

Jayson P. Ahern

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By Michael J. Keegan

Balancing the Flow of Travel and Trade with Border Security

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) protects our nation's borders from terrorism, human and drug smuggling, illegal migration, and agricultural pests while simultaneously facilitating the flow of lawful travel and trade. Its mission is vitally important for the protection of the country and the national economy. On a typical day in fiscal year 2006, CBP processed approximately 1 million passengers and pedestrians; 71,000 containers; 327,000 privately owned vehicles; and 85,000 shipments of goods approved for entry.

As CBP's deputy commissioner and its previous assistant commissioner for field operations, Jayson Ahern has played a significant role in shaping the identity of this new and evolving organization. "No agency in government has a greater responsibility for protecting the homeland from the introduction of a terrorist or a weapon of mass destruction or weapon of mass effect coming into this country than the men and women who work the front line for Customs and Border Protection," says Ahern. Operating at the nexus of national security and American economic security, CBP performs a delicate balancing act between securing the country and facilitating the free flow of commerce. "It's our twin pillars to make sure that we actually facilitate legitimate travel and trade as we cultivate and deploy our layered strategy for defense of the homeland. And if we don't do that accurately and do it effectively and come out with a well-thought-out strategy, stifling legitimate trade or legitimate travel would have such a negative impact on the economy of the country that the terrorist organizations would win in that fashion, so we can't let that happen," maintains Ahern.

Rethinking the way to manage the country's borders began in earnest in the aftermath of 9/11. For the first time, one U.S. agency is in a position to implement a comprehensive strategy for border security. "I think it's important to begin with talking about the layered strategy we put in place post-9/11," says Ahern. "We realized we needed to make sure that our ports of entry and the borders of the United States were not the first

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- Deputy Commissioner, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Department of Homeland Security
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opportunity for us to intercept either something or someone of concern who posed a risk to this country." As a result, CBP developed and implemented a multi-layered, risk-based strategy that seeks to extend the U.S. border beyond simply its physical manifestation. At the heart of this strategy are five interconnected focus areas: requiring submission of advance information on both cargo and passengers; performing advanced target risk analysis; scoring collected information; using cutting-edge technology, such as non-intrusive inspection equipment, to detect radiation and other anomalies; and partnering with foreign governments and with the trade community to expand America's zone of security.

CBP requires advance electronic information on all cargo being shipped to the U.S. before it arrives at a U.S. port. For oceangoing cargo containers, that means advance manifest data 24 hours before they are loaded at overseas seaports on vessels headed for the U.S. "We crafted the Trade Act of 2002 that actually got us advance information for not only maritime cargo, but also for air and land," explains Ahern. "It gives us the information electronically for very specific elements that we can then run through our Automated Targeting System (ATS) to score for risk before containers can be put on a vessel destined to the United States." Receiving information in advance enables CBP to separate low-risk from



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high-risk shipments, allowing CBP to focus resources on those potentially high-risk areas. This capability goes beyond cargo. With the Advance Passenger Information System (APIS), CBP has the capability to identify dangerous individuals before they enter the country. This system receives biographical and official passport information on passengers arriving to and departing from the U.S. by air and sea, which the CBP can analyze to derive a risk-assessment model using ATS.

By using ATS, which is built on risk-assessment rules and algorithms based upon strategic intelligence about terrorist threats, CBP has the capability to detect anomalies and to red-flag potential high-risk cargo and individual passengers. “ATS is an exceptional system,” observes Ahern. “We get 100 percent of all the manifest information ... we then score it for risk. For passengers, we have a decision support tool for our frontline officers ... we use some of that information that we’re getting in advance.... The Automated Targeting System is flexible enough that we can write targeting rules using that advance passenger information ... to see if there’s any traits or characteristics that the system could identify and flag for the frontline officer, again, as a decision support tool.”

To focus on this analysis, CBP established the National Targeting Center (NTC). “I think [it’s] one of the greatest innovations that [we came] up with post-9/11,” says Ahern. According to Ahern, right after the attacks on 9/11, CBP started bringing in some field experts to do centralized national targeting. “We now have the ability to have all the information on people and on cargo coming into the country run through the centralized location at the National Targeting Center.... It gives us ability to do centralized national targeting, so we can make uniform decisions throughout the country,” he explains.

To complement its advance targeting capability, CBP relies on other technologies to secure the international supply chain. Over the last few years, non-intrusive inspection technology, such as X-ray and gamma-imaging and radiation-detection devices, has enabled CBP to facilitate the security review process and eliminate the need to physically examine high-security-risk containers bound for U.S. ports.

But to fully secure the international supply chain as well as expand America’s zone of security beyond its borders, CBP has recognized the importance of collaboration with both foreign governments and the private sector. Partnering with other countries is best illustrated by CBP’s Container Security Initiative (CSI), which calls for high-risk containers to undergo security inspection before being loaded onto a vessel destined for the U.S. “We now have over 200 officers placed at over 50 locations around the world, and these are [the] major shipping ports [to] the United States.... That accounts for 82 percent of the container traffic that comes to the United States,” notes Ahern. “We’ve entered into declaration of principles with each one of the countries—we’re basically out there without authority, but through the declaration of principles, we work collaboratively with the host country counterpart.”

CBP has also partnered with industry through its Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism (C-TPAT), which entails completion of a comprehensive security profile and a commitment to work with CBP to strengthen the supply chain. These efforts together form CBP’s multi-layered border strategy, which seeks to extend security beyond the country’s actual physical border and enable CBP to meet its twin mission of securing the border while facilitating legitimate trade and travel. “It’s very clear that there are still individuals out there that want to cause harm to this country.... I think to be adaptive, we need to make sure that we’re flexible to any emerging threats posed through the moving of people or things into this country,” says Ahern. ■

To learn more about the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, go to www.cbp.gov.



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