

U.S. Customs Container Security Initiative to Safeguard U.S., Global Economy

The U.S. Customs Container Security Initiative (CSI), proposed by Commissioner Bonner in a January 17, speech given at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, would secure an indispensable, but vulnerable, link in the chain of global trade: the oceangoing sea container. Ensuring the security of the maritime trade system is essential, given that approximately 90% of the world's cargo moves by container.

Each year, more than 16 million containers arrive in the United States by ship, truck, and rail. In 2001, U.S. Customs processed more than 214,000 vessels and 5.7 million sea containers. A proactive stance by Customs in screening sea containers will significantly contribute to the agency's overall efforts to secure the borders against dangers that might be introduced through commercial traffic.

The Container Security Initiative consists of four core elements. These are: (1) establishing security criteria to identify high-risk containers; (2) pre-screening containers before they arrive at U.S. ports; (3) using technology to pre-screen high-risk containers; and (4) developing and using smart and secure containers. The fundamental objective of the CSI is to first engage the ports that send highest volumes of container traffic into the United States, as well as the governments in these locations, in a way that will facilitate detection of potential problems at their earliest possible opportunity.

What is the risk from sea containers?

Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda terrorist network have vowed to cripple the U.S. and world economy. More than half of all goods that enter the United States arrive by oceangoing cargo containers. A terrorist attack using a sea container would prove detrimental to this portion of the global trading system, by bringing the worldwide movement and processing of oceangoing cargo containers to a halt.

What is the Container Security Initiative?

Recognizing that trade is vital to the world economy, U.S. Customs has proposed a four-part program designed to achieve the objective of a more secure maritime trade environment while accommodating the need for efficiency in global commerce. The program's pillars are: establishing security criteria to identify high-risk containers; pre-screening containers before they arrive at U.S. ports; using technology to pre-screen high-risk containers; and developing and using smart and secure containers. A critical element in the success of this program will be the availability of advance information to perform sophisticated targeting.

As a first step, U.S. Customs has determined the top 10 "mega-ports" that send containers to the United States, and will contact the governments in these locations to solicit their participation in the CSI. These locations were identified based on their volume of sea container traffic destined for the U.S.; however, the CSI approach is not something that must be restricted to only these locations. Risk assessments and trade analysis will play an important part in future deployments, and increased security measures are vital to the operations of any port in today's environment.

How do you currently screen and process cargo arriving at U.S. seaports?

U.S. Customs currently employs a multi-layered strategy of targeting to sort out suspicious goods from legitimate trade. Our strategy relies heavily on the use of strategic and tactical intelligence to target incoming goods for scrutiny.

U.S. Customs pre-screens people and goods entering the country at all 301 ports of entry. This long-established screening process enables U.S. Customs to determine which containers may be "high-risk" and which ones are not. The goal of the CSI is to pre-screen cargo containers at ports of origin or transit rather than waiting for these goods to arrive in our ports for inspection.

What benefits can other countries derive from participation in the CSI?

While the pre-screening that would be performed in the CSI presents clear benefits to U.S. security, early targeting of high-risk containers is potentially of great value to the ports that have implemented heightened security initiatives. A more secure maritime trade infrastructure would help ensure the continued smooth flow of merchandise through seaports. Ports that have implemented increased security and pre-screening become more attractive locations to those companies that depend on timely movement of merchandise or processing inputs. In the event of a catastrophic event involving the use of seagoing containers and subsequent paralysis of maritime trade, those ports that have participated in the CSI are well positioned to resume operations quickly and with the confidence of the trade community.

In addition to these benefits, advance targeting of containers destined for the United States should, under normal circumstances, result in those shipments not presenting identifiable risks clearing Customs rapidly, taking full advantage of the facilitative mechanisms that U.S. Customs has already been employing for some time.

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