

## March 2020

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## Open Skies for National Security

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## Open Skies for National Security

Sixty years ago, dramatic events closed one Cold War chapter and opened another in keeping skies open for overhead reconnaissance. Peacetime monitoring of adversaries has proved essential for avoiding war and remains indispensable today.

On April 9, 1960, an American reconnaissance U-2 plane took off from an airfield in Peshawar, Pakistan. The aircraft crossed the border of the Soviet Union, flew over and photographed nuclear and missile test sites, and then safely returned and landed at Zahedan in Iran. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was indignant that the new “antiaircraft [guided missile] batteries had been caught napping and did not open fire soon enough.” He reprimanded a number of officers.

Only three weeks later on May 1, 1960, a Soviet surface-to-air missile S-75, known in the West as SA-2 and Guideline, brought down a U-2 plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers over the Ural mountains. Powers bailed out from his aircraft damaged by an explosion of the missile nearby. A second missile then directly hit his falling down plane. This was the 24th U-2 flight over the Soviet Union. American President Dwight D. Eisenhower promptly ordered termination of the intrusions.

Development of long-range ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons threatened devastating consequences should the Cold War turned into a full-scale military conflict. New technologies allowed no time for preparation for hostilities and mobilization which made monitoring military developments and posture of the adversary a key to avoiding a fatal miscalculation and hence reducing the risk of war.

In the wake of the Powers incident, Eisenhower explained at a press conference: “No one wants another Pearl Harbor ... Secrecy of the Soviet Union makes this [aerial reconnaissance] essential. In most of the world no large-scale attack could be prepared in secret but in the Soviet Union there is a fetish of secrecy and concealment.”

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