

Beyond the Polar Code: Enhancing Seafarer Safety along the Northern Sea Route

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Climate change has led to dramatic reductions in sea ice coverage in the Arctic, which in turn made shipping in the Arctic Ocean a reality. Also Antarctic marine tourism is increasingly relevant. At the same time, maritime travel in the Arctic and Antarctic oceans remains dangerous. On 1 January 2017, the Polar Code entered into force. In addition to numerous technical aspects, it also contains rules which address the so called “human factor” in shipping.

The overwhelming part of the Polar Code is technical in nature. In addition to providing a “Polar Water Operation Manual”, the Polar Code deals with issues such as the prevention of pollution, the vessel’s structure, stability and integrity. Other technical aspects include communications and machinery installations. But the Polar Code also deals with issues at the crossroads of technology and human behavior, with particular attention to the dangers encountered in Polar waters. This includes issues such as Fire Safety, Navigational Safety and other technology or measures related to Safety but also Voyage Planning, which is particularly relevant in waters where it is likely to encounter sea ice and / or icebergs.

In order to identify this human dimension, it is necessary to start by looking at the Polar Code as a whole. The human dimension of the Polar Code which should not be underestimated – even though its place in the structure of the Polar Code (in the last chapters of parts I-A and I-B respectively) can create the impression that the provisions on manning and training might have been somewhat of an afterthought. This was not the case, but it becomes evident when reading the provisions of the Polar Code that manning and training are perceived through the lens of the technical aspects of shipping.

In this presentation, the question is addressed how this human dimension of the Polar Code looks like, which regulatory approaches have been used and how innovative the Polar Code actually is in this regard. Particular attention will be given to the question of seafarer training and the parallels between the Polar Code and existing international norms. It will be shown that more attention ought to be placed on human aspects of shipping.

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