

FACT SHEET

THE CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT AND A TREATY BANNING THE PRODUCTION OF FISSILE MATERIALS FOR USE IN NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Fissile materials are those elements that “can sustain an explosive fission chain reaction” and “are essential in all nuclear explosives.” The most common fissile materials in use are highly enriched uranium (HEU) and plutonium. Fissile materials that can be directly used in nuclear weapons do not occur in nature. They must be produced through complex physical and chemical processes.

Historical Context

As of January 2015, the global stocks are estimated to be 1370 tons of HEU and 500 tons of separated plutonium of which 272 tons is in civilian custody.¹ All fissile materials of non-nuclear-weapon States parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) are subject to safeguards applied by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The majority of fissile materials, however, are held in the stockpiles of the nuclear-weapon States, where they remain available for use in nuclear weapons and are not subject to IAEA safeguards. Stockpiles of fissile material are also known or believed to exist in the States that do not currently apply safeguards required by the NPT (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, India, Israel and Pakistan).



As early as 1953, then US President Dwight Eisenhower called for the elimination of fissile materials in his “Atoms for Peace” speech before the United Nations. His speech can be seen as a tipping point for international focus on the peaceful uses of atomic energy, even during the early stages of the Cold War.

The end of the Cold War brought a renewed call for nuclear disarmament and for a ban on the production of fissile materials used in nuclear weapons. In December 1993, the General Assembly recommended “the negotiation in the most

appropriate international forum of a non-discriminatory, multilateral and internationally and effectively verifiable treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.”²

Shannon Mandate

On 24 March 1995, Ambassador Shannon, appointed as Special Coordinator by the Conference on Disarmament (CD) on the issue of fissile materials, presented a report on his consultations,³ which called for the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee within the CD to negotiate a “non-discriminatory, multilateral and internationally and effectively verifiable” fissile material treaty. The mandate left the issue of scope to be discussed, stating: “It has been agreed by delegations that the mandate for the establishment of the Ad Hoc

¹ International Panel on Fissile Materials, 2016.

² Resolution 48/75 L entitled “Prohibition of the Production of Fissile Material for Nuclear Weapons or Other Nuclear Explosive Devices.”

³ CD/1299.

Committee does not preclude any delegation from raising for consideration in the Ad Hoc Committee any of the issues.” As such, it circumvented the issue whether or not existing stocks should be part of the negotiations.

Following the Shannon report, discussions on forming the proposed Ad Hoc Committee stalled. States of the Non-Aligned Group insisted that progress toward the negotiation of a treaty be linked to real progress toward the elimination of nuclear weapons, a position that is still widely held.

In 1998, an Ad Hoc Committee was established and met in negotiations for the three final weeks of the annual session. However, it was not reestablished in the following year.

Ever since, the CD has made several attempts to agree on a Programme of Work that would include negotiations of a fissile material treaty. However, the issue of the inclusion of existing stocks and linkages that emerged over time with the other substantive issues on the agenda of the Conference have prevented such agreement. In June 2017, the Working Group on the “Way Ahead” established by the CD (CD/2090) was holding substantive discussions on the topic.

Conference on Disarmament Decision CD/1864

In May 2009, the CD decided to establish a working group to negotiate a fissile material treaty on the basis of the Shannon mandate of 1995 while also establishing deliberative working groups for the other core issues on the CD’s agenda - nuclear disarmament, prevention of an arms race in outer space, negative security assurances (CD/1864). However, differences of view among the members of the CD prevented the CD from implementing that decision.

Treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices

The negotiation in the CD of a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices remains a priority for a majority of its members. The Group of Governmental Experts (GGE)⁴ established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 67/53 met in Geneva for four sessions in 2014 and 2015 and submitted its report (A/70/81) to the Secretary-General, which he transmitted to the Conference on Disarmament.⁵

Following the GGE report, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General by resolution 70/39 to seek the views of Member States on the report of the GGE (A/70/81) and to submit a report to the General Assembly (A/71/140/Rev.1 and A/71/140/Add.1).

In December 2016, the General Assembly with resolution A/RES/71/259 requested the United Nations Secretary-General to establish a high-level fissile material cut-off treaty (FMCT) expert preparatory group with a membership of 25 States to consider and make recommendations on substantial elements of a future non-discriminatory, multilateral and internationally and effectively verifiable treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices, on the basis of CD/1299 and the mandate contained therein.

The first session of the Group will take place at the United Nations in Geneva from 31 July to 11 August 2017.

For more information: www.unog.ch/cd/fmct

⁴ 25 States were invited to nominate an expert to participate in the GGE: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria, Republic of Korea, Russia, South Africa, Ukraine, United Kingdom, and United States of America.

⁵ CD/2023.