ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

FAILSAFE REVIEWS: A VERITABLE CBM IN THE AGE OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

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The expiration of the New START Treaty, the last bilateral arms control arrangement between the United States and Russia, has removed all guardrails on the deployment of strategic nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. While some scholars have argued that this development does not spell an end to arms control, geopolitical tensions and increasing distrust militate against its revival. The near-absence of an arms control architecture will further vitiate a fraught strategic environment, in which all nuclear-armed states are modernising their nuclear forces. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) Yearbook 2026, all nine nuclear possessors "continued to strengthen their nuclear arsenals in 2025," with several adding to their tallies of nuclear warheads. The proliferation of emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) further elevates nuclear risks. These developments are interacting to raise the probability of nuclear use.

A key category of these heightened nuclear risks is the danger of unauthorised, inadvertent, or accidental nuclear use. Given that great power competition has made the resuscitation of arms control a tall order, nuclear-armed states could contribute to obviating such risks by conducting thorough failsafe reviews— the internal assessment and inspection of systems, safety and security protocols, doctrines, and postures that prevent the unauthorised, accidental and inadvertent use of nuclear weapons. There are three reasons why such reviews could act as a confidence-building measure (CBM) in today's risky strategic milieu.

A Unilateral Effort

The foremost factor that makes it easier for a detailed failsafe review to become a CBM is the unilateralism associated with it. The United States, the only country that has voluntarily conducted two failsafe reviews, did not need to take any adversary or ally into confidence or build trust. Both reviews were conducted under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Defense and Department of Energy (the latter having a significant nuclear weapons responsibility). By taking these unilateral actions, the United States thoroughly evaluated the strength and reliability of its nuclear enterprise, signaling both

responsibility and confidence. Other nuclear-armed states could undertake similar reviews to assure and reassure audiences at home and abroad that their nuclear weapons are guarded against unauthorised use. While these unilateral measures are not a substitute for arms control, they could inspire some confidence in the robustness of states' nuclear command and control systems. Until a propitious environment for arms control is created, these reviews could attenuate strategic anxieties that emanate due to lack of transparency. They could be particularly useful at a time when the Sino-US impasse over arms control shows no sign of ending in the near future. If China decides to conduct a failsafe review, US concerns over the total absence of transparency would somewhat decline. More importantly, Beijing could take this initiative without thinking that it is Washington's sinister effort aimed at containment. However, these benefits of disclosure notwithstanding, whether to publicise or classify a failsafe review's findings should be a state's prerogative.

Can Nuclear Enterprises Handle EDTs?

The second reason why comprehensive failsafe reviews could become an all-important CBM is the fact that they would inform us how prepared nuclear enterprises are for the EDT revolution. EDTs, including artificial intelligence, cyber weapons, and quantum computing, have the propensity to disrupt nuclear command, control, and communications, conjure and amplify dangerous deepfakes and compress decision-making timelines. All of this has vitiated the nuclear risk landscape, raising the prospect of unauthorised, inadvertent, and accidental nuclear use. While controlling the military applications of EDTs requires cooperation at bilateral and multilateral levels, failsafe reviews could inspect how resistant and resilient nuclear enterprises are to the subversive effects of EDTs. Therefore, in the absence of dialogue, these reviews would help alleviate trepidations around the interaction of nuclear weapons and EDTs. While assuring foreign audiences is important, all nuclear-armed states, for their own sake, need these reviews to gauge how their nuclear enterprises might interact with EDTs and what steps are needed to make them more resilient against these new threats. Unilateral failsafe reviews would serve states well, as they want to ensure that their nuclear deterrents are available for use whenever they are required.

Signaling Seriousness and Avoiding Complacency

The third reason that could make failsafe reviews an effective CBM is that they would assuage fears of nuclear have-nots who look askance at the evolving nuclear landscape. By not only conducting but also publishing failsafe reviews, nuclear-armed states could signal that they not only understand new risks but are also committed to reducing them. Concomitantly, opening their nuclear enterprises to independent, all-encompassing reviews – which are still conducted on a classified basis by trusted national experts – will also demonstrate that these states are not complacent when it comes to handling nuclear weapons. All of this is likely to reduce tensions between nuclear-armed states and disarmament and risk reduction advocates.

In addition to this set of reasons, one additional factor favoring failsafe reviews is the relative absence of viable alternatives. As mentioned above, arms control has eroded to the point where it no longer induces stability, while there is little appetite for new bilateral or multilateral CBMs. Moreover, the growing salience of nuclear weapons is shrinking the space for nuclear-related cooperation.

In sum, failsafe reviews, if conducted, could contribute to building stability by addressing risks in a context of little substantive bilateral or multilateral nuclear diplomacy. Confidence could also increase if failsafe reviews lead to more transparency on how states are protecting their nuclear enterprises against EDTs. Last but not least, the trust deficit between nuclear-armed states and non-nuclear states would be reduced, as these reviews would signal seriousness and help avoid complacency regarding nuclear risks. Given that there are few alternatives available, failsafe reviews could prove to be a veritable nuclear risk reduction measure. The sense of assurance that these reviews are likely to create could be used to resume arms control-related discussions going forward.

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