

# Classification Society – A Voice of Influence or just an IMO Ally?

Ulhas S. Kalghatgi

*[You can exert no influence if you are not susceptible to Influence – Carl Jung]*

**Abstract** – The International Association of Classification Societies (IACS) greatly values its role as the principal technical advisor to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). IACS develops and applies technical rules that reflect the aims embodied within IMO conventions. The advice, expertise, and experience of IACS' twelve members are always available to the Organization and the wider maritime industry in pursuit of shared objectives of cleaner and safer shipping.

IACS has consultative status with the IMO and remains the only non-governmental organization with observer status.

The **International Maritime Organization (IMO)** with its headquarters in London is the United Nations specialised agency responsible for the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine pollution by ships. The primary task of the IMO is to create effective, widely accepted and legally implementable frameworks for the wider maritime industries.

Synergy exists between the IMO and IACS because IACS plays a key role within the IMO, by providing technical support and guidance and developing unified interpretations (UIs) of the international statutory regulations developed by the IMO member states, adopted as key IMO instruments:

The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the following issues:

- What are the main parameters of 'influence' at the IMO?
- Who among member states, industry or other players are the main influencers?

To address these issues, a perspective mainly but not exclusively based on the author's own experience with the activities of the IMO's Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) is considered.

**KEY WORDS: IACS; IMO; MEPC; SOLAS; UN.**

**1. INTRODUCTION – IACS HAS DEDICATED ITSELF** to the cause of safe ships and clean seas. Through

their technical prowess, IACS members uniquely contribute to maritime safety and regulation through technical support, compliance verification and research and development. Historically, the maritime domain has been the linchpin of global commerce. Today, it continues its legacy with over 90% of global trade safely transported by sea because more than 90% of the world's cargo-carrying tonnage is covered by the classification design, construction and through-life compliance rules and standards set by the member societies of IACS. This efficient role played by IACS makes it indispensable in connecting global economies and anchoring international trade, by maintaining the highest safety standards both during construction of ships and through periodical surveys on board ships.

This paper is structured by elaborating in section 2, the significance of IMO in the maritime industry particularly in reducing global GHG emissions from ship operations to manageable levels. The ambitious targets set by the IMO for the next two and half decades are enumerated. Section 3 covers the role played by IACS in the era of globalisation. It also facilitates IMO's various agendas which are deliberated during the plenary sessions of the IMO's two main bodies, namely MSC and MEPC and various subcommittees. Thus, it has an important role in **Promoting Global Ocean Governance**. Section 4 of the paper clarifies the distinction between IACS's role as an **"ally" or a voice of influence** on IMO's policies. Section 5 deliberates on the stakeholders' influence in driving the IMO's policies and who the key stakeholders amongst the signatories to the IMO's various conventions are?.

Section 6 reflects on the differences between an **ally and an influencer**. The outcome of the paper is concluded in section 7, deliberating upon whether IACS **is an IMO ally or a voice of influence**

