

Opinion

Trump and Dominguez: the art of compromise

Arsenio Dominguez faces the daunting task of finding compromise where none appears on offer



Arsenio Dominguez says he will start talking to member states about the IMO's Net-Zero Framework this week.

Photo: IMO/CC BY 4.0

Paul Peachey

TradeWinds correspondent | London

Published 28 January 2026, 15:40

It's nearly 40 years since the publication of the business book that created an image of Donald Trump as a consummate deal-maker and helped to propel him to the White House.

Trump: The Art of the Deal cemented his reputation as a successful tycoon. The success of the book led directly to his role as host and boardroom judge of the US version of the TV show *The Apprentice* and public recognition that he parlayed into ballot box success.



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IMO chief open to compromise to secure green goals

“Trump only takes two positions. Either you’re a scummy loser, liar, whatever, or you’re the greatest,” his ghostwriter, Tony Schwartz, told the New Yorker before Trump’s first run for president.

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If you want to find the polar opposite of that approach, head down to the south bank of the Thames in London and enter the building of the International Maritime Organization, a temple dedicated to the God of consensus.

Here, the 176 member states seek unanimous agreement, which requires patient diplomacy, concessions and compromise.

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Despite widespread scepticism, they managed it with the 2023 agreement to phase out greenhouse gas emissions from ships by the middle of the century.

What happens when these two approaches come together became clear last year during talks to put the framework into practice.

“The United States will NOT stand for this Global Green New Scam Tax on Shipping, and will not adhere to it in any way, shape, or form,” wrote Trump.

Despite widespread agreement from member states, the resolve crumbled after Trump’s personal interventions and the bullying tactics of negotiators, who threatened members with sanctions and visa restrictions.

European states tried to push back but were divided and defeated.

The IMO chief, Arsenio Dominguez, has given his first indications of how he would try to navigate the organisation’s way out of the mess.

He will talk to everyone, he says. Nothing is off the table. We’ll see where we are at a key meeting in April.

But how do you get a compromise when one side appears uninterested in finding one?

The size of the US-flagged fleet should limit US influence in maritime matters. But a lesson of the past year is that the Trump administration is happy to upend long-held practices and use its geopolitical heft to get what it wants.

Remarkably, the most powerful man decided to get involved in industry discussions about shipping emissions. But the world’s most famous climate

change denier at the White House has made clear that he will never back the carbon-pricing scheme that is key to the project.



Donald Trump is not a big fan of climate change science (Photo: Truth Social)

The Net-Zero Framework aims to raise \$1trn over a decade to finance climate innovation and support developing countries hardest hit by a crisis not of their making — or, as the US put it, “a giant environmental slush fund”.

This is why some industry leaders are looking at the prospect of a compromise and a framework with the financial measures taken out.

The plan would be focused on technical planning, banking on the broader support of the industry to push ahead with carbon-cutting policies. But the whole point of the process is that the transition is expensive and needs outside investment to encourage the market to innovate.

Removing a mandatory global pricing mechanism to penalise the most polluting ships will leave the scheme toothless.

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It's an unenviable tangle for Dominguez to negotiate, but the outcome will define his tenure at the organisation.

Everything is still up for consideration, he said. And he pointed out there are other issues that are contested — notably the role of LNG as a transition fuel, which mobilised Greek shipowners against the plan.

Asked directly last week where he could see the potential compromise to fix the impasse, Dominguez laughed. He said he needed to talk to the member states first.

“I don't want to be disruptive to the process,” he said.

On that front, Donald Trump got there first.