Monthly barometer

TRENDS IN CONTAINER SHIPPING FREIGHT RATES

May 2026 |

upply

SHIPPING COMPANIES **UNDER PRESSURE AS PROFIT MARGINS DWINDLE**

As the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz continues to disrupt world shipping, the shipping companies are under pressure as they struggle to deal with increasing costs and stagnant freight rates. The threat of overcapacity continues to loom.

#THE SITUATION IN THE PERSIAN GULF

Iranian blockade versus American blockade. The situation in the Middle East is getting bog-ged down as the warring partners compete to get the upper hand as peace talks struggle to make progress. Confusion is the main result, while more than 10,000 seafarers and some 600 ships, including a hundred or so container carriers, are still immobilised, waiting for a solution.

On 5 May, eight members of the crew of the CMA CGM San Antonio were wounded after the vessel came under fire. The vessel continued on its route and the company immediately began rescue operations. A little earlier, it was reported that another attempt to get through the strait by the CMA CGM Saigon had succeeded without incident.

A selective blockade

On the US side, the blockade is directed at particular targets and the US presence in the strait zone itself is limited. According to calculations by some experts, there are more vessels entering the Persian Gulf than there are leaving it, which is paradoxical, given that there is a double blockade in place. Iran is still managing to get vessels out, albeit in less than optimum conditions, via its territorial waters and those of Pakistan.

Container ship movements, on the other hand, are virtually non-existent, as replacement overland routes are used instead.

Illegal toll charges paid anyway

Taking advantage of the confusion, Iran is proceeding with its plans. On 18 May, the Iranian authorities announced that they were setting up the Persian Gulf Strait Authority to take charge of management of the Strait of Hormuz. Its exact responsibilities have not been set out in detail but, according to Lloyd's List, it will have the task of regulating traffic and collecting fees from ships going through the Strait of Hormuz.

India and China have not taken up firm positions on this de facto toll regime. In the short term, the end justifies the means: the route is vital for their oil supplies. Moreover, the use of crypto currencies and payments circuits which do not use the Swift international banking system is not displeasing for China, which has made the "de-dollarisation" of the global economy a strategic objective.

Conversely, Western countries, particularly France and the United States are busy defending the right to freedom of navigation, even if commercial interests sometimes take a different, more pragmatic point of view. TotalEnergies chairman and chief executive Patrick Pouyanné argued in mid-April that a toll was preferable to a blockade, and Greek shipowner Evangelos Marinakis echoed this view a few days ago at the Posidonia shipping exhibition, saying, "For me it is better to pay a fee of $100,000 or $200,000, depending on the size of the cargo or the size of the vessel, than to have all this hassle". Many owners take the view that this solution would at least allow them to go about their business with the security assurances they need.

#MAIN DEVELOPMENTS

First quarter signals a difficult financial year to come

Shipping companies' costs are soaring and freight rates are either stagnating or falling. As a result, even with the slight increase in cargo volumes most of them are registering, the shipping companies have begun the year in difficult conditions. The post-Covid recovery of 2021–2022, followed by the Houthi attacks in late 2023, have held up freight rates for some years despite the arrival of additional shipping capacity. Have we come now to the end of the "super-cycle"? Numerous analysts seem to be incorporating this view into their analyses and financial projections, as the threat of overcapacity is compounded by economic and geopolitical uncertainty.

Results of the leading container shipping lines[1]
Q1 2026 / Q1 2025

	Revenue (M USD)	% Change	EBITDA (M USD)	% Change	Volumes (M TEUs)	% Change
Maersk	**8,178**	-8.2%	**903**	-52.5%	**6,406**	+9.3%
CMA CGM	**8,020**	-8.5%	**1,490**	-41.3%	**5,930**	+1.5%
Cosco	**7,600**	+5.5%	**nd**	nd	**6,916**	+6.7%
Hapag-Lloyd	**4,778**	-8.5%	**447**	-58.1%	**3,203**	-0.7%
ONE [2]	**4,042**	-6.3%	**719**	-7.9%	**3,195**	+4.0%

(1) Excluding MSC, which does not publish its financial results.
(2) Q4 of fiscal year 2025-2026 – Sources: companies' financial reports.

