

# Executive Memorandum

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## America Needs a Security Strategy for Safer Skies

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In December 2004, President George W. Bush directed the National Security Council (NSC) and Homeland Security Council (HSC) jointly to prepare a National Strategy for Maritime Security. That made sense. Maritime security is vital to the defense of the nation, and no one federal agency bears all the responsibility for preventing, responding to, and recovering from hostile acts that might threaten America's security from the sea. However, the President should not stop there. The nation's air security faces similar challenges. The President should also direct the NSC and HSC jointly to develop a national strategy for air security.

**Keeping Friendly Skies Friendly.** The United States needs a national air security strategy. Like the maritime domain, U.S. airspace is a complex place that is vital to the national economy but vulnerable to exploitation by terrorists. After the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, Congress created the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), which is part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The TSA is responsible for overseeing commercial airline safety including inspecting boarding passengers. Other DHS elements also have air security missions, including the U.S. Coast Guard and Customs and Border Protection (CBP). In addition, the Departments of Defense, State, and Transportation have significant responsibilities related to protecting U.S. airspace.

Nor is air security strictly a federal mission. State and local governments play important roles, particularly in safeguarding the airports and other aviation infrastructure. The private sector has an enormous stake in airspace security, extending beyond commercial passenger travel and airfreight. General aviation is the fastest growing aviation sector. Finally, air security is an international challenge that requires the cooperation and support of the many nations that have a mutual interest in ensuring that the skies are safe.

**Air Security Priorities.** As America moves into the 21st century, the demand for open skies that are safe and secure and that facilitate efficiency and innovation will only increase. Such improvements in air security are unlikely to happen without a national strategy focused on meeting the mutually important goals of protecting Americans, promoting economic growth, and safeguarding the liberties of individual citizens. Such a strategy should address the following priorities:

- **The future of passenger screening.** The TSA budget is about \$6 billion a year, most of which

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/em996.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/em996.cfm)

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is spent screening the millions of people who fly on commercial airliners. In other words, most of the money is spent looking at people who are not the problem. There must be a better way. If 10 years from now the United States is still physically screening airline passengers, something will have gone terribly wrong. The United States should commit to becoming a global leader in developing an alternative security screening program that does not require 100 percent physical screening. This program should respect individual liberties, only minimally affect the cost of aviation operations, and keep terrorists off of airplanes.

- **Shoulder-fired missile threats.** Man-portable air defense systems were developed to defend against military aircraft, but they are now globally available, and terrorists have used them to target passenger aircraft. It is only a matter of time until a terrorist attempts to shoot down a commercial airliner in the United States or in the country of a friend or ally. The response to such a tragedy would likely be knee-jerk, ineffective, and costly—a cheap win for the terrorist. The United States and other countries should not wait until such an event to develop contingency plans and mid-range and long-range plans to reduce the threat and deploy cost-effective countermeasures, and these solutions and technologies should be shared with U.S. friends and allies.
- **Domestic air security investment.** Currently, the United States relies heavily on the Department of Defense to protect U.S. airspace. This is an expensive and inefficient use of high-performance aircraft that are not optimized for domestic air security missions, such as interdicting hijacked and stolen planes and guarding restricted airspace. The long-term investment strategy should look to building up appropriate civilian law enforcement capabilities in the Coast Guard and the CBP and getting the Defense Department out of the domestic air security business.
- **Theater cruise and missile defense.** Attacking U.S. territory with cruise missiles, short-range ballistic missiles, or unmanned aerial

vehicles (UAVs) covertly launched from seaborne platforms disguised as private or commercial craft is eminently achievable. Even moderately well-funded terrorist groups might be able to mount such an attack. The United States needs the capability to quickly increase air defense, including theater missile defenses, over portions of U.S. territory as warranted by security needs or intelligence reports. Ground-based directed-energy weapons could be part of the solution. The Department of Defense should be able to secure American airspace against these kinds of attacks as effectively as it would secure the airspace over U.S. forces deployed overseas.

- **A reasonable role for the private sector.** Security activities should be dictated by a comprehensive assessment of risks. Washington, not the private sector, is responsible for preventing terrorist acts through intelligence gathering, early warning, and counterterrorism efforts. The private sector is responsible for taking reasonable anti-terrorism precautions in much the same way as society expects it to take reasonable safety and environmental precautions. The government has a role in defining what is “reasonable” and facilitating information sharing. A model public-private regime for the aviation industry would (1) define what is reasonable through clear performance measures, (2) create transparency and the means to measure performance, (3) establish ways for the market to reward good behavior, and (4) ensure that any “fix” does not cripple the economic viability of the aviation industry.

**Conclusion.** America is already a half-decade into the 21st century. It is long past time to start building an air security system for the long term. A national strategy would be a good start.

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