

Europe's port congestion forcing Gemini to switch up Asia service



Hamburg has been one of the harder-hit Northern European ports as both vessel calls and ship sizes have increased during spring. Photo credit: Tobias Arhelger / Shutterstock.com.

Michael Angell, Senior Editor, East Coast Ports | Jul 8, 2025, 3:32 PM EDT

The Gemini Cooperation is adding three new calls on a joint Asia-Europe container service as port congestion in Northern Europe challenges the hub-and-spoke model championed by the shipping alliance.

Gemini partners Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd will change port rotations for their respective AE5 and NE4 services from Asia to “address fluctuating port congestion in Europe and ensure more consistent delivery,” Hapag-Lloyd said in an advisory Tuesday.

The original European rotation of the AE5/NE4 only included London Gateway and Germany's Bremerhaven and Hamburg ports. Along with those existing calls, the

services from September will make added stops at Aarhus in Denmark, Gothenburg in Sweden and Rotterdam in the Netherlands as their last three European calls.

Aarhus and Gothenburg had been previously served by Gemini using a shuttle service for transshipping from Bremerhaven.

The changes announced Tuesday include the AE5/NE4 services calling Hamburg before Bremerhaven.

While the Gemini partners have insisted their hub-and-spoke network could maintain reliable schedules and avoid blank sailings, Maersk said in a separate advisory Tuesday it was just as easy to unwind the network “to address challenges, predicted or not.” It added that the shuttle vessels serving Aarhus will be redeployed to “locations with an increased disruption risk to our customers’ business.”

Since April, Europe has experienced bouts of port congestion because of strong import demand, changes in container alliance structures and poor schedule reliability due to the ongoing longer transits around southern Africa. Other ocean carriers have had to switch their European port rotations to mitigate delays.

Busy spring at Hamburg

Hamburg, one of the harder-hit ports, saw an uptick in ship calls and vessel sizes through spring, according to data from Sea-web, a sister product of the *Journal of Commerce* within S&P Global. During April, 416 container ships called the port, Sea-web data shows, with total vessel capacity reaching 1.83 million TEUs, the highest in 12 months. In May, 421 container ships called Hamburg, totaling 1.8 million TEUs in capacity.

Germany’s HHLA, which operates three of Hamburg’s container terminals, is seeing ships wait between one and four days for an open berth as the “line-up is congested with late-arriving vessels,” ocean carrier HMM said in a customer advisory update. The terminals are operating at 75% to 80% capacity.

Ongoing capital projects at Hamburg terminals may also be impacting handling efficiency. HHLA had to reduce the size of one berth at a Hamburg terminal due to construction of new ship-to-shore cranes.

Another HHLA terminal is constructing two additional container yards this summer, which won’t be completed until next year. The terminal is also testing automated guide vehicles for moving containers. The tests are starting out on smaller ships, with a full rollout to all the berths in late 2025.

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