

IMO looks at autonomous-ship regulations

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The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has started work on assessing how IMO instruments can be used to address the need for safe, secure and environmentally sound Maritime Autonomous Surface Ships (MASS) operations.

The Organization's senior technical body, the Maritime Safety Committee (MSC), last week endorsed a framework for a regulatory scoping exercise, as work in progress, including preliminary definitions of MASS and degrees of autonomy, as well as a methodology for conducting the exercise and a plan of work.

For the purpose of the regulatory scoping exercise, Maritime Autonomous Surface Ship (MASS) has been defined as a ship which, to a varying degree, can operate independently of human interaction. To facilitate the progress of the regulatory scoping exercise, the degrees of autonomy are organized (non-hierarchically) as follows (it was noted that MASS could be operating at one or more degrees of autonomy for the duration of a single voyage):

- Ship with automated processes and decision support: Seafarers are onboard to operate and control shipboard systems and functions. Some operations may be automated.
- Remotely controlled ship with seafarers onboard: The ship is controlled and operated from another location, but seafarers are onboard.
- Remotely controlled ship without seafarers onboard: The ship is controlled and operated from another location. There are no seafarers onboard.
- Fully autonomous ship: The operating system of the ship is able to make decisions and determine actions by itself.

IMO has said that as a first step, the scoping exercise would identify current provisions in an agreed list of IMO instruments and assess how they may or may not be applicable to ships with varying degrees of autonomy and/or whether they may preclude MASS operations.

As a second step, an analysis would be conducted to determine the most appropriate way of addressing MASS operations, taking into account the human element, technology, operational factors and other matters.

The MSC, which met from May 16th to May 25th, established a correspondence group on MASS to test the framework of the regulatory scoping exercise agreed at the session and,

in particular, the methodology, and report back to its next session, MSC 100, to be held on December 3rd to December 7th 2018. Speaking at the opening of the MSC meeting, IMO Secretary-General Kitack Lim highlighted the importance of remaining flexible to accommodate new technologies, and so improve the efficiency of shipping, “while at the same time keeping in mind the role of the human element and the need to maintain safe navigation, further reducing the number of marine casualties and incidents”.
