



## The Future Nuclear Powers You Should Be Worried About

Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programs -- not to mention the risk of loose nukes in Russia or Pakistan -- are worrying enough. But a number of other countries are looking to join the nuclear club, with terrifying potential consequences.

BY MORDCHAI SHUALY | OCTOBER 20, 2009

### BURMA



HLA HLA HTAY/AFP/Getty Images

**Status:** Substantial evidence points toward Burmese collaboration with North Korea in the development of a secret nuclear reactor and plutonium extraction facility. The reactor could be operational as early as 2014.

**Why you should worry:** Suspicions of a nascent Burmese nuclear weapons program are widespread. In July, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly worried about military cooperation between North Korea and Burma, [saying](#), "It would be destabilizing for the region. It would pose a direct threat to Burma's neighbors." Clinton's worries are validated by the reports of two recent Burmese defectors, one a former business executive involved in Burma's nuclear contracts, and the other an officer in a secret nuclear battalion in the Burmese Army, whose roles in Burma's clandestine nuclear program were described in the

[Sydney Morning Herald](#).

Tensions have been rising between Burma and Bangladesh since 2008, with a border dispute and a buildup of military forces along the disputed area. The tension has risen palpably; in the past two weeks, in addition to heavy tanks and artillery, at least five Burmese and four Bangladeshi warships have faced off across the Bay of Bengal. With both countries looking to go nuclear, the prospect of this conflict exploding is only more worrying.

Plus, the Burmese junta has substantial internal instability to contend with. There are reports of a recent "clearance sale" of heroin by ethnic militias, who are rushing to sell off the drugs to finance enormous weapons purchases. The drugs are being sold at bargain-basement prices in preparation for a possible resumption of civil war. These ethnic groups have been fighting the government on and off for more than 60 years. The fighting has largely occurred in Burma's border areas, but a resumption of wide-scale violence also carries the threat of discouraging foreign investments in Burma's energy sector, further weakening and isolating an already dangerous regime.

### BANGLADESH

**Status:** Cleared by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for nuclear power development Bangladesh is receiving support from Pakistan and recently signed a formal bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement with Russia

**Why you should worry:** Bangladesh's drive for nuclear power is understandable; years of underinvestment in its energy sector have made severe power outages a frequent occurrence and some estimates predict that the country could go into a total blackout by 2011 if no new plants are built. Despite these concerns and the IAEA imprimatur, domestic critics continue to raise concerns over whether Bangladesh has the infrastructure necessary to safely operate a nuclear plant, particularly because the country's coal- and gas-powered plants are frequently tripped up by poor maintenance.



SHAWKAT KHAN/AFP/Getty Images

Bangladesh is also not the most politically stable of countries. Since gaining independence in 1971 in a regional war involving Pakistan and India, two of the country's leaders have been assassinated, there have been a series of military coups (both bloody and bloodless), widespread corruption charges, bomb attacks by Islamist militants, and near-constant strikes that have paralyzed the country. In December 2008 a state of emergency ended and elections this January brought an end to interim rule. The election has hardly brought political calm, however; charges of a rigged election were followed by a mutiny of paramilitary border guards in February.

Despite relative peace between Pakistan and India in recent years, including high-level talks and appeals to the United States to arbitrate the dispute over Kashmir, the regional arms race continues unabated. Pakistan will have a new plutonium production facility operating within a year, while India is working on

cruise missiles designed for nuclear warheads and nuclear submarines. Pakistan's recent push to help Bangladesh develop nuclear capabilities only introduces another potentially devastating factor in an already-volatile mix.

## KAZAKHSTAN



STANISLAV FILIPPOV/AFP/Getty Images

**Status:** With 1.5 million metric tons of uranium deposits, Kazakhstan is the world's third-largest uranium exporter. Although it currently depends on Russia for its uranium enrichment, the country is planning to develop its own enrichment plants and begin constructing a new nuclear power plant in 2011.

**Why you should worry:** It's true that there's little risk of Kazakhstan seeking to develop a nuclear weapon. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan voluntarily gave up thousands of nuclear weapons, and the toxic legacy of 456 underground Soviet nuclear tests (test site pictured) has solidified Kazakh nonproliferation sentiment.

