Overseas Container Transport

The journey across the Pacific Ocean and into the U.S.

Imported cargo generally starts at an overseas manufacturer, supplier or consolidation facility, where items are boxed and placed inside a metal shipping container. The U.S. buyer may contact an industry professional known as a "freight forwarder," or logistics company, to coordinate transportation of the cargo. The container will then be transported to a foreign port, assessed for possible security risks and placed aboard a giant container ship that will deliver it to the Port of Long Beach.

1 Product ordered

A typical import transaction starts when a U.S. wholesaler, retailer or other buyer orders products from an overseas manufacturer. These products may be packaged into a container at the manufacturer and shipped directly to port, or sent to a warehouse or consolidation facility where they are packaged with other products destined for the same overseas port.

2 To port

Once the product has been ordered and packaged, the buyer or freight forwarder will arrange for a local trucking company to move the container to seaport, and then for a ship to transport the container overseas.

3 Security checks

A U.S. Customs official based at the port receives information from a U.S.-based command center about which containers may be a security risk. If a container is flagged as high-risk, U.S. Customs officials and local port security will conduct physical inspections.

4 All aboard

When the container is cleared by security it will be placed on a ship along with as many as 8,000 TEU (twenty-foot equivalent) containers. It takes a container ship about two weeks to cross the Pacific Ocean.

5 Coast Guard review

The U.S. Coast Guard reviews crew and cargo manifest information, which must be delivered at least three days before any ship arrives at U.S. shores. Coast Guard "boarding teams," with bomb-sniffing dogs, are authorized to board any ship at sea for any reason, even if the captain or crew objects.

6 Vessel docked

As the ship nears the harbor it will be boarded by a port pilot, maritime specialists with expert knowledge of the harbor waters. The port pilot will work with tugboat operators and the ship's crew to steer the ship into the marine terminal.

7 Unloading the ship

As the ship is arriving, the terminal operator will contact the local union hall and arrange for unionized longshore workers to unload the container (using a giant, electric gantry crane) and place it onto a truck, a rail car or temporary storage area on the terminal property. Unloading an 8,000 TEU ship takes about three days.

8 Security Checks

U.S. Customs officials conduct further analysis and determine which containers warrant further inspection. If no additional inspections are warranted, the container is cleared to leave the Port.

9 Radiation detection

As a final security safeguard, containers pass through large portals that detect radiation. The slightest level of radiation will trigger an alarm and appropriate security procedures.

Cargo Security

Manifest submitted

All shippers must submit a manifest to U.S. Customs authorities, at least 24 hours before any cargo leaves a foreign port, with detailed information on a container's contents and everyone who has been involved in its packaging and transport.

Risk level assigned

Customs agents relay container information to a centralized U.S. government command center in Northern Virginia, where authorities use security intelligence and computer databases to assign a risk level to all containers bound for the U.S.

Inspections

U.S. Customs agents work with overseas port security officials to inspect any containers deemed suspicious or high-risk, first with radiation detectors and X-ray machines. If necessary they will open the container for further inspections.

Coast Guard watch

While a ship is at sea the Coast Guard reviews manifest information on crew and cargo; the Coast Guard can board any ship at sea for any reason.

Upon arrival

Once the ship has arrived at U.S. shores, U.S. Customs conducts further analysis and physical container inspection, if necessary. Before any crew members can leave a ship, they must be cleared by U.S. immigration authorities.

Multi-layered security

Multiple agencies, including the U.S. Customs & Border Protection, U.S. Coast Guard, federal and state Homeland Security offices, Long Beach Police and the Port Harbor Patrol work together to secure all inbound and outbound cargo as well as port facilities.