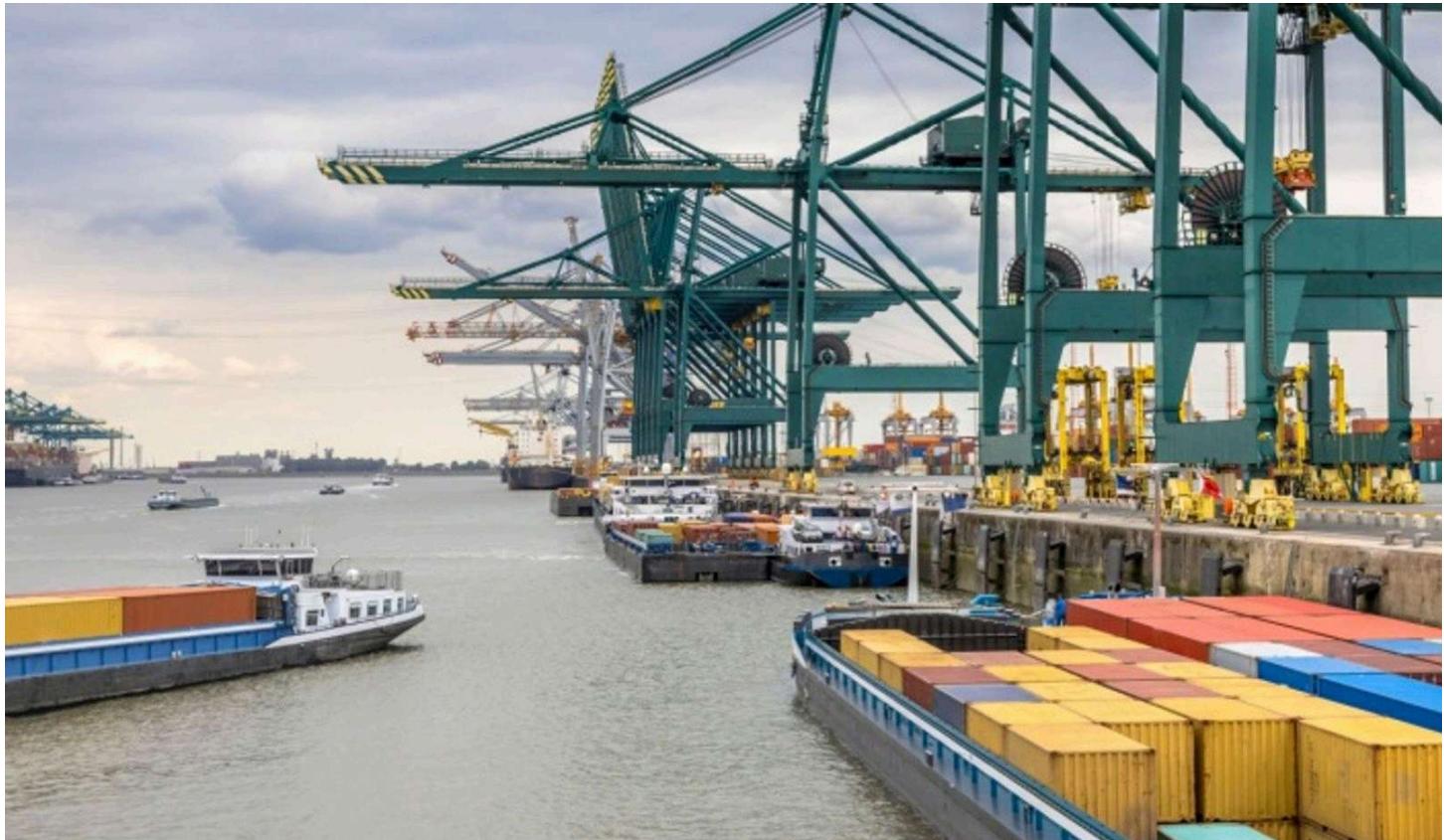




## Stretched logistics capacity in Europe threatened by Red Sea return



*Solid import growth kept North Europe's busy port gateways under pressure this year. Photo credit: Rudmer Zwerver / Shutterstock.com.*

**Greg Knowler, Senior Editor Europe | Dec 5, 2025, 1:04 PM EST**

The wave of inbound volume driven by a potential return of container shipping to Red Sea transits in 2026 would hit a European port network already struggling with maxed out capacity following a year of solid volume growth.

