ARCTIC MARINE TRANSPORT: NAVIGATION ISSUES

Captain J. Ashley Roach, JAGC, US Navy (ret.)¹

Abstract

This paper summarizes the current efforts by the Arctic littoral States and the international community working together to address the needs for safe navigation before commercial shipping through the Arctic becomes feasible. Consideration is given particularly to the results of the recently concluded Arctic Council meeting and the International Maritime Organization’s Maritime Safety Committee meeting to be held the week following the conference. The paper has been updated to include developments through December 2009.

Let me begin by noting that consideration of these issues is timely now before commercial navigation becomes a reality. The recently released Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment² has made a major contribution to identifying the steps that are needed to ensure the safety, security and environmental protection of the Arctic Ocean, the Arctic people and the Arctic environment. It will take some time to achieve agreement on the details of implementing those steps, and even more time to put them in place. As the Assessment properly points out, these issues are not just of concern to Canada and the United States. These issues are of concern to all five States bordering on the Arctic Ocean, the other states in the high north,³ and flag States whose ships might wish to ply these waters when they become suitable for commercial navigation.⁴

² http://arcticportal.org/pame/amss
The Assessment makes a number of recommendations in three broad and inter-related themes: Enhancing Arctic Marine Safety, Protecting Arctic People and the Arctic Environment, and Building Arctic Marine Infrastructure.

Recognizing that the Arctic Council Ministers have approved the Assessment, including its many recommendations, this paper will indicate the current state of action on those recommendations relating to navigation that are within the remit of the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

I. Enhancing Arctic Marine Safety

A. Linking with International Organizations

The first recommendation is that “the Arctic States decide to, on a case by case basis, identify areas of common interest and develop unified positions and approaches with respect to international organizations such as” the IMO (as well as the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO), World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the International Mobile Satellite Organization (IMSO)), in order “to advance the safety of Arctic marine shipping; and encourage meetings, as appropriate, of member state national maritime safety organizations to coordinate, harmonize and enhance the implementation of the Arctic maritime regulatory framework.”

This recommendation reinforces the current practice of the Arctic States. This recommendation will certainly continue to be implemented as a matter of good governance.