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If we were serious about ports' security

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Current political hyperventilation over the acquisition of a British company that operates six U.S. ports by a state-run company from Dubai, part of the United Arab Emirates, is irrelevant to the national security. If our greatest security vulnerability resulted from foreign ownership of port operators, we would actually be in fairly good shape.

Unfortunately, that is far from the case.

The juxtaposition of the news coverage about the Dubai port controversy and what is otherwise happening in the Arab and Muslim world could not be more stark. While we are fixating on foreign ownership at the ports, Muslims continue to protest and riot around the world about the Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed, sectarian violence threatens to rip apart Iraq and the Hamas-led government is turning to Iran to fund the Palestinian Authority in the face of a cutoff of Western aid.

There is a battle going on right now, and it is between the sections of the Arab and Muslim world that are still willing to engage with the United States and those that reject modernity, dialogue, and economic liberalism in exchange for confrontation and violence. The Dubai controversy and the ugly rhetoric about this "Arab company" is making it difficult to tell at the moment whose side of this critical conflict we are on.

The key national security issue today is to convince Arabs and Muslims around the globe that, in contrast to the nihilism of Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the United States shares their desire for a better lot in life, an end to oppressive poverty and for political reform. We do not achieve these ends, and indeed set them back quite a bit, when we buy into the stereotype than anything "Arab" must be "terrorist."

To be sure, there are connections between 9/11 and the United Arab Emirates -- two of the hijackers were UAE citizens and much of the funding for the operation was funneled through UAE banks. It is true as well that the UAE recognized the Taliban prior to 9/11. But 15 of the hijackers were Saudis, and Pakistan once had relations with the Taliban. It is an absurdity to suggest that these connections should forever taint our relations with these three countries.

Managing these extremely delicate relationships is a challenge. Sitting thousands of miles away and insulated from the unpopularity of the United States in many corners of the world, it is easy for us to forget that we are asking governments, such as the UAE, to support our counterterrorism efforts (through military logistical support, intelligence sharing or tracking terrorist financing) even though such support is opposed by the great majority of their citizens. And while we are asking for these governments to disregard the will of their people, we are also pressuring them to democratize and face the voters.

Election-year demagoguery of the Dubai deal might be good for U.S. domestic politics, but it severely complicates our already strained diplomacy. This cost would be one we would have to bear if there were a real security issue at stake. But there is not. Even after the sale to Dubai Ports World, the British company that currently operates the six American ports will continue to hire the employees (U.S. dockworkers) and conduct operations. Moreover, the port operator is

responsible only for loading and unloading the ships, not security. The Coast Guard is charged with ensuring that incoming vessels do not present a threat. Customs and Border Protection determines which containers are to be inspected and conducts the inspections. The corporate board sitting in Dubai has zero impact on U.S. security.

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Ironically, the far greater security threat to us exists in foreign ports where the cargo containers are packed and loaded. If an explosive or, worse, a nuclear or radiological weapon, makes it into a cargo container headed for a U.S. port, we are in big trouble, because even the best efforts of our security agencies are unlikely to identify it. For over four years we have been urging foreign port operators, such as Dubai Ports World, and their host governments to cooperate with us to strengthen security at their ports, at some cost to them, for our benefit. Congressional action to block the Dubai deal is likely to undercut that cooperation and therefore reduce, not enhance, our security.

If Congress wants to enhance domestic security, it should take a close look at our underfunded port security programs. We give expedited inspection privileges to thousands of shippers around the world through our Customs Trade Partnership Against Terrorism, but many of them have not been audited to determine if they meet security standards. We allow containers to come into U.S. ports without proper security seals that would protect against tampering while in transit. The innovative Container Security Initiative is only funded sufficiently to support a half dozen or so U.S. inspectors at each key foreign ports. We currently do not have equipment that can effectively identify nuclear or radiological material inside a cargo container without shutting down commerce due to excessive false alarms.

There are many constructive actions that can be taken to improve our port security. Blocking the Dubai port deal is not one of them.

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