# IMO STRU

## Secretariat



Headed by the  
Secretary-General

## Assem



All member s  
once every

## Coun



40 member  
Supervise wo

## MSC



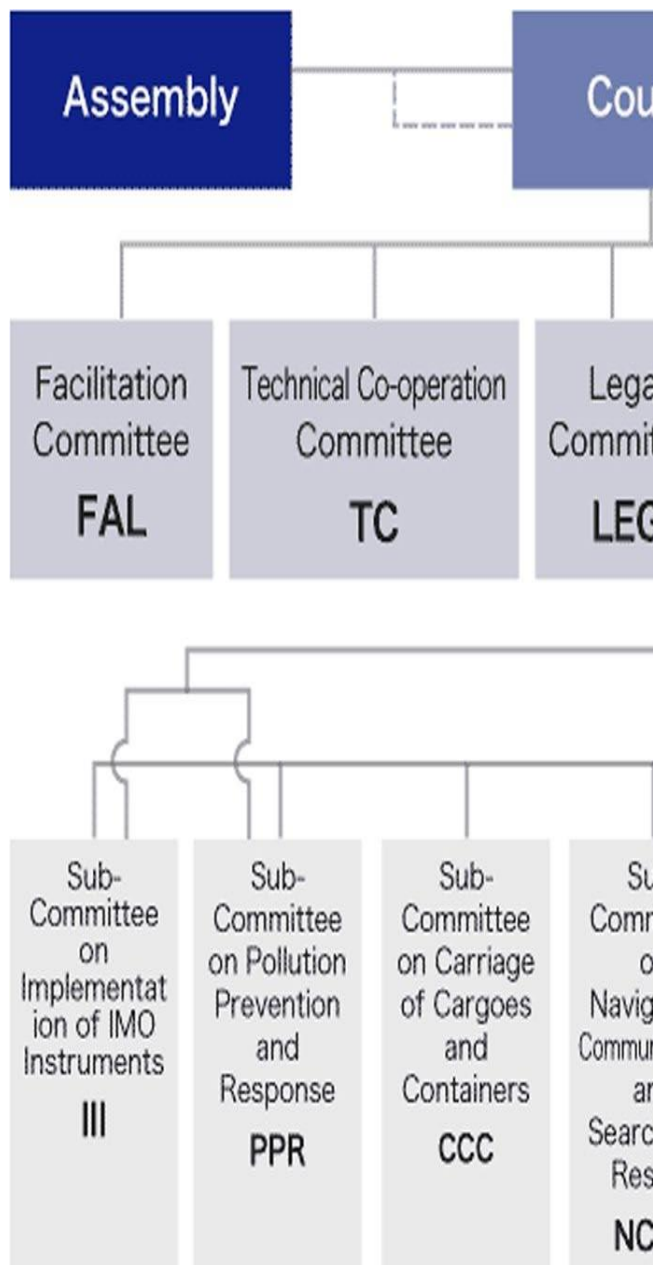
Maritime safety  
Commitee

## MEPC



Marine Environment  
Protection  
Committee

Figure 1: - Structure of IMO



**Figure 2: - IMO structure showing main and sub-committees:**(Source, Class NK 2019)

## 2. International Maritime Organisation (IMO) Structure, Operations, Financing & its Role in Maritime Industry

IMO was established as the Inter-Governmental Maritime Consultative Organization (IMCO) in 1948, became a specialized agency of the United Nations in 1959, and was renamed the International Maritime Organization in 1982.

IMO is responsible for the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine and atmospheric pollution by ships. IMO currently has 174 member states and 3 associate members.

IMO is the global standard-setting authority for the safety, security and environmental performance of international shipping. Its main role is to create a regulatory framework for the shipping industry that is fair, effective, universally adopted and universally implemented

It plays an integral role in meeting the targets set in the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.

IMO sets international shipping policies and regulations on safety, security, and environmental best practices covering ship design, construction, equipment, manning, operation and disposal to ensure this vital sector remains safe, environmentally sound, energy efficient and secure. This safe reliance is provided by the regulatory framework developed and maintained by IMO.

IMO is not responsible for enforcing its policies; when a government or a member state accepts an IMO policy, that government becomes responsible for enforcing the policy, by incorporating it in its national laws.

### 2.1 Structure (see fig 1 and 2)

**The Assembly** is the highest governing body of the IMO. It consists of all Member States and meets regularly once every two years. The Assembly is responsible for approving the work program, voting on the budget, and electing the Council.

**The Council** is the Executive Organ of the IMO, headed by the Secretary General, meets every year. It is responsible, under the Assembly, for supervising the work of the Organization.

The five Committees shown in fig 1 are policy making bodies, responsible for the developing, reviewing,

updating, and approving the organization's guidelines and regulations.

Figure 2 shows IMO structure, showing Assembly, Council, Secretariat, five main committees, (MSC, MEPC, FAL, LEGAL & TC) and seven sub-committees, (III, PPR, CCC, NCSR, SSE, HTW, & SDC). Each of these committees meet either once or twice in a year depending on the agenda. IMO also holds intersessional meetings to discuss important matters such as reduction of GHGs

IMO's activities are mainly funded by the member states and associate members

2.2 The purposes of the IMO, as summarized by Article 1(a) of the IMO Convention, are:

- to provide machinery for cooperation among Governments in the field of governmental regulation and practices relating to technical matters of all kinds affecting shipping engaged in international trade
- to encourage and facilitate the general adoption of the highest practicable standards in matters concerning maritime safety, efficiency of navigation and prevention and control of marine pollution from ships.

IMO is also empowered to deal with administrative and legal matters related to these purposes.

**2.3 Objective:** From the beginning, the improvement of maritime safety and the prevention of marine pollution have been the most important objectives of IMO.

