

Kremlin to Push Nuke Rules at G8

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UDOMLYA, Tver Region — A quarter of a century after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster sent a radioactive cloud over Europe, Russia is casting itself as a champion of stricter safety standards for the atomic energy industry.

President Dmitry Medvedev plans to use a Group of Eight summit that starts Thursday to amplify his call for binding rules the Kremlin says are needed to avert a repeat of the crisis at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi plant.

At the core of the Russian initiative is a proposal to strengthen safety standards governed by the International Atomic Energy Agency and make adherence compulsory.

Russia wants restrictions on building reactors in earthquake-prone areas and rules requiring governments, not companies, to take the lead in responding to serious accidents.

The crippling of the Fukushima plant by an earthquake and tsunami stoked worldwide concerns about safety in the industry. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called in April for a "global rethink" on nuclear safety.

"Fukushima creates a real decision moment," said Matthew Bunn, a Harvard University nuclear security and safety expert. "I think there are a lot more countries saying, 'OK, we now understand that not everything is as it should be.'"

But analysts and environmentalists questioned whether it makes sense — practically and politically — to impose binding rules on nations that have widely differing nuclear programs and are in some cases competitors or traditional foes.

Rivalries among nuclear nations from India and Pakistan to Iran and the United States could be a barrier.

"It's just questionable, the extent that you can make the politics of all of this work," said Malcolm Grimston, a nuclear expert at British-based think tank Chatham House. "I'm not sure it would be possible, or certainly desirable, to try and impose a single international view of safety."

Whatever its success, the proposal marks a turnaround for Moscow, whose sprawling nuclear industry was watched warily from abroad after the April 1986 explosion at Reactor No. 4 at the Chernobyl plant.

"It seems to reflect an emerging Russian self-confidence about how they're managing their nuclear enterprise," Bunn said.

A senior Kremlin official said other G8 countries had expressed an interest in Russia's nuclear proposals.

"Everyone acknowledges that our nuclear safety is at the highest level," he said, and now "we have the moral right and obligation to express our vision."

The initiative allows Russia, a junior partner in financial terms with the smallest economy in the G8, to use its well-developed nuclear industry to punch above its weight in the group and extend its global influence.

It also enables Russia to improve an image still colored by Chernobyl — to promote itself as a responsible leader in an industry it is developing aggressively at home and abroad despite global concerns following the Fukushima disaster.

"We are 100 percent ready" for a new safety assessment that would likely follow an agreement on mandatory standards, said Igor Bogomolov, deputy chief engineer at the Kalininskaya nuclear power plant near Udomlya, a Tver region town located 285 kilometers northwest of Moscow.

Rosatom, the state nuclear corporation, is building 14 of the 62 reactors under construction worldwide and has been pursuing more such deals. It says the nuclear renaissance will continue despite the Japanese accident.

Some critics of Russia's proposal suspect its chief aim is to ensure that prediction comes true.

"It looks like public relations to curb the wave of anti-nuclear sentiment that has emerged after Fukushima," said Vladimir Chuprov, chief of Greenpeace Russia's energy unit.

Harvard's Bunn said it would be difficult to secure support for making IAEA standards binding — largely because of "a big issue of sovereignty that countries want to protect" — but that the lessons of Fukushima might push nations in that direction.

"The Fukushima site had been reviewed by the IAEA and others multiple times, but it's now clear that, for example, its emergency response plan was completely inadequate," he said.

Diplomats in Vienna said member states of the UN nuclear watchdog differ on whether there should be mandatory international safety rules and whether a body like the IAEA should have powers to enforce them.

Currently, the Vienna-based IAEA draws up safety recommendations, but does not have the power to implement them, with national authorities mainly responsible for safety issues.

"Even those advocating something compulsory recognize the difficulties," said one senior diplomat from a developing country. "At the end of the day, nobody would like to be subject to verification of compliance."

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