

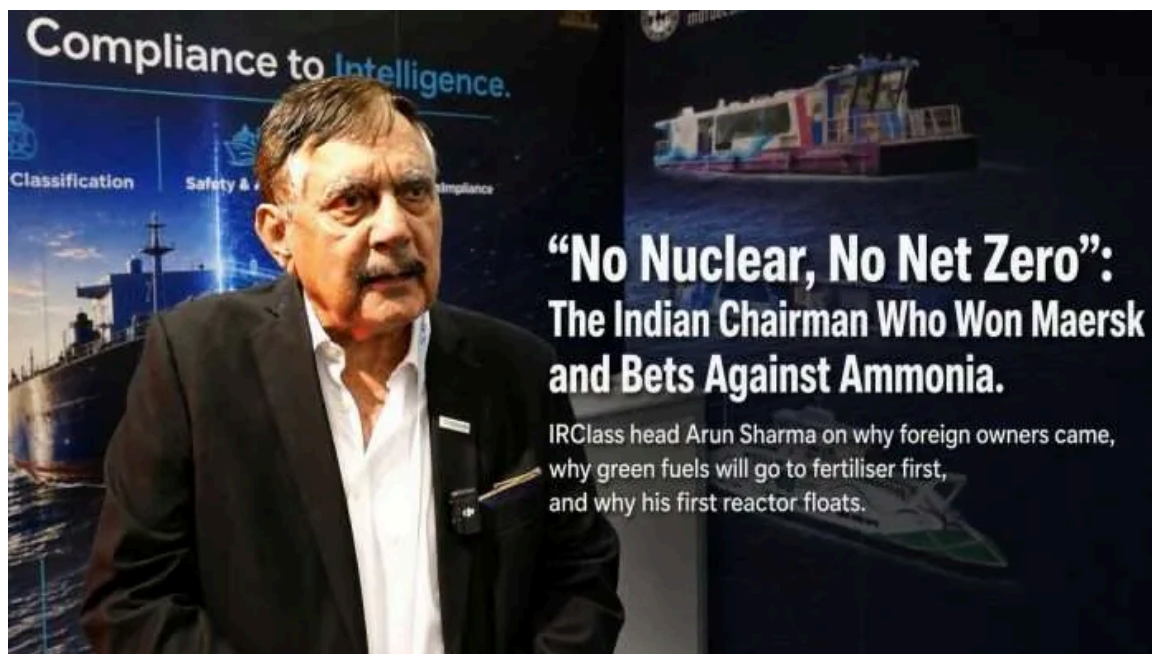
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News, Videos & Insight

"No Nuclear, No Net Zero": The Indian Chairman Who Won Maersk and Bets Against Ammonia



By **Joachim Rosenoegger** September 19, 2026



IRClass head Arun Sharma on why foreign owners came, why green fuels will go to fertiliser first, and why his first reactor floats.

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Interview and text: Joachim Rosenoegger, Maritime Innovations

TL;DR



- Under Executive Chairman Arun Sharma the IRS-classed international fleet has moved from about 10 percent foreign flag to about 60 percent; the interview started from well over 100 deliveries since January 2025 and owners such as CMA CGM and Maersk
- Sharma reframed IRS from regulator to facilitator: show owners the most competitive and fastest route to compliance instead of the rule book
- Ammonia, methanol and hydrogen: availability, scalability and supply chains are still not there; LNG and biofuels are the realistic bridge, and fossil fuels will phase out more slowly than the roadmaps assume
- AI is an assistant that removes repetitive survey work, not a replacement for surveyors
- Dual class is the growth model: single class where IRS is proven, dual class where it is not; five Indian Navy fleet support vessels are now under IRS single class
- His bet is nuclear, starting with a floating nuclear power plant in an Indian port: “No nuclear, no net zero.”

Most classification societies celebrate their age. Arun Sharma does not. The Indian Register of Shipping turned 50 last year, roughly a quarter of the age of the oldest members of IACS, and its Executive Chairman treats that as a non-issue. “You don’t have to be 200 years old to be considered a good class society,” he told Maritime Innovations. The numbers he brings to the argument are more interesting than the age: a fleet that has flipped from 90 percent Indian flag to 60 percent foreign flag, a naval order won against the established societies on both technology and price, and a nuclear programme he expects to see running in a port sooner than later.

From rule book to route map

Sharma came to IRS from commercial shipping, from ship-owning companies and operations, where class was one compliance item among many. That background shaped the first thing he changed. “Don’t just look at the owner and show him the rule book,” he said. A regulator, in his view, has to understand the difficulties of those who must comply and show them the best way to comply. Then the owner complies willingly.

He calls this the shift from regulator to facilitator, and he is candid that it required a cultural change inside the organisation, away from an “I am the boss, I regulate” posture. A number of ship-owning companies, he says, have noticed.

Why the foreign owners came

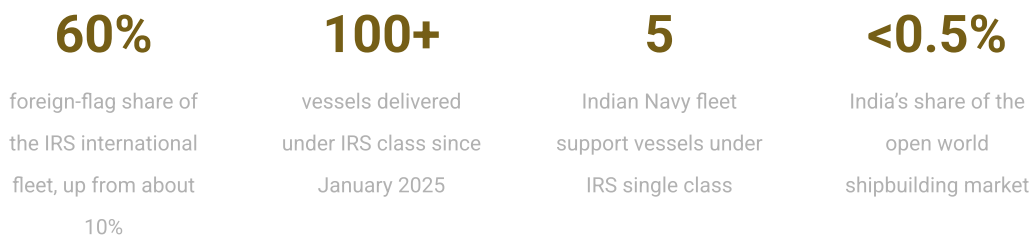
The interview started from a set of figures: well over 100 vessels delivered under IRS class since January 2025, and owners such as CMA CGM and Maersk that were not traditionally IRS customers. Sharma’s explanation has three layers.