**2.4** The four pillars of IMO play a crucial role in shaping safety, environmental protection and labour standards in the maritime industry. These are:

**1. The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS):** sets minimum safety requirements for the construction, equipment, and operation of merchant ships. It covers aspects such as fire protection, lifesaving appliances, and machinery.

**2. International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW):** ensures that seafarers receive proper training, certification, and qualifications. It aims to enhance crew competence and safety.

**3. The International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL):** focuses on preventing pollution from ships by regulating aspects like oil, sewage, garbage, and emissions. It promotes environmental protection.

**4. The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC):** addresses seafarers' working conditions, including hours of work, rest, and other labour-related matters. It aims to protect their rights and well-being.

These conventions collectively contribute to a safer, more sustainable maritime industry worldwide.

## **2.5: IMO Strategy on reducing GHG emissions from Ships**

IMO continues to contribute to the global fight against climate change, supporting the UN Sustainable Development Goals:

- SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use oceans, seas, and marine resources.
- SDG 13: Climate action (addressing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from shipping).
- SDGs 6 and 9: Building a sustainable society with proper infrastructure, transportation, and waste management<sup>1</sup>.

In 2018, IMO adopted an Initial Strategy for reducing GHG emissions from ships, setting out a vision that confirms IMO's commitment to reducing GHG emissions from international shipping and phasing them out as soon as possible.

In July 2023 (MEPC 80) IMO adopted the [2023 IMO Strategy on Reduction of GHG Emissions from Ships](#) in accordance with the agreed programme of follow-up actions.

Reduction in carbon intensity (CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per transport work), on an average across international shipping, by at least 40% by 2030.

The GHG Strategy also introduces indicative checkpoints to reach net-zero GHG emissions from international shipping, namely:

- to reduce the total annual GHG emissions from international shipping by at least 20%, striving for 30%, by 2030, compared to 2008; and
- to reduce the total annual GHG emissions from international shipping by at least 70%, striving for 80%, by 2040, compared to 2008.

## **2.6 Relations with Intergovernmental Organisations in promoting Ocean governance and protection.**

Articles 25 and 66 of the Convention on the International Maritime Organization govern the establishment of formal relations between IMO and intergovernmental organizations.

IMO collaborates with various stakeholders, including the European Union, the Global Environment Facility, and shipping organizations, to address ocean challenges. These partnerships focus on marine litter, reducing greenhouse gases, and preventing invasive aquatic species.

IMO's efforts extend beyond ships. They regulate pollution prevention from waste dumping at sea and explore climate change mitigation options like carbon capture and storage.

IMO's multifaceted approach involves conventions, partnerships, and global cooperation to protect our oceans and promote responsible maritime practices. IMO contributes to global ocean governance through treaties, such as the Hong Kong Convention on Ship Recycling and by participating actively in achieving UN SD goals on shipping. IMO works with other organizations to meet the goals of the BBNJ – a UN treaty on biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

## **3. History of IACS and its Role in IMO and Maritime Industry Partners**

**3.1 Definition of a Classification Society:** A Classification Society is an Organisation which:

- (i) Publishes its own Classification Rules (including technical requirements) in relation to the design, construction and survey of ships<sup>1</sup>, and has the capacity to (a) apply, (b) maintain and (c) update those Rules and Regulations with its own resources on a regular basis.
- (ii) Verifies compliance with these Rules during construction and periodically during a classed ship's service life.
- (iii) Publishes a register of classed ships.
- (iv) Is not controlled by, and does not have interests in, ship-owners, shipbuilders or others engaged commercially in the manufacture, equipping, repair or operation of ships; and
- (v) Is authorised by a Flag Administration as defined in SOLAS Chapter XI-1, Regulation 1 and listed accordingly in the IMO database, Global Integrated Shipping Information System (GISIS).

The purpose of a Classification Society is twofold:

---

<sup>1</sup> "ships" are defined as any ships subject to SOLAS safety certification and capable of unrestricted navigation.

1. To provide classification and assistance to the maritime industry as regards maritime safety and pollution prevention, based on the accumulation of maritime knowledge and technology.

The objective of ship classification is to verify the structural strength and integrity of essential parts of the ship's hull and its appendages, and the reliability and function of the propulsion and steering systems, power generation and other features and auxiliary systems that have been built into the ship to maintain essential services on board.

Classification Societies aim to achieve this objective through the development and application of their own Rules and by verifying compliance with international and/or national statutory regulations on behalf of flag Administrations.

