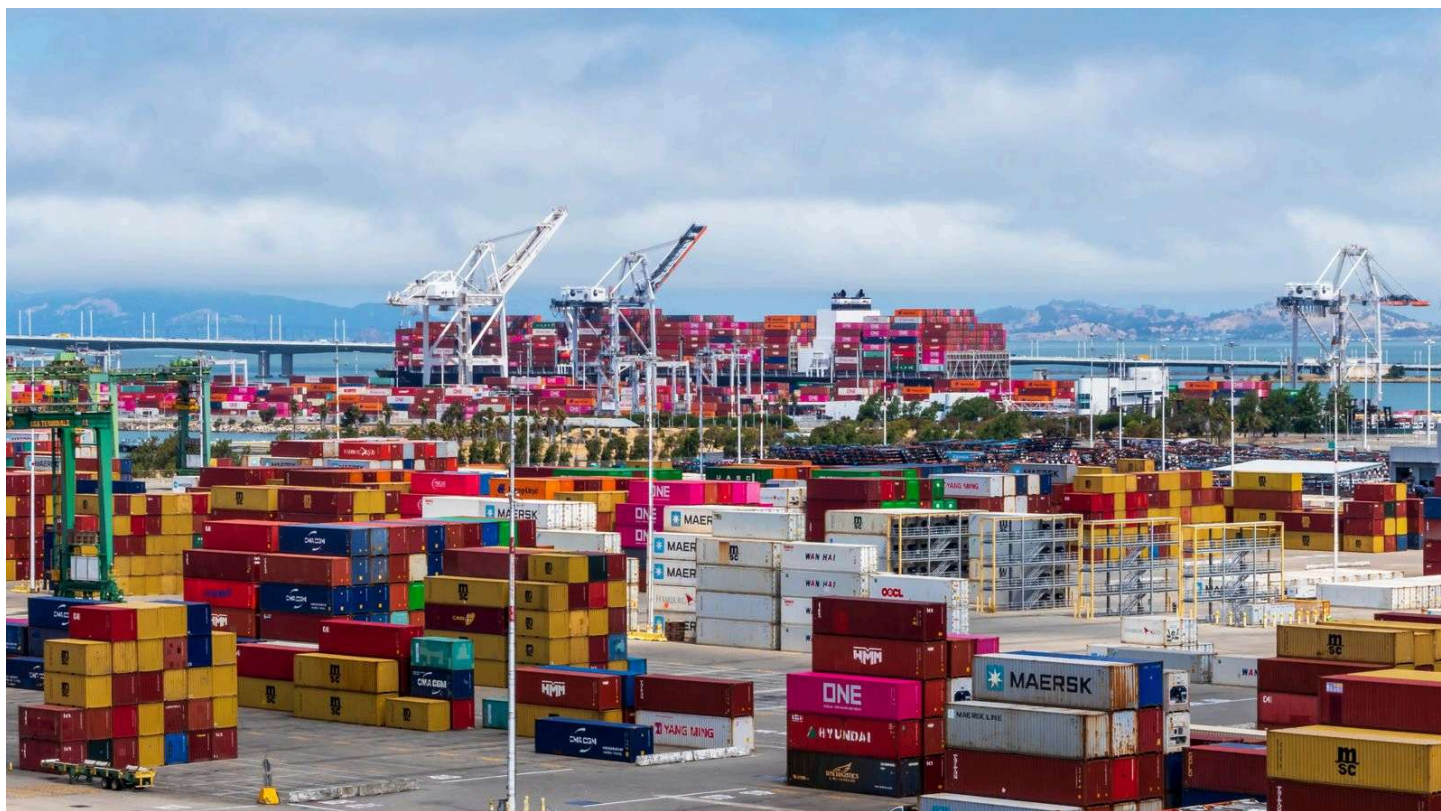


Trans-Pacific contract talks accelerating after Walmart signs



Carriers are urging importers to complete their trans-Pacific contract negotiations expeditiously in order to lock in their space allocations for the coming year. Photo credit: ambient_pix / Shutterstock.com.

[Bill Mongelluzzo, Senior Editor, Trans-Pacific](#) | Mar 16, 2026, 3:20 PM EDT

Container lines that paused trans-Pacific service contract talks to assess the impact of the war in the Middle East are back at the table, and expectations are that major retailers will sign in the coming week now that Walmart has finalized its 2026–27 contracts with a half-dozen carriers.

Walmart's move opens the door for other major retailers and, in turn, smaller importers and then non-vessel operating common carriers to ink their own service contracts, which typically go into effect May 1.

Despite the unknowns in terms of length and scope of the now two-week-long Middle East war, carriers say big-box retailers want to lock in vessel capacity.

Walmart, the largest US importer, has wrapped up its contract discussions with its core carriers, two sources familiar with the matter told the Journal of Commerce.

Carriers, and some forwarders, are urging customers to move expeditiously in their contract negotiations, rather than allowing uncertainties in global trade to deter them.

“We now have seen an unpredictable shock to the global ocean market in like four of the last six years,” a carrier executive who asked not to be named told the *Journal of Commerce*. “Some BCOs [beneficial cargo owners] recognized that and wanted to take risk off the table; they signed early and at higher rates than many were predicting.”

The executive added that analyst forecasts of supply and demand have rarely matched reality in recent years due to that outsized volatility. Geopolitical events including diversions away from the Red Sea, unpredictable US tariff policy and even more weather events, impacting ocean reliability, have begun to shift some shippers’ thinking, he said.

“Some shippers have come to realize that pushing carriers well below breakeven to save a few cents on their cost of goods is not worth the risk of a major unpredictable event happening,” the executive said.

Recouping higher fuel costs

While securing space remains paramount for cargo owners, rising bunker fuel prices, driven by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, is also driving contract discussions regarding bunker fuel adjustment factors. Shippers are reluctant to compensate carriers for the rising operating costs tied to the Middle East on a trade lane that is not directly impacted.

“The uncertainty and waiting around for clarity or resolution is not helpful to anyone,” said Kevin Parkerson, a consultant and former logistics manager at retailers. “Yes, it may impact overall capacity. Yes, it may impact fuel prices. But at this point, that shouldn’t delay the process of contracting. Everybody seems to be proceeding cautiously.”

At the moment, securing capacity in the Asia-US West Coast trade is not a significant issue that would slow negotiations.

“Asia to the West Coast will be fine,” a second carrier executive told the *Journal of Commerce*, noting that if the war in the Middle East drags on for some weeks, East Coast routings from the Indian sub-continent could be impacted by the congestion that is already building at some ports in the region.

In the interim, most importers would be wise to secure the minimum quantity commitments in their contracts as soon as they have a handle on what their space requirements will be, a third carrier executive said.

“Those BCOs who are slow-walking their negotiations to wait for better prices — it may backfire,” the executive said.

Contact Bill Mongelluzzo at bill.mongelluzzo@spglobal.com.

© 2026 S&P Global. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

You are permitted to print or download extracts from this material for your personal use only. None of this material may be used for any commercial or public use. For more information on reprints/eprints, please visit <https://subscribe.joc.com/mediasolutions/>.