



5.1 World seaborne trade


11 billion tons
of goods traded in 2021 was transported by sea




50% of all goods discharged and 35% of all goods loaded in seaports in developing Asia



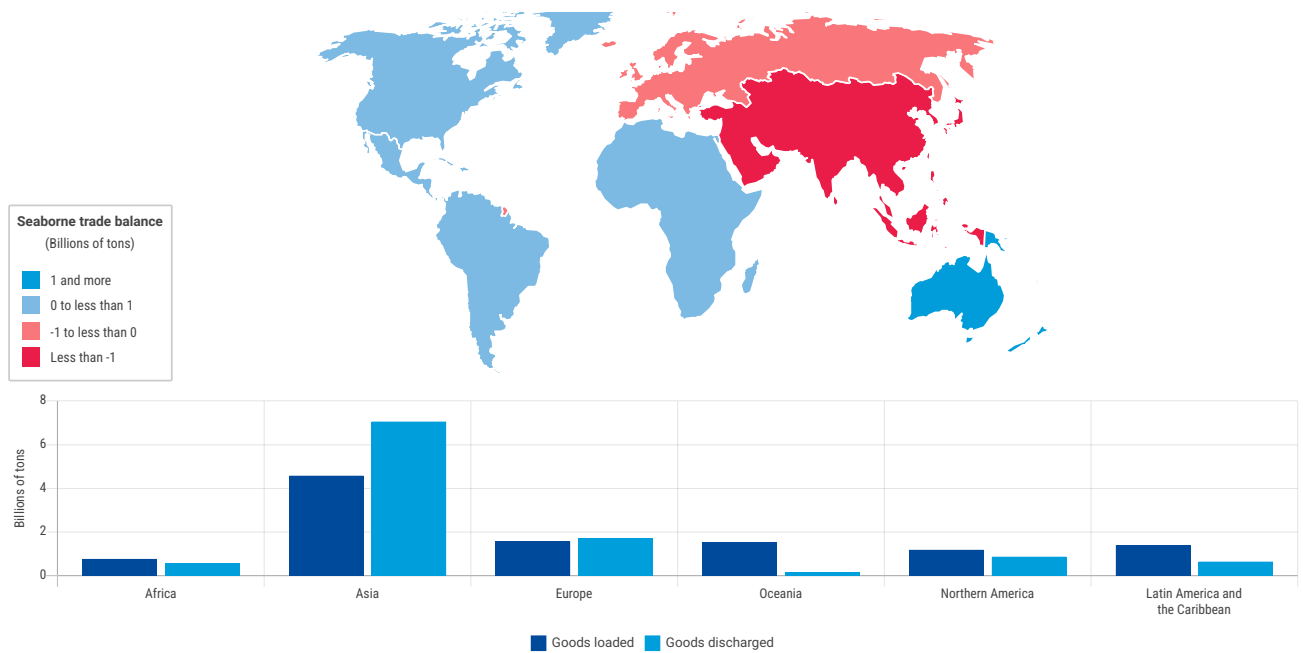
92% of growth in volume loaded from 2011 to 2021 has been growth in dry cargo



Developing economies' seaborne trade balance was -648 million tons in 2021



Map 1. Tonnage loaded and discharged, 2021
(Billions of tons)



Note: Europe includes the Russian Federation and the French overseas departments.

Trends and geography of world seaborne trade

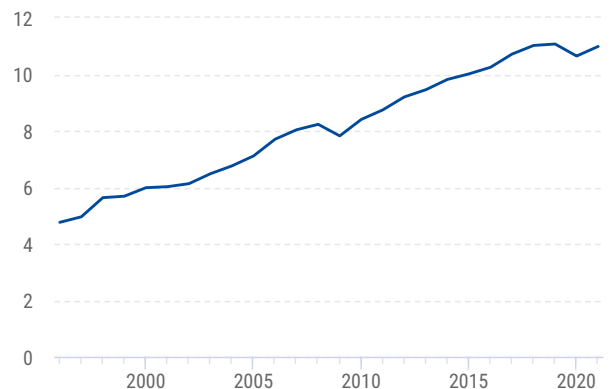
In 2021, international maritime trade bounced back by an estimated 3.2 per cent from 2020. Shipments reached 11.0 billion tons, a volume slightly below pre-pandemic levels.

