US's Concerns with China and Russia - CTBT

Why in news?

- Suspicions were recently raised in the U.S. on Chinese violating the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).
- These led to demands requesting President Trump to “unsign” the CTBT and resume nuclear testing.

Click here to know more on CTBT (evolution, provisions, effectiveness, etc)

What were the concerns reported?

- In mid-April 2020, a Compliance Report was issued by the US State Department.
- This was on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Non-proliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments.
- **China** - The report raised concerns that China might be conducting nuclear tests with low yields at its Lop Nur test site throughout 2019.
- This is allegedly in violation of China's Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) undertakings.
- Together with its lack of transparency, China provokes concerns about its intent to observe the zero-yield moratorium on testing.
- **Russia** - The U.S. report also claims that Russia has conducted nuclear weapons experiments that produced a nuclear yield.
- These were inconsistent with ‘zero yield’ understanding underlying the CTBT.
- However, it was uncertain on how many such experiments had been conducted in 2019.
- It suggests that Russia could be testing in a manner that releases nuclear energy from an explosive canister, generating suspicions about its compliance.

What was Russia and China's response?

- Both Russia and China have dismissed the U.S.’s allegations and rejected the claims.
- They also pointed out Trump administration’s backtracking from other negotiated agreements - Iran nuclear deal, U.S.-Russia Intermediate-Range

Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

- The CTBTO has refrained from backing the U.S.'s present allegations.
- However, with growing rivalry among major powers, the report is a likely harbinger of a new nuclear arms race.

What does this signify?

- The whole turn of events signify a coming back of competition.
- **U.S.** - The key change from the 1990s is that the U.S.'s unipolar moment is over and strategic competition among major powers is back.
- The U.S. now identifies Russia and China as 'rivals', and it is starting to face new nuclear threats.
- The U.S., therefore, has to expand the role of its nuclear weapons and have a more usable and diversified nuclear arsenal.
- The Trump administration has embarked on a 30-year modernisation plan with a price tag of $1.2 trillion, which could go up over the years.
- Readiness levels at the Nevada test site that has been silent since 1992 are being enhanced to permit resumption of testing at six months notice.
- **Russia and China** - Russia and China have been concerned about the U.S.'s growing technological lead.
- This is particularly the case in missile defence and conventional global precision-strike capabilities.
- Russia has responded by exploring hypersonic delivery systems and theatre systems.
- On the other hand, China has embarked on a modernisation programme to enhance the survivability of its arsenal that is considerably smaller.
- In addition, both countries are also investing heavily in offensive cyber capabilities.

What are the challenges ahead?

- The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) limits U.S. and Russian arsenals, but this will expire in 2021.
- U.S. President Donald Trump has already indicated that he does not plan to extend it.
- Instead, the Trump administration would like to bring China into some kind of nuclear arms control talks.
- But this is something that China has avoided by pointing to the fact that the U.S. and Russia still account for over 90% of global nuclear arsenals.
- U.S.'s tensions with China are already high with -
    i. trade and technology disputes
    ii. militarisation in the South China Sea
    iii. recently, with the novel coronavirus pandemic

- The U.S. is also seen to be preparing the ground for resuming testing at its Nevada site.
- In all, resumption of nuclear testing may signal the demise of the ill-fated CTBT, marking the beginnings of a new nuclear arms race.

Source: The Hindu

