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.

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