2. Further it assists international regulatory bodies and standards organisations to develop, implement and interpret statutory regulations and industry standards in ship design, construction, and maintenance, with a view to improving safety at sea and the prevention of marine pollution

### 3.2 Why Classification?

In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, marine insurers meeting regularly at Lloyd's coffee house in London, developed a system for the independent technical assessment of the ships presented to them for insurance cover. In 1760 a committee was formed for this purpose, and the earliest existing result of their initiative is *Lloyd's Register Book* for the years 1764-65-66.

At that time, an attempt was made to 'classify' the condition of each ship on an annual basis. The condition of the hull was classified A, E, I, O or U, according to the excellence of its construction and its adjudged continuing soundness (or otherwise). Equipment was G, M, or B: simply, good, middling or bad. In time, G, M and B were replaced by 1, 2 or 3, which is the origin of the well-known expression 'A1', meaning 'first or highest class'.

This concept of classification slowly spread to other countries, each forming its own "Class Society", resulting in the establishment of twelve Societies.

### 3.3 Formation of IACS

IACS can trace its origins to the International Load Line Convention of 1930 and its recommendations. The Convention recommended collaboration between Classification Societies to secure "*as much uniformity as possible in the application of the standards of strength upon which freeboard is based*".

Subsequent to above convention the seven classification societies held the first conference in 1939 and agreed to consolidate their cooperation. The second conference followed this in 1955 resulting in the formation of working parties on specific topics. IACS was formally founded in 1968. In 1969 IACS was given consultative status with the International Maritime Organization (IMO). It remains the only non-governmental organization with Observer status that can develop and apply Rules.

### 3.4 Role of IACS in Maritime sector and IMO

IACS Societies develop Rules and regulations for the classification of ships, incorporating as unified requirements developed jointly by the IACS Members. Unified requirements (URs) are adopted resolutions on matters directly connected to or covered by specific Rule Requirements and practices of classification Societies and the general philosophy on which the rules and practices of classification societies are established.

In addition, IACS also publishes:

- Unified Interpretations (UIs) are Resolutions on matters arising from implementing the requirements of IMO instruments. They provide uniform interpretations of Convention Regulations or IMO Resolutions on those matters which in the Convention are left to the satisfaction of the flag Administration requirements developed at IMO,
- Procedural Requirements (PRs): are Resolutions on technical matters of procedure, that IACS members follow in their classification activities
- Recommendations, These are guidelines that offer best practices for various aspects of ship design, construction, and operation.
- Position papers: present IACS stance on key industry issues that provide background information and actions taken by IACS.

### 3.5 Class Societies as Recognised Organisations (ROs)

All classification Societies derive their status as recognized organizations (RO) through SOLAS, regulation II-1/3-1 on structural, mechanical, and electrical requirements for ships, which stipulates that:

SOLAS Ch II-1, Reg 3-1 states that, in addition to the requirements of the other (SOLAS) regulations, ships shall be designed, constructed and maintained in compliance with the structural, mechanical and electrical requirements of a Classification Society which is recognised by the Administration in accordance with the provisions of regulation XI/1 or with applicable national

standards of the Administration which provide an equivalent level of safety.

SOLAS and the other International Conventions permit the flag Administration to delegate the inspection and survey of ships to a Recognised Organization (RO).

To be considered as ROs Class Societies must fulfill the mandatory minimum requirements laid down by IMO Resolutions.

- A.739(18), Guidelines for the authorization of organisations acting on behalf of the Administration.
- A.789(19), on Specifications on the survey and certification functions of Recognized Organisations (ROs) acting on behalf of the Administration.

The above Resolutions provide the criteria and framework for the ROs. Fundamentally they require the organisations to demonstrate its technical competence and to be governed by ethical behaviour. The RO's quality management system is to be certified by an independent body of auditors accepted by the Administration. All IACS Members have been certified as such and also found to comply with the requirements of the two resolutions.

In 2013, IMO adopted the Code for Recognised Organisations (RO Code) by Resolutions MEPC.237(65) and MSC.349(92) to replace resolutions A739(18) and A789(19).

The RO Code serves as the international standard and consolidated instrument containing minimum criteria against which organizations are assessed for recognition and authorization and the guidelines for the oversight by flag States. The RO Code: assists in achieving a harmonised and consistent global implementation of requirements established by IMO instruments.

#### 4. Is IACS an Ally or Voice of Influence?

This section deliberates on this issue and elaborates how IACS is more of an ally than a voice of influence.

