Russia Pulls Out Of Open Skies Treaty

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Why in News

Recently, Russia pulled out of the **Open Skies Treaty (OST)** citing earlier withdrawal of the USA from the treaty.

- According to Russia, provisions of the pact that allows unarmed surveillance flights over member countries had been seriously compromised by the withdrawal of the United States.
- This move was made after the **USA pulled out of the Open Skies Treaty** in November 2020, arguing that Russian violations made it untenable for the United States to remain a party.

Note:

> This is different from the **Open Sky Agreements** which are **bilateral agreements** that the two countries negotiate to provide rights for airlines to offer international passenger and cargo services. It expands international passenger and cargo flights. Recently, the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** has expressed interest to have an **Open Sky Agreement with India.**

Key Points

- **Reasons for USA Withdrawal:**
  - **Russia's continuous non compliance:** The USA had for over a decade accused Russia of non-compliance with OST protocols, blaming Moscow of obstructing surveillance flights on its territory, while misusing its own missions for gathering key tactical data.
  - **OST misused to claim Ukrainian region:** The USA also accused Russia of designating an airfield in the annexed Crimean Peninsula as an Open Skies refueling base as an illegal attempt by Russia to cement its claim to the Ukrainian region.
  - **Risk to critical infrastructures:** Russia misused its flights over the USA and Europe to identify critical infrastructure for potential attack in a time of war.
- **Reasons for Russia Withdrawal:**
  - **USA limiting OST:** Russia defends its non compliance with the OST to allow flights over Kaliningrad (Russian exclave in Eastern Europe that lies between NATO allies Lithuania and Poland) citing the example of the US imposing similar limits on flights over Alaska.
  - **No assurance from NATO members:** After USA withdrawal from OST, Russia did not get the sought assurance from **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** allies who continued to remain on the treaty that they would not transfer data collected by their flights over Russia to Washington (USA).
- **Significance:**
  - **For European NATO members:**

    Russia's departure could adversely impact Washington's European allies, which rely on OST data to track Russian troop movements in the Baltic region.
  - **Departure from Arms control treaties:**
    - The failure of the Open Skies Treaty follows the demise of another significant arms control accord, the **Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty**, after both the US and Russia left it in 2019. This treaty aimed at eliminating their stocks of intermediate-range and shorter-range (or "medium-range") land-based missiles which could carry nuclear warheads.
    - Withdrawal of the USA and Russia from OST has further deepened doubts on extension of the **New START treaty**, which expires in February, 2021.
  - **For India:**

    Growing mistrust between global powers could make it difficult for India to maintain good mutual relationships with both the countries if the hostility escalates in future.

Open Skies Treaty (OST)

- **Background:**
  - It was first **proposed by USA in 1955** to deescalate tensions during the **Cold War**.
  - This treaty was eventually signed in 1992 **between NATO members and former Warsaw Pact countries** following the demise of the Soviet Union. It finally came into effect in 2002.
    - The **Warsaw Pact (1955)** was signed between Russia and her satellite states shortly after West Germany was admitted to NATO.
    - The Pact was a mutual defense agreement, which the Western countries perceived as a reaction against West Germany's membership of NATO.
- **Aim:**

  Building confidence: The OST aims at building confidence among its 34 signatories countries through mutual openness, thus reducing the chances of accidental war.
- **Terms:**
  - **Open surveillance:** Under the treaty, a member State can undertake surveillance **on any part of the host nation,** with the latter's consent.
    - Only **approved imaging equipment** is permitted on the surveillance flights.
    - Officials from the host state **can also stay on board** throughout the planned journey.
  - **Sharing strategic information:** The information gathered, such as on **troop movements, military exercises** and missile deployments, **has to be shared with all member States.**
- Both **US and Russia were signatories** of the treaty.
- India is **not a member** of this treaty.

Source: TH