

Plutonium

Plutonium is an artificial radioactive element that does not exist in nature and is generated from a nuclear reactor. Spent nuclear fuel discharged from light water reactors, which are dominantly used throughout the world, contains about 1% plutonium by weight. Plutonium can be recovered from spent nuclear fuel, leaving uranium and fission products, in what is referred to as “reprocessing”.

Several isotopes of plutonium exist, but compositions can vary with the operational conditions of the nuclear reactors. The plutonium recovered from spent fuel at nuclear power plants typically contains about 60% plutonium-239 (reactor-grade). In contrast, the plutonium recovered from spent fuel at military production reactors contain 90% or more plutonium-239 (weapons-grade).

Reactor-grade plutonium contains a large amount of plutonium-240, which can reduce the yield, and is considered not optimal for nuclear weapons. However, this does not change the fact that reactor-grade plutonium has an explosive power that surpasses conventional weapons. Reactor-grade plutonium can still be incorporated into more advanced design techniques, and can make large weapons more destructive.

The Raw Materials Used in Making Nuclear Weapons

Uranium

Uranium is a natural radioactive element. In nature, most uranium is found as the less fissionable uranium-238 (99.3%). Only 0.7% of uranium is the fissile uranium-235. Thus nuclear fission is used to increase the concentration of uranium-235 in a process called “uranium enrichment.” Uranium enriched to 20% or more is believed to be usable for weapons, and is referred to as “Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU).” Typical nuclear weapons use uranium enriched to 90% or higher. On the other hand, nuclear fuel used in a nuclear power plant typically has a 3–5% concentration, and is referred to as “low-enriched uranium (LEU).”

It is still possible to produce highly enriched uranium, even in civilian facilities that produce low-enriched uranium. Take for example an enrichment facility with a supply capacity of 130 tons of low-enriched uranium per year, which enables operation of a gigawatt class power plant for a year. From 150 tons of natural uranium it is possible to produce 100 kg of 93% highly enriched uranium (equivalent to four atomic bombs) in one year. In addition, from 4% low-enriched uranium it is possible to also produce 100 kg of 93% highly enriched uranium, but in just eight days. However, thanks to inspections conducted by the International Atomic Energy Agency, it is not easy for non-nuclear weapon states to secretly manufacture highly enriched uranium in safeguarded civilian nuclear facilities.

Military and Non-military Plutonium

Military: Plutonium used in nuclear warheads or stored for use in weapons; plutonium that is reserved for possible military uses in the future

Non-military: Plutonium separated from spent nuclear fuel from a nuclear reactor for non-military purposes; plutonium declared as surplus for nuclear weapons

Highly enriched uranium and plutonium are essential raw materials for producing nuclear weapons. These are obtained via uranium enrichment or reprocessing technologies and facilities. Some countries have so-called “nuclear fuel cycle” facilities for nuclear power generation. However, even small-scale nuclear fuel cycle facilities have the capability to produce fissile materials for military purposes, significantly increasing the risk of nuclear weapons proliferation.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) believes it is possible to manufacture a nuclear weapon with 25 kg of uranium-235 or 8 kg of plutonium.

Military and Non-military Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU)

Military: HEU used in nuclear warheads or stored for use in weapons; HEU used in reactor fuel for naval nuclear propulsion (including spent fuel)

Non-military: HEU used in fuel for research and testing reactors; HEU declared as surplus for military purposes

