

IMO looks at autonomous shipping

The International Maritime Organization's Maritime Safety Committee began a scoping exercise to discern how current IMO regulations apply to autonomous shipping. In its nascent stages, the debate in London foreshadowed a complicated future for autonomous regulation.

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Delegates in London this week sought clarity on the meaning of autonomous shipping



SOME IMO MEMBER STATES ARGUED THERE NEEDS TO BE A CLEAR DISTINCTION BETWEEN MANNED AND UNMANNED VESSELS.

THE International Maritime Organization is venturing into the world of autonomous shipping to be ahead of its potential widespread commercial development and spillover into international shipping.

The IMO Maritime Safety Committee, which convened in London this week, began discussing a scoping exercise to review how current IMO regulation does or does not apply to autonomous shipping, and from where new regulation may need to come.

The IMO is also setting up a taskforce on autonomous ships to assist with the exercise.

It is not the exercise's purpose to develop new regulations relevant to autonomous shipping, but rather to deconstruct existing regulatory frameworks and see if, where and how autonomous shipping fits in.

While the working group tasked with developing the exercise's parameters deliberates, and will present its findings to the MSC within days, recent talks offered valuable insights into where the broader global regulatory mindframe stands.

It was apparent there is a desire to define autonomy, with some member states arguing there needs to be a clear distinction between manned and unmanned vessels.

Beyond that, however, some members were significantly more eager to advance the purpose of autonomous shipping than others, for whom their colleagues were jumping the gun.

A proposal to issue a circular that dictates that remotely controlled or unmanned ships are not in compliance with existing international regulations, and not

permitted to operate on international voyages, on the high seas or international waters, was unpopular.

But the unambiguous opposition to effectively outlaw autonomous ships until further notice was far from a ringing endorsement of autonomous shipping.

“My delegation does not assume that it is lawful or unlawful,” was the response of one participant. “We are looking at this and studying to ensure, in regulatory terms, that this activity is possible.”

Some delegations supported the development of guidelines for the operation of autonomous vessels as part of the scoping exercise. Others believed these would be premature at this stage and potentially detract from the focus of the exercise.

On several occasions member states intervened to constrain the more enthusiastic delegates and argue that this exercise is intended to examine existing regulations and not to come up with new ones or facilitate the commercial development of autonomous vessels.

Others were dismissive of operational guidelines, but supportive of guidelines on trials and trial areas for autonomous ships.

Despite these disagreements there appeared to be a broad appetite to begin the exercise swiftly.

A suggestion by the International Transport Workers’ Federation and International Federation of Shipmasters’ Associations to extend the completion date of the scoping exercise from 2020 to potentially up to 2023 was mostly turned down.