In the 3rd century BC, Rhodian seafarers sailing the wine-dark waters of the Mediterranean established the foundations of maritime law. Their guidelines regulated everything from bills of lading to standards of passenger behavior. These were formalized in the 7th century AD under the Byzantine Empire. Constantinople's role is fitting, for today maritime governance involves a truly byzantine world including national governments, international organizations and classification societies.

To exemplify the role of IACS as IMO Ally, few examples are included in this section.

#### 1. The introduction and subsequent implementation of:

- The International Safety Management Code from 1<sup>st</sup> July 1998
- The International Ship and Port Facility Security Code or the ISPS Code from 1<sup>st</sup> --- 2002
- The Maritime Labour Convention, MLC 2007

Though IACS may not have contributed to developing these codes, however, they played a stellar role in their implementation, which instilled confidence amongst the sea farers and marine community at large in preventing loss of oil tankers, piracy attacks and improving lives of labour on board ship.

2. The collaborative work is initiated by IACS and IMO in Cyber safety; the ongoing maintenance of the verification process of IACS Members' Rules with goal-based standards; and the redesign of the Marine Casualty Investigation (MCI) module of the IMO Global Integrated Shipping Information System (GISIS). These three initial focus areas demonstrate well the substantive contribution that IACS makes to the work of the IMO, making them as an Ally of IMO.

#### 5. Stakeholders' Influence on the IMO Conventions

The purpose of this section is to shed some light on the following issues: What are the main parameters of 'influence' at the IMO? Who among member states, industry or other players are the main influencers?

The significance of private actors in the framework of global governance has garnered increasing attention. The concept of "**private actors**" is comprehensive, incorporating individuals or nonstate entities that fall outside the traditional ambit of international subjects. As "**participants**" in international activities, their legal capacity varies according to the specific normative framework in question. The same is true in the context of merchant shipping. Arguably, the term refers to all maritime stakeholders revolving around ocean transportation, such as vessels, seafarers, and cargos.

While most nonstate actors are not included as decision makers in international forums, they are nevertheless frequently involved in the broader processes that surround decision making. Generally, through various means, private actors (especially NGOs) influence the development of international law in accordance with their agendas. For private actors wishing to influence institutional proceedings, being accorded the formal

status of observer by the international organization in question offers these entities access to negotiate the substance of international norms.

IMO Council till date has granted consultative status to 81 NGOs, who not only make substantial contributions to the work of the IMO, but also well represent the interest of the member states, whom they represent. The NGOs to name a few of them are, Intercargo, International Chamber of Shipping, Inter Tanko, BIMCO, IACS, CESA, IMAREST, RINA, etc. Additionally, IMO has entered into agreements of cooperation with 64 intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) on matters of common interest

The climate change topic mandated IMO to take drastic measures to reduce the GHG emissions from ships. This led to the adoption of Energy Efficiency Design Index (EEDI) and Ship Energy Efficiency Management Plan (SEEMP) as an annex to MARPOL Annex VI. In a historic move, MEPC 72 adopted the Initial IMO Strategy, that set out a vision to drastically reduce GHG emissions from international shipping. An ambitious target was set to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per ton-mile of cargo transportation as an average across international shipping.

However, though IMO set these targets, it was not a smooth sailing for the IMO, because of the lobbying efforts made by the influential industry trade associations having observer status at IMO to delay the GHG emission reduction measures. The influence exercised may be subtle and due to the technical feasibility of achieving the targets. Some developed countries were found using their economic influence over open registries to push against ambitious climate policies. Transparency was another factor raised by the independent bodies for better IMO governance.

## 5 Analysis

The author has deduced from his experience at MEPC, but not exclusively, from the activities of the IMO at MEPC meetings in the past in respect of various legislations which were deliberated and subsequently adopted by the IMO. The issues which may influence IMO decision making process could be but relevant, are delegation size, delegation composition, number of submissions and other factors that may affect representation.

The analysis is based on the delegation size, delegation composition and number of submissions as factors that may relate to *'influence'* in the IMO, with a focus on MSC and MEPC meetings. The number of delegates varies from

member state to member state and from NGO to NGO (Observer organisations), ranging from one to the largest size of 45 delegates. There may not be any correlation between the number of delegates and the number of submissions to the meetings (MSC or MEPC). Nor this has any bearing on the active participation during the sessions. But the large number of delegates have the numerical advantage of participating in plenary sessions as well as working group discussions which take place during the sessions. It has been observed that some of the delegates participating at IMO sessions are ship-type neutral and the others represent sectoral interests. The delegate composition can vary and is not regulated by IMO.

