

## Nuclear family gathering

*Barack Obama brings the world to Washington to try to keep track of loose nuclear material.*



IN 2007 armed gunmen attacked a nuclear facility in South Africa, breaching heavy security before they were chased off (and never caught). The incident illustrated that the possibility of nuclear materials falling into the wrong hands is far from an abstract one. The fears come in three separate but related forms: that nuclear weapons might fall into the wrong hands; that weapons-grade highly enriched uranium and plutonium that could be used to make nuclear bombs might go missing; and that larger amounts of other radioactive material, from discarded X-ray machines to spent fuel, might be used to make a dirty bomb. Securing nuclear material now means getting more states than ever to co-operate. This is what the nuclear security conference that opened in Washington, DC, on April 12th hoped to achieve.

With 46 countries attending, and many sending their leaders, Barack Obama's administration is selling the conference as the beginning of a new era. The last time America gathered so many world leaders gathered at the president's invitation was when Franklin D. Roosevelt convened them to create the UN. Mr Obama's more modest goal for the meeting is to produce some steps towards securing all nuclear material within three years.

Mr Obama can already point to some progress. On Monday Ukraine announced that it would eliminate its stockpiles of highly enriched uranium by 2012. American officials also said that China is now prepared to work with them on a new UN Security Council resolution for sanctions against Iran. However the Chinese government merely said it had "the same overall goal" on the Iranian nuclear issue as America, and repeated that the issue should be resolved through dialogue and negotiations.

One world leader with a particular interest in whether Iran gets a bomb, Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, opted to stay away. Given the lengths to which Mr Obama went to get other world leaders who are not such close allies of America to attend this looked odd. On Iran, however, Israel tends to speak loudly and act discreetly. A two-man Israeli mission recently went to Beijing to try and persuade China not to oppose, or at any rate not to veto, a new UN resolution on sanctions. Mr Netanyahu's government also apparently calculated that his presence at the summit would make it harder for America to keep attacks on Israel's nuclear capability out of the conference's closing statement.

Dealing with Israel sensitively is the least of the tasks that Mr Obama has set himself on nuclear proliferation. According to a 2008 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency, of the 30 countries generating nuclear power, 24 are considering expanding it. Forty more countries have expressed interest in nuclear power, and 20 are actively considering

programmes. The agency has forecast that by 2030 nuclear-power generation could increase by a quarter (using 2006 as a baseline) if all current plans go ahead, and 93% if "reasonable and promising projects" do. Though this might mitigate carbon dioxide emissions, it will mean a lot more enriched nuclear material generated and in many more countries.

Then there is the rivalry between India and Pakistan to contend with. One of the first of Mr Obama's many bilateral meetings was with Yusuf Raza Gilani, Pakistan's prime minister. Pakistan sees a double-standard in America's aid to India's civilian nuclear programme (freeing, as Pakistan sees it, Indian resources for its weapons programme). Fearful that India's nuclear arsenal will overwhelm its own, Pakistan continues to block negotiations on a treaty that would freeze all production of weapons-grade material.

Add to this the fact that multilateral arrangements like the American-led Proliferation Security Initiative are often seen by developing and non-aligned countries as tainted by an American-dominated security agenda, and Mr Obama might have just decided to throw up his hands in despair. Instead he has made a start, turning the goodwill generated from agreeing with Russia to reduce America's stockpile of weapons into something real, thanks to Ukraine's offer, before the non-proliferation treaty conference next month. Now all that remains is for Mr Obama to persuade nearly 30 other countries with stocks of highly enriched uranium, not to mention his own electorate, to do the same.

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