It's a hypothetical scenario forwarders say is increasingly possible, pointing to how the bottlenecks will take months to unravel and trigger equipment shortages in Asia while inbound volume from ships sailing around Africa and others cutting through Suez will fill yards and warehousing space.

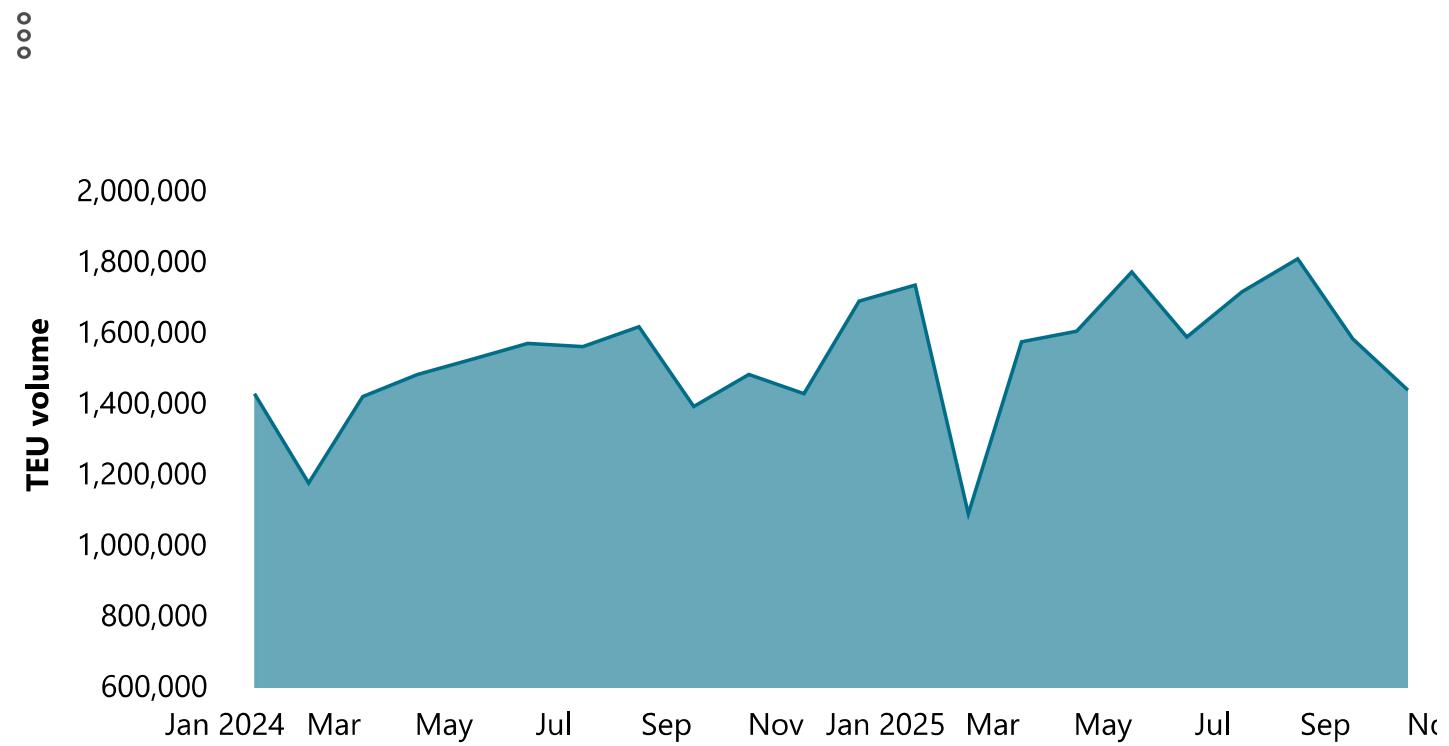
Although container lines have been reluctant to lay out a timeline for their return, industry optimism for a significant rerouting of major carriers to the waterway next

year has grown since the fragile Gaza ceasefire was reached in October. Nearly two years ago when diversions away from the Red Sea began due to Houthi rebel attacks, import volumes from Asia to Europe were modest and the likes of Rotterdam, Antwerp and Hamburg were able to avoid severe vessel bunching. Things are different now.

“Demand growth in Asia-Europe this year is up between 10% and 14%, depending on the market,” said Michael Aldwell, executive vice president of sea logistics at Kuehne + Nagel. “We haven’t seen growth like that on the Far East westbound trade since before the global financial crisis.”

