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POLITICS

# Pentagon Studies Reveal Major Nuclear Problems

By DAVID E. SANGER and WILLIAM J. BROAD NOV. 13, 2014

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WASHINGTON — The Pentagon will have to spend billions of dollars over the next five years to make emergency fixes to its [nuclear weapons](#) infrastructure, Defense Secretary [Chuck Hagel](#) will announce on Friday, after two separate Pentagon studies concluded that there are “systemic problems across the nuclear enterprise,” according to senior defense officials.

The reports are a searing indictment of how the Air Force’s and Navy’s aging nuclear weapons facilities, silos and submarine fleet have been allowed to decay since the end of the Cold War. A broad review was begun after academic cheating scandals and the dismissal of top officers for misbehavior, but it uncovered far more serious problems.

For example, while inspectors obsessed over whether every checklist and review of individual medical records was completed, they ignored huge problems, including aging blast doors over 60-year-old silos that would not seal shut and, in one case, the discovery that the crews that maintain the nation’s 450 intercontinental ballistic missiles had only a single wrench that could attach the nuclear warheads.

“They started FedExing the one tool” to three bases spread across the country, one official familiar with the contents of the reports said Thursday. No one had checked in years “to see if new tools were being made,” the official said. This was one of many maintenance problems that had “been around so long that no one reported them anymore.”

Senior officials said they were trying to determine how much the emergency repairs would cost. “It will be billions” over the next five years, one official said, “but not \$20 or \$30 billion.”

That is in addition to tens of billions of dollars that the Obama



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administration has already designated to upgrade nuclear laboratories and extend the lives of aging warheads. The huge investment has been hard to explain for an administration that came to office talking about a path to eliminating nuclear weapons around the globe, though President Obama has also pledged to make the country's nuclear arsenal as safe and reliable as possible.

Mr. Hagel's call for greater investment will come just 10 days before the deadline to conclude nuclear negotiations with Iran. It puts the administration in the position of demanding that the Iranians dismantle their nuclear infrastructure just as the defense secretary is arguing for an overhaul and improvement of American submarines, bombers and missile silos, and the more than 1,600 nuclear weapons they contain.

Mr. Hagel commissioned two reviews, one by senior Pentagon staff members and one led by two retired officers. Separately, they visited all operational nuclear bases and interviewed roughly 1,500 people, from commanders to enlisted personnel and contractors. While their reports varied on details, their overall assessments were similar: In the long, tedious work of nuclear readiness, a culture of micromanagement and attention to the smallest detail flourished, creating busywork while huge problems with equipment and readiness, most arising from the age of the systems, were ignored.

The "independent" study by the retired officers, Gen. Larry D. Welch of the Air Force and Adm. John C. Harvey Jr. of the Navy, found particular shortfalls at Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota, where both intercontinental ballistic missiles and long-range bombers are based. Morale was low, turnover high, and that single wrench was impossible to find — symptomatic of custom-built systems that date to the 1950s and '60s. Mr. Hagel will fly to Minot on Friday to visit the crews and promise changes.

That report also found major problems at submarine bases, where staffing was so short and parts so scarce that nuclear-armed submarines were kept away from patrols for far longer than planned, undercutting the country's best-hidden nuclear deterrent force.

The billions Mr. Hagel will promise are for short-term fixes; some will be shifted from other projects. But even before the reports were completed, the Obama administration had told the Pentagon to plan for 12 new missile submarines, up to 100 new bombers and 400 land-based missiles, either new or refurbished. Recently, the Monterey Institute of International Studies estimated the total cost of the country's nuclear enterprise over the next three decades at up to \$1.1



trillion.

But the retired officers' report noted that promises of new infrastructure had been made for so long that crews did not believe the new equipment would arrive during their careers.

Officials said the report gave special attention to remedies for the recent cheating scandals that have rocked the Navy's nuclear propulsion programs and the Air Force crews that maintain intercontinental ballistic missiles and stand ready to launch them on a moment's notice.

In March, the Air Force fired nine officers and accepted the resignation of the commander at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana for failing to provide adequate oversight of the 100 or so launch officers implicated in the scandal there.

Officials said the report by General Welch and Admiral Harvey had found that a culture of extreme testing undermined the integrity needed for the demanding nuclear posts. It concluded that the larger problem lay not with the missile combat or Navy propulsion crews that cheated, but with "mispurposed testing." The goal became scoring a near-perfect grade average on the exams that could be reported up the chain of command, rather than making sure that systems worked and that sailors and missile crews, often young and inexperienced, were ready to operate under combat conditions.

Among the report's suggestions, officials said, were more recognition and special pay for highly responsible nuclear jobs. The advice for bolstering morale got as specific as restoring "select crew" patches and creating a pin or patch for successfully completing 200 missile alerts.

Officials said the external reviewers had leveled some of their harshest criticism at personnel reliability programs, which seek to determine the mental fitness of those charged with firing the nation's nuclear arms. They said the programs, as currently managed, often conveyed distrust of atomic personnel and actually reduced fitness.

The recommended fixes, senior officials said, included testing, reviewing medical records and putting more responsibility for assessing mental fitness on commanders than on inspectors.

***Correction: November 13, 2014***

*An earlier version of this article misstated when Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel will travel to Minot Air Force Base. It is Friday, not Saturday.*

David E. Sanger reported from Washington, and William J. Broad from New York.

A version of this article appears in print on November 14, 2014, on page A18 of the New York edition with the headline: Pentagon Studies Reveal Major Nuclear Problems.

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