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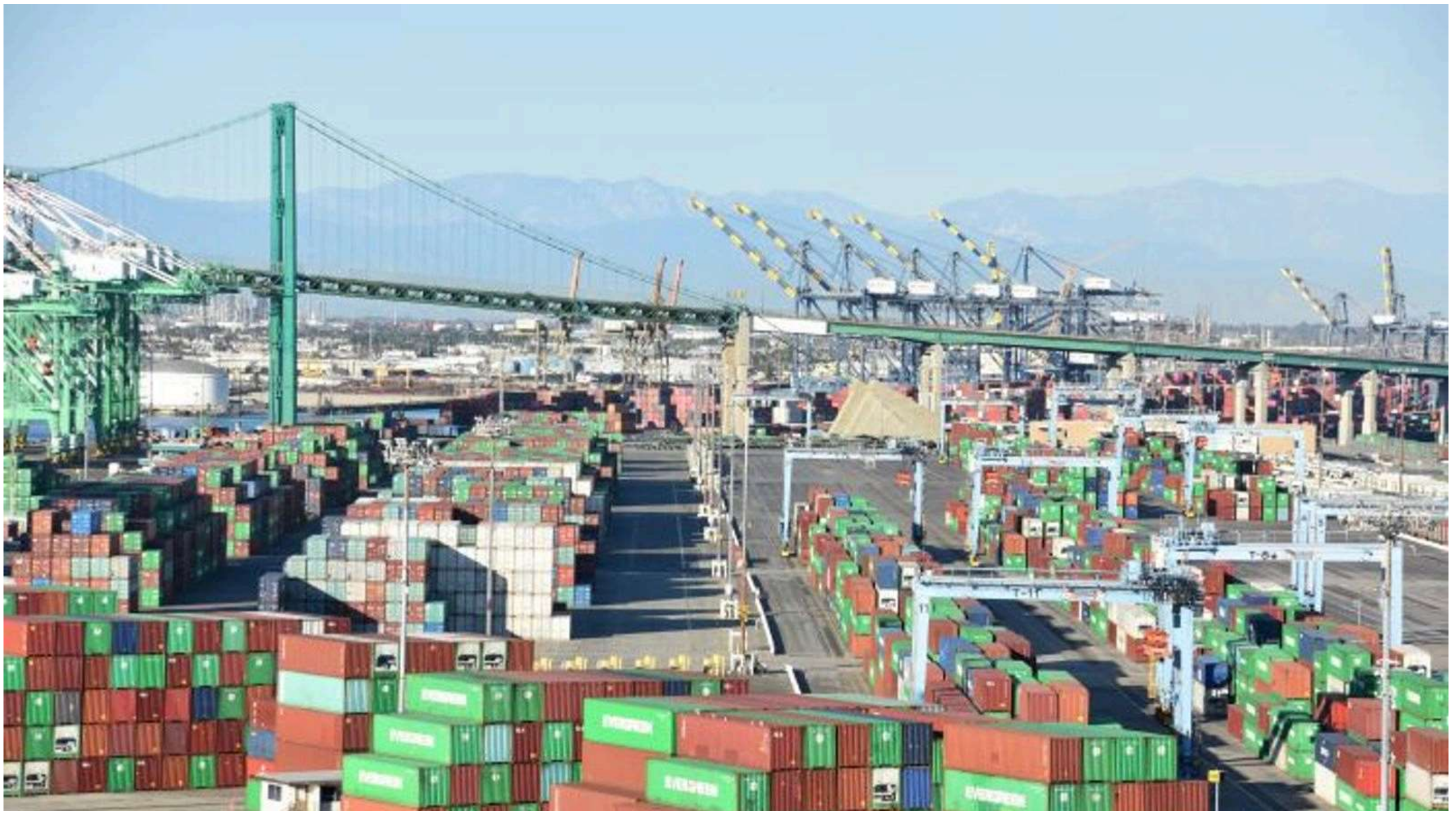
Trans-Pacific blank sailings set to rise after China bookings drop sharply



While utilization out of China is falling, ships in the Southeast Asia trade are seeing 90% to 100% utilization as US shippers seek to use the 90-day reprieve from reciprocal tariffs on other countries to frontload cargo, Photo credit: Ritu Manoj Jethani / Shutterstock.com.

Michael Angell, Senior Editor | Apr 14, 2025, 2:24 PM EDT

Ocean carriers on the eastbound trans-Pacific are poised to blank more voyages after a slew of booking cancellations last week that could leave some ships departing China half-empty through May. As the uncertainty around US tariffs on Chinese goods drags out, shippers face on-the-fly decisions about what to do with their suddenly more expensive freight.

Port of Los Angeles Executive Director Gene Seroka said Friday that 12 sailings from China to the US West Coast in May have been canceled due to the Trump administration's decision to put tariffs of 145% on most goods from China.

Those dozen cancellations would put May's blanks above April's, according to data from third-party logistics provider Spedag Americas, which recorded 11 blanked voyages to Los Angeles during April, including three weekly voyages from a small independent carrier with about 2,000 TEUs of capacity.

Ocean Alliance member Evergreen Marine, which operates the CPS service to Los Angeles, will have the service's last scheduled voyage from Shanghai depart on Tuesday. No further sailings from China are scheduled until May 21, according to China-based shipping agents and the latest CPS schedule, which would mark four straight weeks of blanked service. The canceled voyages would remove 32,000 TEUs of capacity from the trans-Pacific over that period.

