Safran and Thales are transferring all infrared-related business to their joint subsidiary, Sofradir, to bolster its core skills. This is part of a larger effort to consolidate the French infrared detection industry. Philippe Petitcolin, President for Defense and Security at Safran and Chairman and CEO of Sagem, talks to us about the new industry leader’s ambitions.

What was the lead-up to Sagem (Safran) and Thales consolidating their infrared businesses within Sofradir?
In December 2011, Safran and Thales signed an MOU covering the entire French optronics industry. One of its first provisions was the creation of a 50/50 joint venture dedicated to new defense optronics programs, accomplished with the establishment of Optrolead in July 2012. A second component aiming to bolster the French infrared detection industry led to the creation of Sofradir, a joint subsidiary. This too was a two part process, ongoing since January 1, 2013. First we bought back Areva’s 20% stake in Sofradir in January 2012, making Safran and Thales equal partners. Next, Sofradir acquired all infrared detector development and manufacturing activities from each of its parent companies.

What commercial and industrial objectives has Sofradir set itself?
Sofradir has 25 years of expert-recognized expertise in high-performance – i.e. cooled – infrared technology. It perfected Mercury Cadmium Telluride (MCT) technology years ago. But despite MCT currently boasting an almost 50% market share in cooled infrared, it has its limits. That’s where Sagem's InSb-based semiconductors come in handy, letting us extend our range to cover the remaining 50% of the cooled infrared market. By the end of next year, these transferred skills will all be brought together in a new, 4,000 m² site in the Plateau de Saclay business cluster, in Paris’ south-western suburbs.

Now that the new entity is European leader in infrared detection, what next?
By combining all these skills into one single structure, Sofradir has joined the exclusive ranks of detector manufacturers mastering every aspect of infrared technology. It now has the resources it needs to advance this technology to the highest standards worldwide. Safran and Thales plan on leveraging this know-how to develop new products, and perhaps even offering it to external customers. Building up Sofradir’s core skills represents a leap forward for the strategic industry of infrared detection. These efforts should lead to the creation of highly-qualified jobs in France.