MSC fleet tops 1,000 ships mark

MSC, the world's leading container shipping company, now has more than 1,000 ships in operation. It has consolidated its position as sector leader and has an orderbook of more than 100 more vessels. A few days before topping the 1,000 mark, the group's 85-year-old founder, Gianluigi Aponte, officially transferred ownership of the group to his two children, who were already in charge operationally.

The creation of such an empire within the lifetime of a single man merits the respect of the entire shipping profession. The clouds are nevertheless gathering in a world in which the resurgence of tensions between the leading power blocs is making conditions difficult for business development. MSC is clearly not the only one in the container shipping top ten to be suffering from the proliferation of obstacles to world trade.

Difficulties accumulate for Hapag-Lloyd/ZIM merger project

According to Israeli business paper Calcalist, Chen Lichtenstein will replace Eli Glickman as president and chief executive of ZIM from 1 July. The change is being made as the company prepares to be taken over by Germany's Hapag-Lloyd and Israeli investment group FIMI. Calcalist indicates, however, that the project has run into opposition from a number of Israeli government bodies, notably the economy and agriculture ministries and the maritime transport and ports authority. Will Hapag-Lloyd stay in the running after a financially problematic first quarter? Or will we see Maersk or MSC emerge as bidders in its place? The project promises to be highly political in any case in the current state of international relations and difficult for Hapag Lloyd, a shipping company which owns only 10 ships directly, to carry off.

CMA CGM reestablishes India-Mediterranean Red Sea connection

As the now well tested route round the Cape of Good Hope becomes the norm for shipping operators trying to save on fuel by using slower speeds, CMA CGM has decided to restore the Red Sea route between India and the Mediterranean. The passage through the Suez Canal offers significant reductions in time and distance and

CMA CGM's wager is likely to succeed so long as the Houthis do not start attacking smaller ships. It will be interesting to see if other shipping companies follow CMA CGM's example in this buoyant but sensitive market. On the other hand, the return of 24,000 TEU vessels to the Red Sea route does not seem to be on the cards.

FMC dishes out heavy fines

The US Federal Maritime Commission (FMC) sent out a strong message to the market regarding its determination to carry out its primary function, namely, to protect the financial interests and access to services of US shippers. It is currently settling shippers' claims for excessive detention and demurrage charges during the post-Covid period. In the latest case, the FMC concluded an out of court settlement with Maersk, under which the shipping company agreed to pay a civil fine of USD1.9 million and issue refunds and waivers and grant exonerations to the third parties concerned.

Return of Somali piracy

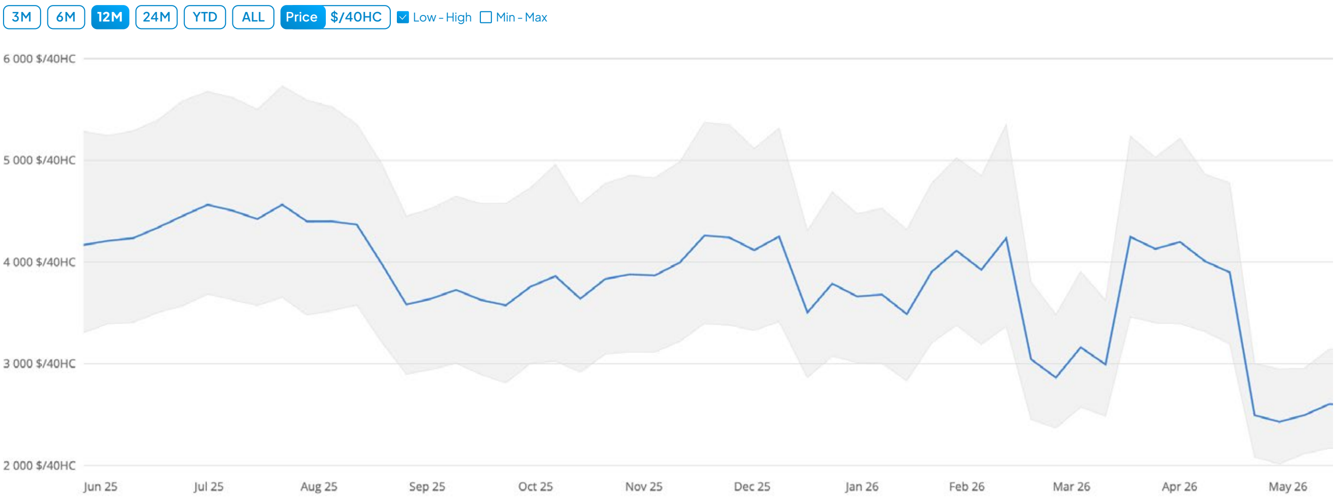
Piracy has returned off the Somali coast in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. Operation Atalanta, the European Union naval mission constituted to provide security in the region has registered 14 attacks since the start of the year, eight of them since mid-April. The UK Maritime Trade Operations Centre has assessed the threat level in the area as "severe" and is advising ships to transit the area with caution and to report any suspicious activity. The number of attacks is still a long way short of the high point registered between 2008 and 2012 but the methods used by the pirates are of the sort to provoke concern, with the use of mother-ships to enable the pirates to carry out much wider-ranging operations.
The resurgence of piracy in the region has further dampened enthusiasm for a return to the Red Sea. For the big companies, the Cape of Good Hope route remains the least bad high-volume solution between Asia and Europe.

