CHAPTER 4

The Strategic Consequences of Containerization

The time- and space-shrinking capacity of the freight container has radically stimulated global interconnectedness. It has also raised some significant global security issues. These pertain particularly to the global tracking of freight containers and their contents. Most evident in this regard is the container’s ability to aid illicit global actors—particularly terrorists—in the transport of highly dangerous materials, such as nuclear weapons, into any one of the world’s sea- or airports. Just as the September 11, 2001 (9/11), terrorists commandeered the global air network, they could also infiltrate and utilize shipping containers in order to mount equally or even more devastating attacks.

The possibility of a single container going purposefully astray packed with explosives or loaded with a virulent biological weapon is not a fictional scenario but a real contemporary possibility. The circuitous nature of container routing offers innumerable opportunities for container security to be compromised. For example, a ship may start out at Port Klang in Malaysia with containers filled with furniture. It may then pass through Indonesia where it picks up textiles. It may then sail to Mumbai to load pharmaceuticals; to Jebel Ali Port to take on board a United Arab Emirates (UAE) crew; to Gioia Tauro where it stops for fuel; and thence to the Port of Algeciras where it picks up ceramics. Its penultimate stop might be Le Havre, where it is packed with plastics. It may then set sail finally for Norfolk, Virginia.

Given time, security agents and technology could identify any contraband. In the shipping world, however, time is of the essence. Anything that impedes the speedy global passage of goods can have a cascade effect. As a consequence, the post–World War II (WWII) blueprint of security through the interconnectedness of the liberal economy has returned to its starting point. That is to say, today the liberal economy and its key elements, like the freight container,
may be viewed not only as vehicles for economic integration but as vehicles that threaten the liberal economy’s existence by threatening its strategic integrity. The events of 9/11 shook the world by demonstrating how precarious and insecure the global transportation system can be. It has become evident that weapons can be made of trucks, transit cars, barges, bridges, tunnels, containers, and every other component of the global transportation system.

The possible consequences of an attack using container shipping can be broadly characterized in terms of who would be affected, how they would be affected, and to what degree they would be affected. The consequences would be manifest in terms of mass casualties, property damage, the disruption of commerce, and effects that are not measureable in terms of casualties or economic losses. Hence the consequences of an attack on the container shipping system are divisible into tangible and intangible strategic and economic ones.

**The Tangible Consequences for States**

The tangible consequences for states of an attack on the container shipping system might range from the minimal, such as utilizing a vessel as a ramming device, to the catastrophic, such as the detonation of a conventional or nuclear bomb or the release of chemical or biological agents in a metropolitan area. Minimal casualties would result if terrorists sought to sink or disable a ship in a channel. In this event, the loss of life and injury would be limited to the number of persons on the vessel or in its close proximity.

If a container was used to transport a conventional weapon, the strategic consequences would be contingent on the location of the container when the weapon was detonated. If detonated in a thriving metropolitan district during peak business hours, the loss of life could be very significant. Many major sea- and airports have been built in close proximity to the urban areas of cities. The detonation of a nuclear device or the release of toxic chemicals near a port would have the potential to cause significant devastation.¹

The container also presents the potential for significant indirect consequences. That is, it offers nonstate illicit actors an instrument that could effectively allow them to hide their unlawful activities behind legitimate trade. The container per se does not usher these nonstate illicit actors or their activities onto the world stage. The container has dramatically amplified the security threat they present to the contemporary world, however.

Security threats have also arisen from agencies that are legitimate, such as a nation’s military. In the contemporary world, however, the threats they pose have diminished. Today, navies no longer set sail to face enemies that share common modes of operation and utilize similar weaponry and strategies. Instead, asymmetric global security threats have now materialized in the form of pirates,