The UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, has called on the US President, Joe Biden, to cancel the sanctions against Iran and on Tehran to reopen talks on the full implementation of the nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He also presented his (incomplete) report on the implementation of the deal to the UN Security Council:

“I continue to believe that a full restoration of the plan remains the best way to ensure that the nuclear program of the Islamic Republic of Iran remains exclusively peaceful.”

Readers will remember that in 2018 the USA withdrew from the JCPOA and reimposed the sanctions that had been lifted in accordance with the deal. These sanctions include entirely unjustified restrictions on trade with Iran in the energy, shipping and financial sectors. International companies are required to cease doing business with Iran, or face being excluded from the more profitable US markets. In turn, Iran threatened to withdraw from all talks unless the sanctions were lifted. Under pressure from the international community, and as a canny preemptive move, last month the USA lifted a few of the sanctions - against three petrochemicals firms and two individuals who had, in the past, traded with Tehran.

The revival of the Iran nuclear deal is a key foreign policy priority for Joe Biden’s administration, or so it claims. The sixth round of the talks between the US and Iran, held in Vienna, ended earlier in June, and challenging negotiations on a seventh round are already under way, though as yet no date has been fixed. It should be said that after six rounds of intense talks on the possible reinstatement of the 2015 nuclear deal, the talks in Vienna have reached a
key stage - and may develop in a number of different directions, with scenarios ranging from the complete reinstatement of the deal in its original form to the failure and discontinuation of the talks. When the sixth round of talks aimed at reviving the JCPOA ended, one thing was clear from the war of words between the USA and Iran: the next round will be the most difficult and aggressive so far - but it is unlikely to be the last.

Firstly, Rob Malley, the head of the US delegation at the Vienna talks has made it clear that the US will not cancel all the sanctions imposed by Donald Trump’s administration. He even threatened to withdraw from the talks if Iran continues to insist on the US doing so. “What they’ve asked for – in principle, they’ve said they want all of the sanctions that President Trump’s administration reimposed or imposed since 2018 to be lifted. And that’s a lot. And we’ve said we’re prepared to remove those that we think we need to remove to be back in compliance with the JCPOA. But we’re not going to lift all of the sanctions that the Trump administration imposed,” Malley insisted. Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, reiterated Malley’s threat, adding “the ball is in Iran’s court”.

But the Iranians see things quite differently: in their view the US unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in flagrant violation of the UN Security Council resolution, and so it should therefore accept the renewal of all its obligations under both the JCPOA and UN Resolution 2231. What is more, the US now has a Democrat administration, headed by Joe Biden, who was serving as Vice President under Barak Obama when the US signed the JCPOA and the UN Security Council resolution. The West, and, above all, the US is clearly trying to take advantage of the current situation in relation to the JCPOA in order to pressure Iran into accepting new obligations - both under the deal and in other unrelated areas. But it is important to remember that, until the US’s withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran had complied in full with its terms, only temporarily halting its compliance with some of its obligations under the JCPOA after the US withdrawal.

Seyed Abbas Araghchi, Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator, considers that many points have now been sufficiently negotiated and it is time for the countries to make a decision. “The Islamic Republic of Iran has already made tough decisions - when the United States withdrew from the JCPOA and Iran decided to stay in the deal. It was Iran’s big and difficult decision that led to the preservation of the nuclear deal until this date. Now it is the turn of the opposing parties, and according to the negotiations we had, they must decide and reach a conclusion on the revival of the JCPOA so that we can reach an agreement,” he said to Iranian state media after briefing the lawmakers on the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee on the Vienna talks. The briefing took place on the day before the talks were scheduled to reopen, but they were postponed, partly due to ongoing internal discussions in the participating countries. As far as Iran is concerned, the sixth round brought relatively little progress, but it provided the opportunity for intensive discussions aimed at developing a strategy for the negotiations.

To achieve this, Iran set up a new committee, made up of representatives of institutions including Iran’s Higher National Security Council, the Iranian Parliament (the Majles) and the government, as well as members of the President-elect’s transition team. The new committee’s key function is to decide whether the outcome of the Vienna talks is consistent with the policy of the nation’s leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. It is also tasked with monitoring the Vienna talks and approving or rejecting any conclusions. With the Vienna talks moving towards an endgame, the committee has set out three possible scenarios in relation to the final results of the discussions on the JCPOA. Firstly, the committee accepts the results of the Vienna talks and approves the reinstated JCPOA. Secondly, it does not approve the results of the Vienna talks and recommends that the development of Iran’s nuclear program be sped up. Thirdly, it rejects the results and proposes a new schedule for talks with the West to resolve outstanding issues, with a new format and guided by new principles.

It is not yet clear which of these scenarios will take place. But it looks as if this question will be decided during the rescheduled seventh round of talks, which is expected to take place in the near future. According to a report on the Iranian news site Asr-Iran, the Vienna talks will restart, and the seventh round will be the deciding one. And this time, the report adds, officials from Iran’s petroleum, banking and insurance industries will join the negotiating team to discuss how Iran can get its frozen assets released and get the bans on petroleum sales and banking transactions lifted.

But whether the seventh round will bring the Vienna talks to a conclusion remains an open question. If the US continues to prevaricate, despite its declared intention to reinstate the JCPOA and cancel the sanctions, the talks will run into difficulties, as Iran has clearly stated that it will not allow the US to renege on its responsibilities a second time. Iran has demanded that the US provide guarantees that it will not withdraw from the deal again. It also wants the US to extend the authorization period for foreign companies working in Iran, and increase it from six months to four years if the US withdraws from the JCPOA again, according to the Tehran Times, which cites an informed source. The Iranians have also called for the creation of a committee, headed by Iran, which will periodically
monitor progress in the lifting of the US sanctions, and which, according to the same source, will operate along similar lines to the IAEA inspectorate in charge of overseeing Tehran’s compliance with its obligations under the JCPOA.

It is also worth noting that Mahmoud Vaezi, Chief of Staff of the President of Iran, has expressed the hope that the nuclear talks under way in Vienna will end with a positive result, but has also insisted that there can be no agreement until all Iran’s demands are satisfied. It is clear that a statement from such a senior official must be taken as representing the position of the country’s Supreme Leader. In particular, he commented: “What has been agreed so far is the most important economic issues that remain as an understanding, but the negotiating team has said that whatever we have agreed on will be ‘final’ when all our demands are met. For this reason, the rest of the cases are being discussed. We hope to have good news on this in the coming weeks.”

In addition, Emmanuel Macron, the French President, Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, and Xi Jinping, the Chinese President all recognize that there is now a “window of opportunity” for the talks on the reinstatement of the 2015 nuclear deal. According to a senior French official, the three leaders, speaking together in a video conference, agreed on the necessity of pushing the talks forward in order to arrive at a deal as soon as possible and avoid the risk of further proliferation of nuclear weapons. The source spoke anonymously, in line with presidential protocol. “We need to do this now”, said the source, adding that he was speaking in order to encourage the negotiators to try harder, as there have been no real results in several months of talks.

It is clear that the Vienna talks have reached a pivotal stage, at which the two main participants, the US and Iran, need to make a hard decision, and do so quickly, as the “window of opportunity” could easily close, in which case the options for political solutions - both in relation to Iran and in further afield - will be much reduced, and military considerations will dominate.

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