

Limited disruption likely as new carrier alliances roll out: Alphaliner



Service disruptions are expected as ocean carriers reposition ships for their new alliance networks that begin after the Lunar New Year. Photo credit: ambient_pix / Shutterstock.com.

Greg Knowler, Senior Editor Europe | Jan 9, 2025, 10:45 AM EST

Ocean carriers will roll out their new global networks next month, and while disruption to supply chains is inevitable during the transition period, the extent of that disruption will be limited by a series of factors, not least of which is the longshore contract agreement on the US East and Gulf coasts, according to Alphaliner

The International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) and the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX) late Wednesday said they had reached a tentative agreement on a new master contract, avoiding a strike that would have begun Jan. 15.

“The carriers must feel relieved that there will not be any striking that would potentially complicate the changes they are preparing,” Stefan Verberckmoes, senior

analyst at Alphaliner, told the *Journal of Commerce* Thursday.

With the threat of a port strike removed, carriers can now focus on preparations for the new networks that will be implemented from Feb. 1 by the Gemini Cooperation (Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd), Premier Alliance (Ocean Network Express, HMM and Yang Ming) and the standalone Mediterranean Shipping Co.

Verberckmoes said in the past, reshuffling carrier alliances “normally creates chaos,” but a series of factors would help to smooth the transition this time.

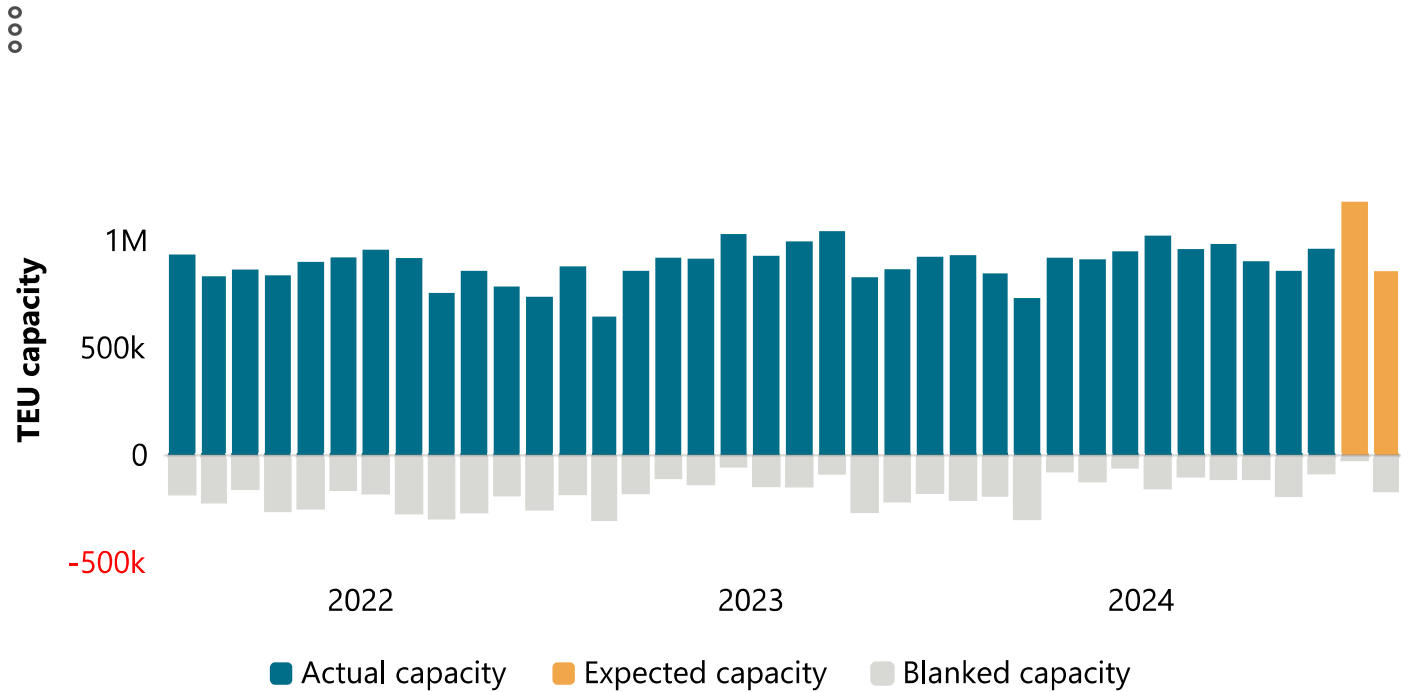
He noted that Lunar New Year falls on Jan. 29, and on top of a slowdown in demand, factories in China will close for at least a week, so the new alliance services would only start in the second week of February. That will leave carriers plenty of time to move ships to the right Chinese port.

Another factor is that even within the alliances, many services will be operated by a single carrier, and those fleets will continue to operate the new loops without the need for extensive repositioning of vessels.

“The new schedules are already published and most of the ships have already been nominated and are in place, so every importer or exporter can already see which ships are available,” Verberckmoes said. “There will be skipped sailings, but it will certainly not be chaos.”

Asia-North Europe carriers pull capacity levers to balance supply-demand

Container ship capacity deployed from Asia to N.Europe, with historical blanked capacity, capacity estimates and blank sailings already announced.



Notes: As of Sept. 20, 2024

Source: eeSea

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6M 2Y YTD MAX

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In preparation for the post-Lunar New Year slowdown, ocean carriers are increasing blank sailings on the Asia-Europe trade lanes in February. Data from visibility provider eeSea shows available capacity from Asia to North Europe is set to drop to 860,974 TEUs from 1.1 million TEUs in January.