PRICES

In this turbulent situation, the market is looking for direction. On the one hand, there is intense competition, which tends to force down freight rates in the final stages of the annual contract negotiating round. Many contracts have been left open, moreover, because of the current economic and geopolitical uncertainty. On the other hand, exceptional surcharges (for additional fuel, war risk and, in some cases, congestion costs) are boosting the final bill for shippers using the spot market and NAC quarterly rates.

ASIA / EUROPE

Shanghai - Le Havre

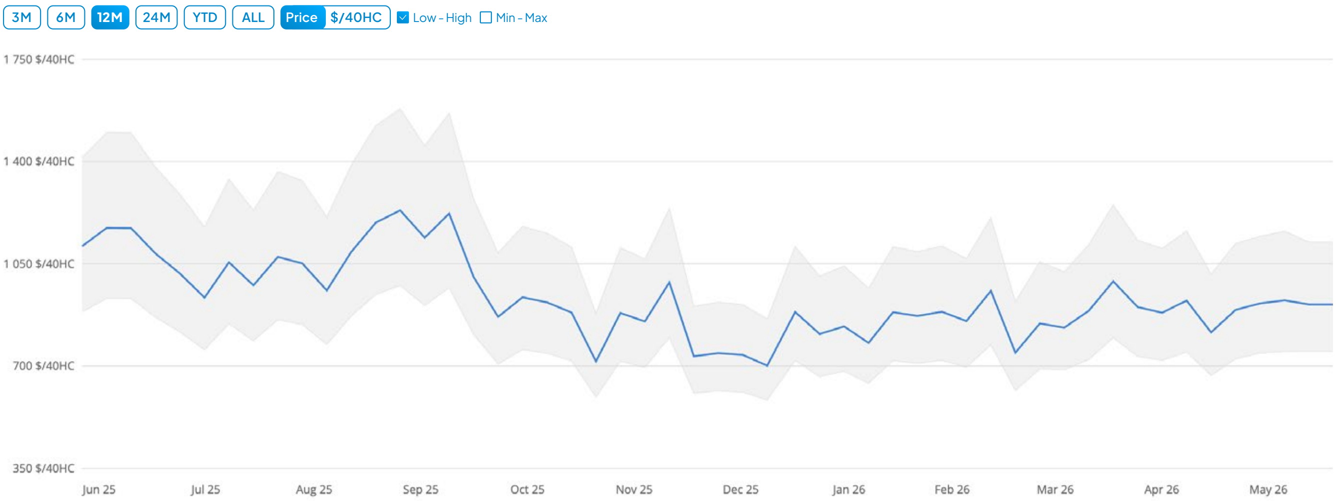


Port-to-port rates (spot and contract combined) billed for direct sailings from Shanghai to Le Havre, departure and destination port THCs included, for a 40' HC DRY container carrying dry, non-dangerous goods. NB: diagram shows median not average rates. Source | Upply

Ex-Asia, there was a slight but nevertheless clear increase in rates to North Europe, even if the shipping companies did not achieve the results they had hoped for from the general tariff increase programmes they introduced in early April. The slight increase in demand could mark the start of a peak season for Europe-bound lines but this trend has yet to be confirmed. The market recovered more strongly between Asia and the Mediterranean, thanks to control over capacity and proportionately heavier, additional operating costs.

