

Take steps toward real port security



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If there is a silver lining to the DP World debacle, it is this: Congress is focused on improving “port security.” But we must be careful what we wish for. Congress killed a deal that had nothing to do with port security — on the grounds that it would undermine our port security.

Two key principles should guide the government’s efforts to enhance port security. First, the greatest threats to our ports are posed by arriving vessels, cargo and crew. Our ports may be attacked using vessels or cargo as weapons. Or they may serve as gateways to smuggle people or weapons inland. But ports are unlikely to be the target of a terrorist already in the U.S.

This means that we should stop doling out grant money to domestic ports to build perimeter fencing, surveillance and access-control systems. These efforts to control access to the ports by land do nothing to address the real threats coming by sea. Taking a cue from the Department of Homeland Security’s Operation Stonegarden, any additional port-security grant money should be linked to initiatives (e.g., buying patrol boats or installing surveillance equipment to monitor crew movements) that will directly support Coast Guard and Customs efforts to address seaborne threats.

Many such efforts are under way. They are based on risk-management principles, and have proved reasonably effective in their nascent stages.

But more can be done, and this leads to the second key principle: We need to act quickly. Osama bin Laden has explicitly threatened the U.S.

economy. He has made no secret of his desire to acquire nuclear weapons and to carry out an even more catastrophic attack. We cannot afford to wait for perceived silver-bullet solutions or let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

We must focus on making immediate, incremental and constant progress in pursuit of the DHS’s clear port-security objectives, such as: identifying and inspecting high-risk vessels, crew and cargo (before arrival, if possible) and working with reliable private-sector partners to meaningfully increase the security of their supply chains. Here are three steps that we could take immediately:

- Develop a robust watchlist of suspicious businesses. The intelligence community and its international partners have dedicated enormous resources to identifying people involved in terrorist activities. We need a similar effort for nefarious international businesses. With the 24-hour rule and entry data, Customs possesses enormous amounts of information about many of the businesses involved with particular shipments. To maximize the value of this and additional data, we need to be able to compare it to a watchlist.

- Substantially increase the obligations of members of the Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism program. We place tremendous confidence in C-TPAT members, particularly those in Tier 3, as evidenced by their very low inspection rates. To ensure that this bargain is warranted, Customs has slowly ratcheted up its expectations for C-TPAT members. We should raise the bar even higher, particularly for importers, consolida-

tors, third-party logistics providers and non-vessel-operating common carriers — those with the greatest influence over point of stuffing and in-transit security — even if it causes some members to opt out.

- Accelerate the development and deployment of next-generation radiation-detection technology. We currently do not screen all arriving containers for radiation. The DHS has spent considerable time and money developing and testing next-generation radiation portal monitors rather than fully deploying currently available monitors, which have well-documented limitations. In addition, the portal approach does not work well for containers moving from vessel to rail, and the DHS has not yet tested any alternative platforms for this environment. The position we are in almost five years after Sept. 11 — incomplete coverage with existing technology and no next-generation technology ready to deploy — is the proverbial no-man’s land.

Perhaps more important, we need to deploy that technology in overseas ports to screen large numbers of U.S.-bound containers much earlier in the supply chain. We should aspire to have a comprehensive and integrated radiation-screening system in place at many, if not all, operational Container Security Initiative ports.

The priority should be to truly improve port security by further addressing threats posed by arriving vessels, crew and cargo.

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