Multipolarity and the Geopolitical Reorganization of the Eurasian Security Order

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Received: 31 July 2025 | **Revised:** 06 May 2026 | **Accepted:** 15 June 2026
DOI: 10.64901/29778271.2026.016

Abstract

How is accelerating multipolarity transforming the structure and stability of Eurasia's security order? Using Brzezinski's realist framework as an analytical methodology, the study reveals that multipolarity is not producing a stable balance in Eurasia but rather a fragmented and corridor-based security structure. The interaction between Western alliance fragmentation, the EU's limited strategic autonomy, and Russia's structural decline has generated overlapping zones of competition, power vacuums, and asymmetric deterrence. As a result, Eurasia is evolving into a "strategic collision belt" characterized by nested power configurations and heightened regional insecurity. The transatlantic alliance is confronting growing trends of internal power imbalance and strategic divergence. The United States is attempting to reassert its primacy through strategic disengagement and trade agreements, while the European Union is mired in institutional lag and fractured leadership on the question of strategic autonomy. The strategic misalignment between Germany and France, together with Central and Eastern European states'

"front-loaded" perception of the Russian threat, has further undermined the formation of a unified European security strategy. Meanwhile, Russia is experiencing a decline in influence within its traditional sphere, creating geopolitical power vacuums in regions such as the Caucasus and Central Asia and thereby intensifying uncertainty surrounding collective security across the Eurasian continent. In this process, Eurasian geopolitical power is undergoing its largest post–Cold War reorganization to date, while regional conflict risks are rising and uncertainty is steadily increasing.

Keywords

Eurasian multipolarity; geopolitics; Russian decline; security transformation; threat perceptions

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical landscape of the Eurasian continent has undergone a profound and complex reconfiguration, amounting to the largest reshuffling of power across Eurasia since the Second World War. Zbigniew Brzezinski offered a penetrating analysis of the broader trajectory of Eurasian geopolitics in The Grand Chessboard, arguing—drawing on Mackinder's theory—that whoever controls Eurasia controls the "World Island" and can thereby shape the evolution of the global balance of power. Against this backdrop, Eurasia has increasingly become the central arena of global geopolitical rivalry, as major powers intensify competition over institutional discursive authority, strategic corridors, and regional primacy (Brzezinski, 2016). Yet with Donald Trump's rise to power, cracks gradually emerged in transatlantic relations, exposing deep divergences between the United States and its European allies regarding security burdens, economic interests, and strategic priorities. This has not only weakened NATO's traditional deterrent capacity, but has also posed major challenges to Europe's pursuit of autonomous security-building. In particular, the misalignment between Germany and France—widely viewed as the EU's core—over strategic vision and leadership, together with the

split between Central and Eastern European states and the Western European core over perceptions of the Russian threat, has further deepened Europe's strategic security dilemma.

At the same time, Russia's structural decline triggered by the Russia–Ukraine war is driving a redistribution of Eurasia's power center of gravity. Its geopolitical influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus is visibly weakening, while China, Türkiye, and Western countries are gradually expanding their penetration into Russia's traditional sphere of influence. Leveraging the Belt and Road Initiative and regional cooperation mechanisms, China is seeking to fill the post-Russian vacuum through economic and institutional advantages, attempting to build a more flexible and enduring pattern of regional influence. Yet this strategic substitution faces severe tests stemming from sovereignty sensitivities, multilateral competition, and geopolitical complexity. NATO's continued eastward expansion and its efforts to shape Eurasian security corridors also indicate that the region's future security landscape will become more plural and more complex (Arynov & Sharipova, 2024).

Building on Brzezinski's realist analytical framework for Eurasian geopolitics, this study aims to think through, in depth, the reconstruction of Eurasia's geopolitical order in an era of multipolarity. Operationally, Brzezinski's realist analytical methodology can be applied through three steps. First, the analysis identifies the principal power centers and their relative capabilities. In this study, this step is operationalized by examining the United States/NATO, the European Union, Russia, and China as the primary strategic poles, assessing their alliance cohesion, military capacity, and influence projection across Eurasia. Second, it maps strategic corridors and geopolitical pivots that link regions (e.g., Baltic–Black Sea, Black Sea–Caspian, Central Asia connectivity routes). Here, the article applies this step by tracing how the Baltic–Black Sea axis, the Black Sea–Caspian corridor, and Central Asian connectivity routes function as contested geostrategic linkages where major powers compete for access, depth, and alignment. Third, it assesses how shifts in alliance cohesion, influence projection, and regional penetration alter the broader continental equilibrium. Accordingly, the study

analyzes how Western fragmentation, the EU's autonomy–capability gap, Russia's post-war contraction, and China's expanding regional engagement collectively reconfigure Eurasia's balance and generate layered insecurity. Therefore, today's Eurasia is no longer a stable buffer zone under a single hegemon; rather, it has become a "collision belt" of nested power and strategic contestation. Interlocking interests generate frequent institutional overlap and normative conflict, while regional security frictions and disputes may become the new normal. Eurasia's future geopolitical reorganization will thereby not only imply a more dispersed distribution of power centers, but also higher uncertainty and strategic risk. By analyzing the geopolitical demands of different major power actors, we can better anticipate the possible direction of the evolving geopolitical order and prepare for future risks and contingencies under conditions of uncertainty.

