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Management shortcomings seen at NSA

Report identifies a culture of distrust, failures of oversight

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Sun Reporter

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WASHINGTON— In a sharp rebuke to the **National Security Agency's** leadership, an internal task force has concluded that the country's largest intelligence agency lacks vision and is unable to set objectives and meet them.

NSA employees also do not trust one another, which has left the agency fragmented and in search of a "unity of purpose," according to a task force report released to employees late last month."What we need is fundamental change in the way we manage NSA and what we expect of management and ourselves," concluded the study, which was led by George "Dennis" Bartko, the NSA's deputy chief of cryptanalysis. The Sun obtained unclassified portions of the report and eight related documents.

Management problems have been blamed for repeated setbacks as the agency tries to upgrade its ability to analyze the millions of snippets of conversations and other communications collected worldwide every day. In recent years, several major programs have been hampered by delays, technology breakdowns or cost overruns.

Yet the report's blunt conclusions are strikingly similar to those in a pair of 1999 NSA studies, raising questions about how much progress the **Maryland**-based agency has made since then.

NSA Director Lt. Gen Keith B. Alexander commissioned the latest report as part of his campaign to improve the management and spying capability of the agency, which, according to one task force planning document, is facing an "identity crisis."

Rep. C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger, a Maryland Democrat who chairs the House Intelligence subcommittee that oversees the NSA, said he did not know about the report. Told of some of its conclusions, he said, "What you're reading to me is troubling."

Aggressive oversight and more money are needed to make sure that the NSA has sufficient spying capabilities, he said. "Failure, as it relates to NSA, is not an option."

The report's conclusions are a chief reason Alexander announced last month that he would consolidate technology programs under a senior officer, NSA spokeswoman Andrea Martino said in e-mailed responses to questions.

"We agree that these issues are important as we move into the future, and the team's conclusions and recommendations are a key starting point for doing so," she said.

Reaffirming the problem, the task force report was released about the same time the agency decided to overhaul part of the "Turbulence" program designed to enable the NSA to process digital information at high speeds in cyberspace, according to a senior intelligence official.

According to the task force, the NSA must "decide upon a common purpose, develop plans and strategies aligned with that purpose, manage all of our resources, and tie rewards to successful execution of our plans."

The NSA eavesdrops on communications worldwide, and its budget has doubled to about \$8 billion since the Sept. 11 attacks.

But mismanagement has been a continuing problem, driving into the ground a six-year, multibillion-dollar "Trailblazer" program to adapt the NSA's collection and analysis capability to the age of digital communications. More recently, the initiative launched in its stead, "Turbulence," has run into significant problems, exemplified by the recent decision to overhaul a critical piece of the project. Poor planning has also left the agency short of electricity.

That management problems persist more than five years after "the worst terrorist attack in American history" is "really discouraging," said Amy Zegart, a **University of California, Los Angeles** public policy professor whose research focuses on intelligence agencies.

Among the conclusions from the 1999 studies were that the NSA had a "poorly communicated mission and lack of vision" and had ignored "excellent recommendations" in the past. The 1999 reports called for a reorganization of the NSA, which was largely carried out.

But it failed to produce a "fundamental management culture change," the new report concludes.

Bartko, who led the 24-person task force of NSA employees, acknowledged "concerns" that its conclusions were similar to those in previous studies. "If these recommendations were made before, what's different this time?" he wrote in a recent column for the agency's work force.

"Now is the time" for change, he continued. "It has to be. The Nation is depending on us not only today, but tomorrow as well."

In 2004, Congress, frustrated over the NSA's inability to manage its own expensive programs, stripped the agency of its authority to launch new ones without approval from the Pentagon. That authority has yet to be restored.

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