

What Will Maritime Security Look Like Ten Years from Now?

An exclusive interview with

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Clearly, the past five years have seen dramatic improvements to our nation's homeland security. As you have said, we are unquestionably safer from terrorism today than we were prior to the tragic events of 9/11. What have we most significantly accomplished thus far and how can we best build upon these recent improvements to even better protect our citizenry?

I think one of the most dramatic improvements has been the sharing and use of intelligence information. Shortly after Homeland Security was created, we had three Orange Alerts that were nationwide in coverage that had a disrupting impact on commerce and created some controversy. The reason for this action was we did not have sufficient actionable intelligence, but we had more general intelligence.

Since those initial days, the intelligence has improved. We have diminished the broad alarms, and Homeland Security has been able to have sector-specific alerts that have been more targeted and specific in terms of what kind of response is needed. So, I think the intelligence sharing has been a big improvement and made us safer.

When you look at other improvements, you have to look at the 24-hour rule for cargo shipments, the CSI [Container Security Initiative] program and C-TPAT [Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism]. I think the leadership at our ports and the cooperation among all of the parties that play a role at our port facilities has been instrumental in enhancing security. And, then, the private-sector engagement has been encouraging, although it is still not sufficient.

You also have stated that, if we had "perfect security," we would no longer be a free society. Similarly, such perfect security would bring maritime commerce to a grinding halt. How can homeland security improvements continue to be made in responsible balance with personal freedoms, as well as with the ability for business to maintain an efficient flow of commerce, especially considering that we are looking at ever-increasing volumes of containers and other cargo moving in and out of our nation's ports?

The most important aspect of that balance is having the right strategy in place, and that strategy has to be – as the legislation that created the department stated – that we have to protect our borders and our transportation system from terrorists, but to do it in a way that is consistent with the lawful flow of commerce. So that balance is a critical part of our strategy.

The strategy has to be information-based targeting. It has to be based upon the use of technology that accomplishes the movement of commerce at the same time as enhancing security. And so the debate of the future will be whether that strategy is going to change.

I think it's the right strategy. We need to implement it in a quicker fashion, but it has to hinge upon the development of technologies that allow for broad-based threat inspection, but, at the same time, does not simply put a stop to the commerce that is so critical at our ports.

That's not a very easy job to strike that balance, is it?

It's not easy, and it takes some time. Even though we know the technology is available, we know the technology is also changing. So, for government to say, "This is the right technology that needs to be utilized by the private sector," it's difficult to make those quick judgments, knowing it's going to have lasting impact.

It's not easy, but it is critical. The technologies are there. My message is that the private sector should not wait on the government to dictate which technology should be used, but the private sector should go ahead and invest in and move forward with security enhancements.

What other significant challenges will maritime security be facing in ten years, and how might those differ from the challenges we face today?

Well, I hesitate to say it, but I think one of the biggest challenges will be how the maritime industry responds to an attack or an incident that impacts the security of our ports and the flow of commerce. We've never had that before on any large scale, and, hopefully, we will never have it. But both government and the private sector need to be prepared as to how to handle a terrorist incident at one or more ports.

We have to answer the questions as to how we respond at a specific port, how does the industry respond more broadly, how do we enhance security under those circumstances without simply completely shutting off commerce. That takes preparation. It takes training and the use of exercises to coordinate our responses. I think that's one of the great challenges we will be facing in the future.

Specifically, what legislation, regulations and new initiatives – including those involving biometrics and other cutting-edge technologies – do you anticipate we will see in place in maritime security ten years from now?

I hope that we will see in place in the coming years a broader implementation of the TWIC card – Transportation Worker Identification Credential – that has been languishing for some time. And I hope it can move forward with more success and at a quicker pace.

I believe that we will, in the coming years, face a crossroads. Much of the direction we take will be dictated by the political leadership, as to whether we go for a more intrusive type of regulation of industry or whether we stay with a stronger partnership model. If we go with more regulation, it will be heavy on the government dictates end and it will move away from the partnership, where you have government leadership but a large amount of private investment and flexibility in the security requirements.

Presumably, you favor the latter?

I do. I think that has been the strategy, that the government will provide leadership, will provide some investment for pilot projects, and will encourage private-sector investment in leadership and improved technology and security. It's been my hope that you can accomplish the necessary security without heavy-handed mandates that eliminate private-sector flexibility and would also eliminate some of the smaller players in the maritime industry that cannot afford the technology investments that are available to the larger players.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has undergone internal enhancements since its genesis, facilitating greater effectiveness. How do you see the DHS of 2017 differing from that which we have today?

The good news is that the department will have more institutional strength. It will have more history. It will have a greater understanding of its role by the public, as well as by the other departments of government.

In the last four years, the department has had to go through the learning process, has had to make many adjustments in its structure, and has had to fight for its leadership role in security to a certain extent. I think that, in the coming years, it will be more institutionalized and better understood.

So, I think the department has been a success, but I think it will be able to secure greater security goals in the coming years and at a more rapid pace.