

The programme as it stands does not make sense. Russian contravention, and donor acquiescence in it, lends an element not merely of foolishness but of insanity to the Agreement and to an incipient Multilateral Agreement. Sooner or later the insanity will come to light. It will make disposition politically vulnerable and conceivably unsustainable in the donor countries. A disposition process that's disabled or stopped in its tracks, for whatever reason or combination of reasons, is part-way to being reversed. If 34 tonnes goes off the rails, the entire effort to make nuclear disarmament irreversible could be damaged. Contravention threatens irreversibility.

It could be objected that the argument being developed here is ignorant of what irreversibility is all about. When it comes to disposition of the Russian excess, an opposing view might go, irreversibility means ensuring that reactor-based processing of 34 tonnes renders it all but impossible to return to military use. Such a condition is achieved when WGPu is embedded in high-level nuclear waste and subjected to monitoring and inspection by the two principals and by the IAEA. Contrary to what's been said here, making disposition irreversible is nothing more and nothing less than doing what it takes to render a given quantity of WGPu permanently unavailable for renewed use in a weapon. In the Russian case, it could be added, we're talking about 34 tonnes to begin with, and we're doing something about it.

Accordingly, a critic could continue, references in this paper to Russia's recycling plans and to the accumulation of RGPu in that country are simply not relevant in a discussion of irreversibility. Furthermore, he could object to a blurring of the distinction between WGPu and RGPu: the former is vastly more valuable for military use, while large amounts of the latter circulate around the world in various forms and without incident.

My response is that irreversibility is a political as well as a physical outcome. Russia's 34 tonnes can indeed be processed successfully according to physical criteria only. To disposition that amount would be a beginning. We do need to begin somewhere. But, I suggest, the value of a proactive approach is to make us look well beyond the beginnings.

For the donor countries, the beginnings do not promise what they should when the recipient proposes not only irreversibly to disposition 34 tonnes of WGPu containing less than 7 per cent Pu 240, but, before the agreed amount is irradiated, to start generating large amounts of RGPu containing 18 per cent or more Pu 240. Disposition planners and people in the industry may find it easy to draw a sharp line between WGPu and RGPu. Publics and politicians will not. There's a downstream threat to disposition here. It could be multiplied by growing public awareness that all along the fraction of Russia's WGPu holdings that is slated for disposition could have been handled more cheaply and without detriment to international security by storing it under guard and international inspection until needed for commercial use. What then is to be done?

The Russian Federation and the United States could add countervailing provisions to the Multilateral Agreement and to a revised Agreement. Reviving a pre-negotiation which ended in 2000, they might work out a 40-year bilateral moratorium on the recycling of plutonium. Unlikely, it might be said, in view of the current U.S. Administration's energy policy. Or there could be an understanding to leave Minatom's future to market forces, and maybe also to a wager that Russian plans for heavy reliance on MOX will not pan out. This could readily be done. But