

Tides of change: Steering towards improved mariner safety and welfare in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region, a nexus of the world's most dynamic maritime corridors, serves as a critical artery for global trade, connecting diverse economies from the bustling ports of Asia to the distant shores of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Indo-Pacific countries comprise 40 percent of the world merchant fleet by ownership. Apart from Panama and Liberia, most of these fleet are flagged under the Indo-Pacific countries of China, Marshall Islands, Singapore, Indonesia, and Hong Kong SAR.

At the heart of this vast maritime network are 1.8 million seafarers, whose tireless efforts and navigation skills ensure the seamless flow of goods, energy, and commodities essential for sustaining global markets and economies. The Philippines, Russia, Indonesia and China are the largest suppliers of officers and ratings working on merchant ships, comprising more than 40 percent of the world supply of vessel crew.

Seafarers, often out of sight, navigate through some of the world's busiest and most strategic waterways, facing not just the natural elements but also caught in the midst of the complexities of geopolitical tensions. Their role is indispensable, as they operate the vessels that carry around 90 percent of global trade by volume, making the safety and welfare of these individuals not just a humanitarian concern but a cornerstone for the stability and efficiency of international trade systems. As such, understanding the challenges and opportunities within the maritime supply chains of the Indo-Pacific is crucial for ensuring the resilience of global trade and the well-being of those at the helm of vessels.

Confronting problems of seafarer safety and security

Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea

One of the most immediate threats to mariner safety in the Indo-Pacific is piracy and

armed robbery. While efforts by international coalitions have seen a decline in piracy incidents in some areas, such as off the coast of the western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden, there are other areas around the Strait of Malacca and the Sulu-Celebes Seas which continue to witness sporadic attacks. These incidents not only pose a direct threat to the physical safety of mariners but also lead to significant financial losses through ransom demands, cargo theft, and shipping delays. The psychological impact on crew members, who may face violence or be taken hostage, can have long-lasting effects on their mental health and willingness to continue working in such high-risk conditions. These waters, crucial for shipping routes connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, have seen a surge in kidnappings and armed attacks on merchant vessels. The response has necessitated coordinated patrols by Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, and the implementation of stricter security protocols by shipping companies. While these measures have led to a reduction in incidents, they underscore the ongoing threat of piracy in the region and its implications for maritime security and trade.

War and war-like conflicts

Since the Israel-Gaza war began last October, there has been related attacks on vessels in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Following the Russian invasion in Ukraine, there have been threats to the safety of Ukraine seafarers onboard vessels heading into Russian ports. Some of these issues include safety threats posed by floating sea mines, stranding of ships, and abandonment of seafarers. There have been reported incidents of hostage-taking and the death of a seafarer as so-called collateral damage. The war in Ukraine has increased shipping distances required to circumvent the area, similar to disruptions from the Israel-Gaza conflict near the Suez Canal, a vital Europe-Asia trade link. Both conflicts have forced the maritime industries to alter routes, complicating shipping schedules and straining the global supply chain. Although these conflicts may only be at the fringe of the Indo-Pacific corridor, the impact on the region is not remote due to the international nature of shipping and seafaring.

Joint War Committee List of Areas of Perceived Enhanced Risk

The Joint War Committee—a body which comprises underwriting representatives from both the Lloyd's and International Underwriting Association (IUA) company markets—designates Listed Areas or Areas of Perceived Enhanced Risk where

shipowners are required to notify underwriters of such voyages. Examples of Listed Areas are the Red Sea, Strait of Hormuz, Ukraine, Sudan, Libya, Gulf of Guinea, and Eastern Malaysia. As a result of being a Listed Area, insurers may categorically change terms of insurance, such as excluding any vessel which enters, sails or deviates towards the territorial sea of any country or place included in the list. While underwriters clearly limit the scope of insurance for vessels plying the waters of Listed Areas, it is unclear what additional financial protection is provided to seafarers employed on these vessels.

The continuing issue of seafarers work rights and welfare

Harsh working conditions

Mariners are subjected to harsh working conditions, characterised by long hours, inadequate rest, and exposure to tough environmental conditions. The physical and mental toll of these conditions is exacerbated by the isolation experienced during long voyages, making seafaring one of the most challenging professions. These factors not only affect the health and well-being of the crew but can also impact the operational efficiency of vessels, as fatigued and stressed mariners are more prone to making errors, potentially leading to accidents at sea.

