

HOMELAND DEFENSE

Continued Actions Needed to Improve Management of Air Sovereignty Alert Operations

Why GAO Did This Study

In the 11 years since September 11, 2001, the U.S. government has put forth extensive efforts to protect the nation's aviation sector and airspace. These efforts include air sovereignty alert (ASA) operations, for which the Air Force provides personnel and fully fueled, fully armed aircraft sitting on constant alert at 18 sites across the United States. In 2009, GAO found shortcomings in the Department of Defense's (DOD) management of ASA operations, leading to a number of GAO recommendations. For this report, GAO examined the extent to which (1) the Air Force has implemented GAO's 2009 recommendations, (2) DOD has implemented a risk-based management approach for ASA operations, and (3) the Air Force has accurately identified expenditures for ASA operations. To do so, GAO analyzed relevant strategies, planning documents, guidance, and expenditure data; and interviewed North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), Air Force, National Guard Bureau, and other DOD officials.

What GAO Recommends

Congress may wish to consider requiring the Air Force to fully implement GAO's 2009 recommendations. In addition, GAO recommends that DOD improve its risk management of ASA operations and improve the Air Force's ability to accurately identify ASA expenditures. DOD fully or partially agreed with all of GAO's recommendations.

What GAO Found

The Air Force has not fully implemented the recommendations from GAO's 2009 report. With regard to GAO's recommendation that the military services should formally assign ASA duties to the units that consistently conduct them and ensure that the readiness of those units is fully assessed, the Air Force did so. However, the National Guard Bureau is considering reversing that action because it believes that the recommendation can be better addressed through the Air Force's standard deployment process. The Air Force has also not established a timetable to implement ASA as a steady-state mission; has not developed and implemented a plan to recapitalize the aging fighter aircraft that conduct ASA operations before the end of their service lives; and, when ASA units are deployed to support other ongoing operations, the Air Force continues to identify replacement units to perform the ASA mission on an ad hoc basis. All of the above were related to recommendations GAO made to the Air Force in its 2009 report. Separately, GAO found considerable confusion about the capabilities associated with ASA operations in part because, in September 2011, NORAD stopped using the term "air sovereignty alert" and created a new term, "aerospace control alert" (ACA), without clearly defining ACA or the missions that are now included within it.

DOD has taken a series of actions for ASA operations that are consistent with a risk-based management approach. However, several key actions have yet to be taken that would enable the department to better balance risk and costs. Risk-based management includes conducting routine risk assessments that evaluate threats, vulnerabilities, and criticality of assets, as recommended in GAO's 2009 report, and selecting between alternative courses of action to mitigate risk and make decisions about allocating resources. Although threats to the nation's air sovereignty continue to emerge and evolve, GAO found that DOD is unable to measure the extent to which ASA helps to achieve the department's homeland-defense goal of securing the United States from direct attack because DOD has not established performance measures. NORAD has not conducted routine risk assessments of ASA operations. DOD has also yet to conduct a cost-benefit analysis for two of the three alternatives to current ASA operations that GAO evaluated. Adopting a more-rigorous risk-based management approach—including balancing risk and costs—would help policymakers within DOD and elsewhere more effectively allocate finite DOD resources.

Weak internal controls limit the ability of the Air Force and National Guard Bureau to accurately identify ASA expenditures. GAO analyzed the fiscal year 2010 expenditure information that the Air Force and National Guard Bureau submitted to Congress along with DOD's fiscal year 2012 budget justification and found the reported expenditures of more than \$246 million to be inaccurate. For example, GAO found that the Air Force overstated ASA flying-hour expenditures by at least \$22 million and included expenditures related to national special-security events, which are not part of ASA operations. GAO found that the Air Force's ability to identify ASA expenditures is limited by unclear roles and responsibilities for programming and budgeting and a lack of guidance on defining and tracking ASA expenditures. These types of internal controls are important to ensuring basic accountability, maintaining funds control, and preventing fraud and abuse.