Monthly barometer

TRENDS IN CONTAINER SHIPPING FREIGHT RATES

July 2026 |

upply

FREIGHT MARKET PEAKS AND COOLS

Thanks to a slowdown in demand after an early peak season, ocean freight rates seem to have levelled off during the second half of July.

THE SITUATION IN THE PERSIAN GULF

On 17 June, during a gala dinner in the Chateau de Versailles in France, President Donald Trump signed a memorandum of understanding with Iran. The Iranian president signed the same document remotely. But, on 7 July, hostilities resumed, bringing an early end to the 60-day truce originally envisaged. Since then, the situation has been very confused.

- The three weeks of relative calm was not enough to allow the evacuation plan for the seafarers and ships stranded in the Persian Gulf to be completed. The plan had been announced on 23 June but had been suspended on 25 June following an attack. Around 300 ships and their crews are still trapped in the gulf, some of which have been there since the start of the conflict on 28 February.

- The Iranian authorities are still blocking the Strait of Hormuz and the United States has re-established its blockade of Iranian ports. Negotiations are continuing but the Guardians of the Revolution insisted in early August that the strait would remain closed so long as the United States refused to accept their conditions. This enabled them to put pressure on the Trump administration as the mid-term elections approach. The ongoing stalemate in the Middle East, which has led to a long-term increase in oil prices, could penalise the president's camp in the elections.

- Saudi Arabia has successfully boosted its use of the port of Yanbu in the Red Sea to export its oil exports, which are running at 4.5 million barrels per day. But the Houthi rebels in Yemen, backed by Iran, have resumed their attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea after several months of inactivity. The aim here is to block both the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait so as to paralyse shipping throughout the area and increase the pressure on the United States.

- The United Arab Emirates (UAE) are adapting to the situation and seem to be expecting the tensions to persist. Jebel Ali, the world's 10th-ranking container port, has been seriously impacted by the blockage in the Strait of Hormuz. DP World, which operates the port's container terminals, announced in July that it would be investing in Fujairah on the west coast of the UAE. It has concluded an agreement in principle with the Fujairah Ports Authority as part of a year 50-year concession for the development of two new terminals - the container and multi-purpose Al Rugaylat terminal and the Dibba general freight terminal. The Al Rugaylat terminal, which will be able to accommodate new-generation ultra-large container ships, will have capacity to handle 2.5 million TEU annually.
- On 23 July, the Lloyd's Market Association (LMA) published a new clause stipulating that any ship paying a toll or other charge to go through the Strait of Hormuz would have its insurance cover immediately cancelled. Owners who deal with the Persian Gulf Strait Authority will face a significant risk, therefore.

#CONFLICT PROLIFERATION

The conflict in the Middle East has opened the way to a deeper reconfiguration of trading patterns. Members of the BRICS alliance are breaking away from the West to negotiate their own agreements for the supply of oil from Russia and Iran outside international regulations. The conflicts currently in progress are accelerating the process, marked by a notable escalation in July when two American gas carriers came under attack from unknown sources in the Egyptian port of Damietta. This created a third flashpoint in addition to the straits of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb.

July was also marked by massive attacks on merchant ships in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. More than 140 ships, mainly small Russian tankers, were targeted by Ukraine. Altogether, taking all conflicts together, nearly 200 merchant ships came under military attack worldwide in the course of a month and dozens of seafarers have been killed or wounded.

Meanwhile, a Russian warship carried out a live-fire exercise in the English Channel on 21 July, the day that new British prime minister Andy Burnham took office. This was another strong reminder of current tensions, just after the European Union's adoption of a 21st series of sanctions against Russia. Greece, which tried to block the EU move, was, however, authorised to continue exporting Russian LNG to its non-EU clients.

This deleterious climate is pushing us further away from the normalisation of world maritime trade as we knew it and the regularity of the attacks being made is bringing us closer and closer to a situation of open warfare.

The merchant marine sector, which was already not considered very attractive, risks finding it even harder to recruit, which could lead to increased costs for the shipping companies, which, in one way or another, will be reflected in freight rates. In the meantime, insurance premiums are not going to be reduced and tonne-mile ratios will continue to increase.

THE OTHER MAIN DEVELOPMENTS

Suez Canal

In early July, container traffic through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait increased steadily, in line with announcements from certain shipping companies, but it is not at all clear that the trend will be maintained over time. There will be no overnight normalisation of the situation and, for the time being, no one is considering sending fully loaded 24,000 TEU vessels through the Red Sea.

