

Open letter to the UK Government from Sir John Thomson GCMG New thinking required over Iran's nuclear programme

Introduction

Everyone realises the current strategy towards Iran is failing. Iran is edging towards a nuclear weapon capability, and hardliners are using western hostility to build up strong domestic support in reaction.

Sir John Thomson has been promoting the idea of converting Iran's enrichment facility into a sophisticated multinational operation. This was outlined in BASIC's 2nd Iran paper, available online at <http://www.basicint.org/pubs/Papers/iran2.pdf>. He deals in this letter with the two principle objections to his idea: that Iran would use this as a cloak for covert operations; and that Iran would expropriate the facilities. Both would be more difficult for Iran with international personnel running around the place; and the sophisticated black-box technology used would be more difficult for Iran to reverse engineer.

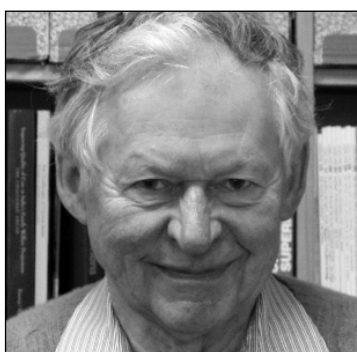
We do not have the luxury of implementing ideal solutions that guarantee non-proliferation - but we do have choices. The Iranians have already indicated a willingness to negotiate around this option - it minimises the risk of proliferation whilst meeting the Iranians' bottom line. Sir John offers tactical advice the British government would do well to listen to.

Paul Ingram
Executive Director,
BASIC

Monday, 19 May, 2008

Dear Cabinet Ministers,

The Iran crisis has taken yet more turns for the worse with the rejection by Tehran of Security Council resolution 1803 and the dithering reaction to it by the great powers. The 3+3 held together though barely and British diplomacy deserves credit for that - but that is the extent of Western success. The resolution was so watered down as to be almost colourless and unlike its two predecessors, it failed to achieve unanimity in the Council. What was advertised a year or two ago as a big stick turns out to be a twig. The instant Iranian rejection was a matter of course. Following that the 3+3 have had difficulty in deciding how to improve their June 2006 offer containing some vaguely worded meagre concessions. The belated agreement last week, according to the press, produced a few "very modest" improvements. This hardly seems likely to appeal to Iranian pride and self-interest sufficiently to cause Tehran to abandon a nationally popular policy based, as they claim, on treaty rights.



Sir John Thomson

Sir John Thomson, Research Affiliate at MIT, served as the United Kingdom Ambassador to India and as the Permanent Representative in the United Nations. He has also been Head of Policy and Planning in the British Diplomatic Service, and a Minister at NATO.

To be blunt, Western policy is not working. It is not even nearly working. What is the world to conclude when the US Secretary of State pleads with cocky Iranian leaders to talk anywhere, any time but only if they will first concede (as they see it) the main point at issue? Western weakness, contempt for Security Council decisions and wishful thinking are all too evident. And, I would add, the non-proliferation regime, the defence of which is supposed to be the main object of our policy, is eroding.

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If a policy is not working the sensible conclusion is to change it. To retort, as some are inclined to do, that change is a sign of weakness and encourages bad behaviour is, in this case, untenable. Over the past four years, the West has made at least half a dozen changes and cannot claim therefore that change is necessarily a bad thing or contrary to principle. The trouble is that since the Iranians 'voluntarily' suspended their enrichment operations in 2003 and 2004, the West has got nothing in return. Why? Probably because the changes were too little, too late, and in any case, ill-conceived to alter Iranian minds.

The result is that the Iranians think they are winning. The prospect, as it appears to them, is the opportunity to do as they please, either to stick by their signature of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons or on the contrary, to make them. I need scarcely point out that the latter would be a disaster for the whole international community. But nevertheless they may do it, if we are not adroit.

