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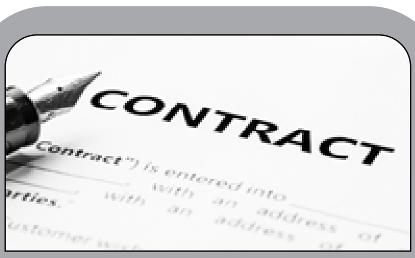

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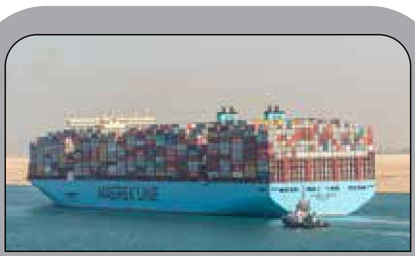

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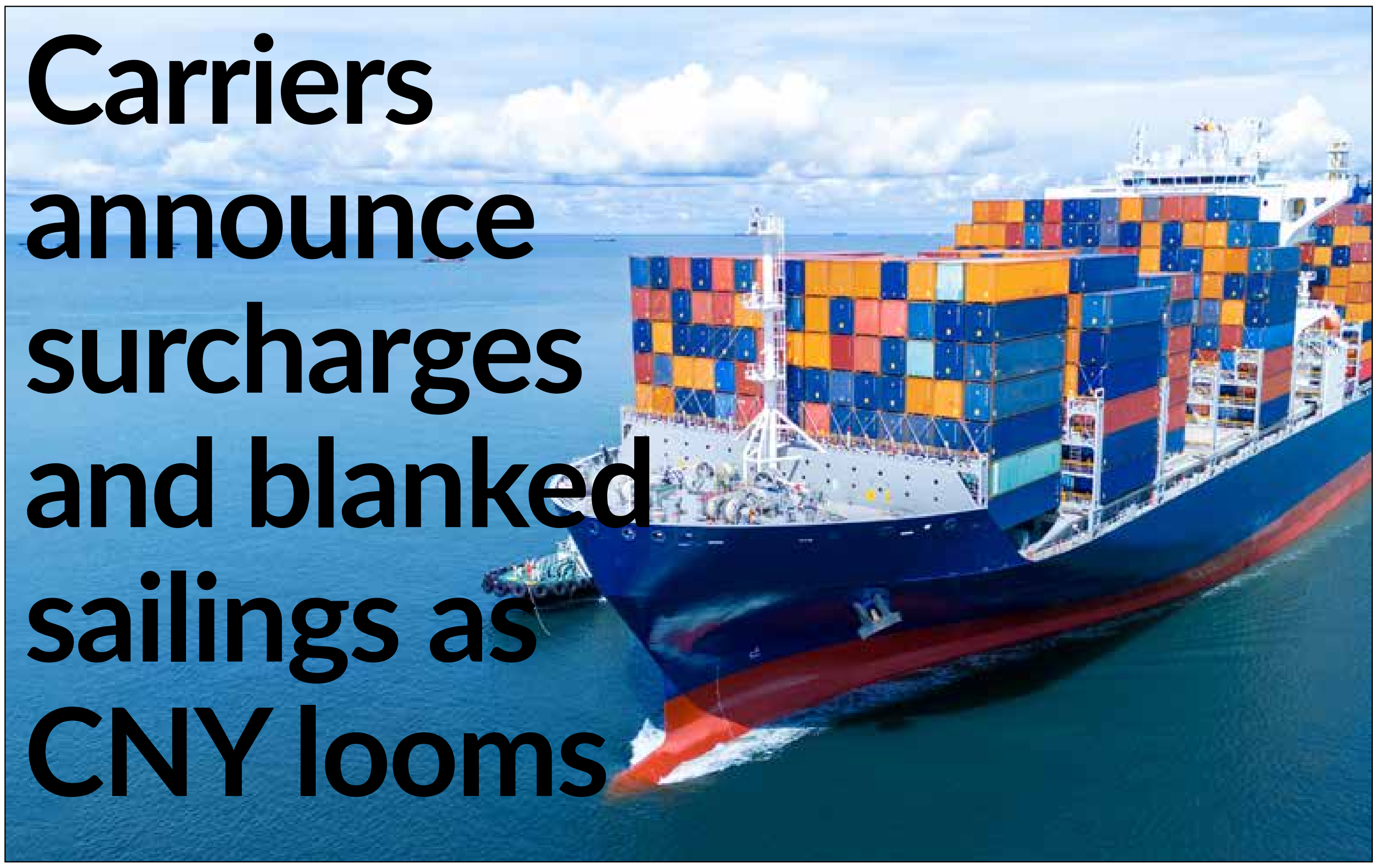

Carriers announce surcharges and blanked sailings as CNY looms

Forwarders and shippers are returning to work with a bump

FRESH from the festive break, forwarders and shippers are returning to work with a bump as they contend with a slew of new peak season surcharges (PSSs) brought about by the pre-Chinese New Year (CNY) rush.

