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

May 20–21, 2026

MEETING SYNOPSIS

Overview

» On May 20–21, 2026, the Centre for Security, Strategy, and Policy Research (CSSPR) at the University of Lahore, Strategic Foresight for Asia (StrafAsia) in Islamabad, Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN), and Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) co-hosted a second online workshop convening a delegation of senior American and Pakistani experts and officials. The workshop, titled "Global Strategic Stability, Risk Reduction, and Nuclear Fail-Safe Reviews," expanded on last year's exploration of nuclear risks, the value of nuclear fail-safe reviews in addressing these risks, and methods of applying fail-safe review principles in the distinct U.S. and Pakistani systems.

» The remarkable elevation of this dialogue to the Track 1.5 level in only its second year and greater number of Pakistani and U.S. panel speakers all reflected a growing shared commitment to advancing engagement on these issues.

» The goal of the workshop was to discuss the changes in the nuclear strategic environment since our last meeting; explore how accelerating development and deployment of emerging technologies were elevating nuclear risks; consider how fail-safe reviews could help address these dangers; and provide mutual updates on the 2022–2024 U.S. fail-safe review, comparative lessons to its 1990–92 predecessor, and the extent and forms of engagement with the fail-safe concept in Pakistani strategic debates.

» Participants reaffirmed that fail-safe reviews would not require negotiation, treaty, or verification, and that reviews did not necessarily carry any external transparency commitments for their findings. However, participants also agreed that internal national

and voluntary measures to strengthen or adopt fail-safe principles formed an important unilateral risk reduction measure. Their value was especially amplified in this context of rapid global nuclear force expansion, intensifying geostrategic tensions, and an increasingly moribund international risk reduction agenda.

» The value of these exchanges, building upon the strong foundation established last year, was such that CSSPR, StrafAsia, APLN and NTI agreed to discuss a more intensive joint program of initiatives and engagements to advance the fail-safe concept. This work is intended to begin soon.

Participants discussed:

» Nuclear multipolarity; the growth of emerging and dual-use technologies; and the technological and political complexity of crisis and nuclear decision-making mean policymakers and analysts must now think of nuclear risks, including the risk of unauthorized or accidental nuclear use, in systemic rather than linear terms. Participants noted that systemic risks arise from interactions across technologies, organizations, decision-making processes, and geopolitical developments. Instead of expecting nuclear crises or security threats to escalate along a limited number of predictable, linear pathways, greater planning must be devoted to considering how different elements of the broader geostrategic and technological system might rapidly interact in a crisis to generate new risks to nuclear forces.

» Fail-safe reviews, as a unilateral process for evaluating safeguards that prevent the unauthorized, accidental, or mistaken use of a nuclear weapon, are a valuable mechanism to surface these systemic risks and recommend corrective measures.

» Following this systemic perspective, these reviews cannot solely focus on identifying potential technical faults across nuclear forces and supportive technologies that could become vulnerabilities. Reviews should also explore possible vulnerabilities that could arise from misinterpretation, misinformation, and human-machine interaction. Participants emphasized that these risks may be intensified by the increasing compression of decision-making time during crises. These factors further cannot be investigated in isolation, and reviews should highlight how they might interact and cause cascading effects.

» In an international environment characterized by deteriorating arms control and confidence-building measures—alongside a similar decline in the official nuclear strategic dialogues which could generate these initiatives and build underlying political trust—fail-safe reviews can serve as an important unilateral confidence-building measure.

» Emerging technologies, including advanced cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence (AI), counterspace systems, and hypersonic weapons, may further compress decision-making timelines during crises. Participants discussed the importance of preserving opportunities for deliberation and verification, strengthening safeguards against rushed decision-making, and increasing confidence that leaders have sufficient time to assess ambiguous or conflicting information before considering nuclear use.

» Given the pace of change in AI, cyber capabilities, space systems, and other emerging technologies, fail-safe reviews should not be viewed as one-time exercises conducted many years apart. Periodic systemic reviews could be supplemented by more frequent and targeted evaluations of specific technologies, risks, or operational processes.

