



Highlights of [GAO-11-238T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Aviation Operations, Safety, and Security, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The attempted December 25, 2009, terrorist attack and the October 2010 bomb attempt involving air cargo originating in Yemen highlight the ongoing threat to aviation and the need to coordinate security standards and practices to enhance security with foreign partners, a process known as harmonization. This testimony discusses the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) progress and challenges in harmonizing international aviation security standards and practices and facilitating compliance with international standards. This testimony is based on reports GAO issued from April 2007 through June 2010, and ongoing work examining foreign airport assessments. For this work, GAO obtained information from DHS and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and interviewed TSA program officials, foreign aviation officials, representatives from international organizations such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and industry associations, about ongoing harmonization and TSA airport assessment efforts and challenges.

What GAO Recommends

In response to prior GAO recommendations that TSA, among other things, track the status of foreign airport assessments, DHS concurred and is working to address the recommendations. TSA provided technical comments on a draft of the information contained in this statement, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

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AVIATION SECURITY

DHS Has Taken Steps to Enhance International Aviation Security and Facilitate Compliance with International Standards, but Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

In the wake of the December 2009 terrorist incident, DHS and TSA have strived to enhance ongoing efforts to harmonize international security standards and practices through increased global outreach, coordination of standards and practices, use of enhanced technology, and assessments of foreign airports. For example, in 2010 the Secretary of Homeland Security participated in five regional summits aimed at developing an international consensus to enhance aviation security. In addition, DHS and TSA have coordinated with foreign governments to harmonize air cargo security practices to address the statutory mandate to screen 100 percent of air cargo transported on U.S.-bound passenger aircraft by August 2010, which TSA aims to meet by 2013. Further, in the wake of the December 2009 incident, the Secretary of Homeland Security has encouraged other nations to consider using advanced imaging technology (AIT), which produces an image of a passenger's body that screeners use to look for anomalies such as explosives. As a result, several nations have begun to test and deploy AIT or have committed to deploying AIT units at their airports. Moreover, following the October 2010 cargo bomb attempt, TSA also implemented additional security requirements to enhance air cargo security. To facilitate compliance with international security standards, TSA assesses the security efforts of foreign airports as defined by ICAO international aviation security standards. In 2007, GAO reported, among other things, that TSA did not always consistently track and document host government progress in addressing security deficiencies identified during foreign airport assessments and recommended that TSA track and document progress in this area.

DHS and TSA have made progress in their efforts to enhance international aviation security through these harmonization efforts and related foreign airport assessments; however, a number of key challenges, many of which are beyond DHS's control, exist. For example, harmonization depends on the willingness of sovereign nations to voluntarily coordinate their aviation security standards and practices. In addition, foreign governments may view aviation security threats differently, and therefore may not consider international aviation security a high priority. Resource availability, which is a particular concern for developing countries, as well as legal and cultural factors may also affect nations' security enhancement and harmonization efforts. In addition to challenges facing DHS's harmonization efforts, in 2007 GAO reported that TSA experienced challenges in assessing foreign airport security against international standards and practices, such as a lack of available international inspectors and concerns host governments had about being assessed by TSA, both of which may affect the agency's ability to schedule and conduct assessments for some foreign airports. GAO is exploring these issues as part of an ongoing review of TSA's foreign airport assessment program, which GAO plans to issue in the fall of 2011.