

OPEN FORUM *Neil J. Numark*

Nuclear Stockpiles Can't Be Stored Forever

THERE WAS good news for world citizens Wednesday when Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton announced that they would accelerate START II cuts in nuclear weapons arsenals. Unfortunately, however, the agreement lacked any plan for ultimately getting rid of nuclear materials contained in weapons.

These materials are too dangerous to be stored indefinitely. The recent seizure by German authorities of plutonium cargo smuggled out of the former Soviet Union made the problem absolutely clear. If the nuclear powers do not act swiftly, terrorists or rogue states could get hold of enough plutonium for a nuclear weapon or for nuclear blackmail.

Russian authorities insist that they provide excellent security over nuclear weapons materials and argue that the West exaggerates the problem. However, the growing grip of Russian organized crime and corruption, and the potential for cash-starved Russian nuclear weapons workers to sell materials, leave no room for error. Meanwhile, U.S. security may not be leak tight either.

It is essential to continue dismantling nuclear weapons. But without also destroying their contents we create the potential for "loose nukes." To their credit, Yeltsin and Clinton agreed to enhance nuclear security and prevent smuggling. But the plans they announced were sketchy and avoided the subject of eliminating nuclear materials.

Besides the risk of theft, the other reason for Russia and the United States to get rid of nuclear weapons materials is to demonstrate to each other and the world that we are not holding them for possible future military use. Otherwise, we are in no position to preach nuclear non-prolif-

eration to others.

Yeltsin said Monday that he wants the five nuclear powers to sign a treaty on nuclear security. But including Britain, France and China at this stage would severely slow the process.

The United States and Russia have the world's largest stockpiles by far and should sign a Plutonium Elimination Treaty establishing the framework and timetable for destroying the vast majority of U.S. and Russian arsenals. The goal should be to achieve an agreed-upon residual inventory of weapons-grade plutonium within 20 years, from the current stock of about 100 tons per side to, say, 10 tons each. Each could comply by whatever method or combination of methods they chose, as long as the aggressive treaty goal is met.

We can begin destroying weapons plutonium on a small scale with one year by burning it as fuel in one or two existing nuclear power plants.

Selection of a long-term course will depend on the continuing debate over whether plutonium is a resource or liability. But we should not let this get in the way of at least initiating the disarmament process now using existing facilities.

Whatever methods are selected, it will be several years before we have put a dent in weapons plutonium inventories. But this does not justify our de facto policy of storing these vestiges of the Cold War without taking any action to get rid of them, which is dangerous and sends the wrong signal to the world.

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