DOD Sees Risks in Plutonium Trade

Several government reports released last week, 8 months past the due date Congress had set for them, uncovered a simmering debate within the Reagan Administration over the potential danger of increased commercial use of plutonium in Western Europe and Japan.

The reports evaluated International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) standards for the protection of plutonium or highly enriched uranium. The Defense Department, in its 40-page report, warned that the IAEA's standards "lack specificity in important respects," and could permit lax security measures that would leave nuclear materials vulnerable to use by terrorists.

The Defense Department's statement put it at odds with the rest of the administration. The State Department's 12-page report concluded flatly that "the existing international standards . . . are adequate." The Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission also endorsed the IAEA's guidelines, but noted that their implementation in some countries differs from that of the United States. The Department of Energy (DOE) had not released its report by press time, but a DOE official said that it supported the State Department's views.

With its report, the Pentagon served notice that it will take a close look at future shipments of plutonium or highly enriched uranium, and may block them until it is satisfied that the materials will be protected adequately from terrorist threats. The United States, under agreements for nuclear cooperation with foreign countries, can veto international shipments of plutonium produced from uranium originating in the United States. According to the Pentagon report, U.S. veto rights cover up to 50% of the plutonium, and nearly all the highly enriched uranium, that will be used commercially in foreign noncommunist countries through the year 2000.

Plutonium is particularly worrisome, said the Pentagon report, because its use is mushrooming. Britain, France, West Germany, and Japan all plan to open new plants that will separate plutonium from spent reactor fuel. By the late 1990s, the report states, "as many as 300 shipments of separated plutonium will leave reprocessing plants in Europe every year," amounting to a tenfold increase in a single decade. These shipments, according to a study by David Albright and Harold Feiveson published in *Science* last March, could contain more than 25,000 kilograms of plutonium annually.

If terrorists succeeded in capturing a small amount—perhaps 10 kilograms—of separated plutonium and had access to the necessary technical and engineering resources, they could build a crude nuclear bomb, according to a panel of former scientists at Los Alamos National Laboratory who released a study on this subject earlier this year.

Even if no bomb were built, said the Pentagon report, a terrorist in possession of plutonium could "fabricate hoaxes . . . for extortion, or to cause massive public alarm and perhaps panic."

The release of the Pentagon report was a setback for the State Department. State officials argued that the Administration should speak with one voice. They tried for more than half a year to force the Defense Department to revise its report. But the Pentagon, with backing from Senator John Glenn (D–OH) and other congressional advocates of strict controls on U.S. exports of sensitive nuclear materials, got approval from the White House to issue its independent report.

The dispute between the State and Defense Departments is rooted in an underlying disagreement about U.S. policy toward plutonium use itself. "There are a few people in DOD who would like to banish plutonium from the face of the earth, which is not going to happen," said one official.

The State Department's view is that attempts to clamp down on plutonium use around the world would backfire. "You don't try to dictate to other countries whether or not they should use plutonium," said an official. "That would be a major mistake, and can only do severe damage to our interests in nonproliferation and physical protection, because countries are going to go tell us to stuff it."

Other nonproliferation experts accused the State Department of downplaying the dangers of plutonium use and avoiding open criticism that would shake up the cozy and secretive system of international nuclear cooperation. "The Defense Department is more tenacious than the State Department when it comes to questions of security, because we are not, like the State Department, burdened with the requirement to be diplomatic," said former Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle at a congressional hearing on nonproliferation policy in March. "That's a great help in matters of this sort."

"If these countries are going to pursue plutonium use, they're going to have to face up to the fact that plutonium can be used in a bomb," said David Albright, staff scientist at the Federation of American Scientists in Washington. "So they're going to have to be more responsible in protecting it." ■

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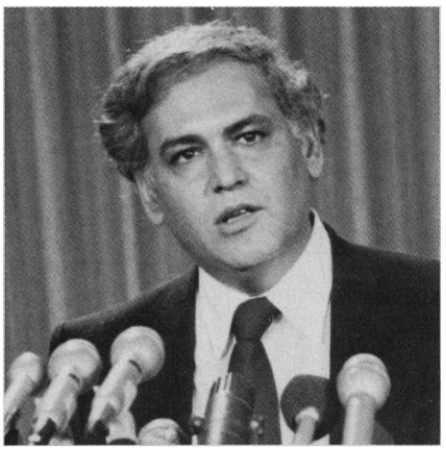

DOD

Richard Perle, Pentagon adviser. *"We are not . . . burdened with the requirement to be diplomatic."*

A Plea to Close Defense Reactors

Issuing a "challenge" to the Soviet Union and the United States, eight arms control and environmental groups* joined together last week to ask the superpowers to stop manufacturing plutonium, the critical explosive in modern nuclear weapons.

The proposal for a 2-year ban on production is contained in a letter released at a press conference in Washington, D.C., on 5 November. Its signers include some luminaries of strategic or environmental policy, such as William Colby, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency; Russell Peterson, former chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality; Gerard C. Smith, chief negotiator for the SALT I treaty; Paul Warnke, former head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency; and Jerome Wiesner, president emeritus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Architects of the plan are Frank von Hippel of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and

*Groups endorsing the "plutonium challenge" are the Environmental Policy Institute, the Energy Research Foundation, the Federation of American Scientists, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and the Union of Concerned Scientists.