

Escorting the IMO's convoy

Efthimios Mitropoulos keeps the zig in the IMO's zag. As he tells *Fairplay* what lies ahead in bunkering and fuels, the SG expresses anger about outside attacks 'that put in doubt the credibility of this organisation'



By Andrew Lansdale
Markets Editor

The convoy system still exists – or a parody of it. The system was introduced to prevent merchant ships falling prey to outside threats. The ships stuck together under the command of a commodore, invariably a merchant navy master mariner.

The lines of ships zigzagged in harmony toward their destination. They threaded their way through narrow straits and waters littered with mines.

It was the commodore's job to keep all the ships on the same course while the whole fleet kept to the speed of the slowest vessel.

The modern version of that system is

on land, with headquarters on London's River Thames. But it does have the equivalent of 167 ships. It is the International Maritime Organization, the United Nations agency with 167 countries represented.

The commodore of this convoy until 2012 is the IMO secretary-general, Efthimios Mitropoulos. He similarly navigates a tricky course through international minefields. And as he told *Fairplay* last week: "I was a navigator, and a very successful one."

The SG, as he is known at the IMO, started his career as a seafarer, unlike his predecessor William O'Neil, who came from a civil engineering background.

The SG graduated from the Aspropyrgos Merchant Marine Academy in Greece and joined his first ship, the tanker *North Lord* in 1959.

After passing his second mate's exam,

he continued as a ship's officer until joining the Greek coastguards. He rose through the ranks, on the way becoming the harbourmaster in Corfu. From then on, the task was navigating a desk at the ministry, being seconded to the IMO and finally being appointed SG.

Since he has been in the IMO's most senior position, the whole convoy has speeded up.

Speedy steps taken on security

After the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, the International Ship & Port Security Code was drawn up and introduced in record time. And the STCW was also brought to adoption quickly. But speed does not always guarantee advantages.

A ballast water proposal is a case in point. The SG made reference to it when he spoke about planning the revision of Annex VI to MARPOL, the bunkering conundrum: "We wanted not to repeat the mistake we made when we adopted the ballast water management convention in 2004.

"We were overambitious in (1) the convention coming into force within a certain period of time, which has not happened; and in (2) introducing a requirement, which then we found out we could not implement because the technology was not there."

Mitropoulos pointed to the sofas around a low table in his temporary office in Victoria Street: "Over there, before the MEPC-57 meeting, I had informal but intense consultations with all segments of the industry."

These included shipowners and oil industry representatives, who were briefed on the decision that was likely to be reached at the MEPC meeting.

"Their reactions were positive, and

“ We do not act under threat, we do not act under pressure. **We act because we are responsible** ”

Efthimios Mitropoulos

1939: Born Piraeus 30 May

1959: Graduated from Aspropyrgos Merchant Marine Academy

1959: Joined tanker *North Lord* as cadet

1959-62: Worked up to chief officer

1962-4: Entered Hellenic Coastguard Academy

1964-79: Commissioned coastguards officer (retired as rear admiral)

1979: Joined the IMO in the maritime safety division

1992: Appointed director of maritime safety

2000: Appointed assistant secretary-general

2003: Appointed SG from 2004

Married: Chantal (née Byvoet) from the Netherlands

Children: Elias and Athina, born in the UK

Lives: In Kensington, West London

Interests: Swimming, diving, fishing, football, classical and other music and reading – in particular, naval history



Photo: IMO

since the decisions were made, they have all come openly to praise IMO for what has happened,” Mitropoulos declared.

He drew out a letter from the file. “This is what the Oil Companies International Marine Forum had to say: ‘Any change from a significant amount of residual fuel to distillate on a particular day in the short term would have an impact on the fuel market that is without precedent. In order to create a market for distillate fuel, any changes need to be gradual and aligned with supply on a geographical basis so as not to create a global crisis in the supply chain.’

“This is something that these decisions have respected,” the IMO boss told *Fairplay*. He was obviously pleased with the outcome of the meeting and described the decision as one that followed his guidelines: practical, realistic, pragmatic, workable and cost effective.

Others appear to be equally pleased. Spyros Polemis, chairman of the International Chamber of Shipping, touched on these talks at the DNV UK Maritime Forum last week.

“The agreement represented one of the IMO’s finest moments – not only for the governments involved, who would be able to ensure the protection of the health of their citizens, but also for IMO’s system of international regulation, which was so important to the industry,” he told delegates.

“Assuming that the deal is confirmed by the IMO nations in October, the ICS earnestly hopes that this will be enough

Main men out

Among the 167 countries represented in the IMO, these major flags have not ratified the Kyoto accords:

- Panama
- Liberia
- Bermuda
- Bahamas
- Antigua & Barbuda
- Marshall Islands
- Singapore
- China

to satisfy the politicians – especially those in North America and in Europe – that there is no need for unilateral regulations at variance with the IMO regime,” he added.

Such unilateral threats do upset Mitropoulos. “Well-meant – but not properly substantiated or well-founded – efforts might end with dividing the IMO members,” he warned *Fairplay*.

And it was here that the secretary-general put on his commodore’s hat: “It is my prime responsibility to keep the members united.

“When the members are united, they make decisions by consensus, which is what an industry as international in character as shipping needs more than anything else. And this is what makes me angry: when the good work of this organisation is not recognised to its full extent and when people show that they do not believe in the IMO being able to deliver. When I hear these threats, ‘If IMO does not act, we will act’, that is what makes me angry. When there are statements that put in doubt the credibility of this organisation.”

Mitropoulos confers (above) with former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

The SG went on: “We do not act under threat, we do not act under pressure. We act because we are responsible and we honour our position and we want to move forward the maritime agenda.”

He holds that IMO has gone a long way to reducing ship-sourced pollution. In 1990, the Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Pollution reported that ships were responsible for just 12% of marine pollution. That is thought to have been cut since GESAMP’s report to less than 10%.

The number of oil spills has been reduced by more than 85% since 1970. The quantity of oil spilled has been cut by close to 95% in the same period.

Ships v planes: it’s not even close

Air transport requires 2kW of energy to carry one tonne of cargo 1km; a box ship requires 0.026kW. Carbon emissions are also considerably less. In terms of grams per tonne/km, air freight emits 540, a truck 50 – and a cargo ship larger than 8,000dwt produces just 15.

Mitropoulos is dismissive of other UN bodies that favour allying IMO measures to the Kyoto protocols.

Some have asserted that there is a conflict between what the IMO is doing and that agreement.

Mitropoulos pointed out that if the IMO provisions applied only to the 40 countries that had ratified Kyoto, major flag countries would be among the three-quarters of the membership excluded (see box, left) – a wholly unsupportable situation.

And what of the future? Mitropoulos is passionate about training. He looks with pride at the World Maritime University in Malmo and the International Maritime Law Institute in Valetta on Malta.

He pointed out that according to a report from the Baltic & International Maritime Council, by 2015 there will be a shortage of 27,000 ships’ officers.

So the SG plans increasingly to concentrate on how to encourage young people to make a career of the sea.

Since he spent so many years as commodore, successfully guiding his fleet through turbulent times in safety, perhaps this uphill task will not be beyond his hopes and expectations. ■