The cause of the collision and devastating fire, in January 2018, that led to the tragic loss of the Panama flag (and Iranian owned) tanker ‘Sanchi’ and its 32 crew, in waters between China and Japan, is currently unknown. But this terrible incident serves as a stark reminder that there is always a risk associated with seafaring that can certainly be greatly mitigated but unfortunately not entirely eliminated.

A central function of ICS’s Marine Department is to engage on behalf of the global industry in the detailed work of IMO’s technical committees. These meet in almost continuous session throughout the year as IMO Member States seek to further improve maritime safety. This includes the important work of the IMO Sub-Committee on Navigation, Communications and Search and Rescue (NCSR).

IMO’s work on navigational safety is currently focused on three thematic priorities: digitalization of information exchange, modernisation of communications and the standardisation of bridge equipment.

Much effort is being made by IMO Member States to develop new standards and guidance for the digitalization of information exchange between ships and between ship and shore, with the intention of ensuring that Masters and bridge teams have access to digital maritime services that will provide additional information which is reliable and easily assimilated into navigational decision making. This also includes work at the International Association of Marine Aids to Navigation and Lighthouse Authorities (IALA) and at the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO).

IMO work on the standardisation of bridge equipment has emerged from experience with the entry into force of the IMO carriage requirement for electronic chart display and information systems (ECDIS). During 2017, under the leadership of Australia and the Republic of Korea, draft guidelines for standardised display (S-Mode) were developed which were considered by the NCSR Sub-Committee in February 2018. With the support of manufacturers, these guidelines should enhance the standardisation of user interfaces and recognition of key functions, making ECDIS familiarisation in accordance with the STCW Convention and the ISM Code a more efficient process.

The support for the IMO guidelines offered by the manufacturers they affect is a welcome sign of positive intentions. However, ICS is still unconvinced that non-mandatory requirements for standardisation will be sufficient to respond to the needs of Masters and bridge teams.
Navigational Safety

May 2018. While not an issue exclusively related to navigational safety, the law of diminishing returns suggests that the effort required to achieve further marginal improvements will need to be significant. The question is whether the thematic priorities of current work will make a tangible contribution to enhancing maritime safety.

Ship routeing and reporting measures are a continuous element of navigational safety work at IMO. ICS remains an active participant in the consideration of new and amended measures for ship's routeing. Increasingly, however, this work now involves the challenge of balancing protection of the marine environment and wildlife, with optimum safety and freedom of navigation. ICS is committed to ensuring that all proposals for new measures are objectively assessed based on the evidence provided, and that they genuinely optimise solutions for protection of the marine environment and the safety of navigation.

Meanwhile, in June 2017, the IMO Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) agreed to a major regulatory scoping exercise to accommodate the expected development of Maritime Autonomous Surface Ships (MASS). This work will begin in May 2018. While not an issue exclusively related to navigational safety, it is expected that navigation and collision avoidance will be activities where autonomous systems are applied first.

ICS does not currently agree with the ambitious timescales for adoption of MASS expressed by some IMO Member States. Instead ICS believes that autonomous systems on board ships will be adopted, but at a more conservative rate driven by the operational and commercial needs of shipowners. Consequently, ICS will attempt to guide the IMO discussion towards ensuring that the work comprehensively addresses the process of change that the adoption of autonomous systems represents, rather than simply providing for specific types of autonomous vessel.

Indeed, the consensus within ICS is that automated systems already present challenges with respect to the knowledge and skills required to manage and operate them safely and effectively. ICS will therefore seek to ensure that the regulatory framework for vessels making use of autonomous systems is sufficiently robust that it allows adoption of autonomy in the future without negative impacts on safety or pollution prevention.