

# The Proliferation Security Initiative at a Glance

Press Contact: Wade Boese, Research Director at (202) 463-8270 x104 or [wade@armscontrol.org](mailto:wade@armscontrol.org)

June 2004

President George W. Bush announced May 31, 2003 that the United States would lead a new effort, the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), to interdict shipments of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and related goods to terrorists and countries of proliferation concern. The initiative's aim would be "to keep the world's most destructive weapons away from our shores and out of the hands of our common enemies," Bush declared.

**Participants:** Ten countries originally joined with the United States to shape and promote the initiative. These countries are Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Canada, Norway, Russia, and Singapore have since joined the effort and some 40 additional states have voiced support for the initiative. PSI participants have downplayed the concept of membership in the initiative, explaining in a press statement that PSI is "an activity not an organization."<sup>1</sup> U.S. officials have courted China to join the regime, but so far it has kept its distance, citing concerns about the legality of interdictions.

**Mission:** The initiative aims to stop shipments of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons, as well as missiles and goods that could be used to deliver or produce such weapons, to terrorists and

countries suspected of trying to acquire WMD. Initiative participants intend to carry out cargo interdictions at sea, in the air, or on land. For some countries this is not a new practice but an enshrinement and expansion of current operations. The United States and other countries have long records of intercepting illegal trade and smuggling activities, including illicit weapons transactions.

Still, the initiative is designed to make it more costly and risky for proliferators to acquire the weapons or materials they seek. By doing so, members hope that other countries will be dissuaded from pursuing weapons in the first place or experience significant delays in their acquisition efforts.

PSI is limited solely to seizing shipments of WMD and dual-use goods—items that have both civilian, peaceful purposes and that can be used to make weapons—to those countries and nonstate actors viewed as threats by PSI participants. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton, a chief architect of PSI, has indicated that participants will not be targeting the trade of countries perceived as U.S. allies or friends, such as India, Israel, and Pakistan—all three of which possess WMD arsenals, including nuclear weapons.

**Principles:** The 11 original PSI participants released a set of principles September 4, 2003.<sup>2</sup> The principles call on PSI participants, as well as other countries, to not engage in WMD-related trade with countries of proliferation concern and to permit their own vessels and aircraft to be searched if suspected of transporting such goods. The principles further urge that information on suspicious activities be shared quickly to enable possible interdictions and that all vessels "reasonably suspected" of carrying dangerous cargo be inspected when passing through national airports, ports, and other transshipment points.

**Legal Authority:** The initiative does not empower countries to do anything that they previously could not do. Most importantly, PSI does not grant governments any new legal authority to conduct interdictions in international waters or airspace. Such interdictions may take place, but they must be confined to what is currently permissible under international law. For example, a ship can be stopped in international waters if it is not flying a national flag or properly registered. It cannot be stopped simply because it is suspected of transporting WMD or related goods. PSI is primarily intended to encourage participating countries to take greater advantage of their own existing national laws to intercept threatening trade passing through their territories and where they have jurisdiction to act. In situations where the legal authority to act may be ambiguous, Bolton



Reuters

A helicopter hovers above a customs vessel during the "Pacific Protector" exercise Sept. 13. It is the first of 10 exercises to help participating countries strengthen their interdiction capabilities.

---

said participants might go to the UN Security Council for authorization.<sup>3</sup>

PSI participants are working to expand their legal authority to interdict shipments by signing bilateral boarding agreements with select countries to secure expedited processes or pre-approval for stopping and searching their ships at sea. The United States has concluded such agreements with Liberia and Panama, the two countries with the largest fleets of registered ocean-going vessels in the world.

**Structure:** PSI is an informal arrangement among countries. To date, there is no list of criteria by which interdictions are to be made (except that the cargo is destined for a recipient that might use it to harm the United States or other countries). There is also no secretariat or formal organization that serves as a coordinating body. Instead, participants aim to readily share information among one another as appropriate and to act when necessary to help seize or thwart dangerous trade.

**Status:** PSI participants have conducted several interdiction exercises agreed to in July 2003. The exercises, including mock ship boardings, are intended to increase the participants' capabilities to cooperate with one another. They are also intended to put a public face on the initiative and act as a deterrent to potential proliferators.

Bolton said in a November 2003 interview<sup>4</sup> that there have been successful interdictions since the initiative's launch. He and other U.S. and foreign government officials indicate that there are no plans to announce when such interdictions occur because of concerns about compromising future PSI activities.

The one successful interdiction that has come to light was an October 2003 operation to seize centrifuge components destined for Libya. U.S. officials credit the interdiction with helping to further convince Libya, which had been conducting secret disarmament negotiations with the United States and United Kingdom for several months, to publicly renounce its WMD ambitions and programs two months later.

---

## NOTES

1. The British government issued this statement as part of its Chairman's Conclusions following an October 9-10, 2003 meeting of PSI participants in London.
  2. The interdiction principles can be found on the State Department's Web site at <http://www.state.gov/t/np/rls/fs/23764.htm>.
  3. Bolton stated in a November 4, 2003 interview with *Arms Control Today*, "And the 11 PSI countries also talked about circumstances where one could envision a Security Council resolution that might give authority in certain circumstances."
  4. The full interview is available at <http://www.armscontrol.org/aca/midmonth/November/Bolton.asp>.
-