

THE ASIAN VOICE: CLEARER AND STRONGER

An open letter from S.S. Teo, Chairman of the Singapore Maritime Foundation

Two recent events in the maritime sector show that real progress is being made in efforts to encourage a stronger, more unified voice for shipping and maritime companies from the Asia region.

The first has been the setting up of a permanent secretariat for the Asian Shipowners Forum (ASF), an association representing Asian ship owners' interests, in Singapore. The work of the ASF is important for Asian ship owners because it is a vibrant forum in which the owners' views can be heard. Via its five standing committees – which deal with shipping economics, insurance and liability, recycling, seafarers, and safe navigation & the environment – Asian owners have formulated common viewpoints on these pressing issues which affect the global industry.

Now the permanent secretariat, which has a full-time secretary general and support staff, can carry this work one step further and assist in shaping policy issues which reflect the Asian position, and that law and policy makers in the West can hear and understand.

The second major development came more recently when it was announced that Japan is aiming to form a non-governmental organisation to represent the interests of Asian shipbuilders at the International Maritime Organization (IMO). In an initiative spearheaded by the Japan Ship Technology Research Association, the Asian Shipbuilders Experts Forum (ASEF) aims to establish an NGO to put forward the interests of shipbuilders in the region at the IMO by 2011. At present only European shipbuilders are represented at the IMO via the Community of European Shipyards Associations.



An NGO for Asian shipbuilders is necessary to put forward the views of the world's largest shipbuilding nations on issues such as goal-based standards, ship recycling, air pollution and ballast water treatment systems. The decisions made by IMO in all these areas have an important impact on Asian shipbuilders.

It is early days for both initiatives but they are important as they can help Asia show its leadership qualities and make its voice heard.

While many Asian governments play an increasingly important part at IMO and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Asian maritime industry as a whole does not articulate its position clearly enough at present in many global maritime regulatory discussions. This is a dangerous absence at a time when countries or regions pursue national or regional regulations, which are contrary to the one developed internationally by the IMO.

A current example of an issue that is crucial to all international shipowners is the discussion at IMO

about climate change and air emissions. In this debate, it is vital that Asian ship owners' associations – especially via the ASF – give their views to international bodies which in turn can put forward a coherent position on behalf of the global industry.

Other issues currently being debated include regulations for the marine environment, ballast water management and ship recycling. The regulations introduced as a result can and will have a profound effect on the operation of international shipping.

These are just some of many crucial international topics on which it will be

vital for the Asian industry to be engaged if there is to be a balance between the maintenance of the maritime industry's prosperity with society's demands. Others include, for example: manning, the criminalisation of seafarers and piracy – issues of great relevance to the region and to the industry as a whole.

It is essential the Asian industry has an opinion on these subjects and also takes part in the debate and after that debate, is able to put forward one coherent and strong voice.

That is why events such as the Sea Asia conference, which takes the whole issue of the Asian voice of world shipping as its cornerstone discussion, are so important. Sea Asia 2009 takes place in Singapore next April and its theme is the "Asian Voice of World Shipping: Clearer and Stronger". It must be hoped that for the sake of the global shipping industry, this voice will become both clearer and stronger in the years to come.

S.S. Teo