

HEU Elimination: The Time and Occasion for the EU to Become Engaged?

Lars van Dassen

Director of the Swedish Nuclear Non-Proliferation Assistance Programme, SNNAP,

Office of Non-Proliferation,

Swedish Nuclear Power Inspectorate, SKI, 106 58 Stockholm, SWEDEN

In May 2002, during a seminar organized by the Swedish Pugwash Group on tactical nuclear weapons disarmament, a group of interested and concerned specialists discussed the menace arising from the large amounts of highly enriched uranium (HEU) that exists worldwide and particularly in Russia. It was agreed that this issue would merit further inquiry and therefore, SKI promised to apply for funding from Swedish authorities for a study. The Swedish International Cooperation Development Agency, SIDA, contributed with funding and the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs stated that it would be interested to be the recipient of the ensuing report. The report titled *The Elimination Stockpiles of Highly Enriched Uranium: Options for an Action Agenda in Co-operation with the Russian Federation* is now due to be released and is available from SKI at (www.ski.se), or by mailing to (lars.van.dassen@ski.se). In the hour of giving this presentation the report is being printed. The presentation below is based on the findings of the report.

The reason we should worry is that HEU exists in large amounts, especially in the Russian Federation. The exact amounts are either unknown or undisclosed but it is assumed that there are some 12-1500 tonnes in Russia alone. HEU can with relative ease be used for a nuclear explosive device. The material is easy to handle without there being radiation hazards and for the same reasons HEU is hard to detect by existing detection equipment technologies.

The EU ought to be interested in securing and reducing the risks arising from these amounts of nuclear weapons useable materials. Geographical proximity to Russia is one reason for why Europe should bother; another is that the mere size of the financial burden for eliminating HEU will demand engagement of a large actor such as the EU. The EU and European countries have often been accused of doing too little in Cooperative Threat Reduction and the Global Partnership context. Engagement in the HEU field could change this.

On the other hand, the EU is also an actor that is restrained for a number of reasons. First of all, it does not have established high-level fora for strategic discussions as the USA and Russia do from four decades of nuclear crisis management and arms reduction discussions and agreements. This is a disadvantage in itself. Moreover, the EU has not so far developed the structures for being and becoming large-scale suppliers of non-proliferation assistance as the US has been able to do. Finally, it merits much attention that the EU is divided over the use of nuclear energy. Therefore, it will be hard to profess a scheme like the one the US and Russia have in force regarding the elimination of 500 tonnes of HEU that are turned into nuclear fuel for US nuclear reactors. Such a solution in the EU context might suggest the expansion of nuclear energy and would be difficult to accept in many EU member states capitals.

To the extent the EU is willing to work on its weaknesses and use its assets the following options are available. The EU should initiate a dialogue over the Russian Federation declaring there being "excess material", that is; HEU that is not needed for "strategic purposes". Afterwards the EU can pay for the services for having the available amounts of HEU down-blended to 19,9% where it is low enriched uranium (LEU) and not suitable for the manufacture of a nuclear explosive device. The ownership of the HEU-turned-into-LEU should remain with Russia. The LEU can by Russia be stored and turned into nuclear fuel that can be sold on an international market when Russia thinks it is profitable. Till then the material should be stored under international control and there should be a pledge that Russia will never re-enrich the LEU or use it for military purposes. The revenue from the sales of fuel that originates from this process should be used for other nuclear security work in Russia.

The possible cooperation between the EU and Russia in the field of eliminating HEU will need further scrutiny and studies, as well as the establishment of a common forum for discussions on the issue. Nevertheless, the gains can be large for both parties. The EU would contribute to and be assured of the irreversibility of the nuclear disarmament process. Russia would open up a number of new channels for economic cooperation with the EU that will be wholly new. Both sides will enjoy the benefits of environments with reduced risks of nuclear terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear materials to third states and sub-state actors.