

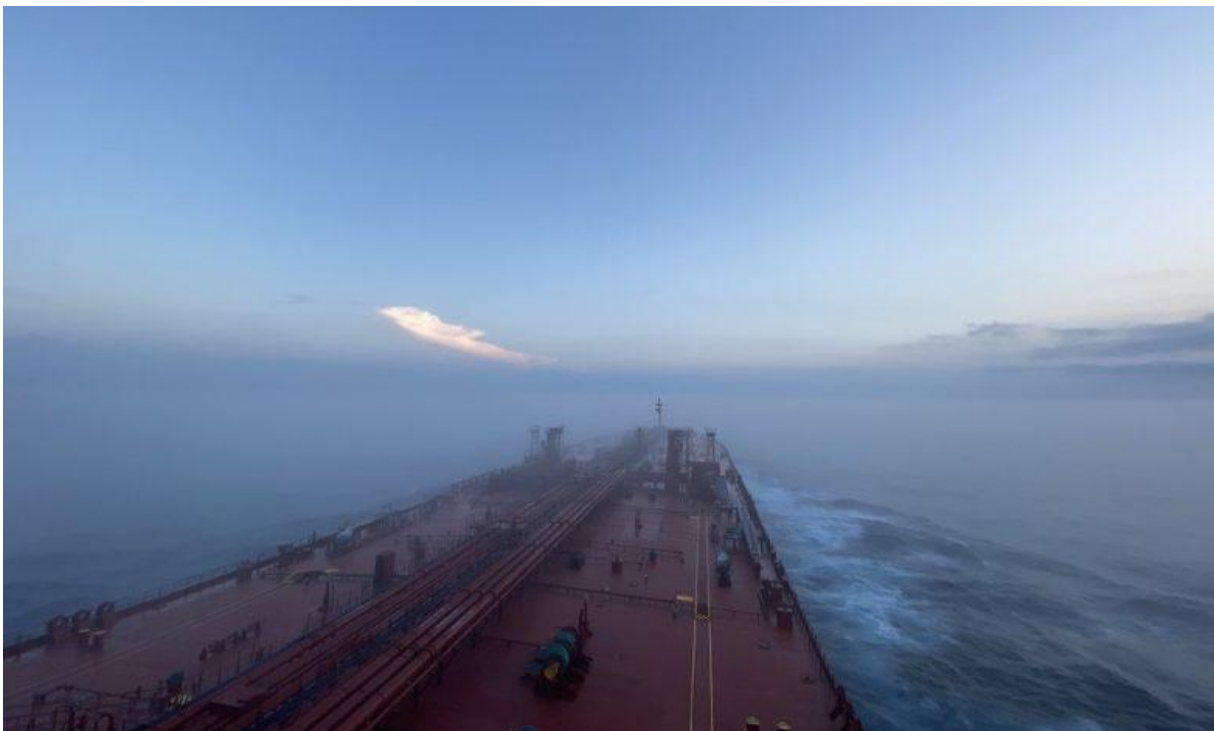
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The floating dead: oversight lags behind the rise of zombie vessels

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May 28, 2025



Maritime identity laundering and the rise of so-called zombie vessels have evolved from a niche tactic into a “systemic enabler of large-scale sanctions evasion” with global authorities unable to keep up, according to a new report from Kpler, a maritime analytics platform.

“Zombie vessels represent the bleeding edge of maritime deception – combining digital obfuscation with recycled identities to operate beyond the reach of law and oversight,” wrote Dimitris Kotsias, a market analyst, in the new Kpler report.

These ships operate under the stolen identities of vessels long since scrapped, enabling the large-scale evasion of international sanctions and posing grave risks to global maritime safety and regulation. This emerging tactic has evolved into a systemic enabler of illicit trade, with increasingly sophisticated methods of identity laundering now commonplace within the shadow fleet.

Without decisive action, identity laundering risks becoming institutionalized within global trade flows

Vessel identity laundering is a process where a ship’s real identity is hidden through the manipulation

of Automatic Identification System (AIS) signals, hijacked registration numbers, or the reuse of IMO numbers from decommissioned ships.

At the most deceptive edge of this practice lies the zombie vessel—a real ship operating under the false identity of a vessel that has already been legally dismantled. In March 2025, the sanctioned VLCC *Veronica III* began broadcasting as *DS Vector*, a tanker scrapped in 2018. By falsifying its AIS signals in the Caribbean and conducting dark ship-to-ship (STS) transfers off Venezuela, *Veronica III* successfully loaded high-sulfur fuel oil (HSFO) and masked its true origin.

This wasn't an isolated case. In April and May 2025, *Veronica III* received three HSFO cargoes from three smaller tankers ferrying oil from the El Palito and Cardon refineries in Venezuela. Satellite imagery confirmed the covert STS transfers. Similarly, the suezmax tanker *Apus* has assumed the identity of *Fresia I*, a vessel scrapped years ago, allowing it to load Venezuelan cargo under a false name.

These deceptive practices pose significant safety and environmental hazards, Kpler warned. Zombie vessels typically lack proper registration, insurance, and compliance with international safety regulations. Their outdated systems and blacked-out AIS transponders heighten the risk of maritime collisions. Furthermore, their anonymity means no clear liability in the event of oil spills or other environmental catastrophes.

Worse yet, these vessels may be mistaken as hostile in conflict zones due to their falsified signals, creating risks of accidental military engagement or detention.

The rise of zombie vessels also undermines the effectiveness of international sanctions. Grey fleet tankers commonly engage in unreported ship-to-ship (STS) transfers in international waters, rendering the tracking of sanctioned oil flows difficult, if not impossible. Kpler reports that deceptive activity—including AIS spoofing and identity laundering—has surged since 2022, directly correlating with expanded Western sanctions.

Efforts to curb these practices are underway. The US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) recently prohibited the reuse of IMO numbers from scrapped ships and increased scrutiny on identity changes. However, enforcement remains reactive and slow-moving compared to the rapid evolution of evasion tactics.

Experts suggest that only a globally coordinated response backed by advanced technology can begin to address the growing threat. Emerging tools include machine-learning systems for satellite image analysis, cross-border vessel tracking databases, and mandatory AIS integrity checks at ports.

Still, the grey fleet and the rise of zombie vessels continue to outpace regulatory capabilities with Kpler's Kotsias writing: "They highlight an urgent need for global enforcement synchronization, advanced verification technologies, and real-time maritime intelligence. As regulatory frameworks slowly adapt, the burden of detection increasingly falls on proprietary tracking tools and robust market surveillance systems ... Without decisive action, identity laundering risks becoming institutionalized within global trade flows, eroding both safety and trust at sea."

"Unknowingly transacting with zombie ships exposes banks and commodity traders to significant legal, financial, reputational, and sanctions risks. These vessels are deliberately operated to deceive and exploit the unsuspecting," warned Pole Star Global, another maritime data platform, in a recent social media posting.

Global insurer Allianz also discussed the “challenges” brought about by zombie vessels, primarily linked to Venezuelan oil trades, in its just published Safety and Shipping Review, while Windward, another maritime analytics platform, has a recent whitepaper out covering the same topic.

“Zombie vessels exploit a structural weakness in global maritime compliance: the industry’s overreliance on static identifiers like IMO numbers, vessel names, and flag registries. These data points were designed for uniqueness and permanence, but they weren’t built to withstand intentional manipulation,” Windward explained in its whitepaper, warning that identity laundering at sea is likely to increase.

“Static sanctions compliance is no longer fit for purpose. The industry must evolve to prioritize dynamic intelligence, behavioral analysis, and context-rich decision-making,” Windward urged.