

IPCC suggests better climate governance for shipping

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The Working Group Report III released yesterday by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on the battle against climate change suggested that an improved degree of climate governance for shipping and aviation could speed up the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

The report will not be comfortable reading for the executive of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), which is based in London. The organization has long struggled to deal with the contradictory desires of developed world governments, emerging world administrations, and the competitive cost pressures on shipowners and operators worldwide.

The IPCC's authors said that "improvements to national and international governance structures would further enable the decarbonization of shipping and aviation. Such improvements could include, for example, the implementation of stricter efficiency and carbon intensity standards for the sectors."

Most countries believe that shipping can only be regulated at global level through the IMO, and do not account for the sector in their climate laws; neither do they include the shipping world's carbon pollution in their own nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement.

The result has been to leave shipping a rather embarrassing example of an industry seeming to move too slowly towards decarbonization and to be contributing insufficiently to the avowed aims of the Paris Agreement, which hoped somehow to restrict global warming to 1.5°C. The IMO struggled to get some members to accept the modest aim of halving emissions by 2050, and that was compared to a 2008 baseline rather than 2021.

The IPCC Working Group III report was finalised and approved by 278 authors and 195 governments. It is the most comprehensive review of how the world can mitigate climate change since the fifth assessment report in 2014.

The report examines current trends of emissions, projected levels of future warming, and how to transition to a low carbon economy in order to limit global warming in line with Paris targets.

The IPCC report also said of shipping and aviation that “while efficiency improvements (e.g., optimised aircraft and vessel designs, mass reduction, and propulsion system improvements) can provide some mitigation potential, additional CO₂ emissions mitigation technologies for aviation and shipping will be required.”

Alternative fuels for shipping identified by the IPCC included low-emission hydrogen, ammonia, biofuels, and other synthetic fuels, while electrification could play a niche role for shortsea shipping.