Evergreen declined a request for comment about the CPS service. James Caradonna, executive vice president of Spedag Americas, told the *Journal of Commerce* that April's blank sailings were for just one or two non-consecutive weeks. Carriers had been expected to start bringing more ships into service as 2025–26 annual service contracts are signed and seasonal summer shipments start.

"Four consecutive weeks [of blank sailings on the service] is extreme," Caradonna said.

Half-full ships from China

A senior vice president for an independent ocean carrier in the trans-Pacific trades told the *Journal of Commerce* that his company saw an immediate 30% drop in container bookings out of China last week due to the new tariffs.

Other customers are requesting that containers already in-gated at origin not be loaded on ships, while others have asked that containers be pulled completely from the port, the source said, not an easy task inside of China's high-volume gateways. Likewise, the source said there is concern that cargo already loaded on ships from China may be abandoned at US ports due to the tariff costs.

He expects that ships leaving China for the US in the coming weeks will be less than half-full as the cancellations continue, forcing the carrier to blank more voyages.

"People are canceling and putting cargo [from] China on pause," the source said. "It will accelerate our blank sailing schedule because vessel utilization is dropping."

While utilization out of China is falling, he said ships in the Southeast Asia trade are seeing 90% to 100% utilization as US shippers seek to use the 90-day reprieve from reciprocal tariffs on other countries to frontload cargo, adding that vessels in China-US trades could be redeployed to Southeast Asia.

Likewise, Asia-Mediterranean trades are seeing increasing strength, sending vessels in yet another direction.

The longer the US and China engage in a back-and-forth on tariffs, the more it will force a long-term reconsideration of the carrier's trans-Pacific network and whether there is enough volume out of China to support calls.

"Our short-term reaction is to blank," the source said. "But as people are accelerating their alternative sourcing — and this is giving everyone reason to accelerate those efforts — the effect is that we have to look at our rotations. We would probably eliminate some of the China ports."

Jason Cook, managing director of non-vessel-operating common carrier (NVO) Ardent Global Logistics, told the *Journal of Commerce* he's seen a 60% drop in bookings out of China this week due to the tariffs. While the cancellations were initially among intermittent, low-volume shippers, he said the concerns about tariffs are now spreading to larger shippers with regular, consistent volume.

"Whatever [was] leaving China on April 9, we [were] told to cancel it," Cook said. "It's not only the smaller customers, but the big ones as well saying we're going to pause for two weeks."

April 9 was the date country-specific reciprocal tariffs took effect; they have since been paused for 90 days. But the China reciprocal tariffs remain in place.

Ardent's customers are also asking that their US-bound cargo at Chinese ports not be loaded or be removed from the marine terminal, Cook said. One customer tried to have the goods returned to the Chinese manufacturer, but it refused, he added.

"The lack of clarity about tariffs has left so many customers confused that they are canceling all bookings, even if the container was already gated into the terminal," Cook said.

Cook is now fielding requests for use of bonded warehouses and foreign trade zones in the US as a short-term way to deal with the tariffs. He also expects that there will much more demand for freight out of Southeast Asia and India that will keep ships on those trades full. But with most of the empty containers still in China, US shippers may see delays at origin.

"Once cargo out of China dries up, Southeast Asia is going to go a bit ballistic," Cook said. "There's not enough equipment and not enough calls. It's setting up for some serious disruption."

Preparing for decline in volumes

A New Jersey-based executive with a forwarder that handles 40,000 containers per year into the US told the *Journal of Commerce* there has been about a 20% drop in China-origin freight over the past week due to the tariffs. He said that most of the cancellations are among intermittent or low-volume shippers with about 2,000 containers per year.

So far, the cancellations mostly just cover anything that would land in May, but as the tariff policy remains in place, he expects to see the cancellations start to affect cargo further out in June. The forwarder said some ocean carriers are deferring 2025 contract signings until May due to the uncertainty around tariffs.

“I think this can get worse,” he said.

A US-based executive for an alliance ocean carrier said that while some shippers immediately canceled bookings from China, other major customers are still proceeding with their shipments. But he said caution is increasing the longer Trump’s trade war with China drags out, adding that he expects tariffs will eventually cause more shippers to halt their freight from China.

“Orders may be canceled or delayed until there’s more clarity on tariffs, so we’re preparing for a potential [volume] dip in the coming months,” the source said.

And if the tariffs on China persist, the issue could reach far beyond volume retractions. According to Sanjay Tejwani, CEO of consulting firm 365 Logistics, the third quarter could bring tough decisions for some shippers moving Chinese cargo.

“In Q3, if it remains as-is, some people are not going to ship,” said Tejwani. “Some things are just unaffordable. I am hearing that [some] containers might get abandoned. The importers may not even take delivery because they don’t want to pay the duties.”

Benton Kauffman, head of trans-Pacific air and sea logistics at the forwarder DSV Global, told the *Journal of Commerce* Monday that overall eastbound freight in the trans-Pacific is down about 20%, but 60% of that volume is out of China.

“I think in the next two weeks we will see Southeast Asia bounce back,” Kauffman said.

A second carrier source said most retailers and direct importers are covered for at least the next three months because they have sufficient inventory to get them well into the summer. After that, they will have to decide how much they have to import and from which countries in the second half of the year, he said.

"Eventually they will have to restock," the carrier executive said.

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Senior Editor Bill Mongelluzzo and Associate Editor Laura Robb contributed to this report.