EUROPE / ASIA

Rotterdam - Shanghai

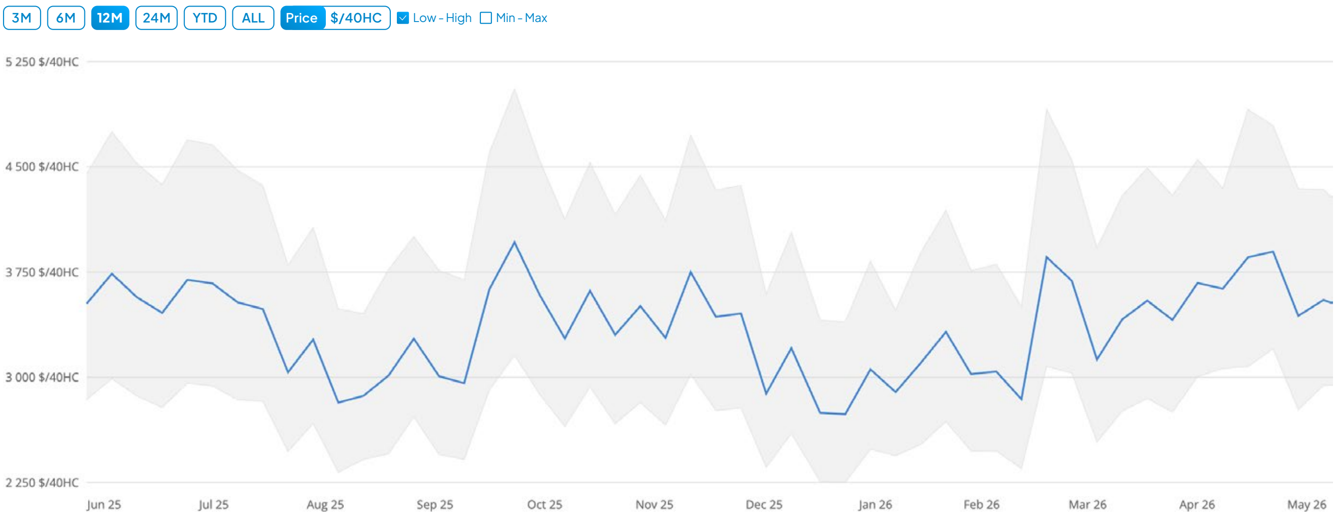


Port-to-port rates (spot and contract combined) billed for direct sailings from Rotterdam to Shanghai, departure port THCs included and destination port THCs excluded, for a 40' HC container carrying dry, non-dangerous goods. NB: diagram shows median not average rates. Source | Upply

On the Europe-Asia corridor, we see the usual flatline trend, with services deteriorating in terms of transit times and ships leaving at slow speed, half-filled with empty containers.

