

Bringing Iran into the nuclear family

Gordon Brown's admission that Iran has a right to pursue a nuclear energy programme is a sign of improving relations



Paolo Cotta-Ramusino

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Prime Minister Gordon Brown's speech today at Lancaster House goes in the direction of beginning a more constructive dialogue with Iran. In recognising Iran's right to nuclear energy, and in offering to use Iran as a "test case" in helping non-nuclear countries develop civilian nuclear power in a way that reduces the associated nuclear weapons proliferation risks, Brown begins to frame the central concerns in a way that might lead toward a more productive interaction between Iran and the west.

Taken with recent UK statements for "an assertive and co-operative strategy, founded on the premise that the goal of a nuclear weapons free world is achievable", these twin measures reinforce the basic principles of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which guarantees the right of non-nuclear weapons states to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, while committing the nuclear weapons states to disarmament.

Coupled with US president Barack Obama's offer to find ways to negotiate with Iran, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's offer to invite Iran to upcoming discussions on Afghanistan, it seems the west is finally starting to recognise the need to discuss proliferation concerns in a broader strategic framework.

In 2008, Pugwash held four meetings in Europe in which – in their personal capacities—some Iranian officials met with western and other experts. The following are my personal perspectives, based on these and many other interactions with people from the region.

The success of any negotiation requires that each party perceives the result as a victory. In this case, Iran must be convinced that it will be able to acquire economic and political gains through better relations with the west, and the west must be reassured about

containing the risks of nuclear proliferation. Both parties should believe that talks will lead to a better regional security architecture.

The general philosophical approach of the Iranian political leadership is that agreement is possible if certain "basic principles" including "justice" are respected. Justice is antithetic to nuclear weapons and the Iranian rejection of nuclear weapons as a legitimate instrument of warfare should be considered positive and important.

Justice also requires that there should be "no extra discrimination", in addition to the already discriminating distinction in the NPT between Nuclear Weapon States and Non-Nuclear Weapon States. There is nothing in the NPT that forbids uranium enrichment. On the other hand, regulating the enrichment capability on a mutually agreed basis, strengthening the international monitoring regime and implementing multinational fuel cycle units or consortiums, are all topics that easily could be discussed, and where a consensus should be possible.

The relationship between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is rather a positive one (and could be better if the additional protocol were ratified). There should be no obstacle to continuing the review of past Iranian nuclear activities (if continuing such a review is needed). Of course Iran could voluntarily give up uranium enrichment and fuel fabrication inside Iran if it had absolute guarantees of nuclear fuel supply. This is the preferred opinion of many in the west and economically it can make sense. Iran though seems not to be enough reassured to agree to this viewpoint. If future talks are focused only on denying enrichment capability to Iran, these talks will go nowhere, while from the point of view of preventing proliferation, what really matters is monitoring and international control.

In reference to the possibility of extending the sanction list against Iran, as a counter-measure if dialogue fails, one has to be aware of the fact that maintaining an isolationist stance toward Iran will not per se eliminate the risk of proliferation. On the contrary, if nuclear activities are developed in a climate of international cooperation, then chances are that we will have a situation of better transparency.

There are many important initiatives that should be put to Iran: discussions on disarmament and non-proliferation issues, and specific safeguards for the nuclear civilian programs could be explored in talks among international groups of scientists including, crucially, Iranian scientists; dialogue on regional security issues could start with maritime security in the Persian Gulf and proceed with Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, etc.

Looking ahead there may be a common interest in proceeding towards the re-establishment of US-Iran diplomatic relations, first by having relevant departments

manned by nationals of the respective countries, who should be entitled to issue visas; in organising parliamentarians' exchange visits and inter-parliamentarian meetings; in discussing economic cooperation in conjunction with the removal of sanctions; in facilitating cultural and scientific exchanges and visits.

On June 12 Iran will hold elections. Whoever wins the Iranian election will have to start from the position negotiated by the previous leadership. If the US and EU decide to wait for the Iranian elections in the hope of a change in the presidency, crucial time and opportunities could be lost. Things that are possible now will not necessarily be possible later. Now is the moment to press the "restart" button on relations with Iran and get out of the box of previously defined schemes. It will, however, take determined political will and "unclenched fists" on all sides.

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