

# Asia-Pacific Leadership Network–Pakistan Nuclear Fail-Safe Dialogue

March 12, 2025

## MEETING SYNOPSIS

### Overview

- » On March 12, 2025, the Centre for Security, Strategy, and Policy Research (CSSPR) at the University of Lahore, Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN), and Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) co-hosted an online workshop, bringing together a delegation of former American and Pakistani officials and experts. The workshop, titled “Global Strategic Stability, Nuclear Security, and Risk Reduction Issues in 2025: Evolving Threats and the Fail-Safe Review Concept,” focused on examining nuclear risks, including through the process of nuclear fail-safe reviews, which evaluate safeguards that prevent the unauthorized, accidental, or mistaken use of a nuclear weapon. The workshop was part of a broader regional project on fail-safe measures conducted by APLN and supported by NTI.
- » The meeting’s objective was to discuss contemporary nuclear risks, especially of inadvertent escalation, from Pakistan’s perspective. Within this sphere, the discussions considered national nuclear risk reduction measures and the need for bilateral and multilateral fail-safe measures. Participants discussed the purpose and merits of “independent” nuclear fail-safe reviews similar in concept to the 1990–1992 independent review commissioned by the U.S. Department of Defense and the more recent review authorized by the U.S. Congress in 2021.
- » Participants candidly explored the security benefits of such fail-safe reviews; why and how such reviews could be conducted periodically by all nuclear-armed states; that such reviews required no negotiation, treaty, or verification; and that reviews did not necessarily carry any external transparency commitments for their findings. Sharing results or actions was not required and would be entirely at the discretion of each state. Pakistani participants also expressed the view that credibility of fail-safe measures could only be assured through bilateral or multilateral measures.

## Participants discussed:

- » Nuclear risks are heightened by the lack of strategic dialogue between nuclear-armed states and deterioration of global arms control and risk reduction architecture. In this context, fail-safe reviews could serve as a mechanism for reducing the risk of accidental or inadvertent launch and reaffirming national commitments to this end. However, this measure alone is not a substitute for effective strategic dialogue and efforts to revive the international arms control and risk reduction agenda, including among the P5, India, and Pakistan.
- » As more nuclear-armed states conduct fail-safe reviews, national leaders might recognize that certain risks that surface in their reviews are likely to be shared by other nuclear-armed states. As one example, U.S. experts highlighted the growing threat of cyber interference with nuclear systems as a likely shared risk, which could fuel new efforts toward a global cyber-nuclear non-attack agreement. Pakistani experts also highlighted possible fail-safe concerns regarding emergent regional nuclear-armed naval forces. Nuclear fail-safe reviews could, therefore, still hold potential for strategic risk reduction dialogue.
- » Every nuclear-armed state has unique nuclear force decision-making, management, and security processes; an effective fail-safe review need not replicate the design of U.S. reviews. Participants discussed the general principles that should still inform fail-safe reviews across states. These included:
  - A proposal from U.S. participants to refrain from dual-hatting actively serving policymakers and other national nuclear enterprise personnel as fail-safe review team members. Serving officials are necessarily focused on the day-to-day management and execution of their responsibilities and may only be engaged on these tasks within one element of the nuclear enterprise (such as a military service or nuclear scientific laboratory). By contrast, a fail-safe review team constituted of retired policymakers, nuclear and defense officials, and/or experts not involved in current operational management will be better able to adopt a holistic, long-term, and independent perspective of the entire enterprise, including potential seam issues between its elements.
  - A call from U.S. participants for ensuring buy-in across the nuclear enterprise regarding the intention of the review to support its work. The effectiveness of the review is correlated with the level of access and transparency its staff members have with and within the organizations comprising the nuclear enterprise. The review staff members must ensure that organizations are reassured that raising concerns about potential and emergent issues will not lead to punitive measures, but will better support the security of the nuclear arsenal as the shared collective goal. In turn, the organizations should welcome the opportunity for a farsighted review of potential technological and other vulnerabilities to inform and strengthen their own work. All parties should be made confident that the review process and results will be conducted and held on a highly classified basis.
- » Building upon the need for buy-in across the nuclear enterprise, Pakistani participants noted the interactivity, and level of inherent tension, between three principles underpinning a successful fail-safe review:
  - Secrecy, regarding the classified nature of the review proceedings and findings.
  - Vulnerability, both in the review's goal to identify possible vulnerabilities in the nuclear enterprise and the prospect of sharing findings with other nuclear-armed states that have conducted their own fail-safe reviews to promote cooperative risk reduction, with the risk that these issues may be exploited rather than reduced or eliminated through international actions.

- Transparency, among review staff members to surface areas of concern for reform. This principle also manifests in the question of how to prove to other states that a fail-safe review has been completed, if its results remain entirely classified.
- » In response, U.S. participants noted that each national government would have sole discretion on how it sought to balance these principles in its fail-safe review design, execution, and follow-up policies. This included whether states wished to share any findings with other nuclear-armed states and even details of a review's completion. While still suggesting the two guidelines of no dual-hatting and ensuring buy-in as conducive to an effective review, how a state enacted these guidelines was entirely at its discretion.
- » Pakistani participants emphasized that bilateral or multilateral arrangements are necessary to ensure effective fail-safe measures/confidence-building measures; evaluated the nuclear threat as a continuum from conventional to nuclear deterrence; and broadened the scope of these measures to include threats posed by emerging and disruptive technologies such as cyber and artificial intelligence.

## **Bottom line**

- » The dialogue between Pakistani and U.S. former officials and experts was highly valuable. Both sides explored and explained the logic and outcomes of fail-safe reviews. More broadly, the dialogue also enabled a discussion of each other's evolving nuclear risk perceptions. Participants agreed that the workshop formed fruitful ground for future engagement on this issue.