Setting the groundworks, CMA CGM announced it would make use of a dual pricing approach, imposing a $250 per teu PSS on Asia-North Europe bookings from 29 December, prior to a new freight all-kinds (FAK) rate of $2,600 per teu on New Year's Day.

MSC then piggybacked on the latter, announcing its own $3,700 per 40 foot FAK for Asia-North Europe bookings would take effect on 1 January, only to inform customers that another FAK on the route would be coming on 15 January.

Forwarders seem none too surprised by the decision, with several having said that they expected the trade to experience a busy period in the run-up to CNY, one noting they had seen "increased bookings at the end of December going into January".

One told Voice of the Independent (VOTI): "I think the first half of January will see some space issues, but it may be more around carriers managing allocation agreements more closely – I'm not hearing of any roll pools yet."

> "I think the first half of January will see some space issues"

Asked what may have led to this, the forwarder said that while they were not certain, it may have been down to poor Asia-Europe schedule reliability across some of the alliances and carriers prompting shippers into limited front-loading.

"With these delays, I'm guessing shippers are trying to ship earlier, expecting the traditional January mini-peak," the forwarder added, pointing out that the continuing strength of demand had left carriers in a position to hike January prices via a series of PSSs.

Those were evident on not only CMA CGM's services, but Maersk's which announced a PSS for Asia-Mediterranean shipments of $1,500 per 40 foot, coming into effect on 5 January, while CMA CGM punted an FAK on the route of $5,500 per 40 foot.

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Modal shift threat may deal air shippers a decent hand

CHEAPER ocean freight coinciding with a general downward demand could give shippers an upper hand when it comes to airfreight block space agreement (BSA) negotiations for 2026, with much more caution in the air this year following a tepid 2025.

Per Xeneta, global air cargo volumes are forecast to rise by no more than three per cent this year, after last year's four per cent growth forecast, with indications that there will be substantive regional variations in BSAs over the course of 2026.

Chief airfreight officer at Xeneta Niall van de Wouw said that "last year had something for everyone", pointing to the benefit airlines received after higher-than-anticipated volumes in the early part of 2025, while shippers gained from lower rates in the second half.

> "I think something has to give in 2026 from a volume perspective"

But he said questions on trade and uncertainty on geopolitical tension added "a further layer of uncertainty, I think something has to give in 2026 from a volume perspective, and that means there's going to be more in it for shippers in terms of lower rates".

He added: "When I look at the biggest risks this year, right now I would say it's more likely we will see something that will put a stopper on the level of airfreight growth we have seen in the last two years."

Nonetheless, together with strength on the intra-Asia trade, AI, ecommerce, and hi-tech exports are helping to pump up carrier confidence in volume growth from Asia-Pacific into Europe and North America.

One source told Voice of the Independent (VOTI) they were expecting an average BSA upturn of anywhere from 10 to 20 per cent over the course of 2026 on the intra-Asia trade, with many BSAs on this routing having expired last month.

A senior executive at a multinational described intra-Asia lanes, both air and sea freight, as having hit historical highs by the end of 2025, suggesting the level of growth exceeded even that of the pandemic era.

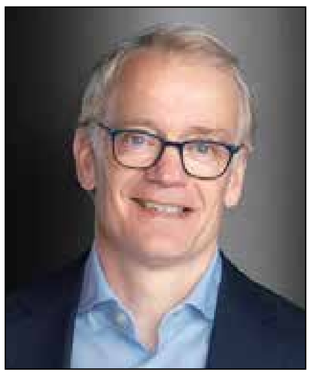
That may be good news in some respects, but with ocean freight experiencing a general slump – one that may worsen with a slew of new orders and extra capacity set to hit the market – and improving reliability, the opportunity is there for shippers to switch.

It is this that has complicated the approach to negotiations for shippers, particularly with recognition that there is increasing scope to see AI servers shift from air to sea, "provided supply chains can be planned accordingly".

"From a logistics perspective, if customers can plan their supply chains, then clearly moving by sea is a much more financially effective solution," said one source, pointing to overcapacity in ocean shipping and falling rates.

As if to add further confidence to shippers that they may be able to assure themselves of a reliance on air, a hoped for, and increasingly likely, easing of Red Sea disruptions could further increase capacity and put additional downward pressure on pricing.

One point of interest for van de Wouw is whether longer-term contracts can regain the ground they lost post-pandemic, or whether



NIALL VAN DE WOUW
Xeneta

shippers increasingly mirror the prevailing short-termism, particularly with demand expected to lag supply this year.

"Overall, the market has been relatively stable, but we are entering a phase when shippers will be looking for better rates, and demand may deteriorate in the first quarter," van de Wouw says.

Strength driven by a shift in seasonal patterns

continued from page 1

Chinese New Year may officially begin on 17 February, but the public holiday runs from 15 to 23 February, with forwarders noting that carriers were seemingly using the present strength of demand and the looming eight-day shutdown in China in negotiations.

"Talking to the carriers, they are all pushing at how strong they believe December and January, and even February, will be, although it is negotiation time. We saw freight rates increase for the second half of December, but nothing excessive," one forwarder said.

