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Complete Cargo Inspection and Port Security Grants Do Not Promote Homeland Security

Alane Kochems and James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.

Homeland security efforts that waste scarce resources by focusing on the least likely maritime threats do not further homeland security. Since 9/11, some analysts have raised concerns about terrorists smuggling a nuclear weapon into the U.S. inside a shipping container or simply detonating a liquid natural gas tanker in a U.S. harbor. Congress should reject the proposed “solutions” to these concerns of mandated 100 percent inspection of cargo and increased port security grants.

Qualifying threats is important. The U.S. simply cannot “child proof” the entire supply chain, eliminating every conceivable vulnerability and opportunity to attack U.S. interests. Overly fixating on specific threat scenarios can lead to an inefficient and ineffective use of resources. One such example is the misguided call by some Members of Congress to inspect every container bound for the United States because one could possibly be used to smuggle a nuclear weapon or a “dirty” bomb (radiological dispersion device) into the country.

Misguided Port Grants and Inspections. To counter the nuke-in-a-box threat, some propose spending billions of dollars on container and port security. This argument fails on five counts:

1. The nuke-in-a-box is an unlikely terrorist tactic. If an enemy wanted to smuggle a bomb into the United States, an oil or chemical tanker, roll-on/

roll-off car carrier, grain or other bulk vessel, or even private watercraft would be a more logical and secure way to transport it, either directly to the target (e.g., a port) or indirectly by landing it in Mexico, Canada, or the Caribbean and then moving it across a remote section of the U.S. border. Indeed, logic suggests (and most experts believe) that a port is more likely to be attacked from land than from sea, especially given the lack of visibility into the

domestic trade network, the lack of protection on the landward side, and the ease of constructing explosive devices with domestic resources. Terrorists would likely construct smaller items (e.g., biological agents) domestically and then deliver them through FEDEX.

2. While nuclear smuggling is possible, so are dozens of other attack scenarios. Overinvesting in countering one tactic when terrorists could easily employ another is dangerously myopic.

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- Securing trade requires a more comprehensive and effective approach than just fences, guards, 100 percent radiation detection, and cargo inspection.
 - Instead, the U.S. should expand Coast Guard capabilities, improve the sharing and use of commercial information, and enhance international cooperation.
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3. Spending billions of dollars and deploying thousands of personnel to search every container and harden every port is an extremely inefficient and expensive way to stop terrorists from using cargo containers, especially when they would probably use other means.
4. There is no apparent viable business case for many of the proposed solutions for “hardening” shipping containers, conducting 100 percent physical container inspections, or requiring expensive tracking or monitoring devices. These measures would provide only minimal utility at the cost of billions of dollars in new duties, taxes, and operating costs.
5. Such efforts would distract resources from solutions that would measurably strengthen maritime security, including watching the back door of American ports through which trucks, trains, and barges travel daily.

As a matter of common sense, the United States should not attempt to make every cargo container and port into a miniature Fort Knox. Securing trade requires a more comprehensive and effective approach than just putting up fences and gates, posting guards at ports, deploying radiation detectors at every entry, and inspecting all cargo containers as they enter the country. Such an approach would waste security resources by inspecting things that are unlikely security risks and create isolated, easily bypassed chokepoints to address specific (and unlikely) threats.

A Better Way. To safeguard the flow of global maritime commerce, the United States needs to expand Coast Guard capabilities, improve the sharing and use of commercial information, and enhance international cooperation. Specifically, Congress should:

- Expand the Coast Guard’s International Port Assistance Program.
- Focus on specific shipments that indicate a reason for suspicion by cultivating better information sharing between the public and private sectors. This approach would allow more efficient allocation of resources and effort by pinpointing suspect shipments rather

than trying to screen all containers, most of which pose no threat.

- Separate the intelligence and compliance functions of Customs and Border Protection and combine intelligence and data collection into a single, focused authority at a high level elsewhere in the Department of Homeland Security.
- Require the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security to sponsor joint operations and intelligence fusion centers.
- Aggressively fund and implement the Coast Guard’s Integrated Deepwater System to accelerate completion to within 10 years to 15 years.
- Restructure U.S. assistance programs. Congress should begin to address this issue by requiring the Government Accountability Office to inventory and assess the effectiveness of the various U.S. programs and their international counterparts.

Conclusion. The better answer to the nuke-in-a-box scenario, as well as more likely threats, is to increase efforts to interdict potential dangers before they reach the ports and to use the best and broadest possible intelligence generated from commercial and government information. In this regard, security measures should focus on building capabilities that address a broad range of dangers rather than fixating on a few “Tom Clancy” scenarios.

Closing the real gaps in U.S. maritime security means focusing the government on stopping terrorists and criminals and focusing the private sector on sensible, reasonable, transparent, and uniform action that will enhance the security of the global supply chain. Much can be done to improve maritime security without placing undue burdens on maritime commerce.

—Alane Kochems is a Policy Analyst for National Security and James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow for National Security and Homeland Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.