## Solid growth in Asia-Europe volume slows through October

Monthly containerized imports from Asia to Europe, with year-over-year change



Source: Container Trades Statistics

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There is limited buffer capacity in Europe’s terminals to handle existing demand and a sudden surge in import containers will quickly lead to cargo backing up.

“There is not a lot of idle capacity in facilities, and you better be ready for that,” Aldwell told the *Journal of Commerce*. “If everything’s full, when [Red Sea transits

return] you will have a problem."

Some carriers have been testing the Red Sea waters recently by sending ships on their eastbound backhaul legs to India, the Middle East and Asia through the Suez Canal.

Although a large scale return to the Red Sea is not imminent, "at some point, this is going to end," Evangelos Chatzis, CFO at Danaos Corporation, told a Capital Link webcast Tuesday.

"By 'at some point,' I'm not referring to the distant future. I believe that in 2026, the Suez will normalize," Chatzis added.

## **Safety of crew, ships paramount**

That point might be a little closer with news this week that CMA CGM's Indamex service will transit the Suez on both front- and backhaul voyages between India/Pakistan and the US East Coast.

"Until now, these transits via Suez Canal have been on a case-by-case basis, diverting voyages originally scheduled to sail around Cape of Good Hope," Peter Sand, chief analyst at rate benchmarking platform Xeneta, noted in a market update Friday.

"CMA CGM's announcement this week is important because it is a structural change with a service proforma to transit Suez Canal on every sailing," he said.

Despite the positive signs, there remains no clarity on when the mainline Asia-Europe services will resume voyages through the Suez. Carriers are assessing the risk profile of returning to the Red Sea, which revolves around the safety of the crew, ship and cargo, Aldwell noted.

"There are clear statements from the industry that this is about safe passage and not about passage no matter what," he said, pointing to a Maersk missive issued in November that swiftly corrected an announcement by the Suez Canal Authority that the carrier was returning to the route this month. Maersk said transits through the Red Sea would only normalize "as soon as conditions allow, with safety of our crew as the top priority."

Aldwell said once safe passage was assured, and once multiple carriers transited the route with larger capacity, "that will quickly give way to the majority of services running back through Suez, and that is going to have an impact."

Andy Gillespie, senior logistics advisor at supply chain managers WOWL, said the real story was not the shorter transit times that will result from a return to the Red Sea,

but the chaos that will accompany the switchover.

“For a few months we’ll have Suez and Cape routes running side by side, ships suddenly gaining back 12-18 days and waves of vessels hitting Europe, the Mediterranean, North Africa and parts of the US East Coast in the same arrival windows,” he noted in a [LinkedIn post](#) this week.

## Potential equipment shortages

Aldwell said the delays at terminals in Europe will impact carrier schedules and take time to normalize, which could spell trouble for capacity and equipment availability in Asia.

“There will be a metering out of capacity that has to go back to Asia, which means for a time there will likely be a shortage of equipment and a shortage of capacity in Asia until the shipping system gets back into a normal rotation,” he said.

While North Europe ports will battle to handle the additional volume on top of ongoing congestion challenges, Helge Neuman-Lezius, global head of full container loads (FCL) at Hellmann Worldwide Logistics, said a mass move back to Suez will have significant implications for Mediterranean trade flows, particularly at ports handling transshipment cargo.

“From a congestion perspective, you are a bit better off in the Mediterranean because there are so many small ports compared to the large ones in the north, but when it comes to transshipment ports, that is different,” he told the *Journal of Commerce*.

When the Houthi attacks forced ships to divert around Africa two years ago, carriers moved their Asia–Mediterranean transshipment calls away from the eastern Mediterranean hubs of Port Said in Egypt, Piraeus in Greece and Ambarli in Turkey to ports in the west, such as Morocco’s Tanger Med and Algeciras in Spain.

“Egyptian transshipment is nearly gone with no one transshipping in Egypt and Piraeus has lost a lot of transshipment in cargo,” Neuman-Lezius told the *Journal of Commerce*. “But when the Red Sea route returns, carriers will move transshipment port calls from the west to the east, basically reverting to where we were two years ago.

“When that shift happens there will be a lot of disruption, because it is not just one or two carriers that will be moving; it is all carriers and all alliances and the entire service offering that has been bypassing the Red Sea,” he noted.

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