The final Drewry World Container Index (WCI) of 2025 only supported the claims of a looming peak, with Shanghai–Genoa and Shanghai–Rotterdam spot rates having climbed 10 per cent and eight per cent, respectively.

This marked the third successive week of price increases, with Drewry noting: "This strength is driven by a shift in seasonal patterns. Over the past three years, Drewry has recorded a double-digit month-on-month demand growth in December.

"This has established strong year-end volumes as the 'new normal'. As carriers are already recording early bookings ahead of the impending lunar new year in February, Drewry expects further slight rate increases next week."

Further carrier confidence could also be gleaned from Container Trades Statistics' latest data, which showed that by the end of October, total Asia-Europe volumes were up 8.6 per cent, year on year, surpassing the 21.95 million teu mark.

Of course, carriers themselves are only too aware CNY will necessitate service amendments, with the Gemini Cooperation first out of the blocks to announce the expected slew of blanked sailings for the period.

Those include two of its four weekly Asia-North Europe services – Loop 1 and Loop 3 –blanked in week nine (commencing 23 February); Asia-Med Loops 1 and 2 blanked in week eight (16 February); and Asia-Med Loop 3 will also be blanked in week nine.

Air rates and capacity fall, but CNY bounce on the way

AIRLINES engaged in a rapid reduction of available freighter capacity following the seasonal year-end peak, with volumes going into a dramatic slump and rates seemingly going the same way.

Per TAC data, spots on both Hong Kong-Europe and Hong Kong-US trades underwent a sharp decline in the opening days of 2026, with the full index for Hong Kong outbound routes showing a 12.8 per cent week-on-week decline.

Outbound Shanghai showed an even sharper weakening, dropping 19.9 per cent week on week, although the year-on-year dips proved less precipitous, with Hong Kong down 3.9 per cent compared with January 2025, and Shanghai down 6.1 per cent.

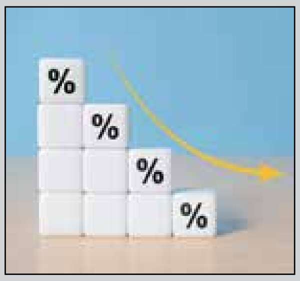
This contrasted somewhat with the global Baltic Air Freight Index, which indicated that globally there had been a far greater year-on year weakening, being down 11.4 per cent compared with January 2025, while there was a 14.1 per cent week-on-week drop.

Alongside the rate correction, airlines acted, significantly cutting available freighter capacity, with Rotate pointing to a 10 per cent week-on-week fall, but it has been on the Latin America-Europe lanes where the drop is more pronounced, down 33 per cent.

Interestingly, there have been some exceptions to the diminishing rates picture, with spots from Bangkok to Europe up week on week, while Taiwan experienced a spike on both the European and US trades – rising week on week and year on year.

Much of this has been put down to strong semiconductor exports out of Taiwan, with the Asian island shippers having moved to rapidly build-up its semiconductor business in Europe – including through the launch of training opportunities for European students.

With Chinese New Year approaching, there is some expectation that there will be a pre-holiday bounce, with sources pointing to an expected tightening later in the month as shippers look to get goods moving ahead of the China shutdown.



Focus ON

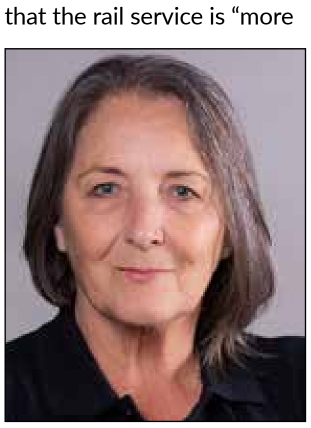
Carriers and forwarders – a relationship not broken, but getting

CARRIER forwarder relations were never easy. But the pandemic ruptured them. Quite how those relations look now really appears to depend on to whom you speak. In recent years, there has been something of a consensus among forwarders and shippers that the damage done over that tumultuous period was permanent; "we just cannot trust them anymore".

General manager for 1Up Cargo in South Africa, Cindy Luyt, tells Voice of the Independent (VOTI) that in those instances where they are able to, carriers are simply looking to "eliminate forwarders". In those instances where they cannot, what does Luyt think about the quality of service on offer?

"In South Africa we have noticed that the carriers have down scaled the number of staff who are office based and, in the case of a number of the shipping lines, are actually in the process of closing down their offices," Luyt tells VOTI. "Staff seem to be remote-working and we have noted that they appear to be favouring employing overseas staff rather than local, and often the individuals concerned do not have a clue where South Africa is, let alone about the current situations and challenges, such as bad weather, strikes, and shutdowns that may affect cargo movement."

Exemplifying the problem, Luyt notes that a carrier will have cargo consigned to "Port of Final Destination Johannesburg via Durban Port" on their bill of lading. She says this is despite carriers being "fully aware" that the rail service is "more often than not" out of service between Durban and Johannesburg. In the run-up to Christmas, she points out, the rail freight operators were unable to accept any cargo for at least two weeks.



