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Trump and Putin's 'trash talk'

By Tim Echols -
Tuesday, July 10, 2018

ANALYSIS/OPINION:

The upcoming summit between President Donald Trump ([/topics/donald-trump/](#)) and President Vladimir Putin ([/topics/vladimir-putin/](#)) holds great promise. Many are hoping that Mr. Trump ([/topics/donald-trump/](#)) scolds the Russian leader about his cyber tactics or his Syrian policy, but I think there is much more at stake.

While most of the country has no clue that a large plutonium disposal facility is being built just over the Georgia-South Carolina state line at the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site, Mr. Putin ([/topics/vladimir-putin/](#)) is well aware of it and knows it is on the chopping block

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The little-known facility began because the U.S. and Russia (/topics/russia/) signed an agreement back in 2000 for our two countries to mutually destroy 68 metric tons of surplus weapons-grade plutonium, the equivalent of 17,000 nuclear weapons. That's not a typo. These weapons contain high grade plutonium — a material that terrorists and rogue nations like the Taliban, ISIS and Iran would love to have.

Since information about how to build nuclear weapons is widely available on the Internet the primary obstacle to preventing this from happening is the lack of access to weapons-grade materials — plutonium and highly enriched uranium. During the Cold War, Russia (/topics/russia/) and the United States built up a stockpile of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons. And if you read history books, both countries lived in fear every day of annihilation.

As the Cold War subsided and the USSR entered into a period of political and military disarray, the United States sought a diplomatic solution to reduce the threat of these dangerous materials being stolen or diverted. The United States agreed to purchase large quantities of surplus Russian highly enriched uranium which had been downblended for peaceful use as commercial reactor fuel. Plutonium could not be disposed of in this fashion, and following extensive technical study and detailed negotiation, the two countries signed a bilateral agreement which triggered the construction of highly technical facilities in each country to dispose of their surplus weapons plutonium.

The U.S. motivation for this agreement was ever so real in the years following the end of the Cold War as Russia (/topics/russia/)'s vast nuclear arsenal was vulnerable to theft by terrorists, disgruntled military leaders, or former KGB thugs who were in need of money to support their families and were disgruntled over the collapse of the USSR. These people could steal quantities of the weapons materials themselves, or even trade it to a rogue regime — anything was and is possible. Clearly, the very existence of these stocks of surplus weapons materials are a risk to the entire world.

So the decision was made in 2000 and subsequently reaffirmed by succeeding administrations to eliminate 34 metric tons of U.S. surplus plutonium in rough parallel with Russians which agreed to eliminate a similar quantity of Russian surplus plutonium. And believe it or not, the Russians further agreed, for the first time, to allow for verification of the disposition process by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Like a gun buyback program in dangerous neighborhoods that results in weapons being melted down or rendered unusable, the agreement with Russia (/topics/russia/) required the plutonium to be destroyed or materially altered so that it could never again be reused for weapons purposes. The chosen method of disposal was by burning up the plutonium as mixed oxide (MOX) fuel in commercial nuclear reactors. A side benefit of this process is that we would be recycling bomb material into green electricity. This MOX fuel would be made available at a discounted price compared to fresh uranium fuel the utilities currently buy. It certainly makes sense to me as an energy regulator.

As time has passed the Russians constructed the necessary facilities and infrastructure to begin disposing of their surplus plutonium while the key U.S. facility is only about 70 percent complete. Citing increased costs, the Department of Energy wants to abandon construction of the MOX facility and pursue a completely new and risky disposition method which doesn't convert the plutonium to a form that can never again be used for weapons purposes. As a result, the Russians have refused to proceed, and large quantities of surplus weapons-grade plutonium remain in storage in each country.

But I believe that Mr. Putin (/topics/vladimir-putin/) will ask the president about the project and make it clear that if the U.S. changes its mind on disposing of the plutonium in accordance with the bilateral agreement that the two countries signed, Russia (/topics/russia/) will do the same. And can you blame him?

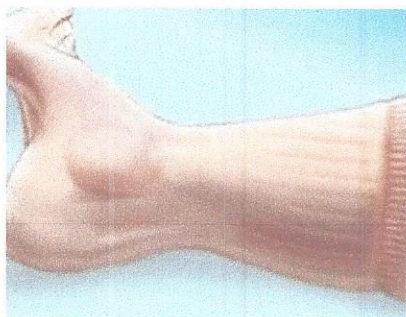
So what should the president say to the Russian leader if the topic comes up? Maybe Donald Trump (/topics/donald-trump/) believes Russia (/topics/russia/) is stable and the threat no longer remains because all the weapons-grade materials are safe and under lock and key? Maybe he re-negotiates the deal in some way. Maybe he gets Mexico to pay for it?

I hope the answer is “finish the drill.” We have so much surplus weapons-grade material that the MOX facility will be operating for at least 20 years. The facility is nearly three-quarters complete and provides thousands of jobs for the region. Reactors around the U.S. could utilize the material. But most importantly, it represents a tool to eliminate the equivalent of 8,500 Russian nuclear weapons that might one day save innocent lives.

• *Tim Echols is vice chairman of the Georgia Public Service Commission.*

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