» While retaining a systemic approach, initial or targeted follow-up reviews might be modular in their selection of a specific technology, program, or issue of potential concern to

policymakers. Exploring the potential vulnerabilities of one element within the nuclear force, as it interacts with other elements and in crisis contexts through scenario-based analysis and red-teaming, could serve as a useful internal demonstration of the fail-safe review model. Such a modular exploration could then be broadened out into a system-wide review to fully identify and address possible vulnerabilities to safeguards against unauthorized, accidental, or mistaken nuclear use. A modular review might also be commissioned to update one component of a previous systemic fail-safe review.

» As an example for other states, the 2022–2024 U.S. fail-safe review examined the threats posed by AI, among other topics. The pace of AI development since 2024 might lead U.S. policymakers to internally consider whether the review's AI-relevant analysis and recommendations still reflect the current nature of potential AI risks. If so, a modular review of the AI section of the assessment might be an appropriate way to update this analysis.

» All national nuclear forces are unique, and a systemic approach should naturally reflect and analyze the system as it exists in each country. For example, "emerging technology" as a term should include the new technologies coming online for distinct national nuclear forces, regardless of whether this term has a different technological meaning in other nuclear-armed states.

» The discussion also reinforced and further developed key conclusions from the 2025 fail-safe review workshop, including:

  - the two U.S. reviews are not a one-size-fits-all model; and
  - the underlying fail-safe principles of "no double-hatting" (review staff not currently holding operational responsibilities in the nuclear force to ensure fresh eyes), and "ensuring sufficient buy-in" (entities engaging with reviewers should be assured that vulnerabilities they disclose will not lead to punitive measures and will remain classified), remain valid and should be appropriately adapted to each national context.

» The Biden administration did not follow the precedent of partial declassification of the U.S. 1990–92 review, and refrained from similarly declassifying elements of the 2022–2024 review. The administration's reasoning was that declassification could create an implicit expectation that a fail-safe review in another state would require publicization or partial declassification to be deemed successful and complete, and thus reduce the likelihood of other states conducting such reviews. However, the continuing classification of findings and implementation is in other ways a missed opportunity for supporting efforts to promote global fail-safe in a context of 21st century emerging technologies.

» Pakistan's existing nuclear security arrangements include measures and internal scrutiny relevant to fail-safe approaches. This includes an information fusion system for rapid response in the event of an incident.

» The nature of the nuclear force means that relevant risk insights will be held at multiple institutional and organizational levels. Rigorous responsibility for nuclear risk management is held for weapons at Strategic Plans Division (SPD) and for military fissile materials by scientists operating under the National Command Authority, to give some examples. Only a few individuals hold visibility of risks across the entire system on a day-to-day basis.

» While Pakistan has demonstrated robust nuclear stewardship and safeguards, the above systemic geostrategic and technological risks to nuclear forces means that no nuclear-armed state can be complacent in its past record. U.S. participants made this point early and repeatedly with reference to the U.S. nuclear stewardship record.

» Within this space, there is potential further scope for developing this broader systemic risk approach throughout Pakistan's nuclear force institutions, to strengthen understanding of how elements managed by distinct institutions might interact to undermine the safeguards managed by each institution and at a national level. Such a process would remain entirely classified and at the discretion of Pakistan's leaders, and there is no suggestion of external involvement.

» Responsible nuclear stewardship requires institutional humility. The complexity of modern nuclear systems, the possibility of unknown vulnerabilities, and the interaction of technological, organizational, and human factors mean that no nuclear-armed state can assume its safeguards are perfect or complete. Fail-safe reviews provide an important mechanism for challenging assumptions, identifying previously unrecognized risks, and reducing complacency.

» Fail-safe reviews and processes are valuable unilateral risk reduction measures. However, they still do not substitute for multilateral arms control and risk reduction dialogue and agreements, and there remains an urgent need for nuclear-armed states to return to this agenda. Nevertheless, as more states conduct classified national fail-safe reviews, their independent recognition of similar fail-safe vulnerabilities might prompt new dialogues and initiatives to address and curtail these shared risks.

Bottom line

» The 2026 U.S.-Pakistan nuclear fail-safe dialogue substantively built upon the rich exchanges from last year's iteration, aided by its elevation to the Track 1.5 level. In light of evolving and increasingly systemic nuclear risks, the dialogue's continuing approach of constructive candor and detailed discussion of the benefits of fail-safe reviews and principles reflects the shared commitment by all participants to addressing these challenges. CSSPR, StrafAsia, APLN and NTI further agreed to discuss a joint program of activities and exchanges to further promote the fail-safe concept before the next planned plenary dialogue in 2027.