Cindy Luyt
1Up Cargo

"The cargo then stands at a siding in Durban with no regard for the consignee waiting in Johannesburg," Luyt adds. "Should you suggest to them that they need to consider alternative movement by road, they take that as an 'instruction' and then charge for additional road haulage as well as storage for the container from the time that it discharged from the vessel, and expect that this is paid prior to release."

Such behaviour may be unique to South Africa presently – other forwarders we spoke did not share such anecdotes – but there is a raft of claims before the US Federal Maritime Commission (FMC) over unfair charging practices between 2020 and 2023. Given the weak demand – not to mention the clamouring from carriers during the 2022 post-Covid dip, VOTI asked forwarders whether carriers were short-sighted on this front.

One tells VOTI, "the thing is, they know that the cargo has to go to them whatever they do, so they really do not care about relationships with forwarders", pointing out, as Luyt does, that the ultimate ideal is to do away with forwarders completely. In this respect, the forwarder says the demand for a relationship comes from the forwarder, who has more to benefit by being in good standing with their carrier partners.

"And for us, we are managing to get on well with our carrier partners – it is going well," the forwarder adds. "However, we speak to other forwarders and hear that they are having issues engaging the carriers at all. They tell us that the carriers have all but cut them out and are only interested in speaking to the large forwarders or direct to shippers."

This reflects Luyt's thoughts on the matter. She notes that rather than being able to contact staff by phone, the shipping lines are tending to favour interaction through their portals, resulting in poor service levels and "extremely delayed" turnaround times. To top it off, she says that the carriers are then passing on the additional charges that their own practices are resulting in before releasing the cargo.

"The days of actually having a friendly, reliable contact person that you can call, explain the challenges that you are facing and get answers are gone," she continues. "None of the shipping lines seem to have any sense of urgency. A number of the lines are also requesting all details of consignee/consignor and going directly to these parties and offering in-house 'door to door' services, thus eliminating forwarders where they are able, which is undermining trust levels and not necessarily giving the best service."

> "None of the shipping lines seem to have any sense of urgency"

Sticking very much to ocean carriers for the moment, it is worth noting that they have also made plays into the aviation sector – using their huge cash reserves to buy up aircraft and get their own freighter airlines running. One of those, CMA CGM, saw its effort to launch an air cargo operation in line with Air France-KLM go bust fairly rapidly, but others have stuck at it and SME forwarders have not always been wholly opposed. Speaking last year, one told VOTI that they were not as concerned about the risk posed by ocean carriers moving into airfreight, even pointing to some of the possible benefits that could accrue.

"There is potential for positive impact if these carriers adhere to IATA standards and uphold the established ethical norms of the sector," they said. "When done correctly, this expansion can bring advantages, such as enhanced multimodal capabilities that offer comprehensive logistics solutions. However, if ocean carriers adopt aggressive competitive tactics similar to those in shipping, directly challenging forwarders by circumventing their established client relationships, they may face significant obstacles. Success in this new arena will likely depend on collaborating with forwarders to ensure regularity and consistency in service offerings."

Picking up on that shift away from office-based staff, Espace Global Freight's sales and marketing director, Kelly Vasey, believes that the breakdown in relations between carriers and forwarders may not be wholly down to disdain between the two sectors. Instead, Vasey suggests that the changing shape of technology could have unwittingly played a role in reshaping the industry.

"When I started in freight forwarding over 25 years ago (and goodness, that does make me feel old!), the office was a buzz," Vasey tells VOTI. "Phones rang constantly, people spoke multiple languages across desks, and there was real energy in those conversations. That is what I loved. My languages degree led me into this industry, and those daily interactions were a huge part of the appeal. Over time, though, there has been a noticeable decline in phone chatter. Carriers now often prefer an email, a WhatsApp message, or communication via another platform rather than picking up the phone. Behaviours have changed – not just between carriers and forwarders, but across the entire way people do business."

Such shifts were already beginning before the pandemic. But Vasey says that the onset of Covid and the ensuing lockdowns "certainly accelerated" the use of video calls – Teams, Zoom, Google Meet – adding that in this respect, it has changed how the industry connects. Pointing to the behaviour having been in play prior to Covid Vasey adds that the move away from face-to-face meetings is clearly no longer just purely health or risk related. Instead, she says it is about time, efficiency and data.

"People are stretched, diaries are full, and there's a strong preference for quicker, more streamlined touchpoints," she continues. "Social anxiety is also something we are seeing more of post-pandemic, although whether that is truly pandemic-related or simply a consequence of the digital age and constant online presence is up for debate."

Nonetheless, the sense is that carriers maintain close relations with larger forwarders, indicating the view they have for the smaller operators. This, others have told VOTI is odd considering that SMEs are responsible for 60 per cent of volumes. Of course, those are disaggregated. Some have suggested SMEs negotiating for space in bulk, bringing the buying power of an MNC while retaining their independence. "It would make them think twice".

It is certainly an idea, and one other forwarders have been willing to show support for. But in the present, SMEs are left recognising that – whatever the cause – the pandemic-induced rapid adoption of digital communication has, as Vasey says, proved a major "catalyst for a shift in relations between carriers and forwarders for sure".