Switzerland, the world's leading container power

Unsurprisingly, the mid-year ranking of countries with the greatest container transport capacities confirmed the position of Switzerland as number one. Thanks to MSC, which has its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland accounted for 7.14 million TEU. According to data from marine intelligence provider Alphaliner, Denmark was in second place with 4.61 million TEU, mainly provided by Maersk, with China in third place with 4.35 million TEU, thanks to COSCO and OOCL. France came fourth with 4.14 million TEU, almost exclusively provided by CMA CGM, followed by Taiwan with 4.14 million TEU, mainly accounted for by Evergreen and, to a lesser extent, Yang Ming.

The United States was a long way behind in 11th place with just 209,000 TEU, mainly attributable to American flag operators Matson, Maersk Limited, Hapag-Lloyd US and APL US (CMA CGM). This lowly position largely explains the determination of the US to catch up with the leaders.

Low water levels worldwide

On virtually all continents, shipping is being penalised by low water levels. The situation is catastrophic on Europe's inland waterways, notably the Rhine, the Danube, the Rhône and the Po. On the Rhine, carrying capacity has been drastically reduced and, on certain stretches, services have been halted completely. On the American continent, the Panama Canal has also begun a new phase of major restrictions (see the "Services" section), which is increasing prices for services using it.

The Cape Horn route is likely to be used to a greater extent, even though this will increase the tonne-mile ratio and engender additional delays and costs. Restrictions have also been announced on the Saint Lawrence in Canada and on the Amazon in Brazil. According to the latest forecasts from the Manaus Port Authority, restrictions on the movement of ships on the Amazon, close to Manaus in northern Brazil, should come into force in the second half of September as a result of low seasonal water levels.

PRICES

For the major BCO (Beneficial Cargo Owner) shippers, long-term annual contract execution is in full flow. For the late signers, the annual negotiating round ended in late May and early June and, this year, there were a lot of them on account of geopolitical factors. Spot market rates established themselves at well above contract rates in the second quarter of 2026.

This trend was stronger in the Asia-Europe market than in the transpacific one. The shipping companies need visibility to fill their giant 18,000–24,000 ships on the Asia-Europe routes, more so than in the Pacific, where 10,000–14,000 ships are standard. Differences of USD1,500 per 40' container could be found between spot and contract rates in the second quarter, as the shipping companies managed to restrict capacity in the face of a surge in demand, linked to widespread early ordering on the part of shippers.

In this situation, yield management is the norm. The shipping companies give priority to loadings offering the highest unit yield, even if this means switching less remunerative freight on to a later ship…and then sometimes a later one again. This strategy was used with success, as is evidenced by the first second quarter financial results from the shipping companies. We can see the previous downward trend reversed, as companies' revenues and EBITDAs began increasing again year on year. In Europe, Maersk and CMA CGM are perfect examples of this.

The major shippers are perfectly familiar with this phenomenon and try to protect themselves against it year by year by saving an increasing share of their bookings for the spot market. The aim is to ensure that their most urgently needed goods are "guaranteed" loading on the first available sailing. In the current environment of international tensions, uncertainty and rising costs in terms of fuel, insurance and tonne-mile ratios, this strategy is fully justified.

Since mid-July, despite ongoing political tensions and increased uncertainty, demand began to dip and, with it, the number of blank sailings. At the same time, spot rates stabilised at very high levels or started to fall slightly during the final two weeks of July. The high point forecast last month seems to have been reached but varying fuel and insurance costs look set to wipe out the impact of falling demand.

The shipping companies will probably do all in their power to prevent spot rates dropping to below contract rates in the second half. Numerous general tariff increases have been announced in August as the companies try to ride the rate surge wave as long as they can. Once again, MSC's strategy could set the trend. Given its strong position in the market, it could opt to be aggressive or more conservative.

