Industry action in support of stringent maritime governance: Accountability playbook

NOVEMBER 2026

1. Safer, more responsible shipping

In October 2025, a group of industry leaders came together at the Global Maritime Forum Annual Summit to discuss concerns about the spread of dangerous and illegal practices by a growing parallel fleet, the exploitation of gaps in the international governance system, and lax enforcement at the national level. Recognising that these issues merit deeper attention, the group agreed to form a maritime governance task force under the auspices of the Global Maritime Forum. The task force intends to identify governance and enforcement gaps and explore how the industry, governments, and other actors can strengthen maritime governance, including where policy or regulatory action is needed. The end goal is an international framework that protects seafarers, safeguards the marine environment, and ensures that all ships operating in international trade meet required vessel and management standards and employ safe sailing practices.

The task force will work with states that constructively engage at the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and will propose and support concrete policy options within existing and emerging international frameworks. It will also encourage all flag, port, and coastal states to support these policies and prioritise their effective enforcement.

Over the past year, the maritime governance task force has also developed an initial set of voluntary, practical recommendations that could help make shipping safer, more environmentally responsible, more transparent, and better self-governed, while supporting more stringent regulation and enforcement.

The focus is not on where a vessel comes from, who owns it, what cargo it carries, or where it trades, provided those activities are lawful. Instead, the task force is interested in identifying and addressing practices that pose risks to vessels and crews, cargoes, coastal communities, and the marine environment, and ultimately undermine confidence in the rules that underpin global maritime trade.

Recent geopolitical developments have put a spotlight on vessels often described as the "shadow" or "dark" fleet. But these terms mean different things in different places and often reflect sanctions regimes or geopolitical perspectives that are not shared globally. Rather than seeking to determine which vessels belong in a particular category, the task force focuses on the behaviours and governance gaps themselves. Fraudulent registration, deceptive vessel identities, unjustified disabling or manipulation of automated identification system (AIS) signals, inadequate insurance, unsafe operating practices, and poor treatment of seafarers are concerns regardless of where a vessel is owned or what lawful trade it is engaged in.

Based on input from the task force, a series of workshops, and extensive one-on-one interviews, the Global Maritime Forum compiled four categories of voluntary best practices and practical recommendations for safer, more responsible shipping, as well as key principles that responsible actors across the value chain can consider in their operations.[1]

1 The recommendations and guidance set out in this playbook are voluntary in nature and are intended to be considered and implemented independently by each actor, based on its own assessment and in accordance with applicable law, including competition law. Nothing in this playbook should be construed as prescribing or coordinating the commercial conduct of competing market participants, facilitating the exchange of commercially sensitive information, or encouraging any form of collective refusal to deal.

2. Recommended key principles for responsible actors

Keep the **safety and well-being of seafarers** at the core of business decisions and operational practices, including by providing confidential channels to raise concerns and using reported issues and incidents to drive learning and corrective improvement.

Engage with and publicly support **stronger maritime governance** expectations, effective enforcement, and stronger implementation of internationally agreed standards through established global frameworks, particularly the IMO.

Promote **transparency and responsible data sharing** across operations and legitimate industry initiatives to support safety, compliance, and governance objectives, ensuring that relevant information reaches appropriate actors who can identify risks, verify compliance, strengthen accountability, and improve industry practices.

Proactively **adopt and responsibly use technologies**, digital tools, and data-driven solutions, and make data publicly available where appropriate, to improve transparency, verification, risk detection, compliance, and enforcement, while ensuring appropriate oversight and accountability for their use.

3. Voluntary best practices and practical recommendations

3.1. Know who you are doing business with

Responsible actors understand who they are dealing with, identify relevant risks, and apply greater scrutiny where circumstances warrant it.

Segment	Recommendation
Shipowners	Maintain and disclose accurate records of vessel ownership, beneficial ownership, flag and class history, AIS integrity, Port State Control (PSC) performance, insurance, and relevant trading history to competent authorities and regulatory bodies.
	Conduct independent, risk-based due diligence and know-your-customer (KYC) checks on all parties and cargo, with enhanced checks where identified risk factors warrant them, such as higher-risk activity or opaque ownership structures.
Charterers / Cargo owners	Publish own governance due diligence expectations for vessel selection and report annually on governance-related indicators.
Ship management	Independently treat repeated or high-risk changes of flag, ownership, or management as risk indicators that may warrant enhanced due diligence.
Marine insurance	Apply independent risk-based KYC checks and due diligence covering registered ownership and beneficial ownership, vessel history, trading patterns, and relevant counterparties, with enhanced checks when warranted.
Ship finance and leasing	Use accurate vessel-tracking systems and alerts to independently monitor financed and/or leased vessels for risks, ensuring that any information gathered is used solely for internal risk management purposes.

