



Highlights of [GAO-08-251](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

It has been 5 years since the Department of Defense (DOD) established U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) to conduct homeland defense and civil support missions in the United States. Planning operations in the United States poses unique challenges for traditional military planning. GAO was asked to assess (1) the status of NORTHCOM's plans and the challenges it faces in planning and conducting operations, (2) the number, experience, and training of planning personnel, and (3) the extent to which NORTHCOM coordinates with other federal agencies. To do this, GAO reviewed available NORTHCOM plans, compared them to joint operational planning criteria, compared planning staff with those at other commands, and reviewed documentation and mechanisms for interagency coordination.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making several recommendations to DOD to direct NORTHCOM to take actions to address the challenges it faces in its planning and interagency coordination efforts. GAO is also recommending that DOD develop metrics by which to measure readiness for civil support missions. DOD generally agreed with the recommendations and suggested ongoing and future efforts to satisfy the intent of the recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-251](#). For more information, contact Davi M. D'Agostino at (202) 512-5431 or dagostinod@gao.gov.

HOMELAND DEFENSE

U.S. Northern Command Has Made Progress but Needs to Address Force Allocation, Readiness Tracking Gaps, and Other Issues

What GAO Found

NORTHCOM has completed—or is in the process of revising—all of the major plans it is required to prepare for its homeland defense and civil support missions, but it faces a number of challenges in planning for and conducting these missions. NORTHCOM has completed its nine required plans. However, NORTHCOM does not know whether supporting plans that must be developed by other DOD organizations to assist NORTHCOM are complete because it has only recently begun to develop a process to track and assess these plans. NORTHCOM faces challenges in three key planning areas. First, NORTHCOM has difficulty identifying requirements for capabilities it may need in part because NORTHCOM does not have more detailed information from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) or the states on the specific requirements needed from the military in the event of a disaster. Second, NORTHCOM has few regularly allocated forces and few capabilities allocated to its plans. DOD could allocate forces to NORTHCOM and assign specific forces to the command's plans, but this would not guarantee that those forces would not have to be deployed elsewhere. However, it would provide DOD and the NORTHCOM commander with a better basis on which to assess the risk that the command would be unable to successfully execute one or more of its missions. Third, NORTHCOM has difficulty monitoring the readiness of military units for its civil support mission because its plans do not specify mission tasks against which units can be assessed. NORTHCOM has undertaken mitigation efforts to address each challenge, and new national planning guidance may further assist NORTHCOM and DOD in addressing the challenges. Nevertheless, NORTHCOM and DOD can take additional actions to reduce the risk from these gaps and reduce the risk due to the overall uncertainty that stems from the nature of its mission.

NORTHCOM has an adequate number of planning personnel, and the command is pursuing opportunities to expand the experience and training for staff needed to perform the command's planning function. NORTHCOM's planning staff is filled at over 96 percent of its authorized positions. NORTHCOM's military planning staff receives the same planning training and education as planners in other combatant commands. To draw upon experience in planning and conducting domestic operations, NORTHCOM has integrated National Guard and U.S. Coast Guard personnel into its headquarters staff. NORTHCOM has also developed a curriculum for required mission-related training courses.

Although NORTHCOM has taken actions to improve coordination of its homeland defense and civil support plans and operations with federal agencies, it lacks formalized guidance and procedures—such as memorandums of understanding or charters—to help ensure that interagency coordination efforts or agreements that are reached can be fully relied on. This is important because responding to a major disaster in the United States—natural or man-made—is a shared responsibility of many government agencies with states often requiring federal assistance from DHS and DOD.