



CONTAINER SECURITY

Current Efforts to Detect Nuclear Materials, New Initiatives, and Challenges

Highlights of GAO-03-297T, a testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans Affairs, and International Relations, House Committee on Government Reform

Why GAO Did This Study

After the attacks of September 11th, 2001, concerns intensified over the vulnerability of U.S. ports to acts of terrorism. One particular concern involves the possibility that terrorists would attempt to smuggle illegal fissile material or a tactical nuclear weapon into the country through a cargo container shipped from overseas. This testimony discusses the programs already in place to counter such attempts, new initiatives now under way to enhance the nation's security against such attempts, and the key challenges faced in implementing these various efforts.

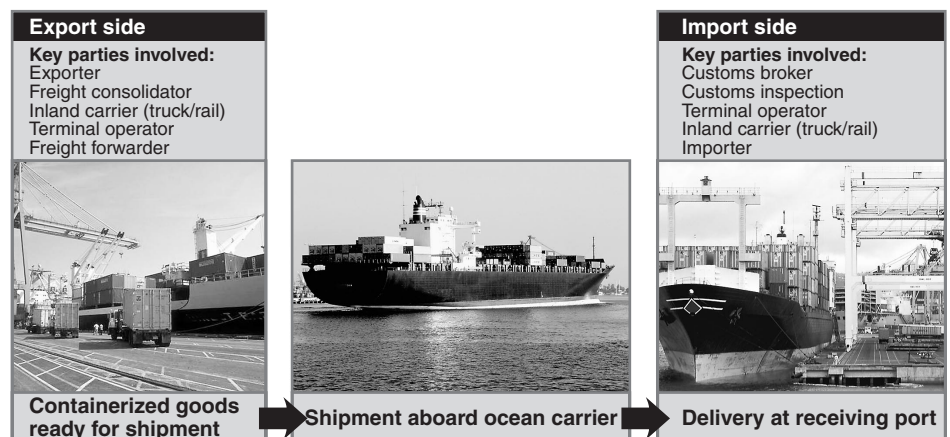
What GAO Found

U.S. ports have programs in place to detect illegal fissile material or nuclear weapons, but these programs are limited in several respects. They focus on screening a small portion of total cargo as it enters the country, and they are carried out without the use of adequate detection aids, such as equipment that can scan entire containers for radiation. Efforts to target cargo for screening are hampered by the quality of information regarding which cargo poses the greatest risk.

New initiatives are under way to supplement these programs. The predominant focus of these initiatives has been to establish additional lines of security in the supply chain of international commerce. In essence, this means moving part of the security effort overseas, where goods are prepared for shipment into this country. These initiatives include such efforts as establishing international standards for ports, carriers, and maritime workers; stationing Customs personnel overseas; reducing security vulnerabilities all the way back to points of manufacture; and using new technology to monitor the contents and movement of containers from their point of origin.

The nation faces three key challenges to implementing efforts to improve the security of ports and containers: creating and enforcing a set of security standards, ensuring the cooperation of diverse groups with competing interests when it comes to the specifics of how things are to be done, and paying the increased security bill. Such challenges exist both for strengthening domestic efforts and for developing new initiatives that expand security on an international basis. GAO is currently reviewing several aspects of port and container security, and will report as those efforts are completed.

Overview of Supply Chain for Cargo Containers



Source: GAO, (c) Nova Development Corporation and Corbis Images (DigitalStock).

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-297T.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact JayEtta Hecker at (202) 512-2834 or heckerj@gao.gov.