

Future of Open Skies Treaty

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The Open Skies Treaty had a larger aim to reduce the likelihood of a war by miscalculation. Two of the biggest global military powers – Russia and USA exited this treaty. This shows the growing mistrust between global powers and the future of the treaty has become uncertain.

In news: Russia withdraws from Open Skies Treaty after U.S. departure

Placing it in syllabus: Foreign Affairs

Dimensions

- History and Provisions of the Treaty
- Significance of the Treaty
- Reasons for Withdrawal of US and Russia
- Impact of Withdrawal

Content

History and Provisions of the Treaty:

- **Open Skies Treaty (OST)** was first proposed in 1955 by former US President Dwight Eisenhower as a means to de-escalate 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). **India is not a party to this treaty.**
- The OST aims at **building confidence among members through mutual openness**, thus reducing the chances of accidental war.

Significant provisions of the treaty include the following:

- Under the treaty, a member state can “spy” on any part of the host nation, with the latter’s consent.
- It allows participants to **fly unarmed reconnaissance flights** over any part of their fellow member states.
- 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, and officials from the host state can also stay on board throughout the planned journey.

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty:

- It was a **nuclear arms-control accord** reached by the United States and the Soviet Union in 1987
- The two nations agreed to eliminate their stocks of intermediate-range and shorter-range (or “medium-range”) land-based missiles (which could carry nuclear warheads).
- It also covered all land-based missiles, including those carrying nuclear warheads but did not cover sea-launched missiles.
- **Both USA and Russia withdrew from the Treaty** in 2019.

The new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START):

- The **new START** is a treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on measures for the further **reduction and limitation of strategic offensive arms**.
- It entered into force on 5th February, 2011.
- It is a **successor to the START framework of 1991** (at the end of the Cold War) that limited both sides to 1,600 strategic delivery vehicles and 6,000 warheads.
- The USA has been worried that extending New Start would

negatively impact an arms deal with China and Russia.

- **USA is concerned** that **China's nuclear stockpile** could be doubled if the New Start Treaty continued as is, without including China.
- The **New Start Treaty also suffered from verification inadequacies** and that the U.S. intended to establish a new arms control regime which would include China.

Significance 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 of OST is to **reduce the likelihood of a war by miscalculation.**
- 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 provides key information that still cannot be gathered by satellite sensors**, such as thermal imaging data.
- So far, more than **1,500 reconnaissance flights** have been conducted under the treaty
- Since 2002, USA has flown over 200 surveillance missions over Russia and its ally Belarus.
- A former Trump official had also hailed OST data gathered during the 2014 Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Reasons for Withdrawal of US

- The US for years **blamed Moscow for selectively implementing the Treaty** on Open Skies and **violating a number of its provisions.**
- It blames Russia of **obstructing surveillance flights** on its territory, while misusing its own missions for gathering key tactical data.
- According to the US, Russia does not allow the aircrafts

of the US and other 34 OST members **to fly over Georgia** and its **military enclave in Kaliningrad** (Russian exclave in Eastern Europe that sits between NATO allies Lithuania and Poland.)

- US President Donald Trump was also unhappy that a Russian reconnaissance aircraft 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, accusing Russia of “flagrantly and continuously violating the Treaty in various ways for years”, and left it in November 2020.

Reasons for Withdrawal of Russia

- According to Russia, the **refusal of NATO members from sharing intelligence data with the USA** after its exit.
- Russia has raised concerns that despite leaving the treaty US could potentially retain access to overflight intelligence gathered by allies who remain members in the treaty.
- 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.
- In its statement, Russia said that these requests were not backed by the NATO members, prompting it to leave the treaty.
- Russia defended its position by saying that the restrictions over Kaliningrad were permissible under treaty rules, and gave the example of the **US imposing similar limits on flights over Alaska**.

Impact of Withdrawal:

- The withdrawal will **erode global security** by making it **more difficult for governments to interpret the intentions of other nations**.
- It has **disrupted the balance of interests between the**

treaty participants and undermined the treaty's role in ensuring trust and security.

- It has deepened the mistrust between global powers. The fears of **increased global polarisation** are turning out to be true.
- It has **increased the trust deficit** between the West and Russia.
- The only U.S.-Russian arms control pact still standing is the **New START treaty**. Experts now worry about the fate of the much larger US-Russia 'New START' nuclear arms control agreement, which is slated to expire on February 5, 2021.
- Arms control advocates have warned that New START's expiration would remove any checks on U.S. and Russian nuclear forces, striking a blow to global stability.

Mould your thought: Why did Russia and the US withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty? How will this impact global security?

Approach to the answer:

- Write basic aims of OST briefly
- Detail the reasons by the US and Russia for withdrawal
- Write about the future impacts
- Conclusion