

Blueprint for safe nuclear power

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One of the most noteworthy aspects of the UAE's civilian nuclear power project is the steady rate of progress since its launch last year. On Wednesday it moved another step forward with an agreement signed in Vienna that provides for inspection and oversight of nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency. While this is a necessary point of compliance with international safeguards, even critics of the UAE's nuclear ambitions do not raise doubts about their civilian purpose: there is a basic level of trust in the country's peaceful intent.

The example demonstrates the benefits of good standing on the international stage. Mohamed ElBaradei, the director general of the IAEA, has backed the programme from the start; nuclear trade deals with France, Japan, South Korea and the US – deals that will help the UAE to secure the best available technology and expertise – are only possible because of confidence in the civilian nature of the project and safeguards against proliferation.

The contrast with other countries' atomic projects, which have often grabbed headlines because of their confrontational approaches, could not be more obvious. North Korea has defined its international character in terms of a programme that has no other purpose besides antagonism. While Iran is ostensibly developing its atomic technology for civilian purposes, its repeated refusal to work with the IAEA and the international community has contributed to one of the most difficult political stand-offs of the present day. Ultimately these nations' decisions to go it alone will retard their programmes and, more unfortunately, put their populations and their neighbours at unnecessary risk.

The UAE's experience shows that there is an acceptance of the sovereign right to civilian atomic projects. Of course amiable international relations are only part of the story behind the UAE's progress. A well-thought out energy policy for the coming decades, as demand is expected to double by 2020, has laid a framework of which atomic is only one element alongside natural gas generation and renewables such as solar. A crucial decision in the coming months will be the shortlisting of companies to design and build the country's nuclear reactors, which will determine whether the Government's steady pace on the project can be maintained, and if the UAE will become the first Arab country to have atomic power in 2017.