UK and the Northern Ireland Protocol

What is the issue?

- The UK has demanded "significant" changes to Northern Ireland's post-Brexit trading arrangements [the Northern Ireland Protocol].
- The rift over post-Brexit trade rules for Northern Ireland is threatening to become a full-scale confrontation between Britain and the European Union.

What is the Northern Ireland Protocol?

- The Brexit treaty on Northern Ireland was negotiated by British PM Boris Johnson and called the Northern Ireland Protocol.
- The Northern Ireland frontier is long-contested.
- Parts of it were fortified during the decades of violence known as The Troubles.
- But after a peace deal in the late 1990s, those visible signs of division have melted way along the open border.
- No one wants checkpoints back.
- The single market allowed goods to flow freely across European borders without checks.
- But as part of the Brexit plan, Boris Johnson insisted on leaving Europe's customs union and its single market.
- This would require bringing back checkpoints at the border.
- The protocol thus sets out a plan to deal with this unique situation.
- It had sought to avoid a hard border coming up between Northern Ireland (part of the UK) and the Republic of Ireland (EU member).
- Accordingly, the region is expected to follow some EU rules in trade with the Irish Republic.
- This effectively leaves Northern Ireland half inside the European system, and half inside the British one.
- The hard Brexiteers in Mr. Johnson's Conservative Party were critical of this clause, claiming that it endangers the U.K.'s sovereignty.

What are the key contentions?

- The current trade arrangement means more checks on goods entering Northern Ireland from mainland Britain.
- This effectively creates a border down the Irish Sea and divides the UK.

- Faced with all the new bureaucracy, some British companies have stopped supplying stores in Northern Ireland.
- They simply said that they could not handle the added paperwork now needed.
- For some in Northern Ireland who want the region to remain part of the UK, it feels as if their British identity is under threat.
- Johnson's alliesaccuse the EU of inflexibility in applying rules.
- They are also concerned about the lack of sensitivity to feelings in parts of Northern Ireland and vengeful hostility toward Britain for exiting the bloc.
- Beyond the trade concerns, there are also fears about the fragility of the Northern Ireland peace.
- EU leaders believe that the bloc's existential interests are being put at risk.
- [The single market is one of its cornerstones.
- If that is undermined, it could threaten the building blocks of European integration.]
- U.S. President Joe Biden, who talks often about his Irish heritage, has also warned Johnson not to do anything to undermine the trade arrangement that helped to end the violence.

What is the recent development?

- Britain said that the treaty could create so many problems.
- It expects that the treaty might have to be abandoned if it cannot be rewritten.
- The European Commission, the EU' s executive body, said it would seek creative solutions but would not renegotiate the deal.
- With UK's present demand for changes to the trade arrangement, the post-Brexit relations between Britain and the EU is further strained.

What options does Britain have?

- Britain says it has grounds already to deploy an emergency clause known as Article 16.
- The Article permits it to act unilaterally, effectively allowing it to suspend parts of the protocol.
- It doesnot plan to do so for the moment, but the option remains.
- If Britain does this, the European side will most likely accuse Johnson of breaking a treaty.
- This could lead to retaliation and even a trade war between Britain and the EU.
- Meanwhile, Britain's current stance is also seen as a negotiation tactic, to bring EU to terms.

Source: The Indian Express

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