

## Open Skies Treaty

### Why in news?

The United States administration said that it would withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty (OST).

### What is the Open Skies Treaty?

- In 1955, the former **US President Dwight Eisenhower** first proposed it as a means to deescalate tensions during the Cold War.
- The treaty was eventually signed in 1992 between NATO members and former Warsaw Pact countries following the demise of the Soviet Union.
- It went into effect in **2002** and currently has **35 signatories** along with one non-ratifying member (Kyrgyzstan).
- The OST aims at building confidence among members through mutual openness, thus reducing the chances of accidental war.
- Under the treaty, a **member state can spy** on any part of the host nation, with the latter's consent.
- A country can undertake aerial imaging over the host state after giving notice 72 hours before, and sharing its exact flight path 24 hours before.
- The data gathered, such as on troop movements, military exercises and missile deployments, has to be shared with all member states.
- Only approved imaging equipment is permitted on the surveillance flights, and officials from the host state can stay on board throughout the planned journey.

### Why the US wants to withdraw from the OST?

- While it was envisaged as a key arms control agreement, many in US had for over a decade accused Russia of non-compliance with OST protocols.
- Russia was blamed for obstructing surveillance flights on its territory, while misusing its own missions for gathering key tactical data.
- The U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Russia of violating the Treaty openly and continuously in various ways for years.
- So the U.S. President Trump's administration has now chosen to withdraw from the pact.
- Russia has denied the allegations, and has called U.S.'s exit as very regrettable.

## What is the significance of the OST?

- The OST was signed in 1992, much before the advent of advanced satellite imaging technology, which is currently the preferred mode for intelligence gathering.
- Yet, surveillance aircraft provide key information that still cannot be gathered by satellite sensors, such as thermal imaging data.
- Also, since only the US has an extensive military satellite infrastructure, other NATO members would have to rely on US to obtain classified satellite data.
- This satellite data would be more difficult to obtain compared to OST surveillance records that have to be shared with all members as a treaty obligation.
- Notably, the OST's utility for U.S. is that since 2002, it has flown 201 surveillance missions over Russia and its ally Belarus.
- A former Trump official had also hailed OST data gathered during the 2014 Russia-Ukraine conflict.

## What US departure could mean for the treaty?

- Pompeo said that the US would reconsider its decision to withdraw if Russia demonstrates a return to full compliance.
- This approach is reminiscent from last year when Trump had suspended US participation in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.
- [**INF Treaty** - A security agreement that had been credited with curtailing the arms race in Europe towards the end of the Cold War]
- Then too, the USA had said that it would re-engage with Russia if it sought a new treaty - a possibility that never materialised.
- Experts believe that the same could happen with the OST, with Russia using USA's exit as a pretext for leaving the treaty itself.
- Russia's departure could adversely impact USA's European allies that rely on OST data to track Russian troop movements in the Baltic region.
- Pulling out of the OST, an important multilateral arms control agreement would be yet another gift from the US to Russia.

## What is the concern?

- The OST exit is only the recent example in the list of important pacts that US has stepped away from during the Trump presidency.
- The US has already stepped away from pacts such as the Paris Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal.
- Experts are now contemplating the fate of the US-Russia '**New START**' nuclear arms control agreement, which will expire in February 2021.

- Trump has already said that his administration would not renew the treaty unless China joins.
- Many see this as improbable, given the already heightened tensions between USA and China over the pandemic.

**Source: The Indian Express**

## **Quick Facts**

### **North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)**

- NATO was founded in 1949 as a defence alliance.
- It was meant to ensure collective protection for its members against the threat of possible post-War communist expansion and aggression by the Soviet Union.
- The key member States included the United States, Canada, and American allies in Europe.

### **Warsaw Pact**

- In 1955, the Warsaw Pact was signed as a **counterbalance to NATO**.
- This pact was a defence and political alliance of the Soviet Union with the Eastern European nations.
- This alliance was disbanded after the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991.