Testing the red lines in the Iran Nuclear Talks

What is the issue?

Months after Iran's presidential elections in June, multilateral nuclear talks have started once again in Vienna with a new Iranian negotiating team.

What is Iran's nuclear deal?

- The Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)**, is a landmark accord that was signed in July 2015.
- **P5+1** (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States plus Germany) were at the core of discussions with 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 number of centrifuges - tube-shaped machines that help enrich uranium - by two-thirds.
- It agreed to reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium by 98% and limit uranium enrichment to 3.67%.
- Iran also agreed to give access to inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's nuclear watchdog agency, to its nuclear facilities.

IAEA is an autonomous intergovernmental organization dedicated to increasing the contribution of atomic energy to the world's peace and well-being and ensuring that agency assistance is not used for military purposes.

It is widely known as the world's "Atoms for Peace and Development" organization within the United Nations family.

*India is a founding member of the IAEA which has its headquarters in **Vienna.***

What is the controversy surrounding the deal?

- For decades, Iran and the United States have been adversaries with a

complicated history that includes
    - A CIA-backed coup in the 1950s
    - A pro-American puppet monarch who was deposed in 1979 in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution
    - The infamous hostage crisis at the US embassy in Tehran.
    - Iranian leaders' constant threats against Israel which is America's most important ally in the Middle East
    - Chants of "death to America" in Iranian streets
    - Iran deal's sunset clauses (restrictions on Iran's centrifuges will be lifted after ten years in 2025, and the restrictions on uranium enrichment will expire in 2030)
    - Pressure for the US from its top allies to avoid engaging with Iran
- Eventually, the deal has been withdrawn by Trump in 2018.
- This coupled with deadly attacks on prominent Iranians, including the drone strike by the U.S. which killed Iran's top general, Qassem Soleimani.
- 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 Iran 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 efforts were taken by the Biden administration to revive the deal?

- Since coming to power, President Biden has pledged to try and revive the deal.
- In 2021, the U.S. officials met their counterparts in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in Riyadh to discuss Iran and other issues.
- Several rounds of talks were held in Vienna and they have started once again in Vienna with a new Iranian negotiating team.
- For the time being, the new round of Vienna talks seems to have no positive outcomes as both sides want the other party to back down first and make concessions.
- Iran insists on all sanctions being lifted, while the U.S. is asking Iran to return to reduced enrichment of uranium and accept full IAEA inspections.

How other countries view this deadlock?

- **Europe's line-** Europeans have been almost non-existent in these new talks.
- The Political Director of European External Action Service, who coordinates talks between Tehran and 6 powers on reviving a 2015 nuclear pact seemed to be very positive about the way the negotiations had started.
- It seems that the Europe is trying to revive the deal as quickly as possible but at the same time, they seem not to be forceful mediators in these talks as China and Russia are favouring Iran.
- **China's remarks-** The China comments about the "nuclear hypocrisy" of the West similar to the fundamental arguments of the Iranian negotiators.
- **Israel's view-** Israeli officials have been pressing European governments and the U.S. on a real Iranian nuclear threat.
- It has said that the main mistake of the last decade was to quit the deal during the Trump administration.
- Israel is stressing Washington to use a different toolkit against Iran's forward gallop in the enrichment sphere.

What can be inferred from the Tehran's stand?

- Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's demands have consistently centered on full sanctions removal but the new government headed by Ebrahim Raisi has repeatedly proclaimed that nothing is agreed on unless everything has been agreed on.
- It seems that the Raisi government is testing international red lines, and trying to leverage Iran's expanding nuclear programme to produce more concessions from the international community, without paying significant costs.
- So there is an increasing pessimism on whether the Iran nuclear deal can be revived.
- It is certain that Iran and the U.S. will both fail if they try to corner each other with a "Trumpian" attitude.
- The key question which remains now is whether the nuclear negotiations in Vienna could become substantive or collapse with no results.

References

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