The danger, however, is the risk of dangerous materials falling into the wrong hands. Corruption is endemic at all levels of autocratic President Nursultan Nazarbayev's government, and the country's massive and expanding nuclear bureaucracy is no exception.

This May, authorities arrested Mukhtar Dzhakishev, head of the state-run energy firm Kazatomprom, which oversees uranium production and plans to become the world's largest producer by 2010. Dzhakishev was arrested for appropriating nearly two-thirds of the country's uranium deposits and selling them to foreign firms. Some have suggested that such a feat would be impossible and the charges are politically motivated. In any case, the implications are troubling: Either stunningly huge amounts of uranium can be shifted around without oversight, or one of the world's largest uranium producers is becoming an unstable political battleground. The risk of rogue states or terrorist groups taking advantage of this situation is significant and frightening.

## VENEZUELA

**Status:** Venezuela has a weak science infrastructure, little nuclear expertise, and limited funding. However, President Hugo Chávez's stated goal of developing civilian nuclear power may yet come to fruition with a little help from his friends.

**Why you should worry:** Despite a distinct lack of material progress, there's reason to worry about Venezuela's nuclear ambitions. Venezuela and Russia have had an increasingly close relationship, signing a number of economic, energy, and military cooperation agreements in recent years. Since 2005, Venezuela has purchased more than \$4 billion dollars worth of Russian arms, and last month Russia provided a \$2.2 billion loan for additional arms purchases. Venezuela has also become one of Iran's most active supporters; Chávez has taken to the international stage to cheer on Iran's own nuclear development and last month announced he would begin sending the Islamic Republic 20,000 barrels of gasoline a day to undermine sanctions efforts.



THOMAS COEX/AFP/Getty Images

Those relationships seem to be paying off for Chávez's nuclear ambitions, which he first announced in 2005. Venezuela has created an atomic energy commission with Russia, designed specifically to jump-start its nuclear program. And Iran is now assisting Venezuela in detecting and testing uranium deposits; Venezuelan officials estimate that there are 50,000 tons of untapped uranium in the country.

"I say it before the world: Venezuela is going to start the process of developing nuclear energy, but we're not going to make an atomic bomb, so don't be bothering us afterward ... [with] something like what they have against Iran," Chávez [has said](#). Given the Venezuelan leader's recent military buying spree and the escalating war of words with neighboring Colombia, such assurances might not carry much weight with his foreign critics or the IAEA. As the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Nima Gerami and Sharon Squassoni [write](#), "Those states and companies that would contemplate nuclear cooperation with the Chávez government should consider whether they might help recreate the alarming history of Iran's nuclear program and subsequent international crises."

## UNITED ARAB EMIRATES



KARIM SAHIBI/AFP/Getty Images

**Status:** In January, the United States signed an agreement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), committing to provide nuclear technology, materials, and expertise. Known as a "[123 agreement](#)," it still awaits congressional approval but is expected to go into effect by the end of this month. In the meantime, the UAE has developed a legal framework for regulation and oversight of nuclear industry and has drafted plans for a number of nuclear power plants to meet rapidly rising energy demand.

**Why you should worry:** On first glance, the UAE's nuclear ambitions seem entirely reasonable. The UAE has incessantly emphasized the peaceful nature of its nuclear plans, and by all accounts the UAE's legal commitment to monitoring nuclear operations should be an effective means of oversight. What's more, the UAE is widely considered one of the most liberal and stable states in the Middle East and has extensive ties

to the international community as a center of global business.

So what's to fret about? There is a great deal of fear that bringing nuclear technology could cause the country's less-than-stable neighbors to seek the same, in a region that has, with the exception of Israel, remained nuke-free. Referring to the 123 agreement, U.S. Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass.) [said](#), "In the Middle East, a nuclear-energy race could be as perilous as a nuclear-arms race." The trend toward nuclear development has already seized the region, with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Egypt, and even chaotic Yemen announcing intentions to look into nuclear energy.

Regardless of how peacefully the UAE's nuclear program begins, arms-control hawks worry that massive amounts of nuclear technology and expertise are a great foundation for developing a nuclear weapons program. As the UAE is a major trading partner of Iran, critics have raised concerns that nuclear material could fall into Iranian hands.

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