

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:  
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

**Helsinki on the Hill Podcast**

**“Open Skies”**

**Guests:**

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**Anthony Wier, Legislative Secretary, Nuclear Disarmament and Pentagon Spending, Friends Committee on National Legislation**

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TIERSKY: Hello, and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky, from the staff of the Helsinki Commission.

Listeners, those of you who live or work in and around Washington, D.C. know very well that the air space over the nation's capital is pretty much locked down. And yet, on a hot summer morning in August of 2017, tourist groups visiting the Capitol building or the Pentagon looked up to see a plane rumbling overhead. Those visitors to Washington probably couldn't haven't guessed that this plane was not only sent by the Russian government but was there specifically to capture images of the Washington area. That's right, folks, a Russian surveillance plane flying right over D.C. in broad daylight, and in peak tourist season no less.

Well, I have two brilliant experts with me in the studio today to explain to us what in the world this Russian plane was doing over Washington, D.C., and whether it's coming back any time soon. Let me bring them in now. First, to my right here in the studio is Alexandra Bell, senior policy director at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation.

BELL: Hi.

TIERSKY: Hi, Alex. Thanks for joining us.

Alex, you previously worked as a senior advisor in the Office of the Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security. So you've worked on this treaty from the executive branch side. You've also been at the Plowshares Fund at the Center for American Progress as well. Thanks for being with us today.

I also want to welcome in Anthony Wier, who currently represents the Friends Committee on National Legislation. Of special important to us, of course, given our recording location here on Capitol Hill, is his experience as a senior professional staff member at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Anthony, your portfolio covered nonproliferation, nuclear weapons issues, international nuclear cooperation, international arms sales. Is there anything you didn't do?

WIER: (Laughs.) No that was about it. No, that was plenty. That kept me busy.

TIERSKY: Great. All right. Well, Anthony, you've also served in senior positions at the Department of State as well, and legislative affairs, and with the policy planning staff.

All right. Thanks to both of you for joining us. Let's dive right into this. Seems like these days we're confronting Kremlin-made problems, or Kremlin-worsened problems – (laughs) – almost all over the world. Why was this Russian plane here over Washington, D.C.? What was it doing? And were we OK with that?

Alex, why don't you start us off?

BELL: Absolutely. As strange as it sounds, that Russian plane was doing exactly what it was allowed to do under a treaty that we voluntarily signed back in 1992. And it's – the treaty itself is called the Treaty on Open Skies, or just Open Skies. And it's an agreement that's aimed at fostering inter-military transparency and cooperation. So the members of the Open Skies Treaty have voluntarily agreed to allow other countries to overfly their states and, you know, take images of various installations, military or whatnot. There's no restriction on where a plane can fly. The only restrictions are related to safety.

So, you know, reciprocal trip to overfly Moscow is completely within the bounds of the treaty. There are 34 different members, and that includes the United States, Canada, and Russia, and a number of countries throughout the European continent. And, yeah, again, it's just the idea of increased openness between militaries will reduce tensions between states and limit the probability of conflict.

TIERSKY: So the idea really is these are – these are a bunch of countries that got together and agreed that letting each other know what they were up to was for the good of the peaceful order or the international order. Is that right?

BELL: Yeah, absolutely. The idea is that if you know what another country has, if it's clearly observable to you, you don't have to plan for things that you're just guessing about.

TIERSKY: OK. All right.

Anthony, where did this treaty come from? I mean, who's bright idea was this, that we signed up to in 1992, as Alex said?

WIER: Yeah, believe it or not it's much older. It was actually an idea of Dwight Eisenhower back in 1955. And it was kind of a dig at the Soviets at the time. It was a way of challenging the Soviets and saying: Look, let's just – let's just fly flights over each other. You know, instead of being worried about a sneak attack or some other thing, let's just allow each other to fly each other – fly over each other's territory. And you would have thought, you know, right, coming after the McCarthy era, coming in the height of the Cold War – you would have thought a proposal by an American president to just let Soviet planes fly over the United States would have been – would have gone like a lead balloon. And in fact, it was a high-flyer. It was a great idea. It was very popular.

TIERSKY: Here in the United States as well?