"That shift has been further compounded by increased workloads, constant time pressure, and the ongoing impact of Brexit on UK–EU relations," she continues. "We simply do not see as many European carriers coming into the UK as we once did, and this too has inevitably changed the dynamic. With less face-to-face interaction and fewer phone conversations, there are far fewer opportunities to build relationships in the traditional sense, resulting in an even greater reliance on digital communication and systems."

Offering his thoughts of the aviation side, executive director of the Air Forwarders Association Brandon Fried tells VOTI that he too has spotted a post-pandemic shift in the way that carriers and forwarders relate to one another. However, he believes it to have proved a more uneven affair than some of the others VOTI has spoken with.

"The pandemic reset the power dynamic," Fried says. "During the capacity crunch, airlines held the leverage and often made unilateral decisions on pricing, space allocation, and service terms. As capacity normalised, the relationship has slowly moved back toward balance, but it has not fully reset. Some carriers have re-engaged forwarders as partners; others are still operating with a pandemic-era mindset."

As such, he says that there have been improvements. And while that shift to digitalised approaches to business may have diluted carrier forwarder relations in one respect, Fried points to gains made around communication and data sharing with at least some of the carriers. Nonetheless, he notes that there remain structural issues.

"One of the biggest challenges is that airlines increasingly rely on third-party ground handlers to manage cargo operations," he continues. "While that may make sense operationally for carriers, it often creates a disconnect for forwarders. When problems arise – warehouse delays, storage charges, cargo availability issues – forwarders frequently struggle to get timely access to airline decision-makers who can actually resolve them. The result is finger-pointing, delays, and costs that forwarders are left to explain and absorb."

Fried notes that it is often worth considering that the relationship between carriers and forwarders can often look hostile from the outside because it is often transactional rather than strategic. This is, he says, is because while the forwarders need to engage the carriers as partners,

Carrier-forwarder relations fragile

KELLY VASEY
Espace Global Freight

there is also a need to protect their own interests. On both the air and ocean side there is an obvious sense that without due consideration, forwarders could find themselves usurped by the carriers. To ensure, then, that they protect their interests, Fried says that forwarders need to diversify their carrier relationships while also pushing back on unreasonable terms, documenting service failures tied to ground handling, and being disciplined about escalation when operational issues occur.

"At the same time, carriers need to acknowledge a basic reality: forwarders are not just customers," Fried continues. "They are the primary interface with shippers, the ones managing expectations, compliance, and service recovery – often for issues outside their control. When airlines outsource the operation, they still own the accountability. Recognising that would go a long way toward reducing friction."

Luyt concurs. When asked what forwarders can do to improve their lot given the shifting relationship with carriers, she says that it is all about letting the carriers know that while they may carry the cargo, it is the forwarder who has been vested with protecting the best interest of the shipper – and protecting their own interest while they are at it.

This, she says, means pushing back against carrier. It means letting the carrier know that "we will not divulge absolutely every detail of the consignee/consignor just to get a quoted rate". And for this to work, it means the whole forwarding industry must be unified.

Interestingly, returning to the idea of shifting expectations, Vasey notes changes on the buying side too, Vasey notes, pointing out that recent years have witnessed a "dramatic evolution" on that front. She believes this is down to a wider societal shift, noting that in general "we have all become accustomed to instant responses, quick confirmations and near-immediate service". This, she continues, has been driven largely by consumer platforms that have set the bar exceptionally high for speed and customer experience.

"Those expectations inevitably spill over into B2B and logistics," Vasey says. "Cold calling and knocking on doors are largely a thing of the past. Phone numbers are not always visible on websites or even email signatures anymore. Businesses increasingly push communication through websites, portals, emails, messaging apps and freight platforms. All of these touchpoints can be tracked, measured and analysed, and when data is king in today's business world, that is understandably attractive."

> "we have all become accustomed to instant responses, quick confirmations and near-immediate service"

So, where does this leave freight forwarders when it comes to relations with carriers? Have things improved? Vasey believes that, in some ways, the answer is yes. For instance, she notes that digital tools have brought efficiency, transparency and speed. Communication is often quicker, records are clearer, and platforms help manage growing volumes with fewer resources.

"But there's also a downside," she says. "Relationships can feel more transactional, loyalty can be thinner, and when capacity tightens or costs rise, forwarders can often feel exposed. This is why it's more important than ever for forwarders to protect our interests. Strong relationships still matter – even if they are built differently. Clear communication, well-defined service level agreements, diversified carrier networks and mutual respect are crucial. Forwarders should confidently understand their value, push for transparency, and not be afraid to challenge when necessary.

Technology may dominate the way we communicate, but trust, collaboration and professionalism remain at the heart of a successful carrier-forwarder relationship. Ultimately, while the tools used and the behaviours may have changed, the fundamentals haven not. Freight still moves because people make it happen. And while there may be fewer phone calls and a lot more screens these days, the relationships we build – however they start – are still what carry us through the challenging moments as well as the good."