Repositioning of ships

Interestingly, disruption to supply chains from the canceled sailings will be mitigated by the repositioning of ships that were doubling as extra loaders moving from Asia to Europe to work the new trans-Atlantic services, Verberckmoes said.

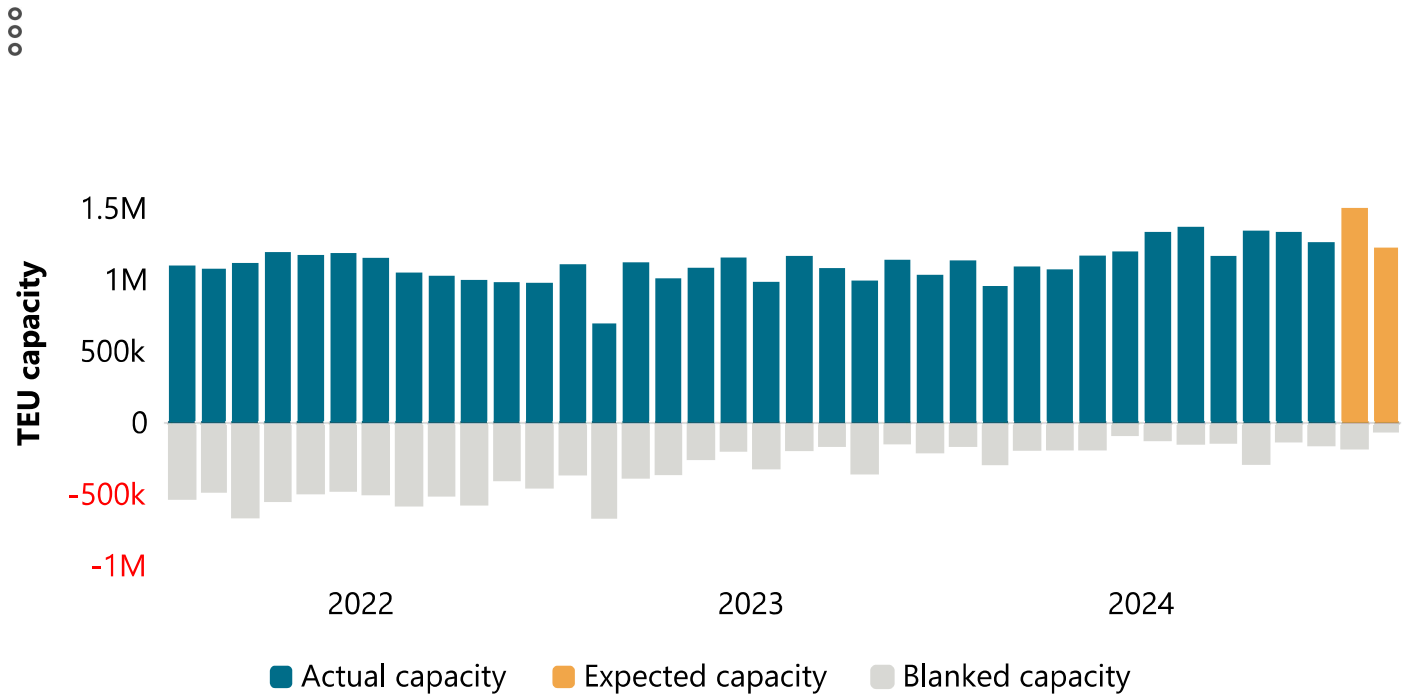
“I already see a lot of extra loaders mainly active on the trans-Pacific trade that are now coming to Europe on extra voyages from the Far East to ensure they are in position to join the new trans-Atlantic services starting in February,” he noted.

Even though the vessels are 6,000-7,000 TEUs in capacity, they are taking on cargo during their repositioning voyages, which Verberckmoes said was offsetting the capacity impact of blank sailings.

Sea-Intelligence Maritime Analysis noted that supply chain disruptions from the Lunar New Year blank sailings might be amplified on the trans-Pacific by the phase-out of existing alliance services and the phase-in of new services.

Carriers make muted cuts in February capacity on Asia-US West Coast

Container ship capacity deployed from Asia to US West Coast, with historical blanked capacity, capacity estimates and blank sailings already announced.



Notes: as of Jan. 8, 2024

Source: eeSea

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6M	2Y	YTD	MAX
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In its weekly Sunday Spotlight newsletter, Sea-Intelligence said carriers on the Asia-US West Coast trade have so far scheduled blanked capacity of 9% for the Lunar New Year week and the following three-week period compared with the 22.8% blanked in 2024 and the average 2016–19 reduction of 18.3%.

This is despite current capacity deployment at just under 1.34 million TEUs for the four-week period covering the Lunar New Year, which corresponds to 33.3% growth in

capacity year over year.

“Under normal circumstances, this would mean significant blank sailings announcements in the upcoming weeks, since it is highly unlikely that carriers would be satisfied with this level of excess capacity,” Alan Murphy, CEO of Sea-Intelligence, wrote in the newsletter.

However, Murphy noted that the phase-in of new networks by MSC, Gemini Cooperation and Premier Alliance introduced a new uncertainty, where carriers might prioritize getting their vessels phased into the new networks at the expense of not blanking as much capacity as usual.

Marc Meier, global head of ocean freight for Toll Global Forwarding, believes there are likely to be service disruptions on the major east-west trades in the first half of the year due to the startup of the new alliances.

“Carriers will plan their capacity to meet demand with many blank sailings in the first two weeks of February for all trades,” Meier told the *Journal of Commerce* this week, noting there would be a gradual pickup in volume expected from Feb. 21.

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