WIER: Here in the United States, yeah. And the administration really played it up, and to kind of much acclaim. It scared the Soviets and made them nervous. And to that extent, in some ways, it kind of achieved a diplomatic purpose too, because suddenly it was the Soviets who were unwilling to take new steps and things like that. But – and then so ultimately the treaty languished, and – right? You see this. But in essence it's both sides doing what the thing was that Gary Powers got shot down over and created real tension and drama in the relationship. And instead, this is two countries, and later multiple countries, agreeing on this, yeah.

TIERSKY: So take us – take us from 1955, where you said this idea languished for quite a while, and then we get to '92. We have a treaty that a whole bunch of countries signed up to. What happened in the interim?

WIER: Yeah. It starts with the Berlin Wall coming down. And George H.W. Bush basically revised the treaty in 1989 and said: Let's do this again, only this time not just the U.S. and the Soviets. Let's bring all of NATO and all of the Warsaw Pact into the bargain as well, right? We know that the security environment in Europe is changing rapidly. We know things are changing. We expect we're moving ahead with arms control on the conventional side. Let's create this monitoring mechanism to go with it. And the key idea, really, was let's have it good enough to distinguish a tank from a truck, right? Remember how much stuff, how much metal we had in Europe lined up on either side of what was then the Berlin Wall. And we knew that was going to be moving around and changing a lot. Let's have this mechanism where all the countries could fly over and take a look for themselves and be guaranteed a certain level of access to confirm what other sides were telling them.

TIERSKY: So this mechanism that you're mentioning, I mean, you know, folks might think a treaty like this might be – you know, you could write it up in a page or two. But I happen to have a copy of the Open Skies Treaty and all of its annexes in front of me. I'm looking at page – let's see. Let me blow some dust off of it here, get to the back. And I'm looking at page 478, 482. Why is this thing so long and complicated? Why is it so detailed? Alex, do you want to?

BELL: Yeah, absolutely. It's – while the idea is very simple – you know, fly over other countries with the permission of the country and take imagery – the execution of that is much more complicated. The process by which you approve a sensor inside of a plane, the process by which you are able to inspect a plane that's actually about to fly over your country. You can actually even insist that a country use your own plane to do the overflight if you're not quite OK with their plane. So it's just the number of very specific details that go into the implementation of this treaty. And it's all very clearly outlined in the agreement.

And, you know, this is not crazy high-tech stuff. The – you know, the imagery needed, the sensor capability to distinguish a tank from a truck is relatively low key. But one of the things, I think, that negotiators did, that was actually quite smart, was realize that the technology was changing. So the treaty actually has a mechanism built in to upgrade equipment with the agreement of all the parties. And it was that kind of forward-looking, you know, inclusion in the treaty that I think is actually probably a good example for future arms control agreements to understand that these technologies are rapidly changing. And so, hence, why it is a very, very large document.

TIERSKY: Mmm hmm. Guys, let me take a step back from an arms control word and a treaty word that we're using here. Alex, you've used the word "sensor" a couple of times. So I really want our listeners to understand. What are we talking about? These planes – since 1992, most of them have been flying around with, what, basically cameras, right?

BELL: Mmm hmm.

WIER: Right. Right. And so as Alex said they thought ahead. It was at the beginning of the digital word. But at the time most everyone was just using regular film cameras. But they planned ahead. And they planned ahead to have digital sensors as well. You know, there's other options as well. So it's not just cameras. They imagined video cameras. They also imagined infrared cameras as well as synthetic aperture radar, with the ability to really peer down and see very tight changes in the topography of the ground.

TIERSKY: Let me – let me just come back to this issue of sensors, because of course all of our listeners, you know, will reach into their pocket. They've got a camera. It's got no film in it, right? I mean, those film cameras basically don't exist in our culture anymore. Are there still planes flying around trying to use this kind of – what's called wet film?

BELL: Well, our planes – specifically the U.S. planes – are still using wet film. And we actually had to specifically commission a company to keep building this wet – or, producing this wet film for us. But we're in the process of transitioning out. You'll hear sometimes in, you know, critiques of the treaty that the Russians have these sensors that are better than ours. Well, they just moved faster into adopting this new technology. And their technology was approved and sort of given the go-ahead by all 34 members of the – of the treaty. So, you know, we're a bit behind, but every country has the option to move forward.