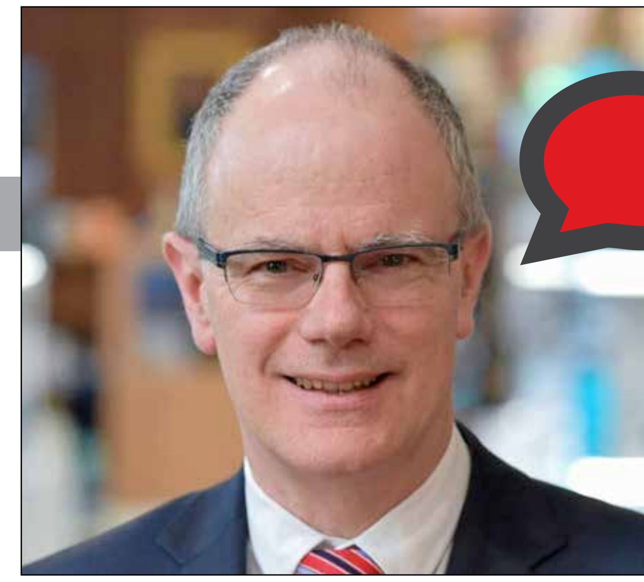
For Fried, the bottom line when it comes to airfreight is that while the relationship between carriers and forwarders is not broken, it is fragile.

"Progress depends on carriers and forwarders treating each other as long-term partners – and on airlines ensuring that outsourced ground operations don't become a barrier to accountability and problem solving," he concludes.

Spotlight ON

James Hookham

This may be the year overcapacity brings a reckoning for box carriers



SME shippers and their SME forwarding partners should pay close attention to carriers this year, with director of the Global Shippers Forum (GSF) James Hookham warning that 2026 may be the year where excess capacity finally catches up on the big container lines.

Speaking to Voice of the Independent (VOTI) Hookham says there have been false dawns before the impact of all these new ships on the liner shipping market.

"I have been saying that it was the looming threat that would engulf the carriers for the past two or three years but, for various reasons, it has not happened. In 2024 it was the Red Sea Crisis and in 2025 it was the instability caused by tariffs," Hookham continues.

"All those situations did though was postpone the inevitable and as the order book has continued to grow there is still a lot of capacity out there and still to arrive over the next two to three years."

Compounding the excess of capacity that is already on the market is that there are further deliveries to come, with the 633 new box ships ordered over the course of 2025 representing more than five million teu – breaking 2024's record of 4.8 million teu.

Shipping analysts have claimed that the orderbook-to-fleet ratio has now surpassed the 33 per cent mark, indicating the huge scale of new orders set to come online.

"For me, the big story of 2026 as far as the small and independent shippers and their forwarding partners are concerned will be the way that carriers seek to deal with this glut of capacity," Hookham continues.

"From what we are seeing, shippers' plans for 2026 could be to play the spot market – they will risk that roller coaster – and hope they can beat the carriers this way."

Hookham's concerns echo those of others that VOTI has spoken to over the recent years, with many claiming that the major problem with shipping lines is that it appears that they tend to hope for the best rather than plan for the worst – "consider all this capacity they have".

Hookham says: "This isn't the first time there has been an excess of teu capacity over the numbers of teu needing to be shipped

"There was the period in the 2010s when the really big 17,000-plus teu vessels were coming online. So, perhaps the carriers are looking at that and thinking 'we've had excess capacity before and survived, why should it be different this time?' But what is different now is not just that demand for goods is low and showing only sluggish signs of growth, but that it is so variable and could change permanently as a result of the geopolitical polices and actions we are seeing."

With pockets of global instability and a US administration that appears desperate to reshape every facet of the international order, the world is in a moment of hesitation.

This, Hookham says, disrupts the sustained, predictable economic growth that had "always been there, at least before Covid", and so inhibits long-term planning, which he says explains the popularity of the spot rate market.

"I think that aside from the option of laying up a lot of ships you will see the carriers try to manage the spot market to avoid a meltdown in rates," he continues.

"We are already seeing this with blank sailings and a recent slew of freight all-kind rate announcements.

"They are essentially going to try and just sort of manage the capacity – even with it growing – by pulling all the levers they traditionally try and pull when they have excess capacity."

But will it work? Hookham is clear when he says "no, I think this is the year that they will see their reckoning," suggesting that given the present state of demand and capacity we may see this start around the middle of the year.

> "I think it will be a really critical year, and one which could put a lot of pressure on some of the less resilient lines"

Should he be proved correct, he says he would expect to see shipping lines look to lay a lot of ships up, which would present its own problems.

"I mean, this would be a serious number of ships, with a serious level of capacity and it will prove to be not only a very tough decision – as it will hammer their cash reserves that they built up over the pandemic – but very tough to put into practice," Hookham continues.

"If they take this route, it is going to cost a lot of money to make happen, and it will also take time to get in place, and that's assuming they can find somewhere to put them."

Even so, Hookham does not think it is beyond the realms of possibility, especially given the level of looming capacity and the present market fragility and lack of demand, but, of course, there remains one big factor: the unknown – "Black Swan events have saved carriers in the recent past. You can't rule out it happening again.".

director
Global Shippers Forum

What does all this mean for the SME – shippers and forwarders – community? It appears that information is key.

