Preventing Maritime Drug Smuggling: Guidance for European Ports and Trades
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1. Background

1.1 Why this matters for shipowners

Spain's position between the Americas, North Africa and the rest of Europe, combined with containerisation and dense port networks, makes the Iberian coastline a natural filter for cocaine and other narcotics entering Europe. Similar patterns are visible in Rotterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg, Gioia Tauro, Marsaxlokk and other major ports.
For shipowners, this is not just a policing problem. Narcotics on board can lead to:

- Arrest or prolonged detention of the ship
- Damage to reputation with charterers, banks and insurers
- Criminal liability for crew and, in some cases, company representatives
- Significant delay, off-hire and additional costs

This Guidance is intended to help shipowners, charterers, masters and P&I Clubs understand:

- The main patterns and methods used to move drugs through European ports
- Practical measures to reduce the risk of a ship being used as a smuggling platform
- How to react if drugs are discovered on board, consistently with IMO guidance and national practice

It is not a substitute for legal advice in a live case but aims to make prevention and cooperation more predictable.

1.2 Current trends: Spain and the wider European picture

Recent work by the International Centre against Maritime Drug Trafficking (CMCON) shows that, in European trades:

- **Cocaine in containers** is still the dominant modality. Most large seizures in Northern and Western Europe involve containerised cargoes linked to Latin American export ports.
- **High-board vessels** (bulk carriers, general cargo, livestock vessels) are increasingly used as "camouflage platforms", exploiting the difficulty and cost of intrusive inspections.

- **Narcoveleros and long-range sailboats** have re-emerged on Atlantic approaches to Spain and the Canary Islands, often with non-Spanish crews and mixed flags.
- **Last-mile depots** just outside port perimeters, on rivers or industrial estates, act as staging points for rip-on/rip-off operations before or after customs controls.
- **Low-tech methods** (magnetised canisters, swimmers, basic "parasite" devices on hulls and sea-chests) remain attractive because they blend into normal port activity and cannot all be detected without disrupting trade.

Spanish experience fits this pattern. After restrictions on unregistered high-powered semi-rigid craft (>8 m / 150 kW), traffickers shifted to longer routes and alternative platforms (ocean-going sailboats, larger high-speed craft), while still relying on Spanish and Portuguese approaches as key gateways.

1.3 Main vectors and where risk concentrates

For shipowners, the risk can be understood along four main vectors:

- **Containers**: highest volumetric risk; ideal for rip-on/rip-off contamination, concealment in legitimate cargo and seal tampering.
- **High-board vessels**: bulk, general cargo and livestock trades offer large volumes, complex stowage and fewer systematic searches.
- **Perimeter and depots**: yards, warehouses and informal depots near port boundaries are used to insert or remove narcotics around the customs "choke point".
- **Recreational craft and small vessels**: numerically fewer but relevant in specific hotspots (marinas, tourist harbours, cross-strait trades).

In parallel, certain **routes and nodes** recur in seizures and investigations (for example, export ports in Ecuador, Brazil, Colombia and Paraguay linked to Northern European and Western Mediterranean hubs). CMCON's corridor analysis and national seizure data are useful tools for identifying these higher-risk combinations of route and cargo.

1.4 A simple operational risk model

To translate this into something usable in day-to-day operations, shipowners can think in terms of a light-touch risk matrix that combines:

- **Vector risk** – the platform: container, bulk, tanker, livestock, Ro-Ro, yacht, etc.

- **Node risk** – recent or planned calls at ports repeatedly identified in CMCON and national reports as high-incidence nodes.
- **Temporal risk** – periods immediately after regulatory changes or major seizures, when traffickers are likely to change route or method.
- **Method risk** – known concealment techniques that fit the voyage and ship type (rip-on/rip-off, hull parasites, false bulkhead, depot staging, etc.).
- **Governance risk** – institutional and enforcement capacity in relevant jurisdictions, including the extent to which information-sharing under the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan is actually functioning.

The purpose is not to produce an elaborate dashboard. It is to allow the company, master and CSO/SSO to explain, in simple terms, why certain additional precautions were taken on a voyage, and to show authorities that those steps were proportionate to an identified risk.

2. Specific Loss Prevention Guidance

This section sets out practical measures. It focuses on what shipowners, charterers, masters and ports can realistically do, while keeping the ship running and aligning with internationally recognised Guidelines, including the **International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) Guidelines** for Drug Trafficking and Drug Abuse on Board Ship, and the **IMO Guidelines** for the Prevention and Suppression of the Smuggling of Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursor Chemicals on Ships Engaged in International Maritime Traffic.