What I think is incredibly important is that any image taken by any observing state is actually available to all parties. So it's not just, you know, images you can take when you are overflying another country. Any picture that's taken is available to everybody. So it really increases the amount of transparency across the board, no matter how many flights you're doing.

TIERSKY: So the Russians coming over Washington, they got some nice pictures of the Capitol building, we could look at those nice pictures of the Capitol building, or the Canadians, or anybody else who's participating in the treaty?

BELL: See all the food trucks lined up along the mall. (Laughs.)

TIERSKY: That's right. All right, well, other than – other than an understanding of how we feed the high tourist season here in D.C., what's the relevance of this today? You know, what's – you know, are there flights going back and forth? We're doing flights, the Russians are doing flights. I mean, is there any real kind of geopolitical value to this? I mean, are we getting – you know, you've mentioned a couple of times that the level of imagery is really just to distinguish between a tank and a truck. What do we get out of this?

WIER: Well, what we get more than anything is legitimacy and a kind of a shared common valid picture of the state of play of a given situation. The best place – the best example is Ukraine, where the United States was able to take imagery early on in the conflict, in 2014, and again most recently with some other flare ups to grab that – grab that imagery through these Open Skies flights, and quickly and immediately share it with other governments. Alex and I both worked in the executive branch.

One of the things you always have to consider, right, is when you – when the superpower United States intelligence community and all the resources that we have to bear collect imagery or any other type of intelligence and serve it up to the president, it's really insightful and informative, or serve it up to the Congress. The problem comes is convincing everybody else who's not cleared for that information why they should trust it, right? And it becomes a big problem in how you downgrade or basically extract that really sensitive intelligence stuff and get it outside of the government.

Open Skies cuts through all of that, because it's planned from the beginning to be shared outside of governments. And, you know, also now in the era of kind of a post-Iraq world where there were questions about U.S. intelligence, and in the fake news world where there's just a deficit of trust, this creates this solid kind of irrefutable body of evidence that then we could use and put in front to say, no, these are the ships that are going into the Sea of Azov. These are the tanks we see somewhere in Ukraine. Like, this is what we're seeing.

BELL: And Open Skies is really, you know, on its own, you know, it's not the most groundbreaking treaty in the history of the world. But what it is is an important part of conventional arms control in Europe. And that transparency, again, the more we know about the nature of each other's, you know, military installations and various deployments, the less we're planning for worst-case scenarios that we're just sort of imagining for lack of intelligence. And it's really key, the idea that countries that don't have the major national technical means that the United States does to do intelligence has their own way to come to these conclusions.

That it's not just sort of – you know, I've heard people at times say: Well, why don't we just give intel to all of these countries and not have this treaty? Well, countries don't want to be our intel client states. They want to be able to make, you know, analysis and decisions based on information that lots of people have that's not being sort of tailored to them. So it's really about empowering countries to help make these assessments together.

TIERSKY: Sure. You mentioned there national technical means. I guess that's kind of a euphemism for our satellite imagery and this kind of stuff. For those of our listeners who aren't actually in the weeds on the arms control piece, listen –

BELL: (Laughs.) I always thought it was strange that they referred to our major satellites as big birds. (Laughter.) Just seemed very sort of, you know, silly term for something as important as that. But the other thing that Open Skies provides is satellites move, you know, in sort of static orbits. And, you know, if you want to take a couple looks at something, it's going to take the satellite a while to get back around, whereas an Open Skies plane can fly all around in various directions, circle around, come back later. It's a lot more agile.

TIERSKY: Mmm hmm. So you've mentioned a couple of advantages that the two of you on satellite imagery, that's – it's the fact that it's more easily sharable with allies and, secondly, we can target it maybe in a different way. Alex, I do want to come back to something else that you mentioned just a moment ago, which is the relationship between the Open Skies Treaty and some of the other agreements that exist and are in place. Without going into much detail on some of these other agreements, you know, I get the feeling that you're talking about

what I think is usually referred to as a kind of architecture of interlapping – overlapping, interlocking treaties and agreements on military transparency. Again, as you all have mentioned, the idea is to make – basically put all of our cards on the table so there aren't misunderstandings and people know what each other is doing in the interests of more stability.

