Iran Nuclear Talks echoes in the Gulf

What is the issue?

Israel and the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are watching the developments of JCPOA talks very closely as their interests directly have an effect on the outcome of the discussions.

What is JCPOA?

- The Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), is a landmark accord that was signed in July 2015 between P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States plus Germany) and Iran.
- The agreement aimed to restrict Iran's ability to develop nuclear weapons in exchange for lifting economic sanctions against Tehran.
- As part of the deal, Iran agreed to reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium by 98% and limit uranium enrichment to 3.67%.
- It also agreed to give access to inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's nuclear watchdog agency, to its nuclear facilities.
- Eventually, the deal has been withdrawn by Trump in 2018.
- This led to Tehran effectively abandoning the JCPOA altogether by gradually violating the pact since 2019.
- By November 2020, the UN's nuclear watchdog said Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium was more than 12 times the limit set under the JCPOA.
- Iranian authorities confirmed that it had produced 55 kg of uranium enriched up to 20%, well above the limits under the 2015 deal and closer to weapons-grade levels (roughly 90%).

What is the engagement of GCC with Iran?

> *Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a political and economic alliance of 6 Middle Eastern countries—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. It was established in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1981 to achieve unity among its members based on their common objectives and their similar political and cultural identities, which are rooted in Arab and Islamic cultures.*

- **The UAE**- The UAE had first reached out to Iran in July 2019, when its senior officials visited Tehran to discuss maritime security.
- Recently, Iran’s chief negotiator visited Abu Dhabi, possibly to seek the UAE’s good offices to facilitate an agreement with the U.S.
- The UAE’s ties with Israel has been enhanced and the UAE is making it clear that in its regional partnerships it does not have a zero-sum approach
- **Saudi Arabia**- Since April 2021, Saudi Arabia and Iran have had five meetings in Baghdad mainly to rebuild confidence, re-establish diplomatic ties and address specific areas of conflict, Yemen and Syria.

- **Isolation from the U.S. partnership**- Following the U.S. assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, the UAE and Saudi Arabia had called on the U.S. to reduce regional tensions, recognising that more conflict would bring the GCC states in the direct line of an Iranian retaliation.
- The GCC countries' isolation from the U.S.' security partnership has been further encouraged by President Joe Biden's disengagement from the region in order to contain China in the Indo-Pacific.

What is the progress of the Vienna negotiations?

- Iran is engaged in negotiations in Vienna on matters relating to the JCPOA.
- **Iran's demands**
  - Return of the U.S. to the JCPOA
  - Removal of the U.S. sanctions
  - Assurance that a future U.S. administration will not withdraw from the agreement
- **The U.S.'s stand-** It is it impossible for the U.S. to accept Iran's demands because of the following situation**.**
  - The polarised political environment in the U.S.
  - Mr. Biden's weak political position in Congress
  - The pervasive hostility to the Islamic Republic

What does this mean for the Gulf?

- **Failure of the U.S. pressure**- The harshest U.S. sanctions on Iran have failed to bring Iran back to the negotiating table or brought about regime change.
- As China buys more Iranian oil and the UAE pursues trade ties, the failure of the 'maximum pressure' regime is already evident.
- An effective strike on Iran's nuclear programme has operational difficulties and harmful implications in the region.
- To avoid the possibility of a military attack, the Iranian spokesman in Vienna has just said that Iran will not enrich uranium beyond 60%, even if the talks fail.
- **Israel's approach**- In the absence of a nuclear deal, it is likely that Israel will push for a normalisation of ties with more Arab states so that it builds a coalition of regional states against Iran.
- **Regional security architecture**- The steps in bringing Iran into this architecture have already been taken through the Saudi-Iran dialogue, the UAE-Iran engagements, the Baghdad conference and the recent Riyadh summit.
- But given the divisions within the GCC and the positions of Qatar, Kuwait and Oman, such a consensus will only emerge if Iran is integrated into the security framework.
- Israel's inclusion will be more difficult as its domestic politics has been framed for decades on the basis of hostility towards Iran.

Reference

1. https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/iran-nuclear-talks-reverberate-in-the-gulf/article38045397.ece



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