2.1 Shipowners, charterers and P&I Clubs

2.1.1 Due diligence and voyage planning

- **Factor CMCON corridors into pre-fixture and pre-arrival checks.**
  Where a proposed fixture or rotation involves ports and routes repeatedly identified in CMCON or national reports as high-risk corridors, record this in the voyage file and apply enhanced measures (for example, stricter seal routines, more detailed stowage checks, pre-arrival security calls with the master).
- **Know Your Counterparty**
  Apply basic checks on new shippers, NVOCCs and freight forwarders in routes with a history of narcotics seizures. Where possible, avoid opaque chains of intermediaries and insist on accurate, complete cargo descriptions.
- **Align charterparty clauses with security practices.**
  Ensure charterparties allow the owner to take reasonable anti-smuggling measures (for example, security searches, slight delays for inspections, reporting suspicious circumstances to authorities) without being automatically exposed to off-hire or deviation claims.

2.1.2 Cargo and seal management (containers)

- Require **documented seal management procedures** for all container operations, including:
  - Recording seal numbers at loading, transhipment and discharge.
  - Immediate investigation and reporting of missing, broken or mismatched seals.
  - Random checks of seal integrity in cooperation with terminals.
- Where routes or shippers are high-risk, consider:
  - Additional high-security seals.
  - Photographic evidence of sealing and stowage for sensitive consignments.
  - Enhanced scrutiny of "plausible" cargoes frequently used to hide cocaine (e.g. fruit, timber, scrap, fertilisers).

2.1.3 Bulk, general cargo and livestock trades

- For voyages from high-risk nodes, owners and charterers should:
  - Require **pre-loading inspection reports** (including hold cleanliness, access points, and any structural anomalies).
  - Encourage the use of **ROVs or divers** where local practice and port facilities allow, particularly for ships with complex underwater structures (sea-chests, bilge keels, stabilisers).
  - Keep a clear record of the **reasons** for any additional inspection (to demonstrate proportionality and avoid claims of arbitrary interference).

2.1.4 Company procedures and training

- Include **narcotics risk** explicitly in the Company's ISM and ISPS documentation (Ship Security Plan, risk assessments, drills).
- Provide **simple, practical training** for masters and officers on:
  - Common concealment methods for their ship type.
  - Early warning signs (unexplained visitors in port, attempts to bribe crew, unusual activity near sea-chests or rudders, etc.).
  - How to react if drugs are found, iwith adherence to the IMO Guidelines.
- Make sure seafarers know that **cooperation with authorities** is supported by the Company and will not, in itself, prejudice their employment.

2.2 Terminals, port authorities and customs (from a shipowner's perspective)

Shipowners do not control ports, but they can **encourage and document** certain practices:

- **Structured information-sharing.**
  Where EUMSS Action Plan 1.1.13 and local frameworks provide for joint operations and intelligence-led inspections, owners should:
  - Share relevant vessel and cargo information with port authorities, within privacy and data-protection limits.
  - Request feedback on narcotics-related incidents involving their ships and incorporate lessons into company procedures.
- **Perimeter and depot risk.**
  Encourage port partners to look beyond the immediate terminal fence. Many rip-on/rip-off operations use nearby depots, laydown areas or riverbanks. Written

evidence that the owner has raised these concerns and cooperated with port security can be valuable if the ship is later implicated.

- **Access control to the ship.**
  Support the port facility in enforcing controlled gangway access, visitor identification and vehicle checks. Ensure the master feels empowered to refuse or delay visitors where security concerns arise, in line with the ship security plan and ISPS Code.

2.3 Masters and crew: practical shipboard measures

Within the framework of the Ship Security Plan, masters and crew should:

- **Control access to the ship.**
  Maintain a gangway watch, visitor log and ID checks. Be cautious with unscheduled visitors, suppliers or contractors, especially in high-risk ports.
- **Protect underwater and external areas.**
  As far as practicable and safe, pay attention to:
  - Sea-chests, bilge keels, rudders and other features where “parasite” devices can be attached.
  - Unusual activity alongside (boats lingering under the hull, swimmers, divers without clear identification).
  - Any ad hoc structures, magnets or cables observed during routine checks or maintenance.
- **Secure internal spaces.**
  Lock and control access to void spaces, storerooms, bosun’s stores and other areas where drugs are commonly concealed. Unexplained modifications or new “panels” should be treated with suspicion and documented.
- **Report and record.**
  Train crew to report unusual approaches, attempted bribes or suspicious packages immediately to the master. The master should record such reports in the logbook and, where appropriate, notify the Company and local authorities.