Alex, can you talk a little bit about some of the other agreements that interrelate with the Open Skies Treaty?

BELL: Sure. There is the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty. Again, at the end of the Cold War a decision was made to try to offload all of these – the ash and trash of the Cold War, and really kind of be more transparent about what's there and work together to draw down forces. There's also the Vienna document. It's a similar transparency and confidence-building measure around conventional forces. And those three treaties are all discussed regularly at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which is headquartered in Vienna. And, you know, various entities in Europe really trying to not let tensions on the continent get out of control and using these various treaties as a way to kind of stabilize tensions. It's particularly important now as Russia and Europe and the United States are kind of undergoing a downturn in relations.

TIERSKY: Let's talk about that then. You all have written together an article that really was the genesis for this conversation that really caught my eye. You wrote an article in Arms Control Today that talked about the Open Skies Treaty as a quiet legacy under threat. So we've had a good conversation so far about some of the advantages of this treaty and some of the benefits that we, the United States, garner from this treaty, and some of our allies, frankly, benefit from the treaty. I'll come back to what Russia likes about this treaty as well. But, Anthony, why did you guys write an article called "Legacy Under Threat"? What did you mean?

WIER: Yeah, because I think it starts mostly with the quiet and the kind of low-key nature of the treaty itself. I mean, I work in this field. I've been working in this field for two decades. I didn't really know about the Open Skies Treaty until I came upon it when I started working at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, you know, well into my career and realized, wait, what's this thing? And you start to learn about it and understand it. Oh, wow, this is fascinating. The vast majority of members of Congress wouldn't know – wouldn't know about it if you asked them. And then, you know, the initial reaction is, well, we have this treaty that allows Russia to fly spy planes over the country, right? There's just a kind of knee-jerk reaction of that seems weird or wrong.

And so the first reason it's under threat is just kind of neglect. In a sense, you don't miss your water until your well runs dry, right? the second part of it is that there really are folks who – I mean, this is an arms control treaty, right? It was an idea crafted by Dwight Eisenhower, our first veteran of World War II as a president. It was brought to fruition by George H.W. Bush, our last veteran of World War II as a president. And it stemmed from this belief that the United States had an interest in avoiding war. The truth of the matter is, the United States has had the luxury of thinking a lot more about winning wars over the last 20 or so years than thinking about how it succeeds in war.

And it's just this idea of taking all of these steps to ensure that we don't get into a war in the first place. It just – it's not something that everyone values. And do there are those who think in fact, no, it's not important. We shouldn't give anything. We should only win. And so I think – so what you've seen is in the last few years you've seen members of Congress begin to really challenge and question the intelligence value that maybe Russia gets. And it's also true, as we have seen the downturn in U.S.-Russia relations, we've also seen several instances of the Russians doing things that, from our perspective, feel like counter to the treaty. And they have – and they have reasons for why they do it. It's not treaty killers. But it really does strain and test the treaty.

And so we wrote this article as a way to say, number one, look, this is out there. This is a really good thing we're getting. But, two, you have to work at it. You know, it's just like any other relationship. You can't just assume it will always be there. You have kind of take action to heal it.

BELL: Yeah, and not throw the baby out with the bathwater. You know, treaties – and I wrote about this in *The Washington Post* some time back, that arms control, just simply there is no treaty that's perfect, that is designed so flawlessly that there are not compliance issues or different ways of interpreting the law. I mean, that's – you asked about the size of the treaty. The reason I gets so into, you know, minute detail is to try to prevent misunderstandings. But they tend to happen anyway. And the problems that we're having with Open Skies right now are concerning, but not insurmountable. But it does require a fair amount of attention and patience and persistence.

And it's difficult at a time where we're having so many other problems with Russia to set – like, you know, why spend time and energy over this, like, small treaty off to the side? But it really is part of a, like you said, overlapping, interlocking system of agreements to keep ourselves from making terrible mistakes, and based on, you know, bad information, based on misinterpretation of what other countries are doing. And, yeah, I think the further we've gotten away from the Cold War the less people understand that it is in our interest to have these, you know, restraints and transparency measures as a way of managing threats.

