

OVERVIEW: THE INTERNATIONAL MARITIME ORGANIZATION

INTRODUCTION

Headquartered in London, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN) responsible for **setting global standards for the safety, security, and environmental performance of international shipping.**

While the Paris Agreement climate goals are implemented through the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), international shipping is regulated instead by the IMO.

ESTABLISHMENT AND PURPOSE

The IMO was established in 1948. Initially, the organization focused on promoting technical cooperation and safety and navigation standards, and reducing barriers to maritime trade. This included administering the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), which remains one of the IMO's most important responsibilities.

In 1975, the IMO amended its mandate to include "the prevention and control of marine pollution from ships" and formed a new Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) to oversee this work.

MEMBERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

The IMO has **176 member States**, alongside **68 intergovernmental** and **98 non-governmental observer organizations** representing a spectrum of interests, including industry and environmental groups.¹ Members and observers can participate in negotiations by submitting documents and

intervening during meetings, but only member States can vote.

IMO CONVENTIONS

The IMO oversees the implementation of numerous international treaties related to shipping activities.²

In 1973, countries adopted the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL). Today, **MARPOL has 161 signatories representing 98.61 percent of world shipping tonnage.** MARPOL has six annexes: two are mandatory for all parties, and four are separately agreed to. **Annex VI regulates greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from ships.**

- **Annex I** - Prevention of Pollution by Oil (mandatory for all parties)
- **Annex II** - Pollution by Noxious Liquid Substances in Bulk (mandatory for all parties)
- **Annex III** - Prevention of Pollution by Harmful Substances Carried in Packaged Form (151 signatories, 98.22 percent of tonnage)
- **Annex IV** - Prevention of Pollution by Sewage from Ships (147 signatories, 97.13 percent of tonnage)
- **Annex V** - Prevention of Pollution by Garbage from Ships (156 signatories, 98.43 percent of tonnage)
- **Annex VI** - Prevention of Air Pollution from Ships (107 signatories, 97.30 percent of tonnage)

¹ For a complete list of IMO members and observers, see: <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Membership/Pages/Default.aspx>

² For a complete list of IMO conventions, see: <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/ListOfConventions.aspx>

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

Assembly: The Assembly is the highest governing body, comprised of all IMO member States. It meets once every two years to approve the IMO's budget and work program. It also elects the Council.

Council: The Council is the IMO's executive arm and is responsible for coordinating and supervising the organization's work. It is comprised of 40 member States, with seats reserved for countries with the largest maritime interests.

Secretariat: 300 staff provide support for all IMO functions, including operations and meeting coordination. They are led by the Secretary General (SG), who is appointed by the Council as the organization's primary representative. The current SG is *Antonio Dominguez Velasco (Panama)*.

Committees: Most of the IMO's decision-making occurs at the committee level. The IMO has five main committees comprised of all IMO members. The two substantive committees are the MEPC and the Maritime Safety Committee (MSC), the organization's highest technical bodies.

Other subsidiary bodies and arrangements: The MEPC and MSC are supported by several standing **sub-committees** with specific operational and technical mandates, like the sub-committees on Ship Design and Construction.

Committees may also form **working groups** to advance work on specific topics when they are not in session. For example, the MEPC formed an Intersessional Working Group on Reduction of GHG Emissions from Ships, which often lays the groundwork for the Committee's decisions on GHG emission-related issues. **Correspondence groups** (including observers) may be established to work on discrete issues between meetings by exchanging draft proposals or text.

³ D Bodansky, *Regulating Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Ships: The Role of the International Maritime Organization*, in *Ocean Law Debates* (H N Sheiber, et al., eds.), Leiden: Brill (2018)

⁴ For more on the IMO's GHG Strategy, NZF, and regulatory process, see: <https://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Pages/Cutting-GHG-emissions.aspx>

DECISION-MAKING AT THE IMO

While voting is the formal decision-making mechanism, **IMO has a "strong culture and tradition"³ of adopting decisions by consensus** due to the need for uniform implementation and enforcement. If a vote is called, decisions of the MEPC require a majority. For amendments under MARPOL, two-thirds of the parties to the relevant annex are required. However, voting remains rare.

IMPLEMENTING IMO REGULATIONS

Ensuring **implementation of IMO regulations generally falls to the flag state with jurisdiction over a given vessel**. But other stakeholders may also play a supportive role, including ports, shipowners, and classification societies. Countries party to MARPOL Annex VI must require compliance certifications of their flagged vessels, but it is the vessel owner's responsibility to obtain these certifications, and the port or coastal authorities' prerogative to inspect them. **Port states play a key role in monitoring and ensuring widespread compliance throughout a global industry.**

2023 REVISED GHG STRATEGY & NEXT STEPS

In July 2023, the IMO adopted a revised GHG Strategy. The 2023 Strategy sets out a framework to achieve "net-zero GHG emissions from international shipping by or around, i.e., close to, 2050" and includes 2030 and 2040 "indicative checkpoints" to measure progress. In April 2025, the MEPC approved the *Net-Zero Framework*, a set of binding regulations that implement the 2023 Strategy and reduce GHG emissions from ships. **In October 2025, the MEPC voted to delay adoption of the Net-Zero Framework until 2026.**⁴

For further information on the IMO, see: IMO, [Frequently Asked Questions](#); [Convention on the International Maritime Organization](#); K Lim, *The Role of the International Maritime Organization in Preventing the Pollution of the World's Oceans from Ships and Shipping*, [UN Chronicle](#) (2017)