

How to Run a Container Automatically After the Server Reboots?

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By default, if a server containing Docker reboots, all Docker containers on that server will shut down. If the server has a lot of containers, you will have to manually turn them on, which is highly exhausting.

Problem

How to run a container automatically after the server reboots?

Solution

In Docker, the restart policy specifies when and how the Docker container will be automatically restarted in the event of a system failure, shutdown, or reboot. There are 4 types of restart policies that you can use:

Restart Policy in Docker

Option	Description
no	Never restarts automatically and this is a default policy
on-failure	Restart only if the exit code $\neq 0$ (fail). Can be added to the maximum restart (on-failure: 5).
always	Always restart the container, unless it is stopped manually (docker stop), including when rebooting the server.
unless-stopped	Similar to the always option, but it won't restart if the container is stopped manually, even after a reboot.

By default, Docker uses the no option for the restart policy so that the container won't turn on when the server boots. There are several methods to automatically turn on containers after the server reboots:

Warning

Make sure that Docker on your server is enabled because all containers on that server won't run automatically after restarting the server if you haven't enabled Docker.

1. If your container is still not running

Use the format below if you run a container and you want it to turn on automatically after restarting the server:

```
docker run -d --restart restart_option your_docker_image
```

If your container name is a webserver that uses the nginx image and you want the container to run automatically after the server reboots, you can use the command below:

```
docker run -d --restart always --name webserver nginx
```

Once the container is running, try restarting the server, and it should continue to run automatically after the server restart, like in the image below:

```

sysadmin@docker:~$ docker ps
CONTAINER ID   IMAGE     COMMAND                  CREATED    STATUS    PORTS    NAMES
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker run -d --restart always --name webserver nginx
7072627cee93953e2d2747c655a4d4cef367e8038ec507665cbf8f7f2b70108f
sysadmin@docker:~$
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker ps
CONTAINER ID   IMAGE     COMMAND                  CREATED    STATUS    PORTS    NAMES
7072627cee93   nginx     "/docker-entrypoint. ..." 3 seconds ago    Up 3 seconds    80/tcp    webserver
sysadmin@docker:~$
Broadcast message from sysadmin@docker on tty1 (Tue 2025-07-15 14:53:03 UTC):

The system will reboot now!

sysadmin@docker:~$ docker ps
CONTAINER ID   IMAGE     COMMAND                  CREATED    STATUS    PORTS    NAMES
7072627cee93   nginx     "/docker-entrypoint. ..." 39 seconds ago    Up 13 seconds    80/tcp    webserver
sysadmin@docker:~$

```

The container runs automatically after the server restarts using the always option

Now, try to stop the container and restart the server, and then the container should still run automatically after the server restarts, like in the image below:

```

sysadmin@docker:~$ docker ps
CONTAINER ID   IMAGE     COMMAND                  CREATED    STATUS    PORTS    NAMES
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker run -d --restart always --name webserver nginx
be085ba25398d0ebd4a7f9697dea401fa369db6c855820dd761eb8493d81c39
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker ps
CONTAINER ID   IMAGE     COMMAND                  CREATED    STATUS    PORTS    NAMES
be085ba25398   nginx     "/docker-entrypoint. ..." 5 seconds ago    Up 5 seconds    80/tcp    webserver
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker stop webserver
webserver
sysadmin@docker:~$
Broadcast message from sysadmin@docker on tty1 (Tue 2025-07-15 16:28:48 UTC):

The system will reboot now!

sysadmin@docker:~$ docker ps
CONTAINER ID   IMAGE     COMMAND                  CREATED    STATUS    PORTS    NAMES
be085ba25398   nginx     "/docker-entrypoint. ..." About a minute ago    Up 14 seconds    80/tcp    webserver
sysadmin@docker:~$

```

The container still runs automatically after the server restarts using the always option

2. If your container is running

If a container is running but has not used the restart option, you can use the format below so that the container can run automatically after the server restarts:

```
docker update --restart unless-stopped container_name_or_id
```

For example, you see a memcached container that uses a redis image is already running on the server, but has not used the restart option. Use the command below if you want the container to keep running after the server restarts, but if the container previously stopped, then at the time of the server restart, the container still won't run:

```
docker update --restart unless-stopped memcached
```

Now, try restarting the server while the container is running, and then the container should still run automatically if the server reboots, like in the image below:

```
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker ps
CONTAINER ID   IMAGE     COMMAND                  CREATED        STATUS        PORTS        NAMES
c2426f53504e   redis    "docker-entrypoint.s..." About a minute ago Up 8 seconds  6379/tcp     memcached
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker update --restart unless-stopped memcached
memcached
sysadmin@docker:~$
Broadcast message from sysadmin@docker on tty1 (Tue 2025-07-15 15:00:18 UTC):
The system will reboot now!

sysadmin@docker:~$ docker ps
CONTAINER ID   IMAGE     COMMAND                  CREATED        STATUS        PORTS        NAMES
c2426f53504e   redis    "docker-entrypoint.s..." 2 minutes ago Up 11 seconds  6379/tcp     memcached
sysadmin@docker:~$
```

The container runs automatically after the server restarts using the unless-stopped option

Now, try to stop the container and then restart the server; the container should still not run after the server restarts, like in the image below:

```
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker ps
CONTAINER ID   IMAGE          COMMAND                  CREATED        STATUS        PORTS        NAMES
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker run -d --name memcached redis
eaafa7344c87ff9b6bf59ed804724ef69f2dbac08fccab27c459f6be30d6a41c
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker ps
CONTAINER ID   IMAGE          COMMAND                  CREATED        STATUS        PORTS        NAMES
eaafa7344c87   redis         "docker-entrypoint.s..." 3 seconds ago  Up 3 seconds  6379/tcp    memcached
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker update --restart unless-stopped memcached
memcached
sysadmin@docker:~$ docker stop memcached
memcached
sysadmin@docker:~$
Broadcast message from sysadmin@docker on tty1 (Tue 2025-07-15 16:26:08 UTC):
The system will reboot now!

sysadmin@docker:~$ docker ps
CONTAINER ID   IMAGE          COMMAND                  CREATED        STATUS        PORTS        NAMES
sysadmin@docker:~$
```

The container is still not running after the server restarts using the unless-stopped option

3. Using crontab

The third method of using crontab is to enter the following formats into crontab:

```
@reboot /usr/bin/docker start container_name_or_id
```

For example, you want to run the webserver container automatically after restarting the server, so insert the script below into the crontab :

```
@reboot /usr/bin/docker start webserver
```

If a container uses a crontab to keep it running after restarting the server, it will continue to run after restarting the server, even if it uses the unless-stopped option and the container is not running before the server is restarted.

Note

If you want a container to run automatically after restarting the server, it is important to note the distinction between using the `always` and `unless-stopped` parameters. If the container is a very important application, such as a webserver or database, use the `always` option for the container, but use the `unless-stopped` option if the container is a non-essential application.

References

docs.docker.com
stackoverflow.com
betterstack.com
baeldung.com