The number of submissions to the IMO is surely an indicator of influence exerted by that member state, but that does not necessarily mean automatic adoption of the paper for discussion at IMO sessions. Each member state or industry stakeholder submits the papers depending on his interest and the subject expertise.

Both member states, NGOs, IACS etc submit large number of papers, but all of them do not influence the decision-making process of IMO. However, IACS intervenes on technical matters to interpret the clause or any submission to provide better clarity so that the implementation becomes easier for the ship owners and stakeholders. In the author's opinion this cannot be termed as an influence, but merely helping the IMO and the industry associations by removing the ambiguity if any.

There are some long-standing but vexing problems which the developing countries have been advocating is Common But Differentiated Responsibilities – Reduced Capabilities (CBDR-RC). This has been the stand of the developing countries because it is enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol. It is a matter of conjecture whether the industry is trying to stall the GHG reduction measure, use of alternative fuels, or introduction of EU monitored Emission Trading System.

## 6 Who is an Ally & Who is the Voice of influence?

*The dictionary meaning of an Ally is [“one that is associated with another as a helper: a person or group that provides assistance and support in an ongoing effort, activity; or struggle]*

*The Cambridge Dictionary defines “influencer” as a person or a group that has the ability to influence the behaviour or opinions of others.*

From the analysis carried out by the author, it is felt that there is a fine dividing line between who can be called an “*Ally*” and who can be called an “*Influencer*”. It cannot be an open and shut case. The member states and the NGOs having observer status have a different role to play, but to some extent they complement each other. IACS being a technical arm of IMO, avoids getting into socio-political issues, as these matters are beyond their remit. Their role is strictly confined to giving interpretations to SOLAS or MARPOL clauses, facilitating their implementation, advising the ship owners on new entry to the conventions interacting with equipment manufacturers on meeting the new requirements, e.g. BWM treatment plant, etc.

Keeping the above context in mind, the role of IACS is significant in maintaining our oceans safe, pollution-free, and greener

Class societies play an unusual role in ensuring safety at sea. Leading societies were established in the nineteenth and twentieth century when the global shipping industry was quite literally picking up steam. They helped and continue to help the ship owners navigate a geopolitically and economically fraught world under pressure to decarbonize and digitalize. At the same time, class societies must respond to seafarer welfare and environmental issues like ocean noise and marine mammal health. Although they face a heavy agenda, societies worldwide are rising to the task.

The class, together with flag states, has been instrumental in ensuring timely compliance of the shipping industry with all the conventions and codes promulgated by the IMO.

## 7. Conclusion

In the opinion of the author a generalised statement cannot be made based on available information to the author. In support of reaching a decision, possible observations are presented:

1. All the decisions at IMO are taken consensually, except on rare occasions, where it is decided on the basis of voting. Thus, IMO cannot be viewed as a partisan organisation favouring one over the other, maintaining the transparency.
2. About five to six member states seem to be potent influencers of the IMO policy decisions.
3. IACS at times appears to be less independent in voicing their views, but the author believes that they are following their principles of taking a non-partisan stand, as per their Charter.
- 4 Classification Societies guide ships to a greener tomorrow.

5 Around the world, class societies have a common goal: to keep people, ships and the sea safe, now and for posterity.

6. EU has the potential to influence IMO decisions but has refrained from exercising that potential, especially in matters regarding decarbonisation process.

To sum up the author is convinced that **IACS is more of an Ally of IMO and not a Voice of Influence.**

---

## References:

[1] International Association of Classification Societies – What, Why & How?

[2] International Maritime Organization, 2012, “IMO’s contribution to sustainable maritime development”. [http://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/TechnicalCooperation/Documents/Brochure/English.pdf\(28.6.20217\)](http://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/TechnicalCooperation/Documents/Brochure/English.pdf(28.6.20217))

[3] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) - Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry Division of Transport: Regulatory Issues in International Maritime Transport

[4] Psaraftis Harilaos N, Kontovas Christos A. – Influency and Transportation at the IMO: The name of the Game – 2 March 2020 © Springer Nature Limited, 2020

## **Statement and Declaration**

### **1. Funding**

*The author declares that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.”*

### **2. Competing Interests**

*The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.*

### **3. Conflict of Interests**

*The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.*