

The risk of renaissance

The more nuclear reactors there are, the higher the risk. This is the logical conclusion made by Yukiya Amano, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). ‘As more countries build more nuclear reactors, the risk of nuclear incidents will probably grow,’ he says. And so accidents cannot be excluded. Does this mean the world is on the brink of a nuclear renaissance?

Right now, in 2010, there are more than 430 nuclear reactors in 31 countries. You would think that they accounted for the lion’s share of worldwide electricity production, but that is not true. Nuclear energy constituted 16% of the world’s electricity supply 25 years ago. Just over twenty years later, in 2006, this had hardly changed.

But the times they are a-changing. The need for energy security could cause the current to reverse. Countries may be tempted to go nuclear thanks to our dependency on fossil fuel imports and volatile oil prices. This certainly holds true for those countries that have had their gas supplies cut off by ‘big brother’ suppliers. These actions literally put smaller countries temporarily out in the cold, often at the most inconvenient times.

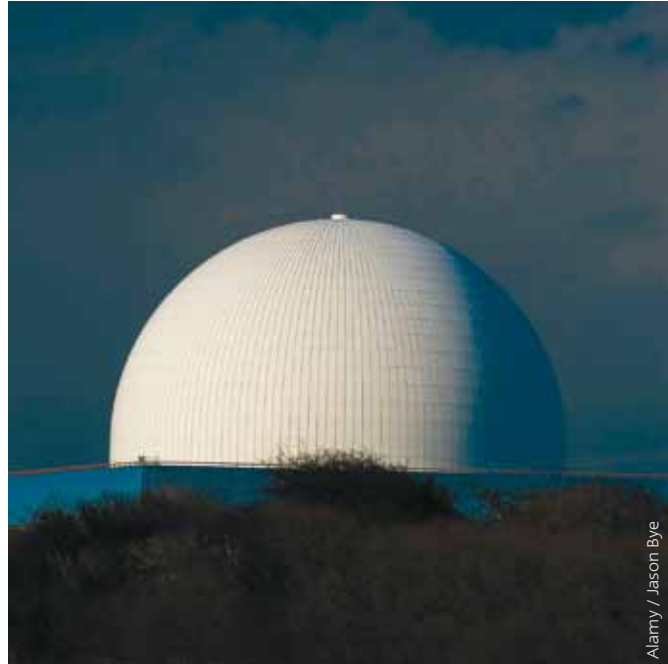
The argument of climate security has also helped legitimize nuclear energy, which is perceived as being a ‘carbon low’ source of electricity production. So there is something controversial about the catch-all notion of ‘safety’. More energy safety entails at least two risks. Less safety, in the sense that the risks of nuclear accidents are not completely under control yet, and the risk of nuclear material falling into the wrong hands.

The IAEA is not ‘neutral’ in all this, standing passively by while the growth curve of nuclear energy rises. On the contrary, the IAEA’s mission is to help countries that decide to go nuclear. Indeed, the final statement of the most recent five-year review conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) not only supported the right of respectable countries to have civil nuclear energy, but also emphasized the international legal duty of the five legal nuclear weapons states to help ‘have nots’ develop civil nuclear energy.

Controversial as it may seem, nuclear energy is even the official bonus for the vow many countries made to permanently renounce nuclear weapons.

Amano predicted in May 2010 that by 2030 there would be around 25 nuclear newcomers. In addition to the well-known example of Iran, countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam and a number of countries in the Middle East are also potential candidates.

The director general of the IAEA is wary of the future, however, and he is not the only one. The *US Nuclear Posture*



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Review, each new president’s guiding policy document on nuclear-weapon strategy, released on April 6 2010, said ‘today’s most immediate danger is nuclear terrorism’. The fear of nuclear incidents is not unfounded. The IAEA has been keeping close track since 1995 of how many and what sort of incidents there have been.

The Illicit Trafficking Database reveals that between 1993 and 1 January 2009 there was a total of 1562 nuclear incidents. Of these confirmed incidents, 336 incidents involved the unauthorized possession of nuclear materials and related criminal activities, 421 incidents involved reported theft or loss, and 724 incidents involved other unauthorized activities and events.

It is therefore crucial in the future to prevent one security problem from being solved at another’s expense. The trade-off in the NPT between the spread of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy could very well be repeated in a new trade-off between energy-dependency and nuclear crime (or even nuclear terrorism).

Either way, the IAEA needs more leverage to keep the nuclear renaissance – such a splendid and promising term – in check by means of strict controls. I remember the previous IAEA director general, Mohamed ElBaradei, lamenting that his budget was smaller than the bag of money a football club like Chelsea spends on new players each year. ■

📖 A longer version of this article can be found at www.thebrokeronline.eu

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