

# European Leadership Network–United Kingdom Nuclear Fail-Safe Dialogue

**October 30, 2024  
London, United Kingdom**

## MEETING SYNOPSIS

### Overview

- » On October 30, 2024, a European Leadership Network (ELN)-Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) delegation met British officials and experts in a track 1.5 roundtable hosted by the ELN. The focus 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 nuclear fail-safe reviews and measures and consider the potential for nuclear fail-safe as an agenda item for bilateral and multilateral (including P5) discussion and initiatives.

### Participants discussed:

- » The purpose and merits of “independent” nuclear fail-safe reviews similar in concept to the U.S. review underway; 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 any sharing of results or actions was not required and would be entirely at the discretion of each individual state.
- » The prospects for any meaningful discussion of common fail-safe interests in the N5/P5 format either under the current Chinese presidency or subsequently from August 2025 under the succeeding U.K. presidency.
- » The merits of greater British government openness towards Parliament and other audiences concerning the United Kingdom’s current, long-standing, continuous fail-safe review mechanism.
  - British officials were cautiously interested in the idea of greater openness. They were skeptical about action in the P5 format but not closed to it. They were opposed to an American style “independent review.” They noted that, in addition to the United Kingdom’s

comprehensive and continuous independent, unitary in-house review mechanism, the United Kingdom's fail-safe arrangements have always been subject to an annual independent review by the United States.

### Participants agreed:

- » Nuclear fail-safe is an important concept for all nuclear-armed states. It can be a unilateral, "positive sum" initiative by which all countries benefit.
- » Defining the term "fail-safe" is important for non-English speaking constituencies but there is a shared U.S.-U.K. understanding of the term. In both the United Kingdom and the United States, fail-safe means that if a nuclear weapon or weapon system fails, it will do so safely. More broadly, in practice the term refers to safeguards that prevent the unauthorized, accidental, or mistaken use of a nuclear weapon.
- » Internal, unilateral nuclear fail-safe reviews by all nuclear-armed states are a valuable tool for safety and risk reduction. Such reviews can involve not only actively serving officials but retired national nuclear scientists, military officials, and civilian defense officials with experience on these issues. Independent reviews such as the one underway in the United States would not be sealed off from government but conducted in consultation with government.
- » Every nuclear-armed state has its own unique nuclear posture, policies and procedures; hence each nuclear fail-safe review process will have its own unique scope and focus. British officials felt strongly that British circumstances are quite different from American ones and justify a quite different nuclear fail-safe review process. U.S. nuclear weapon systems are numerous, varied, and extensive. The United Kingdom has only one, "minimum deterrence," nuclear weapon system. While the United States has no mechanism for a comprehensive, let alone regular, fail-safe review of its multiplicity of nuclear weapon systems, the United Kingdom has long had an institutionally established, regular, semi-independent, continuous, professional failsafe review process.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the United Kingdom's fail-safe arrangements are independently reviewed annually by the United States under the provisions of the 1958 U.S.-U.K. Mutual Defence Agreement. U.K. officials consider these arrangements sufficient unless and until proven otherwise. They acknowledged that a more independent review along U.S. lines could, in theory, review the reviewers and provide additional assurance. But they were concerned that such additional effort might be redundant.

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<sup>1</sup> The fullest public description of the United Kingdom's fail-safe review arrangements appears to be in a 2016 blog post on the BASIC website by Rear Admiral John Gower (Rtd), former U.K. Ministry of Defense Assistant Chief of Defence Staff (Nuclear, Chemical, Biological), in which capacity he oversaw the U.K. nuclear deterrent: "Between late 2008 and late 2014 I was responsible for the annual report on the totality of the vulnerability of the broad range of systems, infrastructure, operations and processes which together constitute the UK's nuclear deterrent. The organisation whose purpose it is to monitor, audit, horizon scan and report, the Strategic Systems Performance Assessment and Analysis Group, worked for me. Clearly the detailed work which is their day-to-day bread and butter and the content of those reports are inappropriate material for this paper, but I was and remain confident that the scope is comprehensive, innovative and independent of policy imperatives.

There was and remains no place for complacency and their assiduous attention to detail reflected the broad scope of expertise: analytical, scientific and operational which exists across SSPAG. Thus, although I am clearly unable to quantify detail, I am confident that every element of vulnerability, actual or potential, is identified, analysed and reported upon."

- » Different national review processes would have different scopes but, in general, the more comprehensive such reviews are, the better. Nuclear fail-safe reviews might address nuclear policy and force posture; procedures; command-and-control processes and systems; and the design of nuclear weapons and delivery systems. British officials left the impression (but could not confirm at unclassified level) that these matters and more are covered in the continuous, “comprehensive” U.K. review process.
- » Nuclear fail-safe is even more urgent now, when nuclear modernization programs are happening in most nuclear-armed states (involving new technologies, early warning, command and control, and nuclear systems, some of which are entangled with conventional forces) along with the development of cyber threats and artificial intelligence (AI)—all of which could work to even further reduce decision time for leaders. Fail-safe steps could and should increase decision time and reduce the risk of an accident, mistake, or blunder.
- » The United States usefully could, and probably will, share its experience with nuclear fail-safe and the two independent reviews it has conducted: the 1990-1992 review and the review that is now nearing completion. But there has so far been no approach by the U.S. administration to the British government on fail-safe (as of October 2024).
- » Nuclear fail-safe would be an appropriate topic for dialogue by the N5/P5, provided that none of the P5 states would be using their interest in fail-safe for misdirection. In principle, British officials saw merit in a P5 glossary of terms, principles, and best practices.
- » Greater openness from the British government about the existence and operation of its fail-safe mechanisms might have merit. It was discussed that greater openness not just with Parliament but with publics would be beneficial. At present, government ministers are not able to say anything about review mechanisms even to the British Parliament.

## **Bottom line**

- » The London talks established clearly the U.K. government’s position on where movement may be possible and where the obstacles lie. While a change of position is unlikely to occur over the short-term, a possible first step could be to increase openness vis-à-vis Parliament and/or addressing the issue in the P5 format. On comprehensiveness of scope, regularity of review, and possibly independence of internal review, the United Kingdom appears to have a very good story to tell.