

# OVERSIGHT OF THE DOD NUCLEAR ENTERPRISE

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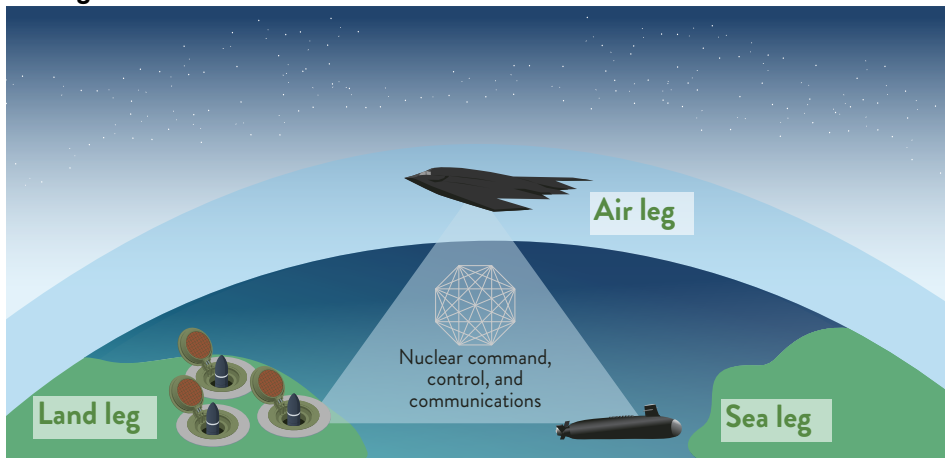
## CHALLENGES TO NATIONAL SECURITY

Comprehensive oversight of DOD’s nuclear enterprise is crucial for supporting nuclear deterrence missions, as the department undertakes triad modernization efforts that are unprecedented in scope. DOD has limited room for errors or schedule changes as it undertakes these efforts. GAO has identified oversight challenges and made multiple recommendations to address them, but many recommendations remain unaddressed.

Following are examples of planned triad modernization efforts that GAO has reported on:

- The Sentinel land-based missile system is intended to replace the Minuteman III system in 2030—50 years past the Minuteman III’s initial planned service life.
- The *Columbia*-class ballistic missile submarines are intended to replace the *Ohio*-class submarines beginning in 2027, the *Ohio*’s service life having been extended from 30 years to 42 years.
- The B-52 bomber—in service since the early 1960s and well past its original planned service life—is intended to get, among other modifications, a full engine replacement.
- B-21 bombers are intended to replace B-2 bombers—in service since the mid-1990s—beginning in the mid-2020s.

## Strategic Nuclear Triad



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-106735

DOD has significantly modified its nuclear enterprise oversight structure multiple times since 2021, putting oversight continuity at risk and potentially affecting senior leaders’ ability to make informed decisions. In 2014 DOD established a group to ensure the long-term health of DOD’s nuclear enterprise by addressing issues identified in the 2014 nuclear enterprise reviews. In 2021 DOD replaced that group with another group that would assume the same responsibilities. According to DOD officials, DOD replaced the second group with a nuclear-focused Deputy’s Management Action Group in 2022.

GAO maintains that its recommendations to strengthen DOD’s nuclear enterprise oversight are valid, especially in light of the significant and continual modifications to the oversight structure. For example, GAO’s recommendations that DOD establish oversight roles and responsibilities and methods of communication and coordination remain relevant for whatever group is responsible for overseeing DOD’s nuclear enterprise.

## THE BIG PICTURE

Modernizing aging weapon systems to support the nuclear enterprise could cost up to \$350 billion over the next 20 years, according to Department of Defense (DOD) estimates. DOD has repeatedly affirmed, most recently in its 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, that DOD’s nuclear enterprise remains a top priority mission for U.S. national security.

Part of DOD’s nuclear enterprise, the strategic nuclear triad comprises Air Force land-based nuclear missiles, Air Force nuclear-capable bomber aircraft, and Navy ballistic missile submarines, as well as associated munitions; air refueling; and nuclear command, control, and communications capabilities. The Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration carries out responsibilities related to the maintenance and modernization of the stockpile of nuclear weapons—the warheads and bombs deployed on DOD weapon systems.

In DOD’s 2014 nuclear enterprise reviews, the department concluded that no single entity governs the loose federation of nuclear activities spread across multiple organizations. DOD noted that nuclear enterprise problems do not exist in isolation and require a coordinated, holistic approach to resolve.

## GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

### Selected GAO Open Recommendations to DOD and the Military Services Related to Nuclear Enterprise Oversight



#### Clarify roles and responsibilities of oversight organizations

- ▶ Document the nuclear-focused Deputy's Management Action Group (DMAG) (formerly the Secretary's Nuclear Transition Review) [roles and responsibilities](#).
- ▶ Update applicable oversight guidance to [clarify roles and responsibilities](#) for nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) oversight.



#### Establish methods of communication and collaboration among oversight organizations

- ▶ Document how the nuclear-focused DMAG will [communicate with other organizations](#) that have oversight responsibilities for portions of DOD's nuclear enterprise.
- ▶ Update applicable oversight guidance to [establish methods for communication and collaboration](#) to reflect changes to NC3 oversight structure.



#### Prioritize programs, projects, and activities within the nuclear enterprise

- ▶ Establish and [review prioritization criteria](#) for DOD's nuclear enterprise activities.
- ▶ Apply [prioritization criteria](#) whenever changes to the nuclear portfolio are proposed or reviewed, and evaluate resources based on those criteria.



#### Monitor issues affecting the nuclear enterprise

- ▶ Identify the means for [monitoring long-standing issues](#).
- ▶ Establish a [joint risk management process](#), in coordination with the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) to periodically identify, analyze, and respond to risks that affect the nuclear enterprise (including the nuclear weapons stockpile, weapon systems, and nuclear command and control).
- ▶ [Report risks and any associated mitigation efforts](#) to internal and external stakeholders, in coordination with NNSA.
- ▶ Assign responsibility to an official or organization to monitor Air Force nuclear certification challenges and lessons learned.
- ▶ Develop a mechanism to identify, evaluate, and address Air Force nuclear certification challenges and a mechanism to collect, analyze, archive, and share nuclear certification lessons learned.
- ▶ Ensure that the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering [conducts a schedule risk analysis](#) of the lead *Columbia* submarine's construction schedule to inform the first in-progress program review of 2023 and provides the results to the *Columbia* program office.
- ▶ Ensure that the *Columbia* program office [uses the schedule risk analysis](#) from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering to update plans for the lead submarine's delivery and mitigate identified risks.
- ▶ Ensure that the fiscal year 2024 30-year Navy shipbuilding plan is [informed by updated planning that reflects resources needed to address shared risks](#) between the *Columbia*- and *Virginia*-class programs, to certify that the budget submitted is sufficient to procure submarines according to the plan's outlined schedule.

Source: GAO (information and icons). | GAO-24-106735

Note: Some recommendations included are from reports with Controlled Unclassified Information.

## ABOUT GAO

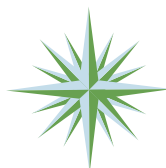
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Source: Air Force/Staff Sgt. Jacob Thompson (cover photo).



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