

# Obama's Goal Of Nuclear Security Still Far Off

by THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

*WASHINGTON March 23, 2012, 01:11 pm ET*

WASHINGTON (AP) — Halfway into an ambitious four-year effort to safeguard nuclear materials from terrorists, President Barack Obama and other world leaders are lagging behind their self-imposed goals and facing renewed threats from Iran and North Korea. They're giving themselves a checkup at next week's summit in the South Korean capital, Seoul.

Although many nations have taken voluntary steps to corral material that could be used for terrorist weapons, they have sidestepped larger questions about how to track all such material, measure compliance and enforce security. U.S. officials expect no major announcements at the nuclear security gathering.

Obama will use the meeting to keep pressure on nuclear North Korea, which has threatened to halt new progress toward disarmament talks with a planned long-range rocket launch. The launch would lead to cancellation of a recent food aid deal with the United States and dim hopes for better relations under new leader Kim Jong Un.

The gathering of more than 50 nations is overshadowed by North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship and fears that Iran could soon build a nuclear weapon. North Korea has built and tested nuclear devices and is considered a suspect in the spread of nuclear know-how and weapons of mass destruction to other countries.

The planned missile launch appears part of a long pattern of steps forward but then backward in U.S. dealings with North Korea, and plays into Republican claims that Obama is being played the fool. Republican lawmakers have accused his administration of "appeasing" North Korea by offering 240,000 tons of food in exchange for a freeze on nuclear activities and a freeze on nuclear and long-range missile tests.

North Korea says the rocket launch is a peaceful marking of the centennial of the nation's founder in mid-April. The U.S. and other countries suspect it would serve to test capabilities of a long-range missile.

Obama has called for the eventual abolition of nuclear weapons, and he has made reducing the global stockpile of such weapons and materials a key goal of his foreign policy. He is considering sharp new cuts to the U.S. nuclear force, including a reduction of up to 80 percent in the number of deployed weapons.

"We've essentially built an international coalition of countries that are committed to the president's goal of securing all nuclear materials around the world," said Deputy National Security Council Adviser Ben Rhodes.

In Seoul, Obama plans to meet separately with numerous world leaders including Chinese President Hu Jintao, North Korea's only real ally. He will see Russian President Dmitry Medvedev for the last time before the Russian leader steps down in May. Despite differences on other policy questions, Medvedev and Obama together pushed through a new arms reduction treaty that trimmed the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals.

More recently, China and Russia blocked a U.S.-backed effort at the United Nations to condemn Syria for its bloody crackdown on civilians. Having all but ruled out military intervention now, the U.S. strategy on Syria is to tighten world denunciation of Syrian President Bashar Assad and make it untenable for him to remain in power.

U.S. officials called the Russian and Chinese vetoes disappointing and even irresponsible, but Obama is unlikely to get either nation to budge.

World leaders came to Washington in 2010 to endorse Obama's proposal to lock down all nuclear materials around the globe by 2014. While there has been some progress in securing potentially vulnerable nuclear components in the past two years, there are few signs that many affected nations would be willing to adopt the most severe controls that would be required.

The nations agreed to meet again in 2012 to check on progress. Obama had hoped to come to the gathering with better news not only about security improvements in established nuclear nations but also about efforts to prevent Iran from getting a weapon and to buy North Korea out of its bomb program.

An independent Arms Control Association study this month found overall that global leaders have kept about 80 percent of 67 voluntary commitments made at the 2010 summit to reduce or better secure stocks of nuclear materials. The study cautioned that "the nuclear material security challenge will not be solved even after all the national commitments made ... are completed."

Another independent report earlier this year, from the Nuclear Threat Initiative, gave poor grades to many of the 32 nations believed to possess such material. It concluded there is not yet a global consensus about what the priorities should be or how materials should be tracked and protected. Radioactive components of civilian nuclear power plants count as nuclear material, as do nuclear weapons.

The summit begins with a working dinner Monday night and continues Tuesday. It will bring together nuclear-armed nations, plus those with civilian nuclear energy plants and several seeking to build them. Several non-nuclear nations and international organizations including the U.N. and the International Atomic Energy Agency are attending.

Countries known or suspected to have nuclear weapons are the U.S., Russia, Britain, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea.

Scores of countries still have research reactors fueled by weapons-usable uranium, and medical devices that use radioactive materials that could be fashioned into a "dirty bomb" are scattered all over the world.

The Obama administration says it has helped five nations completely clear out their stocks of highly enriched uranium.

Romania, Libya, Turkey, Chile and Serbia join 13 other nations that previously disposed of such material — Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Denmark, Greece, Latvia, the Philippines, Portugal, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden and Thailand.

For the most part, those gains were realized by shutting down civilian research reactors fueled by weapons-grade uranium, or converting those reactors to use low-enriched uranium.

The most difficult part of building an atomic bomb is acquiring the weapons-grade uranium or plutonium needed for the explosive core of the weapon. Locking up or eliminating these materials is crucial to preventing nuclear-armed terror.

U.S. arms control advocates have grumbled about Obama's budget cut for a main initiative to secure civilian nuclear materials. He has been unable to overcome solid Republican opposition to ratification of the global nuclear test-ban treaty, and would face nearly impossible political odds in the Senate in this election year if he moved for a new nuclear arms reduction deal with Russia.

The setting in Seoul was intentionally symbolic. The high-rises and chic shopping districts of the sprawling Asian capital lie within easy striking distance of a nuclear or conventional missile attack from the North.

Obama's first public event in South Korea is a Cold War-flavored trip to the Demilitarized Zone along the volatile North-South border. Although U.S. officials regularly go to the DMZ, the presidential visit is likely to be read by the North as a special show of strength to its new, untested leader.