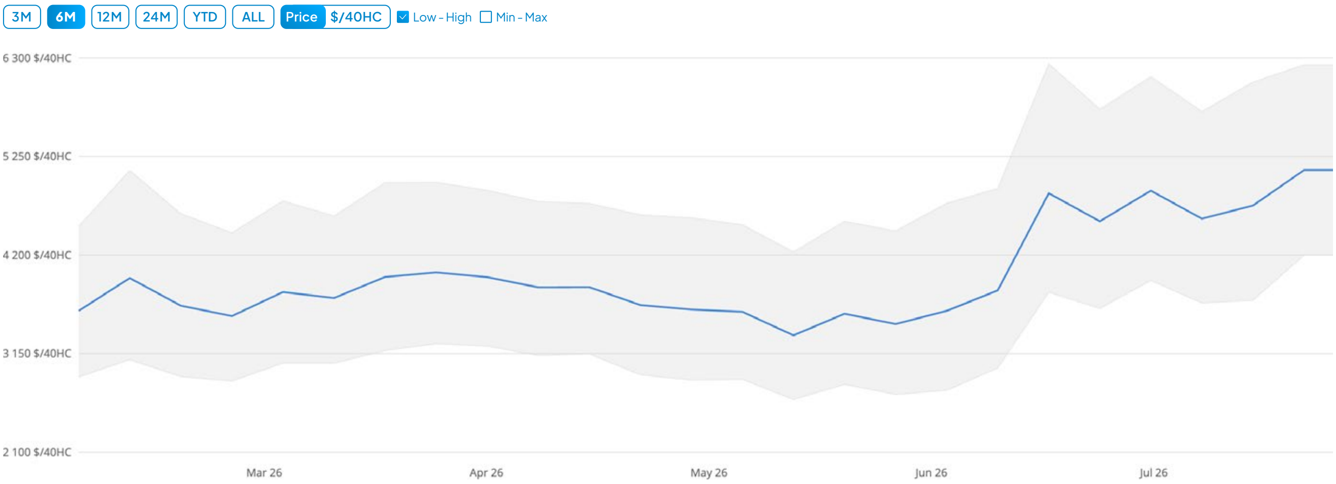
Results of the leading European container shipping lines[1]
Q2 2026 / Q2 2025

	Revenue (M USD)	% Change	EBITDA (M USD)	% Change	Volume (M TEUs)	% Change
MAERSK	10 526	+22.8 %	2 041	+41.4 %	6 722	+4.1 %
CMA CGM	9 960	+22.0 %	2 260	+42.4%	6 330	+6.0 %
HAPAG-LLOYD	5 840	+10.8%	829	+1.1 %	3 481	+3.5 %

[1] MSC has not been included in the table since it does not publish its results - Source: financial reports of the shipping companies.