Abandonment of seafarers

Abandonment of seafarers occurs when a shipowner fails to fulfil fundamental obligations to a seafarer such as payment of remuneration, timely repatriation, and provision of basic necessities. As of March 2024, there were 856 cases of abandonment of seafarers on the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) database. More than 50 percent of these cases involve seafarers from the Indo-Pacific and 20 percent involve flag States from the region. An example is the abandonment of 14 Indonesian crew in January and February 2019 in Port Alang, India, on board *Miss Gaunt* and *North Wind*, as well as eight Indonesian seafarers on board *AHT Carrier* in Mozambique in October 2018. The challenges of crew changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by strict travel restrictions and limited international flights, have led to a significant rise in cases of seafarer abandonment. Many crew members found themselves stranded on vessels beyond their contracts without relief or adequate support, as logistical hurdles prevented timely

repatriation and crew rotations. The International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) reported that Indian seafarers were the most abandoned, with more than 400 cases in 2023. Although these cases have been resolved with the payment of outstanding wages, the adverse impact on the mental and physical health of seafarers and the stress to their families are unquantifiable. Without the intervention of the International Maritime Organisation, the ILO and the International Transport Workers Federation, the actions of flag and port States have been insufficient to address the failure of shipowners to abide by their obligations to the seafarers.

Lack of legal protections

Current maritime safety and welfare policies, grounded in frameworks such as the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW) and the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), have set significant benchmarks for the industry. However, the effectiveness of these agreements depends on their enforcement, which can vary widely across different jurisdictions. There is currently an uneven application of seafarer-related Conventions in the Indo-Pacific. This stems from the differences in the levels of ratification of and adherence to relevant international agreements in the region. As an example, while the STCW has a wide ratification among States, notable exceptions in the Indo-Pacific region, such as Cambodia, Nepal and Myanmar, have not ratified the Convention. Additionally, even some of the key flag States and major seafaring nations in the region, including Taiwan and Bangladesh, remain non-parties to the Maritime Labour Convention. This may imply that the international standards in protecting the rights of seafarers are not being upheld consistently in the region. Some of the key developed nations such as the United States, Canada and Australia also have more modern and up-to-date legislation promoting the rights and welfare of seafarers compared to other nations.

Lessons learned from COVID-19 on occupational health and safety

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a litmus test for the resilience and adaptability of maritime safety and welfare policies. Seafarers were among the hardest hit, with travel restrictions and port closures leading to challenges in crew change and therefore extended periods at sea, exacerbating mental health issues and raising concerns about access to medical care. The pandemic underscored the need for

robust health and safety protocols that can withstand such global crises, emphasising the importance of mental health support, access to healthcare, and the flexibility of crew change protocols. The maritime industry's response to COVID-19, including the adoption of remote inspections of vessels and digital health records of seafarers, offers valuable lessons in leveraging technology to enhance occupational health and safety. However, it also highlights the critical need for global coordination and the swift adaptation of domestic policies to ensure the welfare of seafarers in times of crisis.

Greenhouse gas emission targets and impact on seafarers

One of the most challenging developments in the shipping industry is working towards reaching the greenhouse gas emission (GHG) targets as part of the global movement to mitigate impacts of climate change. The responsibility of the Indo-Pacific region in terms of decarbonisation is enormous. The shipbuilding industry in China, South Korea, and Japan account for 94 per cent of ships made in terms of gross tonnage while India engages in the recycling of 18 percent of the world's ships in gross tonnage. Half of the world's merchant fleet is owned by Asian countries in the region. This means that the next technological development towards a carbon-neutral infrastructure for the shipping industry is expected from these countries. While this can be seen as an opportunity for the region, the immediate and long-term impacts as we develop better technology and transition to a decarbonised shipping industry can only lead to higher shipping costs that can in turn impact the lesser developed countries in the region, especially small island developing States.

Efforts to meet GHG targets have led to technological innovations in ship design, propulsion, and fuel use, requiring seafarers to adapt to new operating procedures and technologies. These changes are crucial for addressing the impacts of climate change and require updated training and education programs to equip seafarers with the necessary skills. Furthermore, the shift towards greener shipping practices underscores the importance of involving seafarers in the conversation about sustainable maritime operations. Their firsthand experience and insights can be invaluable in developing practical, effective strategies for reducing emissions without compromising safety and efficiency.

