Russia's Exit from Open Skies Treaty

Why in news?

- Russia recently announced that it was leaving the Open Skies Treaty (OST).
- In November 2020, the United States left the OST first after accusing Russia of violating the pact.

What is the Open Skies Treaty?

- The OST is an accord with over 30 countries being part of it.
- It allows participants to fly unarmed reconnaissance flights over any part of their fellow member states.
- It was first proposed in 1955 by former US President Dwight Eisenhower 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 had 35 signatories, including key players US and Russia, along with one non-ratifying member (Kyrgyzstan).

How does it work?

- 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 information 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.
- Officials from the host state can also stay on board throughout the planned journey.

Why did the US leave the Treaty?

- The OST was envisaged as a key arms control agreement.
- But many in Washington had for over a decade accused Russia of non-compliance with OST protocols.
- They blamed Moscow of obstructing surveillance flights on its territory,

while misusing its own missions for gathering key tactical data.
- Reportedly, the US President Donald Trump was also unhappy that a Russian reconnaissance flew over his golf course in New Jersey State in 2017.
- In May 2020, the Trump administration announced its intention of withdrawing from the OST, and eventually left it in November.

Why did Russia leave after the US?

- A contentious issue regarding Russia's compliance with the OST was its alleged reluctance to allow flights over Kaliningrad.
    - Kaliningrad is its exclave in Eastern Europe that sits between NATO allies Lithuania and Poland.
- Russia defended its position by saying that the restrictions were permissible under treaty rules.
    - It gave the example of the US imposing similar limits on flights over Alaska.
- After the US left the OST, Russia sought assurances from NATO allies who continued to remain on the treaty that they would not transfer data collected by their flights over Russia to Washington.
- Russia said that these requests were not backed by the NATO members, and so it had to leave the treaty.

What is the significance of the Open Skies Treaty?

- The OST was signed 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.
- Notable among them is the OST's utility for Washington, which, since 2002, flew over 200 surveillance missions over Russia and its ally Belarus.
- The OST data gathered during the 2014 Russia-Ukraine conflict was also significant.
- Overall, more than 1,500 flights is said to have been conducted under the OST.

What happens now with US and Russia out?

- The failure of the Open Skies Treaty follows the demise of another significant arms control accord, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.
- Both the US and Russia left it in 2019.
- Now, with withdrawal from the OST, the fate of the much larger US-Russia 'New START' nuclear arms control agreement is under threat.
    - US president-elect Joe Biden has spoken in favour of preserving the

treaty.
    - Outgoing President Trump did not want to renew it unless China too was made part.
- Despite Biden’s willingness, however, there are apprehensions that negotiations with Russia would not be completed before the February 2021 deadline.

Source: The Indian Express