3.2. Know the vessel and who stands behind it

Responsible actors are able to establish that the vessel, its flag, and the institutions providing critical services are legitimate and credible.

Segment	Recommendation
Shipowners	Prioritise legitimate, high-performing flag states when selecting a registry, drawing on independent assessments such as the Paris and Tokyo MoU performance lists, alongside applicable international standards and IMO audit findings.
	Independently select reputable, high-performing classification societies and marine insurers, such as members of the International Association of Classification Societies (IACS) or the International Group of P&I Clubs, or providers that can demonstrate equivalent standards of governance, competence, independence, financial strength, and operational performance.
Charterers / Cargo owners	Support the wider adoption of registry information-sharing mechanisms to improve verification of flag history and identify suspicious flag changes, enabling each actor to make informed and independent vessel-vetting decisions.
Classification societies	Provide classification services only to vessels registered with flag states meeting international governance and performance criteria, including IMO recognition and acceptable PSC standing.
Marine insurance	Verify compulsory insurance and financial security with reputable and appropriate providers as part of vessel registration due diligence, including independent cross-checking of insurance records when appropriate.

3.3. Set clear expectations and create consequences

Good governance depends on clear expectations backed by contracts, applicable standards, and appropriate consequences when those expectations are not met, especially where seafarers' lives or welfare may be compromised.

Segment	Recommendation
Shipowners	Conduct thorough due diligence across crewing agencies, recruitment channels, employment contracts, and vessel operations to identify and address exploitative crewing practices, modern slavery, forced labour, and human trafficking.
Charterers / Cargo owners	Independently establish and apply clear vessel-selection criteria that exclude vessels operating under fraudulent registries or otherwise failing to meet applicable legal and safety requirements, with enhanced due diligence for unverified or repeatedly non-compliant registries.
Charterers / Cargo owners, Ship finance and leasing	Independently consider the inclusion of contractual provisions that establish information, compliance, and remedial obligations, including the ability to terminate or withdraw services when serious deceptive or non-compliant practices are independently identified.
Ship management	Implement robust planned maintenance, vetting, inspection, and deficiency-remediation procedures in line with applicable statutory requirements and recognised industry management and vetting frameworks.
Classification societies	Maintain transparent, objective, and non-discriminatory admission procedures for societies seeking IACS membership, including appropriate audit mechanisms for vessels both under construction and in service.

3.4. Take responsibility across the vessel life cycle

Responsible governance extends beyond a vessel's operational life to include responsible sale and retirement, and support of safe end-of-life pathways.

Segment	Recommendation
Shipowners	Independently conduct risk-based downstream due diligence when selling vessels, including on the buyer, the intended use of the vessel, and its eventual recycling pathway.
All segments	Independently support safe and legally compliant pathways for vessel retirement and/or scrapping as well as the responsible recycling of high-risk, sanctioned, abandoned, or otherwise restricted vessels at facilities that meet established international safety and environmental standards.

4. Next steps

This playbook is a starting point, not a normative standard. While it provides useful guidance for industry action and a concrete set of recommendations that companies can take to help close governance gaps, it is not intended to serve as a final list of recommendations.

The maritime governance task force will engage with leaders from across the maritime value chain to identify what is already working, what could be taken further, where the real barriers are, and where industry or public-private action could make a difference.

These ideas will be further developed and deepened through continuous engagement with stakeholders across the maritime value chain, who will be actively included in upcoming events, workshops, and outputs. The task force especially seeks to expand the scope of involved segments, such as ports and ship registries, including through industry associations.

Although industry action is a crucial element in improving global maritime governance, it is not sufficient to close governance gaps on its own. The task force recognises the need for more stringent governance and enforcement and therefore intends to actively engage policymakers and regulators to bridge the gap between best practices, global standards, and regulation, notably from port and flag states.

This effort will only make a true difference with broad support. If you are interested in joining the task force or simply learning more, please contact the Global Maritime Forum.