The first is competence. IRS, he argues, now has enough qualified people to do classification at first-class level, and the industry has started to recognise that. He adds a credential from inside IACS: for the last five years he has chaired its quality committee and now its quality policy. If IACS trusts IRS to oversee quality across the association, owners can trust IRS on their ships.

The second is cost. India is a less expensive place to operate, whether that means people or the cost of undertaking jobs, and the saving reaches the owner.

The third is geopolitics, and he does not dodge it. When some vessels could no longer be classed with other societies, owners looked at IRS. IRS examined the risk profile of each case together with its legal advisers and took ships in where that risk was acceptable. Foreign owners then discovered a society that was technically competent, helpful and, in his words, does not believe in any compromises. The tipping effect followed. When he took over, the international fleet was about 10 percent foreign flag and 90 percent Indian flag. Today it is about 60 percent foreign and 40 percent Indian.

He is equally direct about the other side of that history. A substantial number of vessels later came under sanctions, and IRS declassified all of them. The fleet is still good despite loss of such vessels, he said.



Watch the full video interview with Arun Sharma: [Maritime Innovations on YouTube](#)

Alternative fuels: “We have underestimated the timelines”

On fuels Sharma is a sceptic about the calendar, not the destination. Shipping needs to move to clean energy and zero emissions, he said, but ammonia, methanol and hydrogen are still being researched and produced at very small scale. Availability, scalability and supply chains are all still not clear, and nobody guarantees that these fuels will be available for commercial shipping. That, in his reading, is exactly why owners order dual-fuel engines: conventional fuel on one side, LNG, methanol or ammonia on the other, and let time decide.

He adds a point that fuel roadmaps tend to skip. When green ammonia arrives at scale, the fertiliser industry will want it first, because fertiliser is food, and shipping will pay very high prices for what is left. The same energy problem applies to all the green variants: producing green methanol, ammonia or hydrogen takes enormous amounts of energy, and unless that energy is itself from renewable sources the emissions simply move somewhere else.

His near-term list is short: LNG, which the industry already knows how to run, and biofuels to the extent they can be scaled. Fossil fuels will be phased out slowly as the alternatives meet toxicity, availability and rule requirements. “Will it come 2030, 2040, 2050 or will it be later? Time will tell.”

AI as assistant, not as surveyor

IRS is developing AI-driven automation for structural analysis and virtual twins for lifecycle assessment. Asked what that changes for an owner, Sharma answered with unusual restraint for an executive talking about AI: the organisation is assessing the advantages and the disadvantages slowly while the world moves fast.

His use case is specific. Plan approval and surveys are repetitive. Tanks, engines, boilers on one ship, then the same on the next. For intelligent people that gets boring, and boredom is a safety issue. AI should hand the surveyor the data, the history and what has already been done, so that the human can concentrate on what is different about this ship. "AI as an assist will be very good," he said. AI replacing the surveyor he does not expect in his lifetime, because a human looks at a ship in totality, including things beyond the technical.

Dual class as the route to a shipbuilding nation

Sharma has argued publicly that Indian-built ships should be classed by IRS, with dual class for export vessels. Asked whether the ambition runs ahead of capability, he described the method that got IRS here. "Give me what I can do. I will not ask for too much which I can bite but I cannot chew."

The proof case is the Indian Navy. Roughly ten years ago the arrangement was simple: a ship type IRS had never classed would be given as dual class alongside an established society; if IRS felt confident on the next one, it could take single class. The result is an order of five fleet support vessels, complex ships with ship-to-ship fuel transfer, now under IRS single class. IRS won that, he said, on both technical capability and financials.

"You can be small but good, you could be big but not so good. I would rather be a small organisation but a quality organisation."

Arun Sharma, Executive Chairman, Indian Register of Shipping

The same logic is his proposal to the government. India's share of the open world shipbuilding market is below half a percent; Korea, Japan and China hold about 95 percent. Class societies everywhere have grown on the back of their national shipbuilding, and India is now investing in yards. His ask: take IRS along. Indian orders built in India as IRS single class where IRS can handle it, dual class where it cannot, and dual class for foreign-flag ships built in India, because that is how both the yards and the register gain experience. The Ministry has recently assured support to IRS in this regard.

The nuclear bet

The last question was a forced choice: hydrogen readiness or nuclear research, which becomes a real business within five years? Sharma did not hesitate. About three years ago, after talking to people he considered knowledgeable, IRS started working on nuclear and has been collaborating with CORE POWER, TerraPower, India's atomic energy establishment and Russian companies.

His case rests on containment and track record. New reactor designs contain risk far better than the plants people still cite when they mention Chernobyl and Fukushima, and he points to India's own civil reactors as a fleet that has operated without a single serious problem. The fear, he argued, has to be retired. Zero emissions is a no-brainer; what remains is safety and containment.

"No nuclear, no net zero, period."

Arun Sharma

His first step is not a ship. It is a floating nuclear power plant, moored in an Indian port under a single jurisdiction, supplying the port, its equipment and the adjoining city. IRS is already in discussions. Merchant ships come later, once the technology matures beyond naval vessels and icebreakers. "My bet on nuclear is more than other green fuels," he said, "and I hope I can see it while I am still around."