Leveraging technology for maritime industry and seafarer advancement

Rather than fear the future of shipbuilding in the midst of decarbonisation, the region can take this as an opportunity to pioneer growth and technological development. However, this should not be a burden of the industry alone. Governments need to adopt regulatory frameworks that would facilitate investments towards research and development in energy-efficient ship designs, waste reduction and emerging technologies, including for example, making alternative fuels more competitive in the market.

Emerging technologies promise to transform maritime operations, offering opportunities to enhance safety, efficiency, and environmental sustainability. Autonomous vessels, for instance, could reduce human error, a leading cause of maritime accidents. However, the shift towards automation also raises concerns about job displacement and the need for re-skilling the workforce. Similarly, digitalisation and data analytics can improve decision-making and operational transparency but require robust cybersecurity measures to protect sensitive information. Other examples of cutting-edge technologies include Artificial Intelligence (AI) for predictive maintenance; Internet of Things (IoT) devices that are embedded with sensors, software and network connectivity for real-time health monitoring; and blockchain for transparent and secure documentation can significantly improve mariner safety and operational efficiency. The successful integration of these technologies hinges on addressing ethical considerations, ensuring data privacy and developing standards that safeguard the interests of all stakeholders. On the part of the seafarers, having additional skills will improve the economic value of the labour force that can be used to advance their rights in contract negotiations and collective bargaining.

A regional approach to maritime development and seafarer rights protection

One of the primary hindrances to regional development in the seafaring industry is the lack of a unified maritime governance or direction for the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific lacks a universally accepted definition and remains a comprising multiple institutions addressing different maritime security and safety issues, with seafarers

rights being a very small part of it.

There have been some initiatives in consolidating the efforts of various parts of the region towards a holistic approach to maritime safety and security. A regulatory body that would encompass more than 30 countries is pipe dream, but there are other approaches that may prove to be practical. The most recent is the proposal to establish a Maritime Governance Centre of Excellence by the Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the United States). While this proposal remains to be supported at the higher levels of government, the intention of having a hub for knowledge and action is an approach that merits further consideration.

Another approach could be a region-wide industry-led forum, where the focus is on scientific research, technological development, and intellectual property and hence will attract educational institutions, seafarer training centres, as well as investors and financial bodies. An industry-led mechanism could also minimise any political biases and agenda that affect most decisions of existing regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific.

Non-governmental levels of support through advocacy groups and seafarer federations and unions also play a crucial role in advancing mariner safety and welfare. A possible approach in this regard is encouraging institutions such as the ITF Seafarers, Mission to Seafarers, and other similar organisations to establish more offices around the Indo-Pacific, particularly in major flag States and seafaring States. Such organisations can also assist countries to review policy and legislation so they are consistent with international obligations and promote uniform labour standards for seafarers in the region.

Lastly, the region may benefit from a review of its broader sustainable development policies towards the inclusion of seafarer safety and well-being as one of its goals. Most of the existing organisations in the region, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) promote the welfare of people and communities dependent on coastal and ocean resources; however, none of them have specifically included the seafaring industry, whether coastal or ocean-going, in their development policies. There is scope for the integration of seafarers welfare, together with scientific research and technological advancement in the seafaring industry as an additional element in a region-wide approach to sustainability, integration ocean management, as well as the blue economy (economic activities associated with the ocean) in the Indo-Pacific. The IORA, for example has been a

proponent of the Blue Economy since 2015. IORA's Blue Economy framework espouses the creation of job opportunities and improvement of 'blue' skills, both of which can be achieved in the seafaring industry. However it is also clear that some of these goals cannot be achieved without improving the current employment situation of workers, including that of seafarers.

Reflecting on the future of maritime supply chains and seafarers in the Indo-Pacific, it is clear that the region stands at a crossroads. The path chosen will not only determine the efficiency and resilience of global trade but also the well-being of those who navigate these critical sea lanes. By adopting innovative practices, placing mariner welfare at the forefront, and cultivating regional collaboration, the maritime sector can navigate toward a future that is both sustainable, equitable, and resilient. This strategy will safeguard Indo-Pacific seas' prosperity, security, and seafarer safety, guiding them through calmer and more welcoming waters.

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Image: Seafarers on the "Kalimantan Palm", 2020. Credit: ILO/Flickr.

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