

# CSI

## **STRESS TEST CONTAINER SAFETY UNDER SCRUTINY**

**INSIDE:  
PIRACY  
VESSEL TRACKING  
RISK MANAGEMENT  
SECURITY SCREENING**

'Regardless of how many times a container may change hands, the registry allows anyone in the transport chain to look-up the container's registered owner (or primary operator) through the use of the container's ISO prefix'

## Unlocking the code

The BIC code was introduced to bring standardisation to the marking and identification of containers. Douglas Owen of the Bureau International des Containers now profiles the recently-introduced e-BIC service

The e-BIC service offered by the Bureau International des Containers (BIC) is entering its second year after making a strong start in 2014. Originally made available only to Customs authorities, the service is now available to all parties concerned with container safety and security: terminal systems providers, carriers, Non-Vessel Operating Common Carriers (NVOCCs) and others can now make use of the service to ensure containers are marked in compliance with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)-6346, as well as international Customs conventions. Simply put, anyone with a legitimate need to verify container compliance and security can request the use of the service.

The genesis of the original BIC code dates back to the mid-20th century. With the rapid expansion of containerisation it was soon recognised that it would be necessary to introduce some order and standardisation into the marking and identification of containers. Beginning in the late 1960s, the BIC worked with Technical Committee 104 of the ISO to establish the 4-alpha identification code, commonly

known as the 'BIC Code' today. The 4-alpha, 6-numeric + check-digit system became an international standard in 1972, naming the BIC as the international registration authority for container owner codes.

The use of a BIC-registered, ISO-6346 compliant owner code later became a requirement under both the Istanbul Convention on the temporary admission of goods, and the Customs Convention on Containers, which defines rules for the temporary admission of intermodal containers.

To date, over 70 countries have ratified the Istanbul Convention and 40 nations have also ratified the Customs Convention. Today, the registry contains over 2,500 registered codes across 117 countries, allowing instant access to every legitimate container owner/operator in the world.

In 2011, at the request of a limited number of Customs authorities, the BIC began providing regularly updated Excel files containing the register details to those authorities wishing to use the data for

threat assessment purposes. Based on the positive feedback and take-up by a number of countries, the decision was made to provide a real-time, automated version.

The BIC launched its automated e-BIC service in January 2014 to allow authorities to maintain an always up-to-date version of the register within their own systems. The new e-BIC service offers instant and automated download in either CSV or XML format, allowing for easy file integration.

The downloadable file is updated in real-time with changes to the register, allowing the e-BIC user's system to be kept constantly up to date with the latest list of compliant owner codes. The automated version has seen strong uptake among Customs authorities, with extensive use now on three continents, and additional countries continue to be added each month.

While the BIC registry is obviously only one element among many used for threat assessment, it is an important one. Regardless of how many times a container may change

hands, the registry allows anyone in the transport chain to look-up the container's registered owner (or primary operator) through the use of the container's ISO prefix. From a security standpoint, there is real value in having this ability. We also know from Customs authorities that boxes with unregistered codes (typically shipper-owned containers operated by marginal operators) have a higher likelihood of being fitted with false walls or floors for smuggling purposes. Introduced as an additional factor into the complex threat-assessment algorithms used by authorities, e-BIC becomes one more element to help select questionable container shipments for additional scrutiny and inspection.

In addition to those Customs authorities utilising e-BIC, numerous others access the data via an internal World Customs Organization (WCO) system that maintains a recent copy of the BIC register. In particular, those countries participating in the Container Control Program operated by the WCO in conjunction with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) are briefed on use and access of the file.

In addition to the electronic service, the registry is also available online at [www.bic-code.org](http://www.bic-code.org) (a mobile version is available from any smart phone or tablet by accessing the same address).

Both the desktop and mobile versions receive thousands of code consultations each week. The BIC website also allows verification of the check-digit although most organisations typically perform check-digit calculations automatically in their own systems.

 Founded in 1933 as a neutral, non-profit, international organisation, the BIC's mission is to promote and support the expansion of safe, secure, sustainable intermodal transportation.

The BIC is an official partner of the World Customs Organization (WCO), holds official consultative status at the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and is an active partner of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), ISO and other international organisations. The BIC has over 2,000 members in more than 110 countries.

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## The BIC Code (or ISO Alpha Code)

Only ISO Alpha-codes for identification of container owners registered with the BIC may be used as unique identity markers for containers

The BIC code comprises:

- an owner/operator code of three letters
- a fourth letter used as an equipment identifier (1)
- a serial number of six Arabic numerals (2)
- a seventh digit (check digit) providing a means of validating the recording and/or transmission accuracy of the data.

For example (for a container): BICU 123456 5  
The code guarantees that the identification of the container is unique.

It permits:

- the identification of the owner or principal operator
- the identification of the unit by its owner or operator as a reference number for its database (dimensions, type, year of putting into operation, date of control, date of maintenance, etc.).

It facilitates:

- the international circulation and temporary admission for Customs purposes
- the control of containers, manually or automatically, by computerised and/or remote control systems at any stage of the transportation chain and especially in

intermodal transport.

It is accepted by:

- The World Customs Organization and all member Customs Authorities, for which it facilitates validation of containers in relation to the Customs Convention on Containers and the Istanbul Convention.
- the International Road Transport Union
- the International Union of Railways
- the International Chamber of Shipping
- the International Air Transport Association
- the International Federation of International Removers
- It is used globally by over 2,000 owners or operators.

Notes:

1. ISO standard 6346 makes provision for the use of three letters as an equipment identifier: 'U' for containers, 'J' for detachable freight container-related equipment, and 'Z' for container-related trailers and chassis. The use of a different letter from these three as the fourth letter on any piece of equipment is NOT ISO compliant.
2. The BIC does not register the six serial numbers, which are left to the owner/operator's choice (as long as it ensures that each number is allocated only once).