Everybody knew that if India made nuclear weapons Pakistan would do likewise and something similar could happen in the Iranian case. Personally, I do not see an Iranian nuclear arsenal as inevitable. There are people in Tehran who understand the likely consequences and consider that the long term interests of their country are best served by a nuclear weapon free zone in the Middle East. But even these people are not immune to the case made by the hard-liners that a nuclear weapon will deter attacks by the US or Israel or both. Israel's own understandable case for nuclear weapons is similarly based on frightening, recurrent threats to its existence. Repeatedly since the 'axis of evil' speech Iran has been able to quote parallel (and more credible) threats. The effect has been to strengthen the hard-liners, to solidify public opinion behind the regime and to support the deterrence case.

This is not the only counter-productive element in Western policy. We have, in effect, held the door open since early 2006 to an Iranian clandestine programme as a consequence of their ceasing to operate the Additional Protocol. We do not know whether or not they have taken advantage of this opportunity. However, there is no doubt that they have exploited our position to increase the number of their operating centrifuges from a handful to over three thousand and counting. In no way can these developments be represented as a Western success. Yet the same experts who used to be worried by the handful of centrifuges now express relative unconcern about the three thousand plus. They claim the Iranians have not 'mastered' the techniques, whatever exactly that may mean. Yet there is no proof of this. Some leading experts believe the Iranians for political reasons may be masking their 'mastery'. It is possible that we are misleading ourselves through wishful thinking.

The timing is unfortunate. As things stand, the door is likely to remain open for the next eighteen months or so. No-one any longer, it seems, expects significant progress during the remainder of the Bush administration. Whoever his successor may be, there will be a raft of new appointments, Congressional approval procedures and the composition of position papers. Experience shows that this will not be completed before May and may well be later. By then the imminence of the Iranian presidential elections will incline both sides to await their result. So, September/October 2009 appears to be the earliest realistic date for a serious negotiation aimed at the best achievable agreement. Meanwhile, the Iranians will continue to exploit their opportunities.

It is a big thing to take responsibility for the risks that:

- the Iranians will 'master' the technology, if they have not already done so;
- they will install several thousand more centrifuges and develop the IR2;
- they will have the opportunity to begin (if they have not already done so) a covert enrichment operation;
- the Western position in the Security Council and more widely will erode;
- the hardliners in Tehran will be strengthened and the apparent Iranian willingness to reach a compromise agreement will decline;
- more speculatively, the above setbacks will strengthen those in Washington and Tel Aviv who demand a military attack on Iran.

These are major risks with potentially serious consequences. It is hard to perceive how the acceptance of them can be justified unless, perhaps, the policy which creates them is very likely to be successful in its main objective before the risks can arise. But that is not the case. Moreover, there is a lower risk alternative with a higher probability of achieving the main objective.

This is the scheme for a multilateral partnership to run an enrichment facility in Iran on commercial lines which has been widely published, discussed in think-tank and academic conferences and is generally known as the Forden-Thomson plan. (Geoffrey Forden is my physicist colleague at MIT). It is not the only possible improvement on present policy but it is worth observing that perhaps the most popular of the alternatives (to which I have referred in the open literature), namely a small pilot plant, is no longer practicable. It was, so far as I know, first recommended in 2004-05 when the Iranians were experimenting with the P1 centrifuge but were still far from deploying their first 164 centrifuge cascade. The idea was that the Iranians might work with what they had then but no more or perhaps be allowed to go to say 200. Now there is no prospect of getting them to accept less than say 3000 and then only for a limited period. I will not describe in detail the Forden-Thomson plan since the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has seen and commented on more than one edition. However, the following observations may be thought to substantiate my claim that it is superior to present policy.

In principle, the plan contains two risks; a cloak for a covert Iranian operation and expropriation. But the first risk is negligible compared with what is happening under current policy. Nothing is in place to deter or detect Iranian covert activities. By contrast, the Forden-Thomson plans provides two levels of IAEA monitoring and inspection in addition to the obligatory standard level, first, the Additional Protocol, second, special measures designed for the situation. Our plan also provides that the multilateral partnership would take over all Iranian enrichment-related facilities, not just the centrifuges. Thus we would know if anyone tried to remove surreptitiously hexafluoride gas or any material in the chain leading up to it. And so there would be no material to feed into any centrifuges that somehow evaded IAEA inspection. In addition, there would be international personnel on duty at every stage of the enrichment operation – on each shift in the plant, in personnel management, in the overall management, in the secretariat and accounts, in the guard rooms etc. We would know the significant Iranian technicians and engineers and could investigate suspicious absences or activities. In short, it would be hard to devise a more watertight protection against covert operations.