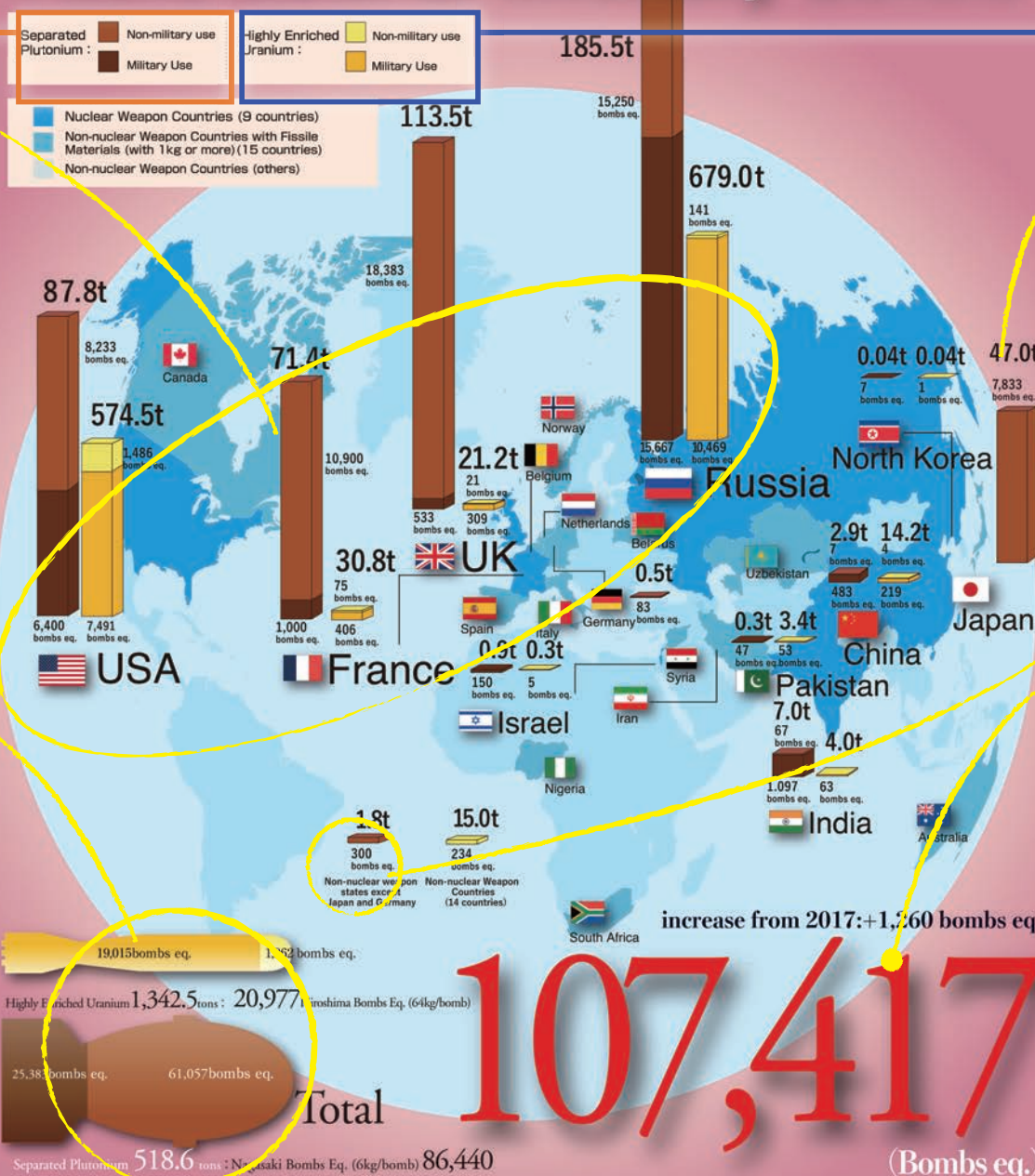
Existing Raw Materials Can Create Many Atomic Bombs

It is estimated that the Hiroshima bomb had 64 kg of HEU, and that the Nagasaki bomb had 6 kg of plutonium. The amount of fissile material that each country has is represented by this bar graph and corresponds to the number of these bombs that could be produced with these materials. Both dark colors represent raw materials for military use.

Downward Trend in HEU and Upward Trend in Plutonium

Military-use HEU accounts for 90% of all highly enriched uranium. In the last ten years, 75 tons of military HEU and 252 tons of non-military-use HEU have been eliminated. In contrast, non-military-use plutonium accounts for 71% of all plutonium. In the last ten years, the amount of military-use plutonium has been reduced by 1.0 tons, but there has been an increase in non-military-use plutonium of 26.0 tons.

A WORLD OF POTENTIAL BOMBS Fissile Material Inventory 2018.6



Japan's High Amount of Plutonium as a Non-Nuclear Weapon State

Japan has almost 8% of the world's separated plutonium, possessing the fifth largest amount of separated plutonium after Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and France. In contrast, the other non-nuclear weapon states combined possess only 0.4% of the world's separated plutonium. From this one can tell that Japan is a very unique outlier.

Reducing Fissile Materials is a Huge Challenge

All of the global fissile materials combined are equivalent to more than 100,000 of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. It is estimated that there are 14,450 nuclear warheads in the world. In other words, the world is capable of developing many times more nuclear weapons than it currently possesses.

Fissile materials will remain even if all of the world's nuclear weapons are dismantled. The elimination of fissile materials must be done in a manner that ensures we never again return to manufacturing nuclear warheads.

* Fissile materials are Highly Enriched Uranium(HEU) and plutonium (Pu) which can be used for nuclear weapon.
* Fissile materials owned by non-nuclear weapon countries are shown only as total of materials owned by all non-nuclear weapon countries except separated plutonium owned by Japan and Germany.
* Global map is drawn as a design and thus may not be accurate. * All data are as of the end of 2016.
Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition, Nagasaki University (RECNA)/Detailed data : <http://www.recna.nagasaki-u.ac.jp/recna/nuclear/fms>