

Highlights of [GAO-13-81](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Use of lighter-than-air platforms, such as aerostats, which are tethered to the ground, and airships, which are free-flying, could significantly improve U.S. ISR and communications capabilities, and move cargo more cheaply over long distances and to austere locations. DOD is spending about \$1.3 billion in fiscal year 2012 to develop and acquire numerous aerostats and airships.

GAO was asked to determine (1) what key systems governmentwide are being developed and acquired, including funding, purpose, and status; (2) any technical challenges these key efforts may be facing; and (3) how effectively these key efforts are being overseen to ensure coordination, and identify any potential for duplication. To address these questions, GAO reviewed and analyzed documentation and interviewed a wide variety of DOD and civil agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD take actions based on the extent of its future investments in this area: (1) if investments are curtailed, ensure it has insight into all current and planned efforts in the short term; (2) if investments increase significantly, include the efforts in strategic frameworks to ensure visibility and coordination, guide innovation, and prioritize investments; and (3) ensure the roles and responsibilities of the senior official responsible for the oversight and coordination of airship-related programs are defined. DOD concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-13-81](#). For more information, contact Cristina Chaplain at (202) 512-4841 or chaplainc@gao.gov.

DEFENSE ACQUISITIONS

Future Aerostat and Airship Investment Decisions Drive Oversight and Coordination Needs

What GAO Found

GAO identified 15 key aerostat and airship efforts that were underway or had been initiated since 2007, and the Department of Defense (DOD) had or has primary responsibility for all of these efforts. None of the civil agency efforts met GAO's criteria for a key effort. Most of the aerostat and airship efforts have been fielded or completed, and are intended to provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support. The estimated total funding of these efforts was almost \$7 billion from fiscal years 2007 through 2012. However, funding estimates beyond fiscal year 2012 decline precipitously for aerostat and airship efforts under development, although there is an expectation that investment in the area will continue.

Aerostat (left) and Airship (right)



Sources (left to right): U.S. Army and U.S. Navy.

Three of the four aerostat and airship efforts under development, plus another airship development effort that was terminated in June 2012, have suffered from high acquisition risks because of significant technical challenges, such as overweight components, and difficulties with integration and software development, which, in turn, have driven up costs and delayed schedules.

DOD has provided limited oversight to ensure coordination of its aerostat and airship development and acquisition efforts. Consequently, these efforts have not been effectively integrated into strategic frameworks, such as investment plans and roadmaps. At the time of GAO's review, DOD did not have comprehensive information on all its efforts nor its entire investment in aerostats and airships. Additionally, DOD's coordination efforts have been limited to specific technical activities, as opposed to having a higher level authority to ensure coordination is effective. DOD has recently taken steps to bolster oversight, including the appointment of a senior official responsible for the oversight and coordination of airship-related programs. However, as of August 2012, DOD has not defined the details relating to the authority, scope, and responsibilities of this new position. Whether these steps are sufficient largely depends on the direction DOD intends to take with aerostat and airship programs. If it decides to continue investing in efforts, more steps may be needed to shape these investments.