TRANSATLANTIC

Antwerp - New York

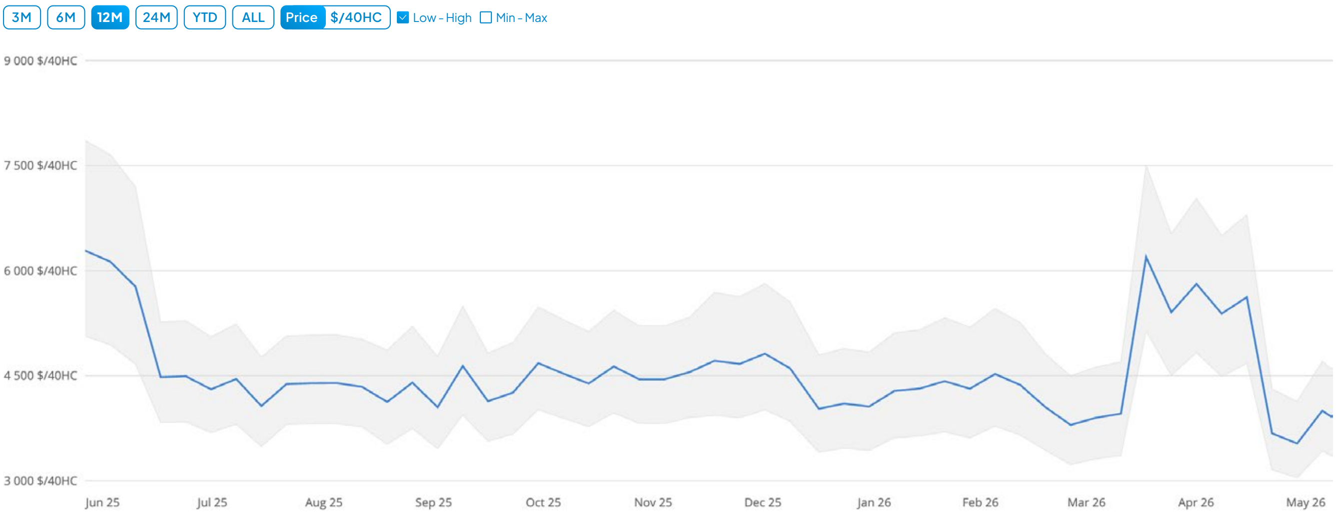


Port-to-port rates (spot and contract combined) billed for direct sailings from Antwerp to New York, departure and destination port THCs included, for a 40' HC DRY container carrying dry, non-dangerous goods. NB: diagram shows median not average rates. Source | Upply

The Transatlantic Westbound market has reached cruising speed, with rates progressing slightly and MSC in dominant role and continuing to win market share. Gemini and other secondary players are following the general trend, given that their financial results do not allow them to engage in a new rates war.

TRANSPACIFIC

Shanghai – Long Beach



Port-to-port rates (spot and contract combined) billed for direct sailings from Shanghai to Long Beach, departure and destination port THCs included, for a 40' HC DRY container carrying dry, non-dangerous goods. NB: diagram shows median not average rates. Source | Upply

On the Transpacific West-East market, lrates are consolidating without taking off. It would seem that, in this trade, the shipping companies are managing to pass on their additional operating costs more easily on routes which are not directly impacted by the military tensions being experienced elsewhere. The FMC expressed concern and said that it was watching developments closely to ensure that the inflationary trend which had been detected was not too disconnected from market trends.

The port of Long Beach is starting to feel the reaction to the Trump administration's policy on imports, with full container imports down 8% during the first four months of the year.

SERVICES

The reliability rate of the shipping companies improved in April. It rose 0.4 points month on month and four points year on year to reach a total of 62.4%. This was the best result so far in 2026, said Sea Intelligence in its monthly report, which covers the performances of 13 shipping companies. Average delay time dipped 0.27 days month on month to 5.34 days but increased 0.31 days by comparison with April 2025.

Mærsk stayed in number one position with a reliability score of 76.1%, compared to 70.8% in March. Hapag Lloyd, its Gemini alliance partner, came second with 75.1% (+2.8 points more than in March). Elsewhere in the table, most companies scored between 50% and 70%, with Wan Hai in last position with 39.6%, down from 46.6% in March. Overall, five of the 13 companies improved their scores month on month and 11 out of 13 did better than in April 2025.

Among the alliances, **Gemini** stayed in pole position. Maersk and Hapag Lloyd achieved a combined reliability score of 85%. The score is an honourable one but one which should be compared with the 90% target set by the two companies for their east-west services when they founded Gemini and set out its new "hub and spoke" service system. They are progressing from month to month but are still some way short of their objective.

For its part, **MSC** scored 73.4%. After ending its cooperation agreement with Maersk in February 2025, the Geneva-based company opted to go it alone. Compared to its former service model, it has improved its score by 1.2 points. Ocean Alliance, meanwhile, improved its performance by several points. The alliance, which includes CMA CGM, COSCO, OOCL and Evergreen, progressed from 65.9% in March to 67.5% in April, although this was below the 68.9% it scored in February. Finally, **Premier Alliance** (ONE, Hyundai Merchant Marine and Yang Ming) has been unable to halt the slide in its performance of recent months. After having lost 1.2 points in March, it lost three more points in April, taking its score down to 54.2%.

