

Gist of RSTV Big Picture - Treaty on Open Skies

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What's in the news?

- Russia and the other members of the 'Treaty on Open Skies' held a conference to discuss the future of this framework.
- The conference has come in the light of the decision of United States to withdraw from the 35 member Open Skies Treaty.
- The U.S withdrawal has raised concern that the global security architecture would collapse further.
- Treaty on Open Skies aims to promote openness and transparency of military forces and activities of its member states.

What is the Treaty on Open Skies?

Framework of the treaty:

- The treaty was started in 1992 as an initiative of the U.S. President, George H. W. Bush and after ratification, came into effect on January 1, 2002.
- Currently it has 34 member states, while the 35th nation Kyrgyzstan, has signed but not ratified it.

Aim of the treaty:

- It is one of the pillars of global security, aiming to increase transparency, promote confidence-building measures and predictability.
- The larger aim is to reduce the likelihood of a war by miscalculation.

Provisions of the treaty:

- It allows unarmed aerial surveillance flights to go over the member nations' entire territory as well as over their military establishments, under certain controlled conditions for inspecting and surveying these establishments.
- Observing states must provide at least 72 hours' advance notice before arriving in the host country to conduct an overflight.
- The treaty lays out certain standards for aircraft being used as observation flights.
- Copy of all data collected has to be supplied to the host country.

Why has the US announced to pull out of the Open Skies Treaty (OST)?

- The US has notified the Open Air Commission about its withdrawal within a period of six months from the issue of notice.
- According to the US, Russia has not been abiding by the principles and objectives of the treaty, as they do not allow the aircrafts of the US and other 34 OST members to fly over Georgia and its military enclave in Kaliningrad, as well as over
- The US has been expressing concern about the ability of Russia to use surveillance planes to get confidential information about the US military activities which couldn't be accessed otherwise.

Are these allegations against Russia by the US justified?

- Russia has refuted these claims and called the US withdrawal - a political move, as this is the third arms control pact which the US has withdrawn from.
 - US had suspended its compliance with the **Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) Treaty** in 2019.
 - The US withdrew from **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)** or 'Iran Nuclear Deal' in 2018.
- The future of the **New Start Treaty with Russia** due to be renewed before February 2021 is increasingly uncertain. If New START is allowed to expire without a replacement in 2021, there will be no legally binding limits on the world's two largest strategic arsenals for the first time since 1972.
- There have been repeated complaints from Russia of certain provisions of the OST being abused by the US and its allies. For Example:

- US flights surveilling over the Kaliningrad region were used just for circling this small territory for many hours in a row causing disruption to the air traffic, and sometimes, civilian activities in the region.
- US aircrafts flying over the border areas which are unregulated and regions of frozen military conflicts was also problematic.
- As per Russia, this decision of withdrawal by the US is unjustified as it had only forbidden the US from monitoring problematic zones which are very small.

Why is the US administration withdrawing from many multilateral organisations and treaties?

- Among the NATO nations, countries in the European Union and within the US there are divisions and debates about the relevance of being involved in various multilateral treaties relating to trade and arms.
- The Democrats in the US believe that the multilateral treaties have enhanced American trade and security interests. The Senate Armed Force Committee and Foreign Relations Committee also support the treaties.
- The US administration believes that if all the members do not comply with the agreements as stipulated in the multilateral treaties, then the entire multilateral architecture built after World War II becomes redundant.
- It is not the first time that the US has pulled out of an arms treaty.
 - In 2001, under President Bush, the US had withdrawn from the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty (1972).
- These developments can also be attributed to the 'America first' foreign policy stance emphasizing on isolationism, protectionism and unilateralism, that is gaining popularity in the US presently.

Rising global concerns:

- A global transformation is taking place due to evolution of Chinese military capabilities and nuclear forces-
 - In 2020 China has added two new nuclear ballistic missile submarines into its navy.
 - It is the third country in the world which is building a ballistic missile early

warning system.

- European signatories of the Open Skies Treaty, including France, Italy and Germany have expressed regret over US withdrawal.
- The United States said that if Russia will start complying with the provisions of the OST, it will be ready to join it back.

With evolution in technology and introduction of modern drones and satellites in the last eighteen years, has the OST outlived its utility?

- **The Open Sky Treaty is very useful in current global order as -**
 - The ability to send reconnaissance planes into suspicious locations makes them valuable. They provide an opportunity to check offensive activities on the other side, such as any suspicious concentration of troops.
 - Sometimes routine military exercises of ground forces or air forces of a country may be mistaken by another nation as preparation for an attack.
 - It is relevant due to worsening diplomatic relations between the US and Russia and in the backdrop of China's aggressive foreign policies.
- **Limitations of satellites-**
 - Satellites fly at predetermined trajectories which are known to all countries. This gives a chance to countries to take certain measures to cover their military activities from the observers.
 - Satellites have certain limitations, as during bad weather conditions they cannot see below the clouds
- **Limitations of drones -**
 - Drones fly much lower than aircrafts and for a shorter period of time.
 - They cannot fly into other party's territory without permission

Has the OST served its purpose?

- It had served its purpose by bringing harmony in the tense relationship between the US and Russia due to the Cold War, by encouraging mutual ideals of disarmament and reassuring each country that the other was not preparing an attack.

- Currently the strategic priority for the US has become China. So the United States is perhaps planning to begin negotiations with China for separate arms control and confidence-building measures.
- Any multilateral treaty without the participation of China is barely relevant as China is becoming the third superpower along with the US and Russia.

The best way forward-

- Keeping a constructive dialogue among Russia and the US is important to avoid tensions from escalating which could increase global polarisation. This is especially critical due to the economic difficulties caused by COVID-19 pandemic.
- The OST will continue to be useful for Russia even without American participation to enable Russia to monitor North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) activities.
- A trilateral global strategic stability has to be maintained as China joins the elite group of nuclear superpowers.
- China needs to be a part of several important multilateral treaties but it has to be ensured that China is bound by those treaties and abides by them.