TIERSKY: Let's talk a little bit about some of the concerning, even if not insurmountable, problems with compliance with the treaty. You know, in doing a little bit of preparation for this discussion I obviously note that the U.S. Department of State, where you both worked, puts out an annual compliance report on arms control agreements. They point out that there are some problems in terms of compliance with the Open Skies Treaty. Can we talk a little bit about those, Anthony?

WIER: Sure. Yeah, sure. I mean, the first one that often gets mentioned – your listeners may remember – there's this little strange enclave outside of the most of Russian territory. It's this territory called Kaliningrad. And several years ago the Russians started placing restrictions on the flights that were from an airport that was closest to Kaliningrad that was meant to cover Kaliningrad. And so – and they did this because, frankly, there was a little bit of gamesmanship a few times of flying back and forth. One of the things the treaty says is you can't cross your flight path, but you can fly a kind of back and forth lawnmower pattern, essentially.

And, you know, you got to remember there are military flights but they're happening in civilian airspace also. And so they can have a real negative interaction with civilian airspace. So the Russians said, no. From now on you can only – they imposed an arbitrary cap of flight restrictions. So people can still fly over Kaliningrad and still take pictures, but not to the letter of the treaty. And so that is a compliance problem, right? It's just a kind of extrajudicial limitation on the treaty's rights. And it's a problem.

Another one which is – stems out of – there's another rule in the treaty – I should just say, I mean, one of the reasons why – I was thinking about this – you know, this question of why is the treaty so long? It's kind of so long for the same reason your HR personnel manual in your office is so long. Like, it's not because your office hates each other and wants to, you know, destroy each other. It's just that you need to write these rules down because misunderstandings can create much greater tensions than needed to be. And can – and both sides think they're right, but they're – let's just write it all down in advance.

So one of the things we wrote down in the treaty is you can't fly within 10 kilometers of a border of a country that's not a party to the treaty, right? So if you're Mexico, which isn't a party, Russia can't fly right up to the border and start taking pictures sneakily of Mexico, because they didn't sign up for this.

BELL: And this started because Finland wasn't a party to the treaty to begin with, and Finland didn't want Russia coming right up to their – yeah.

TIERSKY: Sure.

WIER: And so in the case of Georgia, Russia has recognized these breakaway republics that they helped, of course, break away from Georgia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. And so they say that flights can't go up to 10 kilometers from those borders, because they have to stick to this principle that they're one of the only ones sticking to around the world that these two things are in fact breakaway republics. Well, of course, the United States doesn't recognize that. Totally rejects that under international law. And so really it's not about the treaty, it just flows from this other dispute and the treaty is getting caught up. Those are kind of the two biggest things.

TIERSKY: So let me turn to Alex here. You know, just talking about these problems but also others with implementation of the treaty and compliance with the treaty, you said these are, first of all, not insurmountable. So first of all, in what way do we continue to derive benefit from the treaty, even despite these violations? Is the worth of the treaty completely undermined by the fact that there are these problems with compliance? And secondly, you know, we've – Anthony's mentioned some of the Russian violations that we're concerned about, that our government is concerned about. What can – should we do about those?

BELL: So, as Anthony said, you know, some of these issues are more about broader problems we're having in our relationship with Russia. But our choices really here are lose all the intel and confidence building and transparency we gain from the treaty, or, you know, deal

with these problems. And that's why I said don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Like, implementation problems with treaties is something that we have a long history of dealing with, we have ample evidence that we're able to work through problems with agreements, even with major violations of agreements as opposed to sort of problems of interpretation and the broader geopolitical atmosphere.

So it's also tedious, though. And it's frustrating. And countries are coming at this from a different perspective. And, you know, obviously the United States and Russia have issues that they're dealing with, and Russia and Ukraine have issues that we're dealing with in an entirely different format. So it – a multilateral treaty is sort of by necessity just a very complicated process to work through. So getting back to the table, using the Open Skies consultative commission which is, you know, created to deal with these problems, having an expert – a seasoned expert negotiating on behalf of countries, really with a mind to solving all of this.

You know, our allies don't want to lose this treaty. And you can see that simply by the investments they've been making in their own Open Skies equipment. They are very invested in this. And I think at a time where we've done multiple things to maybe make our European allies be a little bit concerned about U.S. commitment to security in the Euro-Atlantic context, that this is the kind of thing that's worth investing in.

