

Failsafe Review: What is it and why is it important?

In the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) issued on October 27, 2022, the Biden Administration announced that the Department of Defense “will commission an independent review of the safety, security, and reliability of U.S. nuclear weapons, NC3, and integrated tactical warning/attack assessment systems.” This nuclear “failsafe review” was mandated by Congress in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2022, which requires the Secretary of Defense to charter an independent Federal Advisory Committee to review the safety, security, and reliability of nuclear weapons and related systems.

Modern technologies like cyber are introducing new risks to nuclear systems and underscore the need and urgency of conducting a new failsafe review. The aim of the review is to identify nuclear risk-reduction measures that the U.S. could implement to strengthen safeguards against the unauthorized, inadvertent, or mistaken use of a nuclear weapon, including through false warning of an attack.

Since early 2020, Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) Co-Chair Sam Nunn and Co-Chair and CEO Ernest J. Moniz have championed NTI’s effort to encourage the U.S government to undertake such a review aimed at strengthening nuclear “failsafe,” and to challenge other nuclear powers to conduct their own internal reviews.

Next Steps

To ensure that the failsafe review is thorough and results in actionable recommendations to reduce nuclear risks, NTI recommends that:

- The review should be independent and conducted at an appropriate classification level, with significant input from private sector, scientific community, and government experts and leaders representing a diverse range of expertise and perspectives.
- The review’s mandate should encompass technical, procedural, capital, and policy recommendations for unilateral U.S. actions and steps the United States could pursue with other nuclear-armed countries.
- The President should provide direction for the review and establish expectations that the review’s recommendations be broad-ranging, innovative, and actionable.
- Congress should provide input and conduct oversight, including on the status of the review and its results. Congress should review and, as appropriate, support key outcomes.

A comprehensive failsafe review offers an historic opportunity to reduce the risk of nuclear use today and for generations to come. The failsafe review must result in concrete actions to make the American people and the world safer.

Failsafe Review Background

In the early 1990s, with the strong support of then-Senator and Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee Sam Nunn, then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney tapped Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick to chair an independent advisory committee to review the U.S. Nuclear Command and Control System and recommend failsafe steps to strengthen safeguards against accidental, inadvertent, or unauthorized use of a nuclear weapon. That review identified important opportunities to strengthen nuclear failsafe that were later implemented. A similar review has not been conducted in three decades.