Asia remained the world-leading maritime freight area with Asian ports, in both developed and developing regions, loading around 4.6 billion tons of goods, or about 42 per cent of total goods loaded in ports worldwide. About 7.1 billion tons, equivalent to 64 per cent of total goods discharged worldwide, were received by Asian ports in 2021.

In 1970, more than half of global seaborne trade was tanker cargo. In 2021, almost three-quarters of loaded goods were dry cargo, including bulk and cargo shipped in containers. Of the total maritime freight shipped internationally in 2021, 8.0 billion tons was dry cargo.¹

Figure 1. Goods loaded worldwide

(Billions of tons)



Contribution of developing economies

Figure 2. Seaborne trade of developing economies
(Percentage of corresponding world tonnage)



In 2021, developing economies still accounted for the majority of global seaborne trade. Asian developing economies alone discharged 50 per cent and loaded 35 per cent of the world total. Participation in globalized manufacturing and containerized trade has generally been concentrated in Asia, notably in China and neighbouring East Asian economies. Other developing regions did not contribute equally, a reflection of their varying degrees of integration into global value chains and manufacturing networks.

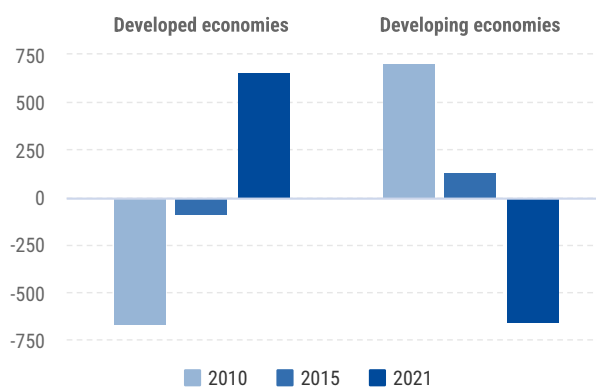
Developments in seaborne trade balances

Developing economies reported a maritime trade deficit of 648 million tons in 2021 while developed economies had a maritime trade surplus. This is a reversal of roles from 2010 when the developing economies had a maritime trade surplus of similar magnitude.

The maritime trade deficit for developing economies can be attributed to discharging dry cargo including bulk and containerized goods more than loading. This in turn is concentrated in the developing economies of Asia. For other cargo types and in other geographical areas developing economies often have a maritime trade surplus.

This parallels the development in the composition of seaborne trade. There were 2.2 billion tons more goods traded by sea in 2021 than in 2011. Of that added volume, 92 per cent was dry cargo.

Figure 3. Seaborne trade balance
(Millions of tons)



Concepts and definitions

The figures on seaborne trade in this section measure the volumes of international shipments, in metric tons, of goods loaded and discharged in the world's seaports. Cabotage and transshipments are not included.

Goods loaded for international shipment are assumed to be exports, while goods discharged from ships are assumed to be imports. The seaborne trade balance measures the difference between the volumes of loaded and discharged goods.

Dry cargo refers to cargo that is usually not carried in tankers, such as dry bulks (e.g., coal, ores, grains), pallets, bags, crates, and containers. "Other" tanker trade refers to tanker trade, excluding crude oil. It includes refined petroleum products, gas and chemicals.

The data presented in this section have been compiled from various sources, including country reports as well as port industry and other specialist websites (see [UNCTAD, 2022](#)).

For references, see UNCTAD Handbook of Statistics 2023, annex 6.4

Table 1. Total seaborne trade by group of economies

Group of economies	Loaded			Discharged			Balance	
	Volume		Annual growth rate	Volume		Annual growth rate	Volume	
	(Millions of tons)		(Percentage)	(Millions of tons)		(Percentage)	(Millions of tons)	
	2016	2021	2021	2016	2021	2021	2016	2021
World^a	10 247	10 985	3.2	10 303	10 975	3.2	-57	10
Developed economies	4 500	4 936	2.4	4 553	4 278	4.1	-53	658
Developing economies	5 747	6 049	3.9	5 750	6 698	2.7	-4	-648
Developing economies: Africa	694	762	3.6	480	553	8.5	214	209
Developing economies: Americas	1 355	1 383	0.7	566	638	8.2	789	745
Developing economies: Asia and Oceania	3 698	3 904	5.1	4 704	5 507	1.5	-1 006	-1 603

^a Annual world totals of goods loaded and discharged are not necessarily the same, given bilateral asymmetries in international merchandise trade statistics and that goods loaded in one calendar year may reach their port of destination in the next calendar year.

