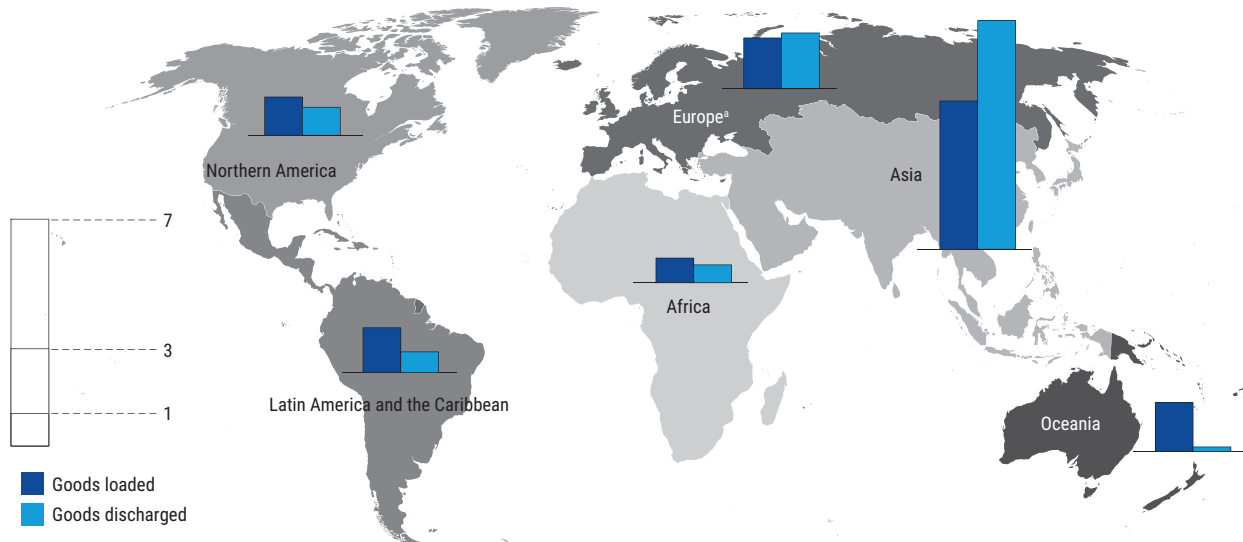




# Fact sheet #13: World seaborne trade

**Map 1 Tonnage loaded and discharged, 2021**

(Billions of metric tons)



<sup>a</sup> Including the Russian Federation and the French overseas departments.

## 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 2022d).

## Trends and geography of world seaborne trade in 2021

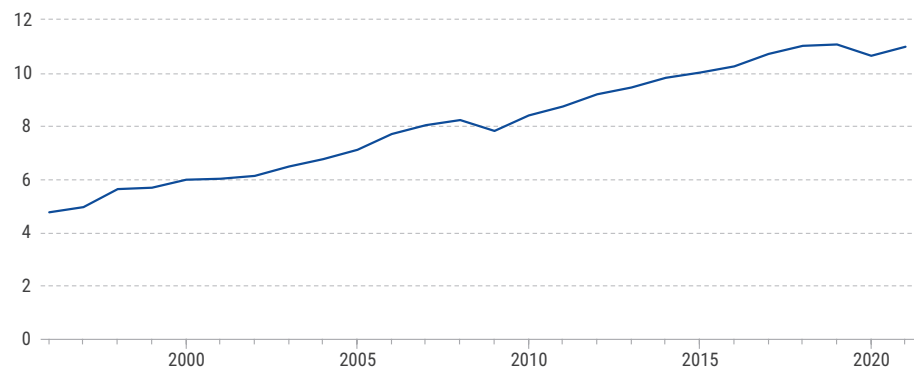
Having contracted by nearly four per cent in 2020 on the back of the COVID-19 pandemic, international maritime trade recovered in 2021 as volumes bounced back at an estimated rate of 3.2 per cent. Shipments reached 11.0 billion tons, a value slightly below pre-pandemic levels.

In 2021, Asia remained the world-leading maritime freight area with Asian ports, including in 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.

A key trend in maritime trade is the shift in cargo composition. In 1970, more than half of global seaborne trade was tanker cargo. Today, almost three-quarters of loaded goods are 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.

**Figure 1 Goods loaded worldwide**

(Billions of tons)





### Contribution of developing economies

In 2021, developing economies still accounted for the largest share of global seaborne trade. They loaded 55 per cent and discharged 61 per cent of the world total. Asian developing economies held the lion's share. 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.

**Figure 2 Seaborne trade of developing economies**

(Percentage of corresponding world tonnage)



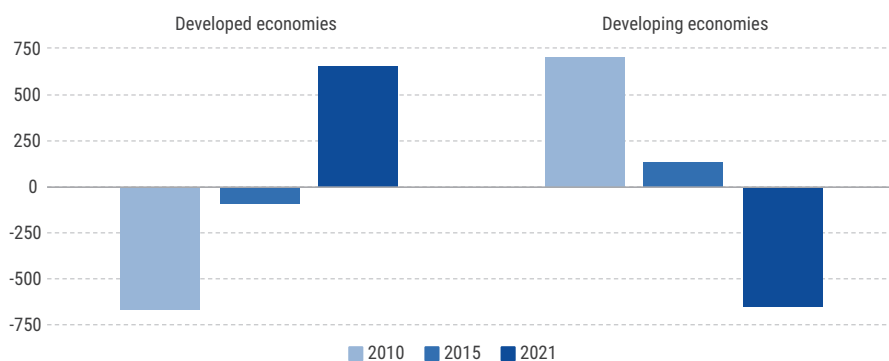
### Developments in seaborne trade balances

Developing economies still reported a maritime trade deficit in 2021 while developed economies featured a surplus. In 2016, developing economies discharged 4 million tons more goods than they loaded. This deficit deepened to 648 million tons in 2021. On the other hand, the surplus in developed economies reached 658 million tons in 2021. This is a reversal of roles from 2010 when developing economies had a maritime trade surplus of 706 million tons while developed economies discharged 669 million tons more than they loaded.

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 to the developing economies of Asia. For other cargo types and in other geographical areas developing economies often have a maritime trade surplus.

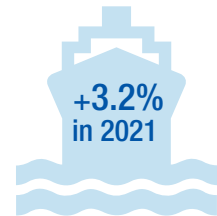
**Figure 3 Seaborne trade balance**

(Millions of tons)



For references, see UNCTAD Handbook of Statistics 2022, annex 6.4

**Seaborne trade**  
jumped by 3.2% in 2021



**64%** of all goods discharged and **42%** of all goods loaded in **Asian** seaports

**Developing economies' share** of seaborne trade imports stood at **61%** in 2021



**Developed economies' seaborne trade balance** was **+658 million tons** in 2021




**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
<b>World<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>10 247</b>	<b>10 985</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>10 303</b>	<b>10 975</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>-57</b>	<b>10</b>
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

<sup>a</sup> 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
<b>World<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>1 832</b>	<b>1 700</b>	<b>-0.9</b>	<b>1 985</b>	<b>1 846</b>	<b>-1.0</b>	<b>-153</b>	<b>-146</b>
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

<sup>a</sup> 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
<b>World<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>1 238</b>	<b>1 252</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>1 235</b>	<b>1 273</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>-21</b>
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

<sup>a</sup> 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
<b>World<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>7 176</b>	<b>8 033</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>7 083</b>	<b>7 856</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>177</b>
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

<sup>a</sup> 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