ASIA / EUROPE

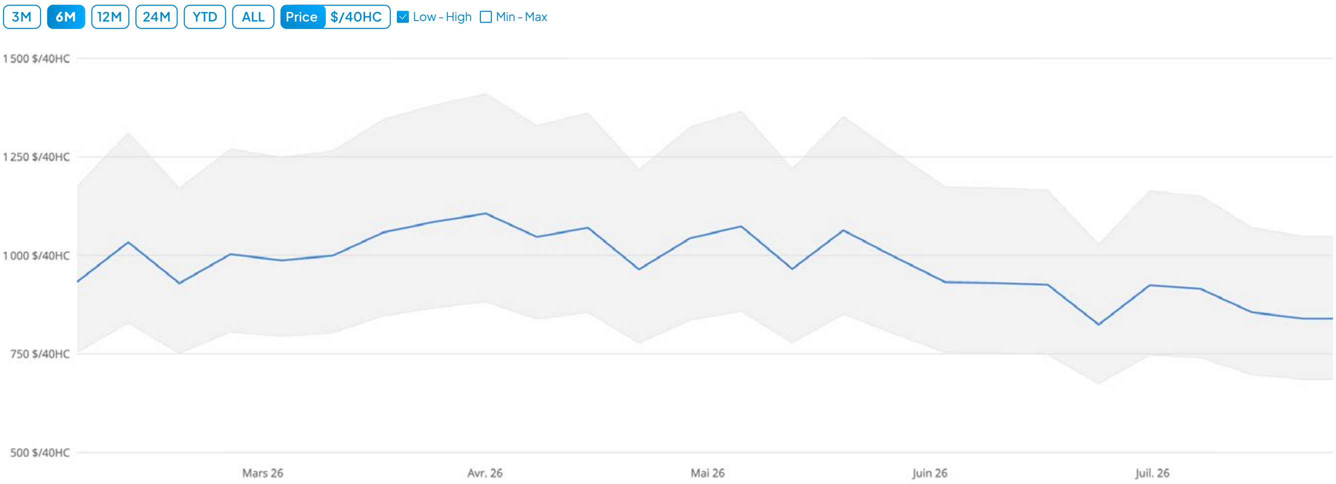
Shanghai – Le Havre



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

EUROPE / ASIA

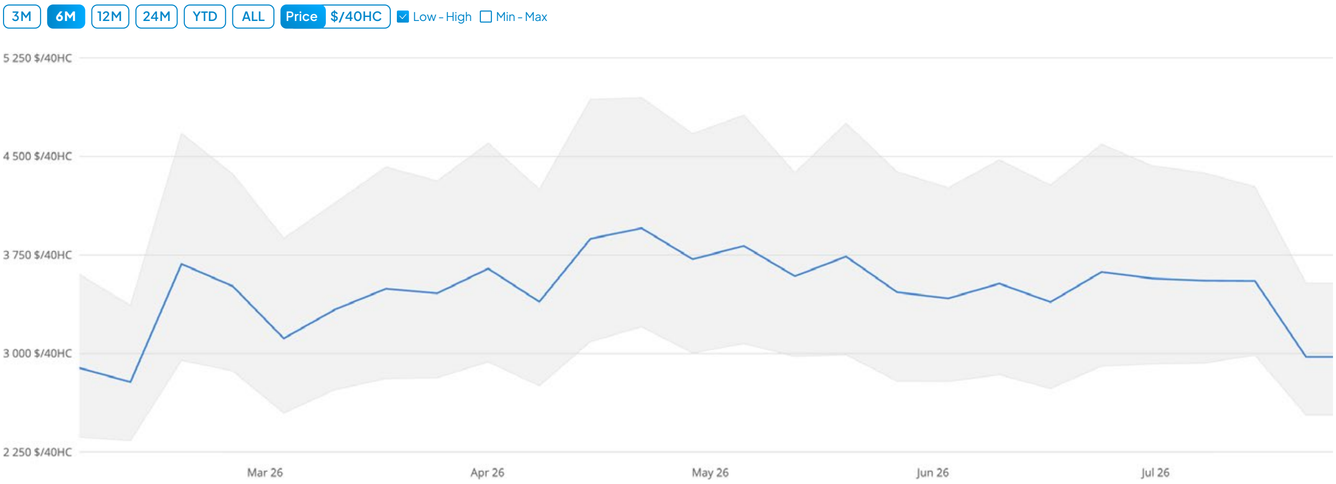
Rotterdam – Shanghai



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 DRY container carrying dry, non-dangerous goods. NB: diagram shows median not average rates. Source | Upply

TRANSATLANTIC

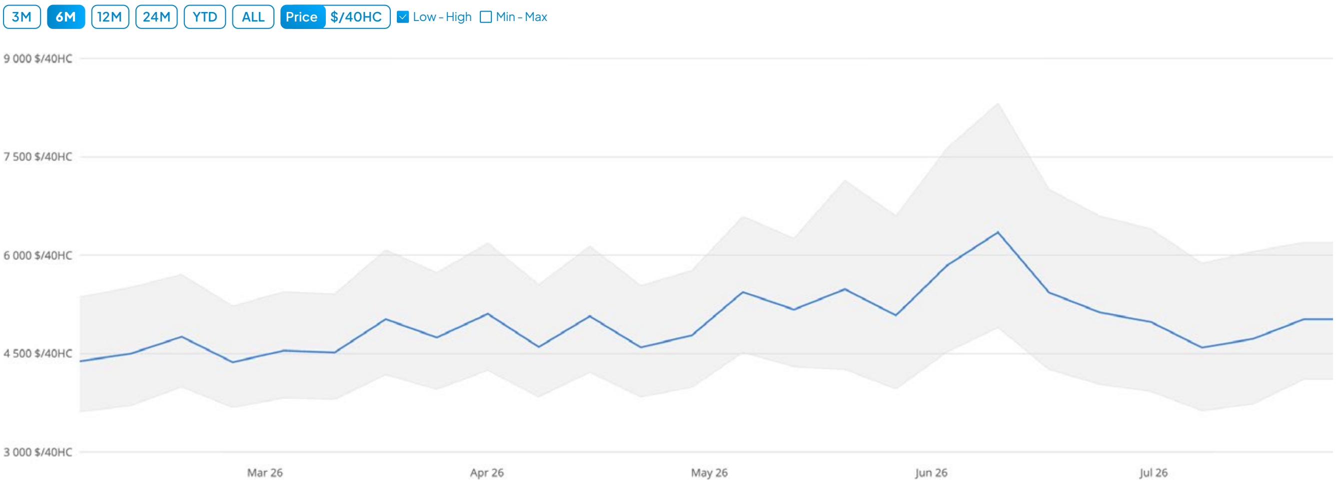
Antwerp – New York



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

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

SERVICES

Reliability rates

According to Sea Intelligence's monthly study, service reliability diminished by 1.9 percentage points in June 2026 month on month, despite registering its second-best result of the year at 62.6%. Year on year, reliability was down 4.7 points. Average ship delay was 5.31 days, slightly better than in May.