As for expropriation – to call ‘nationalization’ by its real name – that is theoretically a possibility wherever there is a host country. But in this case it is a low risk, unlikely scenario because the Iranians if they really intended to make a nuclear weapon would not be so stupid as to enter into a treaty establishing an international partnership only to seize the property and investments of three or four powerful partners. In our scheme we suggest the initial partners might be Iran, France, Germany and the UK with Russia as a possible addition and also – an Iranian suggestion – South Africa. Furthermore, expropriation would be tantamount to telling the world Iran was about to make a weapon but did not have one yet – a particularly dangerous predicament if you have powerful enemies.

Turning to the reasons for optimism, the following are amongst those particularly worth noting:

- the multilateral concept has been encouraged by the IAEA and specifically derives from the report of an expert committee including all the main Western countries and Iran (February 2005); there is growing pressure for the idea to be applied widely in the international fuel cycle;
- on at least half a dozen occasions, the present Iranian government has said publicly they would accept an international partnership to enrich uranium in Iran and they have complained that they have received no Western comment; the silence, they say, has been ‘resounding’;
- several solid reasons suggest that the Iranian national interest lies in accepting the plan – their own scheme will never allow them to produce anywhere near enough fuel indigenously for their proposed twenty civil reactors by 2035 whereas ours will, and in addition can provide high quality fuel for export and as a resource for an IAEA virtual fuel bank; they would get the hefty foreign investment they seek; there would be interesting work for all their engineers and technicians who would learn from their Western counterparts;
- the plan would ensure (in several ways, including those suggested above) that Iran did not make nuclear weapons but would secure the Iranian bottom line, enrichment on Iranian soil, so it would be a compromise in which neither side was defeated, and both could join in support of the international non-proliferation regime; it would thus be a vehicle whereby the bitter opposition on which Islamic extremism feeds would be diminished, and the moderate pro-Western element in Iranian society encouraged.

That, in brief, is my substantive argument. The tactical issue is how to get quickly into fruitful negotiation with the Iranians before their hard-liners exploit the opportunities presented by our 'open-door' and conclude that they have won and therefore have no need to compromise. This in turn raises the issue of managing relations with the other members of the 3+3.

Several channels are available for opening negotiations with the Iranians without pre-conditions yet also without explicitly renouncing former Western positions. Whichever way or ways are selected, the opening gambit might be to ask them to elucidate their statements about a multilateral partnership in an exchange of views in which we set out our suggestions. The going will already be harder than it would have been a year ago but until we try this we will not know whether or not we are missing an opportunity to secure that Iran does not make nuclear weapons.

Diplomatically, the UK has played a key role in support of the present policy, a role which entitles us to tell the other members of the 3+3 that it is time for a change. The Americans under their present leadership and the French will demur but they are unlikely to dispute the argument above about the two presidential elections and their effect on timing. It is scarcely possible for anyone to deny that time is working against us. If the UK takes the lead Germany will pay attention. Russia and China will welcome in principle a plan which has a good chance of avoiding Iran making nuclear weapons. They have seen in the North Korean case what happens when Western countries allow themselves to be governed by wishful thinking. Of course it will be best if the 3+3 agree to commission Solana to act with wide discretion on the lines suggested above. But if not, willing like-minded members of the 3+3 can do so keeping the others informed. In any event, we need to put the three US presidential candidates in the picture.

This is a long letter to address to Cabinet Ministers: my excuse is that some of you may not be fully aware of the timing problem or of all that is at stake. The Foreign and Defence Secretaries in addition to the Prime Minister are no doubt primarily concerned. But BERR has nuclear responsibilities and several Departments are politically affected by events influencing energy prices and availability and also stability in the Middle East including Iraq.

Yours sincerely,



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This letter is a thought-provoking contribution to the public debate over Iran's nuclear program and its international legal and geopolitical context.

The views expressed here are those of the author and not necessarily those of BASIC, its staff, trustees or funders. We welcome feedback: please reply by email to: info@basicint.org

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