Delay in concluding Brexit negotiations

Why in news?

The Brexit withdrawal agreement faces opposition within UK, especially on the Irish Border issue.

What does the withdrawal agreement contain?

- Britain is set to exit the EU on March 29 of this year.
- The draft Brexit withdrawal agreement sets out how the UK leaves the European Union (on March 29), which will have to be ratified by the British Parliament.
- The draft agreement includes a transition period that begins on 29 March 2019 and lasts until 31 December 2020.
- During that period, the UK will need to abide by all EU rules, but will lose membership of its institutions.
- The draft withdrawal agreement says the transition can be extended, but only for a period of one or two years (in other words up to the end of 2022 at most).
- Both the UK and EU must agree to any extension and the decision must be taken before 1 July 2020.
- The great advantage of transition is that it buys more time for businesses and governments to prepare for a new regime, and it smoothes the path out of the EU.
- But the toughest part of the draft agreement to negotiate is on the issue on Irish Backstop.
- Hence there is a delay in securing a withdrawal agreement that is acceptable to all sides before the deadline.

What is the Irish border issue?

- Northern Ireland is a part of the UK, while the rest of Ireland forms the 'Republic of Ireland' and is an independent sovereign nation since 1922. [Click here to know more on Ireland issue]
- As Britain is set to leave the EU, it will also be exiting the single market and customs union.
- This has raised the question on the whether the existing soft-border (open & regulated border) between two parts of Ireland would remain or not in post-

brexit negotiations.

- Under the withdrawal agreement, a long-term trade deal has to be agreed by the end of 2020 to avoid a hard border (fortified/walled borders) between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
- If that is not agreed, a backstop consisting of a single customs territory between EU and UK will be triggered.
- The backstop is a policy designed to avoid a hard border under all circumstances between Northern Ireland (UK) and the Irish Republic.
- Accordingly, Northern Ireland will be in a deeper customs relationship with the EU than the rest of the UK.
- It will also be more closely aligned with the rules and regulations of the EU single market.
- As long as the backstop is in operation, the UK will be subject to "level playing field conditions", to ensure it cannot gain a competitive advantage while remaining in the same customs territory.
- Also, the UK cannot leave the backstop independently, it needs to be decided together with the EU.
- Though this could ensure seamless trade between Irish borders, it would prevent UK from implementing any trade deals with other countries around the world that involve removing tariffs on goods.
- A number of MPs in Britain fear that the UK could be "trapped" in this arrangement for years.
- Hence, they suggested Prime Minister Theresa May to renegotiate her withdrawal agreement with EU.
- They demand the government to come up with alternatives to a soft-border between Northern Ireland (UK) and Republic of Ireland.

What UK can learn from other similar border issues?

- Norway and Sweden have one of the most technologically advanced borders in the world.
- Norway is not in the EU (although it is in single market) and its 1,000-mile border with Sweden (an EU member) is the EU's longest land border.
- Cars go between these countries through unmanned border posts equipped with cameras that use an automatic number plate recognition system.
- Also, a sophisticated computer system allows goods to be declared to customs before they leave warehouses.
- This is with the exception of lorries transporting goods that still stop at a staffed crossing for physical customs checks.
- There are suggestions that a similar technological mechanism could be used at the Irish border.
- However, technology alone wouldn't eliminate the need for checks at the

Irish border.

- This is because the success of the Sweden-Norway customs border relied on high levels of trust and similar product standards.
- In any case, the border posts would be intensely controversial on the Irish border.

What are the suggested solutions?

- Instead of physical checks at the border, checks could be carried out at warehouses instead.
- This solution involves a mix of technology and a simplifying of custom procedures.
- This system could be developed using existing IT systems and no physical infrastructure would be required.
- But the EU requires physical inspections on certain goods (animal products and food products) at the point where they enter the single market.
- Also, there is a possibility that people engaging in checking of standards and products, away from the border, will become the subject of threat.
- Another potential, but expensive, way of avoiding physical checks altogether at the Irish border could be to develop a satellite system.
- However, it would require huge amounts of trust and money and it certainly couldn't be delivered in the next few years.
- Another suggestion is for the UK to have the right to withdraw from the backstop without any EU agreement called the "unilateral exit mechanism".
- But this could harm relations between UK-EU to the point where a future trade deal with the EU became almost impossible to achieve.
- Thus, the EU says the current backstop plan is the only "realistic solution" to preventing a hard border in Ireland.
- This shows that, at the moment it looks as if there are near no easy solutions that would be acceptable to the EU, the UK government and the majority of MPs.

Source: BBC, The Hindu

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