And I sometimes describe treaty compliance as – it's frustrating to have sometimes, like, somebody trying to cheat around the edges, or maybe take advantage of interpretations. But I'd rather have somebody sort of inside a box struggling to get out than completely free of all constraints. And that's sort of the nature. It's not an ideal situation, but it's the best we've come up with so far to control military tensions.

TIERSKY: So, I mean, just in terms of preventing this kind of cheating that you've mentioned – and, you know, again on these violations I can understand skeptics suggesting that maybe the Russians are able to find some technical ways to use this equipment to do things that we're not really comfortable with. How do we – how do we technically prevent, let's say, you know, a Russian plane is getting ready to take off and take pictures of the Pentagon or something. How do we know they haven't put in an extra camera, or a camera that's, you know, someone's iPhone is recording out of the cockpit or something, that it shouldn't be doing? How do we – how do we make sure that that doesn't happen?

WIER: That's what a lot of all the treaty page real estate is devoted to, is exactly all the provisions for inspecting the plane in advance, inspecting the sensors. Long before all 34 states certified that they meet the sort of positive and negative restrictions for sensors that are set out in the treaty everybody is permitted to buy – like, you have to have the – you have to have the sensor available to be purchased by everybody else. So –

BELL: Yeah, it has to be commercially available equipment.

WIER: And hosts get to fly on the plane with the – with the inspecting party. So, I mean, in a sense, the answer is, well, they thought of that. And it's true, you know, with digital images you might be able to, you know, put it on your computer and try to play up one – you

know, once you get the image back, right, turn up one value or another. But, you know, that's true for digital imagery that you can buy from Google Earth or whoever else as well, right? But none of those things give you the cooperation, the problem-solving, the interaction – or, I think, really importantly – the shared confidence that this actually was a picture of the thing. This is not doctored. This is not somehow some scheme.

BELL: Yeah, I remember – like Anthony, I wasn't very aware of the Open Skies Treaty before I went to State Department and was learning on the job. And I remember talking to one of the, you know, civil servants who was sort of in charge of our part of the implementation of this, from the perspective of the State Department. And she described it as, you basically take a plane apart in the process of getting ready for an inspection, and then put it back together. They are, you know, seasoned experts. They know what they're looking for. They know this treaty back and forth, and the provisions.

And, you know, we're on the plane when someone is taking photographs of us. Our people are on the plane. And there's something to be said for that too. It's a slightly, you know, kind of more intangible thing, but the kind of confidence building that comes from simply interacting with these different countries and, like, going through the process. You're creating trust there that's sort of hard to get in any other way, certainly not from just taking satellite images.

TIERSKY: Do we know – do we know how the Russians feel about the treaty? Do we know in their heart of hearts? I mean, we have a good sense that they could take or leave, for instance, the INF Treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, right? Is there – there are treaties that we're pretty aware the Russians could give or take. How about this one?

BELL: I think the Russians derive the same benefits that we derive from it, which is this confidence and the imagery. I think – you know, you mentioned they probably don't mind getting rid of INF. I think they'll probably come to regret that, as will we. We'll just have to figure out an entirely new frame for controlling intermediate-range missile proliferation. But in this case, we have something that's working, that is multilateral – which is important too. That it's not just the U.S. and Russia. Because from Russia's perspective, the threat they feel conventionally is not from things happening over here on the continental United States.

It's in the European theater. They're getting to look at all of these countries in a way that they wouldn't have otherwise. I mean, there are some people who say that Russian satellite technology, their ability is more limited than ours. So they're perhaps gaining something even more than we do from the treaty. But in my mind this goes back to the Eisenhower thing. We don't have anything to hide. And, you know, I am, you know, perfectly comfortable in the assessment of military leaders since this treaty has been in place that it's worth showing our cards, as you said.

WIER: And I'd say too, you know, it's really important to remember that in the policy context this isn't "It's a Wonderful Life." You can't go back before the time that the treaty was born and imagine what if it had never lived, and see what the world would be like, right? So the decision is not what if we didn't have this treaty. The decision would be, what if the United

States chose to walk away from this treaty? And that's a much different decision, right, because you're voluntarily extracting yourself from this thing that binds, you know, nations from Vancouver to Vladivostok, is the phrase. But importantly, binds the United States into the transatlantic, Euro-Atlantic security architecture. And it would be – especially right now – I think our allies in Europe would find it very, very worrisome if the United States suddenly started veering out of this part of the treaty architecture as well.