2.4 Cooperation with port States and prosecutors

When dealing with port State authorities, customs, police and prosecutors, owners and masters should:

- **Follow the IMO Guidelines (MSC.228(82)) as the baseline.**
  These Guidelines emphasise prevention, secure handling of evidence, and cooperation with competent authorities while maintaining safety and facilitating trade.
- **Nominate a clear point of contact.**
  Ensure that the master knows whom to call in the Company (DPA/CSO or designated legal contact) as soon as authorities raise a narcotics suspicion or request a search.
- **Be transparent and consistent.**
  Provide documents promptly (cargo manifests, stowage plans, crew lists, security records, CCTV logs) and avoid contradictory explanations. Transparency often reduces the risk of prolonged detention.
- **Document all interactions.**
  Keep a written record of:
  - Requests by authorities
  - Consents given (for searches, interviews, etc.)
  - Presence of witnesses during searches
  - Items seized and receipts issued

3. Other Loss Prevention Guidance

3.1 Evidence and burden: getting the basics right

In many jurisdictions, narcotics cases are built on **documentation and chain of custody**. Shipowners and masters can reduce their exposure by:

- **Distinguishing suspicion from proof.**
  Risk indicators (high-risk routes, suspicious behaviour, intelligence alerts) justify enhanced vigilance and, in some cases, searches. They do **not** replace hard evidence. Accurate records of seals, cargo handling, access control and crew movements therefore matter.
- **Maintaining chain of custody.**
  Once a suspicious package or device is found and safety is assured, the master should:
  - Minimise handling.
  - Secure the area.
  - Involve at least one independent witness (e.g. another officer).
  - Record the time, place and circumstances of the discovery.
  - Take photographs where possible.
  - Hand over the items to competent authorities against a written receipt.
- **Using treaties and formal frameworks.**
  Where questions arise about jurisdiction or "statelessness", it is generally safer for shipowners and masters to cooperate within the framework of applicable **treaties, MOUs and port State procedures**. These instruments are designed to regularise consent for boarding and searching. From a loss-prevention perspective, a file that shows reliance on clear treaty-based authority is usually more defensible than one built on informal or ambiguous arrangements.
- **Aligning internal reports with official statements.**
  Internal incident reports (ISM, ISPS, near-miss logs) should be factual and consistent with what is reported to authorities and insurers. Discrepancies can undermine credibility in subsequent proceedings.

3.2 When drugs are found on board

The **IMO Guidelines** provide a clear framework for what should happen when drugs are discovered on board a ship engaged in international maritime traffic. In practical terms, the master should:

1. **Prioritise safety.**
   Consider the risk of violence or retaliation by those involved in the smuggling. Avoid confrontation. If there is any immediate threat, focus first on protecting crew and securing assistance from the authorities.
2. **Do not improvise or dispose of the drugs.**
   Unless there is an overriding safety reason (for example, a package that appears unstable or dangerous), do **not** throw drugs overboard, conceal them, or move them unnecessarily. Such actions can compromise evidence and, in some jurisdictions, constitute an offence.
3. **Secure the scene.**
   - Restrict access to the area.
   - Place a responsible officer in charge until authorities arrive.
   - Keep a simple log of who enters and leaves the area.
4. **Preserve evidence carefully.**
   - Handle packages as little as possible.
   - Wear gloves if available.
   - Take photographs of the location and condition of the items.
   - Make a written note of the date, time, exact position and how the items were found.
5. **Report immediately.**
   - Inform the Company's designated contact.
   - Inform the relevant port or coastal State authority, in accordance with local law and any instructions in the Ship Security Plan.
   - If at sea, follow the reporting procedures agreed with flag State and coastal State authorities.
6. **Cooperate with the investigation.**
   Provide access to the area, documents and relevant crew members, in line with national law. Ensure crew are treated fairly and that they understand they are expected to tell the truth, but also that they may have legal rights in interviews.

7. **Maintain normal operations where possible.**
   While the area of discovery must be secured, it is usually preferable to keep the rest of the ship operating safely. Any operational impact (delays, deviations) should be recorded carefully for later use in claims or insurance notifications.

These steps, if followed consistently, help to protect crew, preserve evidence, and demonstrate to authorities and insurers that the ship acted responsibly and in accordance with the aforementioned internationally recognised Guidelines.

4. Conclusion

Maritime drug trafficking through European ports is persistent rather than novel. The methods evolve, but the basic pattern is stable: high-volume trades, busy ports and complex supply chains offer attractive cover for organised crime.

Shipowners cannot eliminate the risk, but they can:

- Build narcotics considerations into **routine commercial and security decisions**, rather than treating them as exceptional events.
- Use **simple, documented risk assessments** to justify proportionate extra measures on higher-risk voyages.
- Align company procedures with the **ICS and IMO Guidelines** and national practice, particularly on evidence preservation and cooperation with authorities.
- Support masters and crews with **clear instructions and training**, so that they know what to do before, during and after an incident.

Done well, this reduces the likelihood that a ship will be targeted, improves the chances of a controlled response if it is, and gives shipowners and P&I Clubs a stronger position in any subsequent legal, regulatory or insurance process.