

How does Russia's transition from a peripheral distraction to a primary systemic threat reshape Western alliance cohesion and redefine long-term geopolitical stability?

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Executive Summary

Russia's transition from a peripheral distraction to a primary systemic threat has reshaped Western alliance cohesion by both consolidating NATO's physical footprint and exposing underlying fragilities in transatlantic trust and European strategic autonomy. Evidence suggests this dual impact redefines long-term geopolitical stability toward a more complex, multipolar, and authoritarian-aligned global order, where Russia acts as a "systemic spoiler" enabled by asymmetric alliances, even as its independent economic power diminishes.

Key Findings

Western Alliance Cohesion: Consolidation and Fragmentation

Russia's reclassification as a primary systemic threat has led to a dual effect on Western alliance cohesion, simultaneously strengthening certain aspects while exposing significant internal divisions.

Consolidation of NATO's Northern Flank: The accession of Finland and Sweden has physically hardened NATO's northern flank, integrating significant Nordic military assets and eliminating strategic ambiguity along Russia's border [1]. This move is mirrored by Northern and Eastern European nations, which have adopted a firmer stance against Moscow, including severing links to Russian infrastructure [3]. This represents a profound political alignment against Russia, enhancing collective defense [1, 5].

Divergent Threat Perceptions and US Reliability: Despite this consolidation, underlying strategic divisions persist. For example, during recent Russian airspace incursions, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk advocated shooting down aircraft, while German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius urged prudence [5]. Domestic political shifts in Western Europe, such as the rise of the pro-Russian Alternative for Germany (AfD) party

and Hungary and Slovakia's refusal to cut ties with Moscow, highlight growing divergences in threat assessments within the alliance [3]. These internal fractures are exacerbated by a perceived structural shift in US reliability. The Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy ranked Europe below other regional priorities and described it as facing "civilizational erasure," signaling a move toward conditional burden-sharing rather than unconditional security guarantees [7, 8, 9]. This transactional approach has eroded transatlantic trust, with a majority of Republicans believing the US does not benefit from NATO membership [7].

European Defense Gaps and US Dependency: Europe is not yet structurally capable of defending itself against Russian coercion without reliable US enablers [5]. Persistent gaps in unified defense industry scale and military command mean European geopolitical stability remains largely dependent on Washington's political will [2, 7]. European governments lack credible independent planning for various escalation levels of Russian aggression [5]. The European Defense Industrial Base (EDIB) remains fragmented, producing low volumes without economies of scale [2]. A significant portion of EU member states' defense procurement, 78%, goes to foreign suppliers, with 63% of that spending flowing directly to US defense firms [2]. This dependency extends to nuclear deterrence, as British and French capabilities would struggle to offer credible extended deterrence against Russia without US backing [8].

Redefining Long-Term Geopolitical Stability: Russia's Asymmetric Power and Economic Subordination

Russia's transition redefines long-term geopolitical stability by sustaining its status as a primary systemic threat through asymmetric alliances, even as its independent economic power diminishes and its capacity to act as a global stabilizer wanes.

Asymmetric Alliances as Strategic Enablers: Russia maintains its systemic threat status by leveraging asymmetric alliances with countries like China, Iran, and North Korea [3, 6]. These partnerships provide critical material support, bypassing Russia's industrial limitations. North Korea supplies artillery and has deployed over 10,000 soldiers to fight in Russia's Kursk region [3, 6]. Iran cooperates with Russia to mass-produce lethal drones for use in Ukraine [6]. China serves as the indispensable economic and logistical linchpin, accounting for over a third of Russia's foreign goods purchases by 2023 and enabling Moscow to sustain its war effort despite sanctions [6]. Bilateral trade between China and Russia grew by roughly 70% over the five-year period beginning in 2021 [6]. This allows Russia to sustain low-level aggression and hybrid warfare, reshaping stability toward a

multipolar, authoritarian-aligned system [5, 7, 8].

Economic Subordination and "Systemic Spoiler" Role: Russia's deepening asymmetrical interdependence with China structurally limits its capacity to act as an independent pole of power, cementing its role as a secondary economic player [6]. This dynamic reinforces Russia's reliance on exporting raw materials (75% of its exports to China are petrochemicals) and importing manufactured goods, accelerating deindustrialization [6]. China's controlled capital markets also restrict Moscow's ability to raise debt independently, with Russia's National Wealth Fund liquid assets falling to about 4% of GDP by 2025 [6]. Consequently, Russia is losing its capacity to perform broader systemic functions, transitioning from an indispensable stabilizer into a "systemic spoiler" that outsources coercion rather than constructing durable global order [10]. Russia's domestic defense spending reached 17.4 trillion rubles, accounting for nearly 40% of its 2025 national budget [4]. To sustain this, it relies on asymmetric partners to share the burden [6].

Hollow Alternative Diplomatic Frameworks: Russia's expansion of BRICS and other diplomatic frameworks represents an increasingly hollow theater of disruption rather than a durable alternative economic and security architecture for the Global South [10]. Russia's ability to guarantee security or mediate conflicts in its traditional spheres of influence has significantly diminished. For example, Russia failed to prevent Azerbaijan's 2023 offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh or protect Armenia despite CSTO commitments, leading Armenia to freeze its participation [10]. In the Middle East, China, not Russia, brokered the normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia [10]. Economically, Russia's alternative architecture is undermined by its subordination to China, limiting its ability to offer a truly multipolar economic alternative [6].

Implications

Russia's re-emergence as a primary systemic threat implies a sustained period of heightened tension and strategic competition for Western alliances. For NATO, this means a continued focus on collective defense, particularly along its eastern flank, but also a pressing need to address internal divergences in threat perception and commitment. Europe faces the imperative to accelerate the development of indigenous defense capabilities and unified command structures to reduce its reliance on potentially inconsistent US backing, thereby enhancing its strategic autonomy. The global geopolitical landscape is redefined by a "China-Russia meta-threat," where China's

economic power enables Russia's military aggression, challenging US hegemony across multiple theaters. This necessitates a Western strategy that accounts for a multipolar world with a strong authoritarian alignment, where Russia acts as a disruptive force rather than a constructive global power.

Limitations and Caveats

The research indicates that while NATO has seen physical consolidation through Nordic accession, the long-term decisive impact on alliance cohesion remains a subject of ongoing debate due to persistent internal divisions and questions about US reliability. Direct quantitative data for Europe's defense industry gaps, such as specific dependency rates for critical munitions, is limited, with the findings primarily citing qualitative capability deficits and broader strategic constraints. While specific asymmetric partners are identified, precise metrics for their material support to Russia (e.g., drone production volumes, artillery shell supply rates) and projected timelines for disruption by Western sanctions enforcement are not detailed. Conclusions regarding the durability of Russia's alternative diplomatic frameworks are based on observed failures and economic subordination, but the full extent of their long-term impact on the Global South's alignment is still evolving.

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