And so I just think it's a dangerous one. Plus, why would – why would the United States pull itself out of a club and leave Russia standing still at the party, you know, able to talk to all of the other European allies and influence them in one way or another? That just seems like a strange decision to make.

TIERSKY: So, Anthony, I think you're alluding to this – and, you know, you guys have – this has been a terrific conversation. I want to close us off with a question, playing off of what you were just talking about, and the title of the article. You know, after all you did call it a quiet legacy under threat. So I want to know from the two of you, what is the worst-case scenario, in your view? How do we get to that worst case? And then let's close off with how can we get to what you would call the best-case scenario? Who'd like to start with that one?

BELL: I'd be happy to. I think the worst case is that this treaty collapses as a result of neglect or outright disinterest in continuing the confidence building that we get from it. I think without it you've started an unraveling process of European arms control as we know it. And it will be a lot harder to preserve security across the European continent without those interlocking agreements. And then we'll get to a point where we just have to do it over again, because we realize that all of the things that we gained from these various treaties were actually important to us.

That we, you know, in some ways had – we were very lucky to have people who saw at the end of the Cold War that we should put these systems into place to keep us from backtracking into a situation where, you know, there was mistrust, where there was tension. And you know, it's just been a long time. And people forgot why we were doing it in the first place. So in my mind, fix the implementation problems that we're having, do it not by megaphone diplomacy but in the – you know, the body that was designed to push through this. And make it clear why we think the treaty is important.

And, you know, I also think broader arms control discussions, whether strategic or conventional, need to be ongoing with the Russians right now. If we're concerned about what they're taking photographs of, that's a conversation we could be having in formal, you know, diplomatic talks. And we're just not doing that right now. So worst-case scenario, we lose it and then somewhere down the line have to just rebuild the whole thing. I prefer to keep what we got and deal with the problems inherent and move forward – and move forward to more transparency and confidence-building measures in Europe.

WIER: Right. I'd build on that for the best-case scenario, and kind of answer the other part of your question, is first of all the United States builds the digital sensors, really gets confidence in that, and we really put U.S. implementation on a firmer footing than it's been in a

while. But then, you know, you begin – one hopes to begin to explore the other parts of the sensor imagery tools that were built into the treaty from the ground up but have never been really used. My best-case scenario, frankly, is that there is such buy-in from the European – transatlantic community that they do more in selling this idea to other regions around the world that I think would really benefit from it.

Again, to kind of take history from the past and bring it back to today, even when Eisenhower's idea in 1955 wasn't taken up in the U.S.-Soviet context, there were almost immediately questions and discussions in the Middle East about whether this idea could be applied. It wasn't then, but it strikes me as a region of the world just begging for greater shared transparency among the parties where they don't have all of these great satellite capacities and all these other ways of collecting information. This would be a really valuable thing. Or, Southeast – South Asia, Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia. These are a lot of other places that this idea of shared transparency – in the same way that the Vienna document principles and the Helsinki Final Act and the OSCE really could be valuable tools.

As Alex said, right, if we didn't have them ultimately we would come to our senses and reinvent them. While we have them, let's start grafting them and planting some of these seeds in new fields where they really desperately need them.

TIERSKY: Well, that certainly is a positive prospect to close our discussion on.

With that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. Alex, Anthony, I'd really like to thank you both for being here with us to give an audience a great tutorial on the Open Skies Treaty. Where can they go for more information on the treaty?

BELL: So I think our respective websites for Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation and the Friends Committee on National Legislation, and of course the OSCC – the Open Skies Consultative Commission – will have a lot of information on there. And then a plug, I guess, for our article in Arms Control Today.

WIER: Right. And the State Department, even though they just revised their website, you can still dig around and find information on the Open Skies Treaty and its history.

TIERSKY: That's great. Thank you very much to both folks. Listeners, as you know, we're always interested in hearing back from you with feedback on this episode or any other. Get in touch via our website, our Facebook page, or on Twitter. Thanks, again, for joining us. We're Helsinki on the Hill. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky signing off.

(END)