Table 2. Seaborne trade by cargo type and group of economies

Crude oil

Group of economies	Loaded			Discharged			Balance	
	Volume		Annual growth rate	Volume		Annual growth rate	Volume	
	(Millions of tons)		(Percentage)	(Millions of tons)		(Percentage)	(Millions of tons)	
	2016	2021	2021	2016	2021	2021	2016	2021
World^a	1 832	1 700	-0.9	1 985	1 846	-1.0	-153	-146
Developed economies	339	429	-2.3	1 104	879	0.1	-764	-450
Developing economies	1 493	1 272	-0.4	882	968	-1.9	611	304
Developing economies: Africa	271	226	-3.7	39	25	-19.0	233	202
Developing economies: Americas	232	190	-5.9	52	36	-6.7	181	154
Developing economies: Asia and Oceania	989	855	1.8	791	906	-1.1	198	-51

^a Annual world totals of goods loaded and discharged are not necessarily the same, given bilateral asymmetries in international merchandise trade statistics and that goods loaded in one calendar year may reach their port of destination in the next calendar year.

Other tanker trade

Group of economies	Loaded			Discharged			Balance	
	Volume		Annual growth rate	Volume		Annual growth rate	Volume	
	(Millions of tons)		(Percentage)	(Millions of tons)		(Percentage)	(Millions of tons)	
	2016	2021	2021	2016	2021	2021	2016	2021
World^a	1 238	1 252	4.1	1 235	1 273	4.1	3	-21
Developed economies	550	503	2.8	517	430	8.6	33	73
Developing economies	688	749	5.0	718	843	1.9	-30	-94
Developing economies: Africa	59	100	18.6	81	118	10.5	-22	-19
Developing economies: Americas	81	71	-5.6	128	129	-0.4	-47	-58
Developing economies: Asia and Oceania	548	579	4.4	509	596	0.8	40	-17

^a Annual world totals of goods loaded and discharged are not necessarily the same, given bilateral asymmetries in international merchandise trade statistics and that goods loaded in one calendar year may reach their port of destination in the next calendar year.

Dry cargo

Group of economies	Loaded			Discharged			Balance	
	Volume		Annual growth rate	Volume		Annual growth rate	Volume	
	(Millions of tons)		(Percentage)	(Millions of tons)		(Percentage)	(Millions of tons)	
	2016	2021	2021	2016	2021	2021	2016	2021
World^a	7 176	8 033	4.0	7 083	7 856	4.1	93	177
Developed economies	3 610	4 005	2.9	2 932	2 969	4.7	678	1 035
Developing economies	3 566	4 029	5.1	4 150	4 887	3.7	-585	-858
Developing economies: Africa	364	436	4.6	360	410	10.2	3	26
Developing economies: Americas	1 041	1 122	2.4	386	472	12.2	655	649
Developing economies: Asia and Oceania	2 161	2 471	6.4	3 405	4 004	2.2	-1 243	-1 534

^a Annual world totals of goods loaded and discharged are not necessarily the same, given bilateral asymmetries in international merchandise trade statistics and that goods loaded in one calendar year may reach their port of destination in the next calendar year.

 **Table 3. Development of goods loaded worldwide by type of cargo**

(Millions of tons)

Year	Total goods	Crude oil	Other tanker trade	Dry cargo
1976	3 366	1 555	289	1 522
1981	3 555	1 364	327	1 864
1986	3 385	1 126	424	1 835
1991	4 120	1 333	457	2 330
1996	4 758	1 590	537	2 631
2001	6 020	1 678	499	3 844
2006	7 702	1 783	915	5 004
2011	8 739	1 751	1 028	5 959
2016	10 247	1 832	1 238	7 176
2021	10 985	1 700	1 252	8 033

1. For a discussion of recent developments, see (UNCTAD, 2023f).