

*The Container Security Initiative: Pushing out the Front Lines
in the War on Terrorism*

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The war on terrorism is just that: a war in every sense but the most traditional. Foreign invaders are trying to besiege and conquer us, to take what's rightfully ours, to attack us right here in our homeland. We want to keep them out. To do so, we are designing and putting up barricades, technological fortifications to defend ourselves.

But just as concrete bulwarks supported by cannon can be breached, allowing invaders immediate entry into protected territory, so can instruments of terror defy defensive measures installed at U.S. ports. Once that's happened, the repercussions might be as destructive as were those when the British broke our lines at Bladensburg, and burned Washington in 1814.

How do we reduce the likelihood of a 9-11 style repeat of the Bladensburg tragedy? In January 2002, the U.S. Customs & Border Protection agency of the Department of Homeland Security (Customs) took the first steps toward measures unavailable in 1814. Customs began moving the war's front lines away from our shores, making U.S. port security not the first point of resistance to would-be attackers, but the last.

With the Container Security Initiative (CSI), efforts to thwart entry into the U.S. of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) begin on foreign shores. Now developed into a multi-faceted, coordinated security and enforcement effort, Customs defines CSI in terms of four core elements:

1. Establish security criteria for identifying high-risk containers based on advance information.
2. Pre-screen containers at the earliest possible point.
3. Use technology to quickly pre-screen high-risk containers.
4. Develop secure and "smart" containers.

With the vast majority of cargo entering the U.S. by sealed container, attention to the cans has grabbed Customs' attention as a – if not the most – significant element of security enforcement. The idea is that suspicious containers never make it onto a U.S.-bound vessel, and ships containing suspicious cargo are kept out of U.S. waters. Screening technology should be utilized to the maximum extent possible. While criteria for retrofitting the six million containers that enter our country annually to make them

“smart” haven’t been established, the idea is to install state-of-the-art IT sensors and tracking systems in them, make them tamper proof, and prevent bad guys from having access to them.

CSI aims to prevent potential WMDs from ever landing here. That pre-screening activity must be conducted abroad. But how do we get foreign countries to warm up to the idea of potentially disruptive port procedures to protect America?

We make it worth their while. Uncle Sam isn’t the only guy worried about terrorism. Many of the world’s largest 20 ports (which export 2/3 of U.S.-bound freight) are in countries also proclaimed to be targets of terrorist groups. American security technology, along with the fruits of our security research and development, are available to those willing to work with us.

It’s a “you scratch my back – I’ll scratch yours” kind of thing. You let us station a handful of specially trained CSI personnel in your ports to monitor and implement pre-screening security programs; and we’ll welcome your analogous guys stateside for similar roles. You let us scrutinize your procedures and equipment; and we’ll share with you our observations and suggestions for making your system more secure. You help us protect our homeland, we’ll help you protect yours.

Moreover, U.S. bound cargo originating in foreign ports not blessed as CSI compliant likely will be more heavily scrutinized on this side of the pond. That means potential delays upon arrival, which should be a disincentive to shippers running their freight through ports not teamed up with us. Of course, most countries peddle their wares here in unparalleled volumes. A terrorist attack in the U.S. accomplished by ocean container transit likely would freeze international water carriage indefinitely, a result that would devastate the international trade community as a whole. A country whose CSI non-compliant port originated a WMD that went off in America could pretty much kiss good bye its U.S. trade relations.

And besides, CSI procedures, if implemented properly, shouldn’t be costly or disruptive. The “host country” gets to determine who ultimately pays for additional screening processes, so port budgets won’t necessarily be strained (in the U.S., the importer picks up the tab). Most containers spend considerable time sitting on piers in foreign ports – time when CSI pre-screenings could be conducted without any additional delay. Pre-screened cargo is less likely to be delayed stateside, and ultimately will arrive at final destination sooner than it otherwise would.

While Uncle Sam doesn’t sport in for the costs of pre-screening equipment used at foreign ports under the CSI program, sharing of technological data (including recommendations about reliable equipment manufacturers) is a reason foreign ports should be interested.

Like most security programs, CSI isn’t premised on Uncle Sam muscling rules down his trading partners’ throats. But he doesn’t have to. The world’s trading community has

predictably responded with favor to CSI, because it's in everyone's best interests to fight the war on terrorism from all fronts.

Ref: the Customs & Border Protection agency's website at <http://www.customs.ustras.gov/>.