In its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, the Joe Biden Administration warned ambiguously that Iran “might get a technology that would be a potential game-changer.” As the negotiating parties work to resolve critical issues in the Vienna nuclear talks, the US is redoubling its efforts to prevent the Iranians from acquiring such technology or destroying the knowledge behind it, should Iran achieve it. This explains why talks in Vienna aimed at reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) have so far failed to produce tangible results. However, many politicians had expected them to be completed in late May or early June.

US administration officials are now imposing a kind of “note of caution,” despite the optimistic expectations expressed by the negotiating parties during the last five rounds of nuclear talks, which began in early April. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said on this occasion that the US still does not know whether Iran is ready to resume compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal. “It remains unclear whether Iran is willing and prepared to do to come back into compliance. We don’t know if that’s actually going to happen,” he said, speaking to Congress.

These remarks prompted a sharp response from Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who caustically remarked that his country was unsure whether the United States was ready to abandon the failed “maximum pressure” policy that the Trump Administration and his nation’s Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had once adopted against Iran. “It remains unclear whether @POTUS and @SecBlinken are ready to bury Trump and @mikepompeo’s failed “maximum pressure” policy and stop using economic terrorism as a negotiating “leverage.” Iran complies with the JCPOA. Just read paragraph 36. It’s time to change course,” Zarif wrote on his Twitter.

Antony Blinken’s remark was another clear confirmation that the negotiations in Vienna have reached a critical point...
where all sides must make tough decisions, and this will probably happen soon. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi, who heads the Iranian negotiating delegation, confirmed this assessment after briefing Iranian lawmakers on the outcome of the fifth round of talks, which had already ended without concrete results. Speaking after a meeting of the Iranian Parliament National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Araghchi was forced to state: "Negotiations have reached a point where some key issues still need to be resolved. We will soon begin a new round of talks and hope to make progress on various issues, but it is too early to judge whether this will be the last round of talks."

But what are these "key issues" that, if not resolved, will derail the entire negotiation process? The Iranian and US and other sides of the negotiations on these issues have remained hidden, which, if announced, will show the extent to which the US is trying to prevent independent, sovereign nations from making scientific advances. According to world media reports, these issues have much to do with Iran’s technological advances since it cut its compliance with the agreement. During the Vienna talks, the US demanded Iran to “destroy” the advanced centrifuges it began using at the Fordow and Natanz fuel enrichments plants a year after the US withdrew from the JCPOA. These centrifuges, known as IR9, are 50 times more potent in producing uranium than those covered by the JCPOA, Reuters reported.

Iran categorically rejected the US demand just as Washington rejected the Iranian demand that the US lift all sanctions imposed, reimposed, or renamed by the Trump administration. In an attempt to create a “golden mean,” Russia, backed by China, suggest that Iran seal and keep advanced centrifuges inside the country under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), according to a report by Al-Arab Al-Jadid, a Qatari newspaper close to Qatar. It remains unclear whether the US will accept this offer. Still, the negative statements by many Western diplomats and analysts about the next round of talks leave little room for optimism about their speedy conclusion. Citing highly knowledgeable sources, Reuters stated that the remaining issues, including Western concerns about Iran’s nuclear know-how expansion, may require weeks or possibly months of further complex negotiations.

Whether Iran and the US will agree on complex issues such as advanced centrifuges and Iranian production of uranium metal in the next round remains to be seen. The US seems to be more concerned about Iran’s scientific progress in producing sophisticated equipment and materials than about accumulating these materials, which could easily be destroyed or removed from the country. Washington’s problem is not whether Iran will destroy its equipment but whether it will produce them quickly. After all, he who can produce it the first time can reproduce it at any other time.

Many sensible politicians still express hope for the success of the negotiations in Vienna, despite many rounds of meetings to be held. Of course, it would be ideal if the current negotiations in Vienna could reach an agreement that Congress would support, but this is unlikely. Most Republican senators would oppose any possible deal with Iran, except one that would amount to a complete surrender to Tehran. At the same time, “the JCPOA can be quickly restored, and the parties can address other issues of concern in a way that strengthens support for rapprochement,” stressed Mark Fitzpatrick, an Associate Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). As a specialist, he said that the strategy of continuing maximum pressure on Iran by the US has been ineffective and unproductive. US President Joe Biden’s administration verbally rejected the policy and acknowledged its failure while expressing a willingness to return to the Iran deal. However, it has taken no concrete steps in this direction and has maintained sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

In an article published by the Canadian website Global Research, American author Daniel Larison emphasized that economic sanctions imposed by US administrations, particularly against Iran, is another form of war. The US is obsessed with this kind of warfare and practices it more than anyone else. He pointed out that sanctions are an instrument of pressure on sovereign states to achieve their goals. Washington has dramatically expanded restrictive measures over the past 20 years, from President Barack Obama to President Donald Trump. And with the latter, the sanctions pressure on many states, including Iran, which does not obey the American dictate, has reached its highest level. As for Joe Biden, who came to power, he left these measures unchanged. According to the author of the article, the economic wars conducted by the US under the name of “sanctions” are based on false information, causing the deaths of tens of thousands of people in Iran. These figures are incomparable to the amount of humanitarian disaster that affects entire peoples because these sanctions involve great destruction of the economy. The United States seeks to provoke wars and subjugate sovereign states.

As always, Israel, which has arrogated to itself the right to dictate its will to other states, has poured oil on the Iranian-American fire of relations, or rather disagreements. The outgoing head of Israel’s Mossad intelligence
service, Yossi Cohen, explicitly admitted that his country was behind the recent attacks on Iran’s nuclear program and the assassination of scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. He also threatened other scientists in Iran’s nuclear program that they too might become targets for assassination, even when diplomats in Vienna are trying to negotiate terms to salvage their nuclear agreement with world powers and improve the situation in this very troubled region of the world. It should be noted that the media in Israel operate under a strict policy that requires journalists to edit stories related to security issues through military censors. The fact that the censors edited Cohen’s words suggests that Israel wants to make another, new warning to Iran against the backdrop of the Vienna nuclear talks. Iran has repeatedly complained about Israeli attacks. The Iranian Ambassador to the IAEA, Kazem Gharib Abadi, has warned that these incidents “will not only be met with strong responses but will certainly leave Iran no choice but to review its transparency measures and cooperation policies.”

Of course, it will take time to establish trust between two states, each with such vivid memories of hostility by the other. In the meantime, implementation of the restored JCPOA will be based on verification and strict monitoring. It is only natural, and many hope so, that Iran and the United States can talk in Vienna about other issues of concern to each of them and find ways to mitigate the dangers and harm each perceives in its own direction and thereby establish peace and tranquility in this very turbulent region of the world.

**Viktor Mikhin, corresponding member of RANS, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”**.