Among the 13 leading shipping companies classed by Sea Intelligence, Maersk achieved the month's best result with a 77.1% rating, ahead of Hapag Lloyd with 75.6% and MSC with 72.1%. CMA CGM scored around 65%, while eight of the remaining nine carriers scored between 50% and 60%. Wan Hai was the least reliable carrier in June with a rating of 35.6%.

Among the alliances, Gemini remained well ahead of the others with a reliability rating of 93.4%, ahead of MSC with 80.7% and Ocean Alliance with 67.6%. Premier Alliance was well behind at 53.6%.

News

- China-India services are showing growth, which is driven by strong demand and freight rates which are attractive for the shipping companies at around USD2,000/40' on the spot market. CU Lines, SITC, Sinolines, RCL, TS Lines et Wan Hai are the most reactive intra-Asian operators. For example, **CU Lines** announced in July that it was launching a service under the name KCI which will offer direct links between north east Asia and the Indian sub-continent. Major international Asian companies like COSCO and Evergreen are also taking up position in this market.

- **Evergreen** also announced a new China-Philippines express service. The weekly service will deploy three ships of around 2,000 TEU and will call in Rizhao, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Cebu and Davao before returning to Rizhao.

- **Maersk** has added a call in Jeddah to its AE15 Gemini service and is consolidating its Asia-Latin America capacity by updating its AC1 and AC2 services. Elsewhere, **Gemini's AE19 service** will go through the Suez Canal in future instead of going round the Cape of Good Hope. Its itinerary will be Xingang - Qingdao - Busan - Ningbo - Shanghai - Tanjung Pelepas - Jeddah – Suez Canal - Port Said - Tangiers - Port Said – Suez Canal - Jeddah - Singapore - Xingang.

- **MSC** is reinforcing its Seahorse intra-Asia service via the additional of new calls in China, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. The Swiss-Italian company is also launching a new Mozambican service called the Afungi Shuttle, which will use dedicated feeder services to link Afungi in northern Mozambique to the ports of Nacala and Maputo further to the south.

- **ONE** is taking space on Maersk's Qilin service from China to Australia.

- **CMA CGM** has launched the Kora Express service between northern Europe and West Africa. The itinerary is Southampton - Vlissingen - Antwerp - Tanger Med - Algeciras - Tema - Lekki - Cotonou - Dakar. The first departure is due on 26 August. At the same time, its EURAF 5 service has been reorganised to concentrate on the southern part of the West Africa region, offering direct links to Cameroon, Gabon, the Republic of the Congo and Angola. The itinerary is Tanger Med - Nouakchott - Kribi - Libreville - Pointe Noire - Luanda.

OPERATIONS

Disruption caused by Typhoon Bavi

On 11 July, Typhoon Bavi arrived in eastern China and the Strait of Taiwan, as western India suffered from extreme monsoon conditions, accompanied by widespread flooding. A number of ports were affected, with disruption in the region lasting from three to five days.

Panama Canal

As the El Nino phenomenon gradually established itself, the Panama Canal Authority announced that the maximum draught for vessels using the neopanamax locks would be reduced to 14.63 metres from 26 August and to 14.48 metres from 3 September.

Congestion in Jeddah

The port of Jeddah is registering record container throughput as shipping companies use it as an alternative to avoid the blockage affecting ports in the Persian Gulf. Despite demand in the region being lower than normal, the port's container facilities are saturated and suffering from congestion.

APMT is investing in an extension to its facilities in Peru

APM Terminals has announced the launch of the next phase of its expansion plans in the Peruvian port of Callao. The new phase, which represents an investment of about USD 570 million, should increase the capacity of the north terminal to 1.75 million TEU per year. The improvements include construction of a new quay, 5C, which will enable the terminal to accommodate ultra-large container vessels, install three new generation Malaccamax gantry cranes and acquire additional container-handling equipment.

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