

Maersk takes 'significant step' toward return to Red Sea transits



The Singapore-flagged Maersk Sebarok sailed through the Houthi-controlled Bab al-Mandeb Strait this week en route to the US East Coast. Photo credit: Dietmar Hasenpusch / Port of Hamburg.

Greg Knowler, Senior Editor Europe | Dec 19, 2025, 12:32 PM EST

Maersk has become the latest carrier to test Red Sea waters, routing a westbound 6,500-TEU vessel through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait at the southern, Houthi-controlled entrance to the waterway.

But an advisory from the carrier Friday was quick to point out that this was not the start of a widespread return of its shipping services to the Red Sea, which has been largely off-limits to commercial shipping since attacks from Houthi militants operating in Yemen began two years ago.

"While this is a significant step forward, it does not mean that we are at a point where we are considering a wider east-west network change back to the trans-Suez corridor,"

Maersk said.

The Singapore-flagged *Maersk Sebarok* on Maersk's MECL service from India to the US East Coast departed Salalah in Oman earlier this week and sailed through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait Thursday en route to the Port of New York and New Jersey.

Maersk's advisory said if security thresholds continue to be met, the carrier would continue its "stepwise approach" toward gradually resuming navigation on east-west services via the Suez Canal and Red Sea.

"The first step is this initial sailing, followed by a limited number of additional trans-Suez sailings," it said. "However, there are no planned sailings currently."

Maersk's advisory on Friday comes after the carrier was forced to correct a Suez Canal Authority statement last month that said the carrier would be returning regular services to the waterway in December. In its own statement at the time, Maersk said transits through the Red Sea would only normalize "as soon as conditions allow, with safety of our crew as the top priority."

The new Maersk sailing follows the launch of a Red Sea-China Service by Thailand's Regional Container Lines (RCL) last month. Ocean Network Express (ONE) and Taiwan's Evergreen Marine are making tentative returns to the Red Sea cargo market under a slot charter agreement with regional carriers, including RCL.

CMA CGM is set to resume a Suez-based rotation for its India-US East Coast "Indamex" service from January, with the first westbound sailing under the "normal" itinerary known to be the 6,039-TEU *CMA CGM Verdi*, due to depart India's Nhava Sheva Port Jan. 18 and transit the Suez Canal Feb. 8, available data indicates. The French carrier plans to switch over to a full Suez rotation for the Indamex in the second quarter of 2026 as it continues to realign capacity deployments.

The resumption of shipping activity in the Red Sea is driven by a perceived improvement in the security situation given there have been no attacks on vessels since the Israel-Hamas ceasefire was signed in early October, with a corresponding decline in additional war risk maritime insurance premiums.

Risk levels 'tolerable'

With attacks paused, the de-escalation suggests operational risks for shipping companies have become more "tolerable" in the waterway, according to security advisory firm Ambrey. This has seen war risk premiums for ships sailing through the Red Sea falling to about 0.2% of hull value from 0.5% before the ceasefire, according

to a UK-based insurer, the lowest level since the Houthi attacks on shipping began in late 2023.

Still, while carriers may be willing to shoulder the lower premiums, getting support from cargo owners could be difficult, as Hapag-Lloyd found out this week when it asked customers for feedback on plans to route an India-US East Coast service through the Suez.

"Expeditors [one of the carrier's largest forwarders on the route] was unable to persuade many of its core shipper clients to sign on to a letter of intent framework that would have required them to absorb terrorism and war-risk liabilities for vessels transiting the Red Sea," an India-based shipping executive with knowledge of the matter told the *Journal of Commerce*.

Helge Neuman-Lezius, global head of full container loads at Hellmann Worldwide Logistics, said insurance excluded coverage for cargo in the southern Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb strait.

"For that reason, we decided to not offer such routings until this passage is declared as safe," he said.

The supply chain director for a Hong Kong-based Asia-Europe shipper told the *Journal of Commerce* that a directive from their head office prohibited the use of services via the Red Sea and Suez because of difficulties in obtaining cargo insurance cover.

DHL Global Forwarding said decisions on whether to return to the waterway would be jointly determined by carriers, forwarders and cargo owners.

"We can see a scenario where certain carriers might be willing to pilot services through the Red Sea, and if this were to prove successful, others could follow suit in order to remain competitive, which along with the reduced transit times could mitigate the possibility of elevated insurance costs," a DHL spokesperson said.

Peter Sand, chief analyst with rate benchmarking platform Xeneta, said shippers were simply not interested in paying the current high war risk premiums.

"Nevertheless, carriers need to take the first steps and illustrate that voyages can be performed safely," Sand told the *Journal of Commerce*. "Later, they can return the services as well when insurance companies lower the premiums paid for cargo, ships and crew sailing through the area."

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