The general increase in reliability is due to higher demand caused by an early start to the summer peak season, according to shipping consultancy Drewry. To match customer expectations, the shipping companies increased capacity, reducing the number of cancelled sailings and services. Drewry found that 39 cancellations were expected during the period from 8 June to 12 July, which is to say four less than over the corresponding period in May-June. Of the 710 services scheduled over the period, the cancellation rate stood at 5% (1 point less than in May). The transpacific accounted for 49% of cancellations, Asia-Europe lines for 33% and the transatlantic market for 18%. The two Gemini operators are making very few cancellations, while MSC is sticking to its forecast and making no cancellations at all over the period.

ASIA-MEDITERRANEAN

Ocean Alliance (CMA CGM, COSCO, OOCL and Evergreen) is adding a call in Jeddah to its MEX service from Asia to the Mediterranean. The service is one of those which has returned to the Suez Canal. From July on, the loop will take in Qingdao, Shanghai, Ningbo, Xiamen, Nansha, Shenzhen, Ho Chi Minh, Singapore, Malta, Valencia, Barcelona, Marseilles, Malta, Jeddah and Port Klang.

Turkish operator Medkon has announced that it is opening a service linking Shanghai, Ningbo, Istanbul and Izmit. The monthly service will use just one ship.

ASIA-EUROPE

Panstar, which operates ferry and feeder services between China, South Korea and Japan, has been chosen by South Korea to carry out a test sailing between Busan and Rotterdam via the Arctic route, with a call planned in the Norwegian port of Tromsø. Panstar was the only candidate to respond to the tender call. The date for the sailing has yet to be set.

Premier Alliance is dropping Algeciras from its FE1 and FE3 services. To compensate, it is introducing a new call in Le Havre on the FE1. On the FE3, Southampton has also been dropped and replaced by Antwerp. The new FE1 itinerary is Laem Chabang, Ho Chi Minh, Singapore, Rotterdam, Hamburg and Le Havre, while, for the FE3, the port calls announced by the company are Qingdao, Ningbo, Shenzhen, Singapore, Felixstowe, Hamburg and Antwerp.

TRANSPACIFIC

Ocean Alliance is adding a call in Miami to its service between Asia and the US east coast. It will replace an existing call in New Orleans. The service, which is operated by CMA CGM but is part of the Ocean Alliance network, takes in Singapore, Ho Chi Minh, Shenzhen, Ningbo, Shanghai, Busan, Houston, Mobile and Miami.
To meet demand and prepare for the peak season, **Mærsk** is adding a service which will run from June to September. It will serve the ports of Ho Chi Minh, Busan and Long Beach. **MSC**, meanwhile, has decided to reactivate its Pearl service in June. The service, which was suspended in summer 2025, will take in Shenzhen, Xiamen and Long Beach.

Finally, **Ocean Alliance** is splitting into two its CIX service between Asia and the US west coast, according to data provider Alphaliner. The MTE service loop takes in Hai Phong, Ho Chi Minh, Shanghai, Los Angeles, Oakland, Kaohsiung and Shenzhen, while the remodelled CIX is calling at Ho Chi Minh, Port Klang, Colombo, Halifax, New York, Norfolk, Savannah, Charleston, Port Klang, Singapore and Laem Chabang.

TRANSATLANTIC

The congestion affecting northern European ports is proving intractable. Antwerp-Bruges, Rotterdam and Hamburg are all being impacted by the disruption currently affecting the shipping lines. As a result, **Mærsk** has decided to replace Hamburg by Bremerhaven on its transatlantic service. The new loop is Southampton, Antwerp, Rotterdam, Bremerhaven, Wilhelmshaven, Veracruz and Miami.

OPERATIONS

PANAMA CANAL

The Panama Canal Authority (PCA) has announced that it will be reducing maximum draughts for ships using its Neopanamax Locks to 15.09 metres from 3 July on. The PCA said that the measure was part of its 'water management strategy to ensure the safe, reliable, and sustainable operation of the Canal under current hydrological conditions and considering the potential development of an El Niño phenomenon over the watershed in the upcoming months".

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The "Services" and "Operations" sections of this barometer are produced in collaboration with Hervé Deiss, who is a journalist specialized in maritime transport and port issues.

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