

European Leadership Network–France Nuclear Fail-Safe Dialogue

**October 28, 2024
Paris, France**

MEETING SYNOPSIS

Overview

- » On October 28, 2024, the European Leadership Network (ELN) and the Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri) co-hosted a meeting in Paris, bringing together French experts and officials from the Prime Minister’s office,¹ representatives of the Gendarmerie for Nuclear Weapons Security with the Ministry of the Armed Forces,² Ministry of the Armed Forces,³ and Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs.
- » The focus of the meeting, entitled “Assuring Nuclear Safety, Security and Surety – the Merits of Fail-Safe Reviews” (“Assurer la sûreté des armes nucléaires : quelle utilité du processus de fail-safe review”) was exclusively on fail-safe, safeguards that prevent the unauthorized, accidental, or mistaken use of a nuclear weapon.
- » The objective was to discuss internal, unilateral review mechanisms and measures, such as the French Contrôle gouvernemental, and consider the potential for nuclear fail-safe as an agenda item for bilateral and multilateral (including P5) discussion and initiatives.
- » The workshop was part of a broader regional project on fail-safe measures conducted by the ELN and supported by the Nuclear Threat Initiative.

¹ The Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale (SGDSN; Secretariat General of Defence and National Security) is a department in the prime minister’s office responsible for inter-ministerial coordination in the field of defence and national security.

² Officials from the Gendarmerie de la sécurité des armements nucléaires (GSAN), a unit that is part of the Ministère de l’Intérieur, were represented.

³ The Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy (DGRIS) as well as the Commandement du Combat Futur were represented.

Participants discussed:

- » The merits of the French nuclear weapons safety and security procedures as laid out in the *Contrôle gouvernemental* (CG)⁴ and how existing French review mechanisms could serve as a best-practice model for other nuclear-armed states to review the safety and security of their respective arsenals.
- » How the French nuclear doctrine served as an inspiration for U.S. Fail-Safe and Risk Reduction Review (FARR) of 1991.
- » The robustness and comprehensiveness of the existing review mechanisms, ensured by the following aspects related to CG provisions:
 - Ongoing and clear review processes; strong systems of compliance and governance are in place to ensure that only the president can launch a nuclear strike.
 - The measures in the CG evolve over time and respond to changes in the threat environment. The CG was last updated by presidential decree in February 2024 to reflect the increasing vulnerability of critical information technology systems, as well as in April 2025, in a relevant decree that aims to strengthen national control over sensitive operations in the nuclear defense sector, including, for instance, tighter control on subcontracting.
 - A strong internal feedback culture that allows mistakes to be turned into lessons learned that strengthen the process.
 - The unit implementing some of the current review processes, the Gendarmerie (GSAN), is not under the control of the chief of staff, which allows for independent assessments.
 - The CG is protected by national defense secret clearance, but those in charge—the minister of the armed forces and the joint chief of staff—can be questioned by Parliament.
- » The benefits of parliamentary scrutiny with regards to the French review mechanisms: while it is possible in France that officials in charge of the CG can be questioned by members of parliament, French officials were surprised to learn that this is not common practice in other nuclear-armed states. They were in favor of other states adopting more openness with regards to their national parliaments.
- » The prospects of non-P5 states reviewing their nuclear weapons safety and security procedures.
- » The merits of addressing fail-safe in an N5/P5 context, possibly under the Chinese P5 presidency.
- » French officials were confident in the reliability and robustness of the structures in place and that they served the purpose of preventing any unintended, accidental, or mistaken use of a nuclear weapon. While they did not see an immediate need for an independent review or even a review of their review mechanisms, they saw benefit in exploring how the CG could serve as a model of best practice for other nuclear-armed states. The group acknowledged that

⁴ The CG contains all provisions related to governmental control of French nuclear weapons safety and security and is enshrined in the Code de la défense.

the French safeguards mechanisms, although largely classified, had inspired U.S. processes, including the 1991 FARR.

- » French officials were in favor of other nuclear-armed states showing greater transparency. They acknowledged that greater openness to the French public about the existing fail-safe mechanisms could be beneficial.

Participants agreed:

- » Robust fail-safe mechanisms are important for all nuclear-armed states. It can be a unilateral, positive sum initiative by which all countries benefit.
- » There is no equivalent term to the English “fail-safe” in French. The ELN used the terminology “assurer la sûreté des armes nucléaires,” which can be translated back into English as “ensuring the safety of nuclear weapons,” which participants seemed confident with. In general terms, the English term “fail-safe” in a French context seems to be automatically associated with the CG. However, the CG cannot be seen as an equivalent for fail-safe.
- » Transparency with regards to fail-safe mechanisms can enhance trust in the public sphere. In the French context, transparency and communication around review mechanisms are crucial, given the commitment to the public regarding the safety of nuclear weapons. Greater transparency with regards to nuclear weapons safety and security could serve as a means to counter anti-deterrence voices. However, there are legitimate concerns that transparency could also, in some contexts, weaken the deterrent.
- » French officials did not see an immediate need for an independent review. They believe that the existing mechanisms enshrined in the CG are adequate to ensure the continued safety and security of the French deterrent. They are considering threats, including new ones, on an ongoing basis, and continually adapting processes in accordance with the prevailing threat environment. Some observed that fundamental to the evolutionary culture of the CG is reporting items below the threshold of incidents that could set off a chain of events. CG personnel communicate and analyze these up their chain of command to ensure absolute clarity and rectification.

Bottom line

- » The Paris talks established clearly the French government’s position on review processes related to nuclear weapons safety, security, and reliability. With regards to the comprehensiveness of scope, openness towards Parliament and adaptability of the current review processes, France appears to have a very good story to tell. There is also great benefit in the explicit separation of the implementation chain and the security chain in the French system. Improvements in transparency vis-à-vis publics and other nuclear-armed states, including in the P5 context, could be a possible step for the French government to take.