

Cosco, OOCL halt Balboa calls in latest twist over Panama port row



Taiwan's Evergreen Marine, Cosco Shipping's partner in the Ocean Alliance, operates Panama's Colon Container Terminal (pictured). Photo credit: Mariusz Bugno / Shutterstock.com.

[Keith Wallis, Asia Special Correspondent](#) | Mar 12, 2026, 1:02 PM EDT

Cosco Shipping Lines and its Hong Kong-headquartered affiliate OOCL have halted calls at Balboa port on Panama's Pacific Coast and are instead redirecting services to Manzanillo on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal.

Cosco did not give a reason for the move, but it comes just two weeks after the Panamanian government wrested control of Balboa and Cristobal ports from operator Panama Ports Company (PPC) after PPC had its 28-year concession nullified by Panama's Supreme Court. PPC is 90% owned by Hong Kong-conglomerate CK Hutchison Holdings.

Cosco announced the service change in an advisory to local customers; updated vessel schedules Thursday show Cosco and OOCL ships calling at Manzanillo instead of Balboa.

Cosco's notice said existing confirmed bookings for Balboa will be canceled. Import cargo already held at Balboa will be released normally, although empty boxes must be returned to Manzanillo International Terminal (MIT) or Colon Container Terminal (CCT), both on the Atlantic coast, the advisory said.

Taiwan's Evergreen Marine, Cosco Shipping's partner in the Ocean Alliance along with OOCL and CMA CGM, operates CCT, while SSA Marine operates MIT.

Some transshipment cargo normally handled by Balboa on Cosco's West Coast South America and regional Caribbean services has been shifted to Buenaventura in Colombia and Lazaro Cardenas on the West Coast of Mexico.

Move comes after Maersk, MSC met with Chinese officials

Cosco's shift away from Balboa came a day after executives from Maersk and Mediterranean Shipping Co. were called to a meeting with officials from China's Ministry of Transport to discuss "international shipping operations."

No details of what was discussed at the meeting have been released by the ministry or carriers. But it comes after Maersk's APM Terminals (APMT) was given a transitory concession contract for the Balboa terminal by the Panama Maritime Authority (PMA), while MSC's Terminal Investment Limited (TiL) was given the same for Cristobal on the Atlantic coast. Both contracts are for 18 months, as APMT and TiL were appointed by the Panama government to operate the ports until new long-term management concessions can be agreed.

China's Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office has warned that Panama would "pay a heavy price, both politically and economically" for the court decision, calling the ruling "absurd ... shameful and pathetic."

Cosco's move away from Balboa coincided with comments by President Donald Trump last weekend that the US would "not allow hostile foreign influence to establish itself in this hemisphere, and that includes the Panama Canal."

The Trump administration had been in an increasingly aggressive spat with China over what it saw as China's malign influence on canal and local port operations.

Contact Keith Wallis at keithwallis@hotmail.com.

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