

## Strong H1 volumes, space crunch keep Antwerp terminals under pressure



*Europe's busiest container port of Antwerp-Bruges reported 3.7% growth in first-half volumes. Photo credit: CMB.Tech.*

**Greg Knowler, Senior Editor Europe | Jul 15, 2025, 10:06 AM EDT**

Marine terminals in Antwerp-Bruges are under “heavy strain,” with strong container volume in the first half of the year exacerbating congestion from a shortage of landside space that is already at critically low levels, the Belgian hub port said Tuesday.

First-half volume at Europe’s busiest container port increased 3.7% year over year to 6.91 million TEUs, driven by a continued surge in overall trade with the US that increased 17.2% to 16.4 million tons.

“Our consistently strong trade relationship with the United States confirms our role as a trans-Atlantic gateway to Europe,” Jacques Vandermeiren, CEO of the Port of

Antwerp-Bruges, said in a statement.

“At the same time, current capacity pressures and operational challenges highlight the need for additional container infrastructure,” he added. “With the ECA [extra container capacity Antwerp] project, we are focused on building for the future so that we can continue to support sustainable growth.”

The lack of space is just one of a daunting series of factors contributing to port congestion in the Belgian port — and to bottlenecks at several other hubs in North Europe — that were outlined by Antwerp-Bruges in its first-half operational update.

“Container ship arrivals remain irregular due to disruptions dating back to the COVID crisis, further exacerbated by rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope to avoid the Red Sea,” the port’s statement noted.

“The recent reshuffling of container alliances has temporarily led to simultaneous vessel calls and high cargo volumes,” it added. “Poor schedule reliability is complicating terminal planning: containers remain on site longer, and vessels are arriving with increasingly large loads.”

The series of factors has driven up average dwell times to between seven and eight days compared with the usual five days, Antwerp noted, adding that overcrowded terminals required additional container movements, placing extra strain on personnel and equipment.

With the port already under severe operational pressure, recent industrial action by national unions has added to the cargo-handling challenges. A nationwide strike in Belgium on May 20 brought vessel handling to a standstill, while another national “day of action” was held on June 25.

Strong peak season demand is another factor that is piling pressure on congested terminals in North Europe and forcing carriers to divert some services away from congested import gateways.

There are also significant delays in Asia that impact the schedule reliability of carriers arriving in Europe, with bottlenecks in the key transshipment hub of Singapore. Port visibility data from Portcast on July 13 shows 35 container vessels were waiting to berth.

## **Tariffs bring uncertainty to trans-Atlantic**

A standout trade lane for Antwerp is the trans-Atlantic, where traffic with the US has continued its first-quarter growth through the first half, although the impact of tariffs

hangs over the corridor.

“The outlook for the second half of 2025 remains uncertain,” the Antwerp-Bruges statement noted. “Much will depend on a potential trade agreement between the EU and the US by Aug. 1, which could restore greater certainty and predictability in the supply chain.”

But the likelihood of a US-EU trade deal appears to be diminishing. President Donald Trump sent a letter to Brussels this week threatening to impose 30% blanket tariffs on European imports beginning Aug. 1, surprising EU officials who thought they were close to a preliminary agreement with the US.

In response, Brussels is now readying a fresh list of American products to hit with retaliatory tariffs if a trade deal isn't reached by the deadline.

One of the sectors hardest hit by the US trade war is automotives. Vehicle exports via Antwerp to the US have seen a clear decline in the first half as tariffs dragged down the numbers. In the first six months of the year, 15.9% fewer new passenger cars and vans (76,089 units) and 31.5% fewer trucks and heavy vehicles (11,751 units) were exported, according to the port.

Antwerp data shows European first-half imports from the US increased 13.1% year over year to 9.7 million tons, with higher volumes in containers and liquid bulk. Exports to the US rose 23.5% to 6.7 million tons, driven mainly by fuels and dry bulk.

Antwerp container exports to the US remained stable at 303,000 TEUs, while container imports rose 12.6%.

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