"What we are saying to smaller shippers is that they should stay tuned to the signals and the messaging that is being put into the market, particularly if you are a spot market player as you won't have the relationships those using contracts have," he adds.

"If there are problems then you will want to be giving as much notice downstream as possible – to your customers, contractors and your staff, who will need to sort out the consequences for you.

"That's a tactic that the larger businesses deploy. They do hold back a lot more volume and do not commit to a contract rate at the beginning of the year but hang on to it and hope to place it on the spot market."

Such an approach is taken in the hope that rates will have dropped by June, July, or August, when those same shippers are wanting to move their Christmas stock.

The problem is that this point coincides with Hookham's predicted carrier reckoning.

"I think it will be a really critical year, and one which could put a lot of pressure on some of the less resilient lines, bringing its own problems of possible further mergers or even business failures," he says.

"We have not been in this situation before, where we have had this level of excess capacity chasing such slow growing and unpredictable demand in such a fragile geopolitical landscape."

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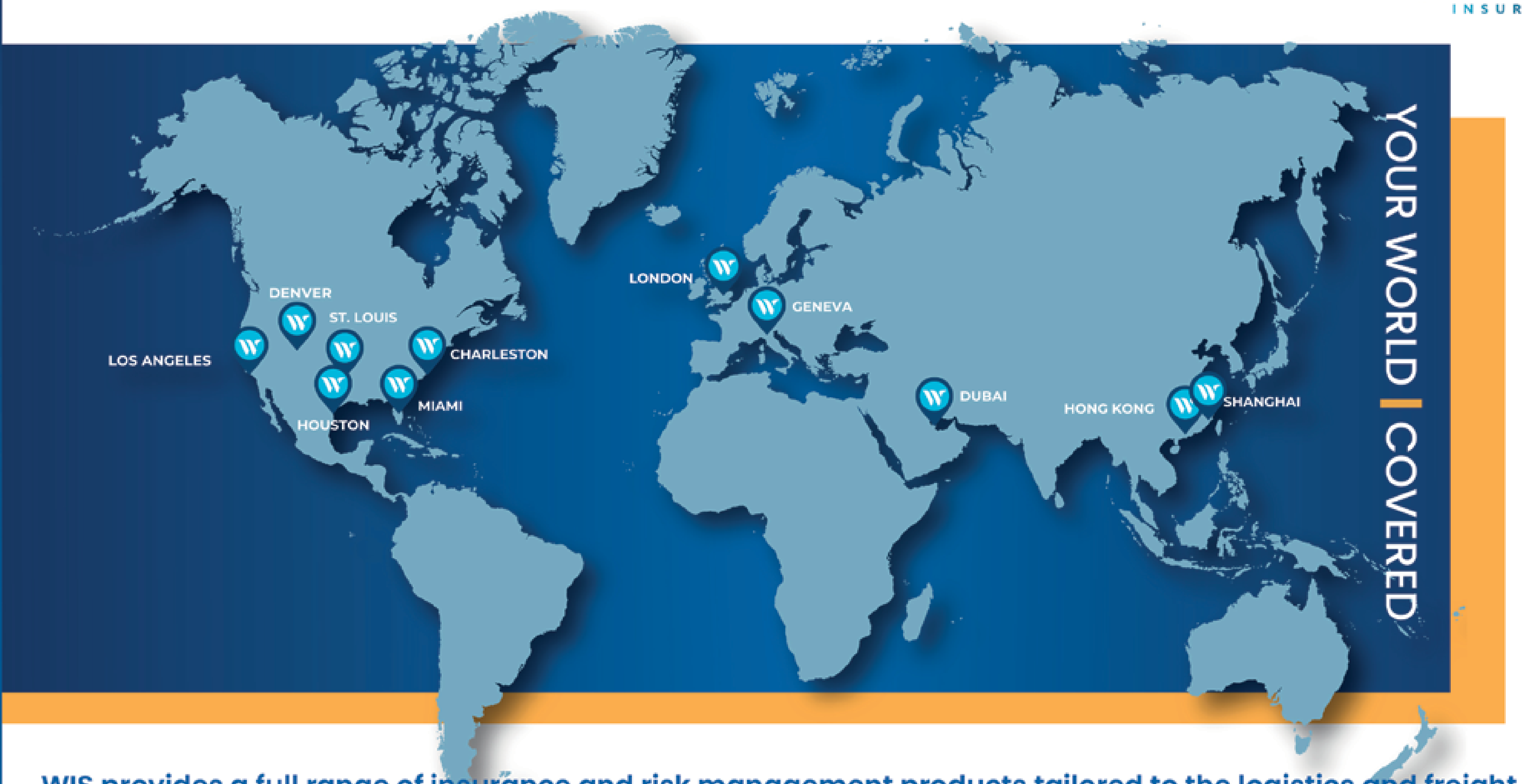

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More speculation as Maersk dips its toes into Suez waters

RED Sea waters appear to be undergoing tests with reports that Maersk has waived its 'transit disruption fee' after the 6,645 teu Maersk Sebarok transited the Suez Canal on 23 December, reflecting expectations of multiple sources for a return to the waterway.

