

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

The fear of suitcase bombs – Europe's new security demands represent a hurdle for poor countries

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Safety precautions have been considerably tightened in all European airports in recent years -- and not just security checks of passengers and their baggage, as the public so often assumes. Attempted attacks in air cargo traffic have been making the headlines recently. Initially there was a test bomb in a suitcase that was loaded without authorisation in Windhoek, Namibia, and sent to Munich in Germany.

Then attempted package bomb attacks from Yemen drew international attention: On October 2010, two viable explosive devices hidden among printer cartridges were found and deactivated at East Midlands Airport in Great Britain and at Dubai's airport. Chicago was their ultimate destination and the packages had already been transferred at the German Cologne/Bonn airport. The al-Qaeda Arab terrorist network took responsibility for the attempted bombings one week later.

Berlin demands stricter European security checks

Since then, security experts in Germany and the European Union (EU) have been discussing how to deal with freight from third countries, that is from countries that are not EU member states. Inside the EU, unified standards for air transport safety went into effect some years ago. Directive [EG Nr. 300/2008](#), adopted in 2008, stipulates that all cargo undergo security controls before going on board. The airlines themselves have to run these checks or have them verified by trustworthy shippers.

There are also guidelines for the quality of airplanes from third countries. Directive [EG Nr. 2111/2005](#), adopted in 2005, states that any airplane flying into the EU may not evidence any technical defects. If an air carrier is found in violation, it is put on the blacklist of airlines banned from flying inside the EU.

No such guidelines are currently in force for cargo from third countries though, despite the fact that developing and emerging nations in particular often fail to meet European standards of security when checking in and loading freight. After the attempted Yemeni bomb attacks, the German government formed a German task force for air cargo security that consisted of representatives from diverse ministries, police forces and the intelligence service, the Federal Aviation Office, Customs Administration and German Air Traffic Control. The task force worked closely with representatives from the air cargo industry to devise suggestions for how the EU could deal with cargo from third countries in future and issued a report with its findings. The ultimate goal here was to present this report to the European Commission as a draft directive.

Guaranteeing security at the point of departure

Controlling international cargo is very difficult for European security administrations. Not all cargo is, after all, loaded on special transport airplanes. Business freight is also often in the hold of passenger planes as so-called additional cargo. Right before a plane is ready to take off, the remaining free cargo space on a given flight is assessed and the additional cargo assigned as part of a just in time delivery system.

Thus, it is not possible to allocate cargo to a specific flight very far in advance. It therefore makes little sense to distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy cargo for security screening. The same security standards must apply to all freight and these must be as high as possible. Due to the high volume of goods in Europe, it would be impossible to screen all the transshipment cargo that is simply transferred inside Europe. Germany's five largest airports alone handled 2.6 million tons of cargo in 2009.

The air traffic security task force suggests that the solution is to work at the other end of the supply chain: cargo should be screened in its country of origin whenever possible. Third countries need to introduce a system of controls and security measures that all the parties involved can rely on. To this end the task force suggests inspecting the security measures at airports in third countries and creating a risk profile. Freight from insecure airports would then be more intensively screened in future.

Increased technical demands on developing and emerging nations

The focus here is on technology, as is so often the case. But many inspection technologies are so new that they are still prohibitively expensive -- such as the puffer or trace portal machines used to detect explosives or the new highly sensitive X-ray machines. The cost of such equipment often far outstrips the benefit, and they are not used uniformly throughout the EU either. Nonetheless, the task force suggests requiring their use in airports in third countries. Ultimately, in view of the sheer volume of cargo in transit worldwide, there seems to be no alternative to the use of screening technology.

But the task force's suggestion also includes support for setting up these security measures, proposing that the EU deliver the know-how and the funds to pay for personnel training and purchase expensive control technology. If security measures still did not live up to European standards, then sanctions would be imposed.

If the German draft directive is adopted, the EU will then have to determine the types of sanctions used. The task force has already identified five risk levels that would call for different levels of severity. If sanctions are as tough as those imposed on air carriers whose airplanes are found to have mechanical problems, airports and firms who fall under the highest threat level could be faced with bans on flying cargo into the EU.

List of sanctions has economic consequences

If in future the EU decides to dictate that state-of-the-art technology must be used to control baggage and cargo, airports and airlines the world over will have to jump on board. No national econo-

my of the world can afford to relinquish the EU as a key market with over 500 million consumers and a nominal gross national product of over 18 billion euros.

But complying with European standards would require massive investment, a huge hurdle for many developing and emerging nations. Although sanctions are aimed primarily at air carriers and not countries, this would not mitigate their devastating effect on national economies. Developing and emerging nations in particular are faced with very strong global competition. Even small market advantages or disadvantages can have a decisive impact on economic success or failure. If important export goods cannot fly into the EU, this could wreak havoc on already weak national economies. Alternative transport methods by land or sea are often too time consuming and expensive for global production chains.

Security policy counteracts development cooperation

Brussels has not yet accepted the German suggestion. Yet it is clear that European countries will soon need to unify their air cargo guidelines. This may well result in a conflict between policy fields, where security policy blocks development policy.

The position of the German and European security agencies, their desire to protect civil air traffic and with it society and national economies, is entirely understandable. Still it would be counterproductive to endanger progress in development cooperation in pursuit of security. The citizens of the European Union are in the happy position of "only" having to consider potential limitations to their civil liberties when the discussion again turns to new security and control measures. But when safety precautions have economic consequences for already very fragile national economies, there is cause to worry. An appeal must go out to European lawmakers: When demands are made, support must also be offered to meet them. The EU may not just threaten sanctions; it must also offer financial assistance for investment in security technologies.