, which characterizes its approach to discarding the entire package of arms control agreements and trust-building measures in the military sphere.

It said that "the US administration's strategy is to cover up its own destructive actions by accusing Russia," and that Russia has been collecting information on critical US and European infrastructure with a view to targeting its precision weapons.

The statement suggests that Washington make public the full list of Russian facilities that it has filmed in the past few years. Using its rights under the treaty, Russia has acted strictly in line with its provisions, and American colleagues have previously made no claims against Russia.

Russia's policy on the treaty is based on its national security interests and in close cooperation with its allies and partners. The policy to discard the Open Skies Treaty calls

into question Washington's negotiability and consistency. Apparently, lacking any real argument in justifying its actions, the treaty's opponents have resorted to this far-fetched allegation.

Besides the official statement, Moscow further indicated it would continue observing the treaty even if the US pulls out. "As long as the treaty is in force, we intend to fully follow all the rights and obligations that apply to us from this treaty," Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko told the RIA Novosti News Agency.

Fellow Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov denounced the "absolutely unacceptable" conditions set by Washington, accusing the US of sowing "discord and uncertainty."

In addition, Grushko warned that the US pullout would damage European security and harm the interests of US allies. China, which is not a party to the treaty, expressed "deep regret" over the US move, calling it a display of the United States' entrenched Cold War mentality.

The Europeans said they would work to resolve "outstanding questions" with Moscow, including "unjustified restrictions" imposed on flights over Kaliningrad — a Russian exclave bordered by Poland and Lithuania. China, which is not a party to the treaty, expressed "deep regret" over the US move, calling it a "display of the United States' entrenched Cold War mentality."

The United States will gain nothing by withdrawing from the Treaty on Open Skies, Chairman of the Russian Federation Council (the upper house of parliament) Foreign Affairs Committee Konstantin Kosachev wrote on Facebook.

According to him, the Trump administration's move is harmful to the US interests so it is hard to understand its logic.

"One can only suspect that the US authorities seek to destroy the current world order. The White House has sent another signal to US allies. Will they show unconditional support, like they always do?" Kosachev said.

In his view, the US president is determined to dismantle the entire mechanism of ensuring global security.

"There is no other way to explain this not only destructive but in many ways clumsy step that the White House has taken," the Russian senator stressed.

Experts have shown much interest. There is no reason for Russia to remain a party to the Open Skies Treaty after the US withdrawal since this gives Washington an advantage in obtaining data on Russia's Armed Forces, Deputy Director of the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the Higher School of Economics National Research University, Dmitry Suslov told TASS.

"It is not advisable for Russia to keep its own participation in the agreement after the United States pulls out of this agreement, because European countries of NATO within the framework of this agreement will still be able to

fly over Russian soil,” Suslov said.

“If Russia remains a party to the agreement, the zero-sum game will go on, because the United States will continue receiving information on the state and deployment of the Russian Armed Forces from its European allies in NATO remaining in the agreement, while Russian planes will not be able to fly over the United States. Certainly, Russia will not receive relevant information about the US army from the Europeans,” Suslov added.

In the meanwhile, Moscow is awaiting an official notice from Washington on its decision to pull out of the Treaty on Open Skies. According to the terms of the agreement, the official withdrawal from the treaty will happen six months after the US officially notifies other participants. Experts interviewed by the Izvestia newspaper agree that Washington’s looming exit from the treaty is another step towards the collapse of the international arms control system. The New START Treaty, which expires in 2021, could be next.

“The agreement was in line with the course towards strengthening trust and security measures. And trust is now needed more than ever, since its lack thereof is close to complete. Washington may be content with it, but in general I don’t see any benefit from the collapse of the system of international agreements for the United States,” Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the UN Office and other International Organizations in Geneva, Alexander Alimov told Russian newspaper Izvestia.

German Federal Minister of Defense Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer stated that Germany would continue to fulfill its obligations within the Treaty Open Skies Treaty, despite the US’s intention to abandon it. Her statement was published in the ministry’s twitter account.

“I deeply regret the US’s announcement on abandonment of the Treaty. All sides must take efforts to preserve this important agreement and prevent the US’s withdrawal. We will continue to adhere to the Treaty,” the Minister said.

According to Agence France-Press (AFP), NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the US decision to quit the agreement would not come into effect for six months, leaving Moscow time to change course.

“All NATO allies are in full compliance with all provisions of the treaty,” Stoltenberg said, adding that Russia has, for many years, imposed flight restrictions inconsistent with the treaty, including flight limitations, over Kaliningrad and restricting flights in Russia near its border with Georgia.

EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell said he regretted the US decision, calling the Open Skies treaty “a key element of our arms-control architecture” which serves as “a vital confidence and security-building measure” and called on Washington to reconsider and for Moscow to “return immediately to the full implementation of the Treaty.”

Earlier, the local media also reported that a group of 10 European nations said in a joint statement they regretted Trump’s threat, — Trump’s latest in a string of withdrawals from international agreements.

China is equally troubled by the new developments. The withdrawal “will have a negative impact on the international arms control and disarmament process,” China Foreign Ministry Spokesman Zhao Lijian said.

The Open Skies Treaty was signed in March 1992 in Helsinki by 23 member-nations of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It was drafted with Moscow’s active participation. The treaty is a major tool of strengthening trust and security.

The Open Skies’ main goals are to build transparency, render assistance in monitoring compliance with existing or future arms control agreements, broaden possibilities for preventing crises and managing crisis situations. The accord establishes a program of unarmed aerial surveillance flights over the entire territory of its participants. Now, the treaty has more than 30 signatory states. Russia ratified the Open Skies Treaty on May 26, 2001.).

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Kester Kenn Klomegah writes frequently about Russia, Africa and the BRICS.

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