Deployed on Maersk's India/Middle East-US east coast MECL1 route, a service on which APL and CMA CGM charter slots, the Sebarok departed Salalah on 15 December, per AIS data, diverting from its planned passage around the Cape of Good Hope.

As this issue was going to press, the vessel was running on a schedule that would see it arrive in New York on 13 January, before going on to make calls at Charleston, Houston, and Savannah.

For those expecting a full-throated return to the canal, it may be best to cool those tempers, with the next vessel in the service rotation, the 6,650 teu Maersk Senang, already off the coast of East Africa, heading south for the Cape.

While Xeneta's eeSea liner database, shows the next vessel in the MECL1 rotation, the US-flagged 6,200 teu Maersk Atlanta, having passed the Cape of Good Hope on 3 January with expectations that it will arrive at New York on 20 January.

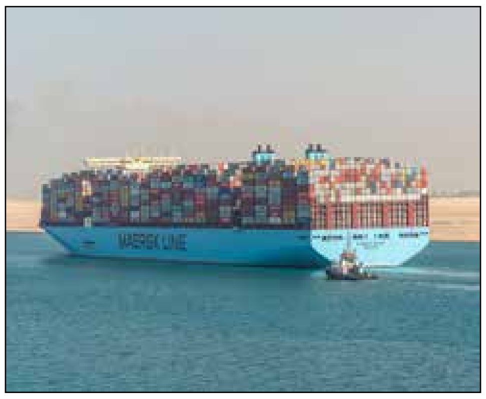
Having stated previously it would take a "stepwise approach" to renewing Suez transits, depending on security in the area, the Danish carrier appeared to not be responding to any requests for comment.

> It added that this initial sailing would mark the first step

Although, on 22 December it reported the Suez transit and said: "Whilst this is a significant step forward, it does not mean that we are at a point where we are considering a wider east-west network change back to the trans-Suez corridor.

"Assuming that security thresholds continue to be met, we are considering continuing our stepwise approach towards gradually resuming navigation along the east-west corridor via the Suez Canal and the Red Sea."

It added that this initial sailing would mark the first step, before following up with a



"limited number of additional trans-Suez sailings. However, there are no planned sailings currently".

Expectations that carriers would begin testing the waters have only grown following last year's US-brokered ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, and while major question marks hover over how long, and even if that is holding, attacks in the Red Sea have diminished.

Sources told Voice of the Independent we could expect to see a small number of, "perhaps not even announced" services going through the canal, with some reducing their forecast timeframes on when we could see a full return.

One source, having previously claimed "there is no way carriers will return to the Red Sea before 2027", now believes it is reasonable to see carriers reverting to the route before this year is out.

Responding to Maersk's test service, Alphaliner said: "The move appears to mark a shift in how the Danish carrier is pricing routes involving the Suez Canal and Red Sea passage, which have been disrupted for the past two years."

If Maersk does cut the surcharge, it will prove a nice new year boost for shippers, with it having been introduced at the tail-end of 2023, at $200 per teu diverted from Suez, and up to $450 per feu.

US shipper also pursuing HMM, claiming 'pandemic practices'

BED, Bath and Beyond's administrators are going after HMM at the US Federal Maritime Commission for millions of dollars over pandemic-era practices, with claims that some $39.7 million in profits were under threat.

Rebranded Butterfly-1, the shipper was allegedly "coerced" by the South Korean carrier into paying extracontractual surcharges over a 14-month period, as well as being hit with $4 million of detention and demurrage fees.

Per the complaint filed at the FMC: "The charges were not just or reasonable, because of circumstances outside the control of [the] complainant and its agents and service providers, such as congestion, lack of appointments, and shortage of equipment.

"Records also reflect the astronomical scale of charges for idling containers (charges that would in many instances run into multiple tens of thousands of dollars) that HMM imposed, despite it failing to schedule appointments for those very same containers."

According to the administrators, after experiencing a 62.37 FEU shortfall in HMM's contracted service commitments, Bed, Bath and Beyond was on the hook for $440,000 in additional charges over the course of 2020.

In 2021, the cost surged to $8.9 million, as it sought capacity from the open market after, it claims, HMM failed to carry more than a quarter of the contracted 2,000 FEU, while the extra contractual charges added up to $430,000 in 2020 and $2.9m in 2021.

"The lost profits sustained by [the] complainant on a per-container basis substantially exceed the excess costs incurred by [the] complainant's purchase of alternative carriage," the administrators said.

"Had we been unable to secure any alternative carriage for HMM's service commitment shortfall of 593.74 FEU during 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, our lost profits would have amounted to at least an astronomical $39.7 million."

What the filing does not make clear is the precise level of damages being sought, but if the figures above are totted up it could exceed $16 million, with the carrier joining what is proving to be an increasing list of other container lines Butterfly-1 is pursuing.

Top of that list remains OOCL, with the $38 million – potentially rising to $44 million, well over double the prospective claim HMM may be forced to pay out; BAL Container Line, Evergreen, MSC, and Yang Ming are also on the hook.

Voice of the Independent

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