



Highlights of [GAO-09-184](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

According to U.S. intelligence, the threat to U.S. airspace remains. The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) is to defend U.S. air space and the U.S. Air Force has 18 sites in the United States that conduct air sovereignty alert (ASA) operations. ASA operations support fighter aircraft in conducting homeland air defense operations. GAO examined the extent to which (1) NORAD has adopted a risk-based management approach to determine ASA operational requirements; (2) the Air Force has implemented ASA operations as a steady-state mission in accordance with Department of Defense (DOD), NORAD, and Air Force directives and guidance; (3) the Air Force assesses the readiness of units conducting ASA operations; and (4) the Air Force faces challenges in sustaining ASA operations for the future and what plans, if any, it has to address such challenges. GAO reviewed relevant ASA guidance, directives, and planning documents; and interviewed DOD officials, including the commanders of all 18 ASA sites.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD conduct routine risk assessments, implement ASA as a steady-state mission, and develop plans to address future challenges. DOD agreed with some and partially agreed with other recommendations. GAO clarified the recommendations based on DOD comments on a draft of this report.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-184](#). For more information, contact Davi M. D'Agostino at (202) 512-5431 or dagostinod@gao.gov.

HOMELAND DEFENSE

Actions Needed to Improve Management of Air Sovereignty Alert Operations to Protect U.S. Airspace

What GAO Found

Responding to individual requests from DOD, NORAD has done some assessments to determine ASA operational requirements. NORAD has not adopted a risk-based approach to determining ASA requirements, including routine risk assessments. Although GAO previously reported on the benefits to organizations that routinely do risk assessments to determine program requirements, NORAD does not conduct such assessments because DOD does not require NORAD to do so. However, such assessments could enhance NORAD's ability to determine and apply the appropriate levels and types of units, personnel, and aircraft for the ASA mission.

The Air Force has not implemented ASA operations in accordance with DOD, NORAD, and Air Force directives and guidance, which instruct the Air Force to establish ASA as a steady-state (ongoing and indefinite) mission. The Air Force has not implemented the 140 actions it identified to establish ASA as a steady-state mission, which included integrating ASA operations into the Air Force's planning, programming, and funding cycle. The Air Force has instead been focused on other priorities, such as overseas military operations. While implementing ASA as a steady-state mission would not solve all of the challenges the units must address, it would help them mitigate some of the challenges associated with conducting both their ASA and warfighting missions.

NORAD has partially assessed the readiness of ASA units; however the Air Force has not evaluated personnel, training, and quantity and quality of equipment. Readiness measures are designed to ensure that DOD forces are properly trained, equipped, and prepared to conduct their assigned missions. For example, while NORAD evaluated the extent to which aircraft were maintained for ASA operations and the units' ability to respond to an alert and to locate and intercept aircraft, it did not evaluate training. Because the Air Force has not implemented ASA as a steady-state mission or formally assigned the mission to the units, it does not assess ASA readiness. By assessing the readiness of units that consistently conduct ASA operations, DOD would be better assured that these units are organized, trained, and equipped to perform ASA operations.

The Air Force faces two challenges to sustaining its ASA capabilities over the long term—(1) replacing or extending the service life of aging fighter aircraft and (2) replacing ASA units with equipment and trained personnel when they deploy. For example, if aircraft are not replaced by 2020, 11 of the 18 current air sovereignty alert sites could be without aircraft. The Air Force has not developed plans to mitigate these challenges because it has been focused on other priorities. Plans would provide the Air Force information that could assist it in ensuring the long-term sustainability of ASA operations and the capability of ASA units to protect U.S. airspace.