International Power Imbalance and Strategic Divergence Within the Western Alliance

U.S. "Strategic Retrenchment" and the Restructuring of Alliance Power

As the Eurasian geopolitical configuration accelerates toward multipolarity, the Western alliance—represented above all by NATO—is undergoing a deep transformation in its internal power structure. The most salient manifestation of this shift is that, under "America First," Trump has progressively withdrawn substantive U.S. investment in European security and has sought to "outsource" strategic responsibilities systematically to Europe's allies. The Trump administration repeatedly stated publicly that it wanted NATO members to raise defense spending to 5% of GDP. This not only signals a strategic retrenchment of U.S. military resource commitments within NATO, but also reflects a pragmatic calculation that treats NATO as a "cost-controlled security instrument," rather than an irreplaceable strategic pillar (Hilse, 2020). Although such measures preserve organizational stability in form, they create an institutional

rupture in function and in the distribution of rights and responsibilities. This strategic move by the Trump administration would fundamentally alter the geopolitical balance of power across Eurasia.

First, this is evident in Trump's weakening of NATO's commitments to support Ukraine. In early July 2025, the White House announced a suspension of certain categories of military aid to Ukraine, drawing widespread attention among European allies. The internal logic was not merely a reassessment of the global allocation of military assistance, but also an indirect demand that Europe "assume security responsibilities autonomously." Although the 2025 Hague Summit pushed member states to raise defense spending and strengthen collective defense mechanisms, the summit's outcomes treated the Ukraine issue only lightly, and its rhetoric toward Russia was noticeably toned down. This strategy—"expressing support politically while preserving institutional flexibility"—has made NATO's response to security challenges increasingly characterized by strategic ambiguity and fragmented resolve (Cancian & Park, 2025; Fenbert, 2025).

This U.S. "strategic disengagement" has produced a pronounced sense of security anxiety within Europe. While the Franco–German axis still seeks to lead Europe's strategic autonomy agenda, it lacks substantive consensus on key issues such as assistance to Ukraine, burden sharing in defense spending, and the construction of a future security framework. Some Central and Eastern European states, by contrast, are more inclined to rely on continued U.S. military commitments, viewing them as essential guarantees against the Russian threat—especially those located on NATO's eastern flank. This mismatch between security dependence and political trust has created serious rifts within NATO over threat perception, strategic priorities, and resource allocation, making it difficult to consolidate a unified collective strategic will. More fundamentally, Ukraine's status as a potential NATO member has long remained suspended between "political dependence" and "institutional marginality," reflecting NATO's reluctance to assume the collective security and war responsibilities that formal membership could entail (Sirbiladze, 2022).

Meanwhile, although most NATO members declared during the 2025 Hague Summit that they would increase defense spending, implementation faces severe constraints. Germany, for example, suffers from aging equipment and generally low readiness rates, and it lacks the capacity to complete military modernization in the short term. In 2024, Germany's defense spending was only 1.9% of GDP—far below the newly proposed 5% threshold. Southern European states, facing fiscal stress and domestic opposition, are even more cautious about sustaining high-intensity long-term defense spending. Spain's prime minister explicitly noted that meeting NATO's new spending standard would require Spain to invest up to an additional €300 billion in defense over the next decade—an increase that would produce structural austerity in public services such as healthcare and education. Clearly, NATO's defense-spending surge plan not only intensifies divisions among allies, but also triggers fierce domestic disputes across Europe over policy priorities (Stengel, 2025; Blackburn, 2025).

This U.S. strategic pullback will also reshape NATO's role boundaries in global security governance. The United States would gradually lose its role as the strategic "balancer" across Eurasia. As Eurasia's Western flank has long functioned as a key pivot for the United States to manage Eurasian equilibrium, losing control over that pivot would inevitably weaken America's ability to shape the broader continental balance. In the short term, Trump's push for allies to increase defense spending and prioritize purchases of U.S.-made equipment not only expands the market share of the American defense industry in Europe, but also signals his attempt to construct a new model of rights and responsibilities in a period of strategic retrenchment: "others bear the burdens, while the United States coordinates." This decision would not only erode the traditional foundations of transatlantic security trust, but could also cause NATO to gradually lose, at the level of institutional logic, its functional character as a unified strategic community. The arms-race dynamics, regional strategic instability, and imbalanced flows of global governance resources induced by surging defense budgets will become key variables shaping the stability of Eurasia's next-

stage geopolitical order. What is more, NATO's intense focus on the Russia–Ukraine battlefield has already compressed its strategic attention and policy investment in other regional conflicts. Even more importantly, massive defense expenditures will continue to crowd out the fiscal space available to multilateral mechanisms such as the EU and the UN for key agendas including sustainable development, climate governance, and humanitarian assistance—thereby affecting the resilience of Global South countries under today's complex international conditions. In short, under deepening multipolarity, the Western alliance is confronting not merely a strategic reorganization, but a multi-level reconstruction of power logic, institutional legitimacy, and regional responsibility. NATO is situated on a fault line between traditional security mechanisms and new multilateral pressures; whether it can adapt to this changing strategic environment and preserve the institutional stability of a transatlantic security community will profoundly shape the future trajectory of the Eurasian order.

The Intensification of Transatlantic Trade and Economic Frictions

In an era in which geopolitics and geo-economics are deeply intertwined, the institutional transfer of NATO burdens is only one dimension of the United States' shift in strategic focus. A deeper change lies in Washington's use of economic instruments to pursue institutional integration and reshaping of its allies. On July 28, 2025, the United States and the EU formally signed a wide-ranging new trade agreement, marking not only continued U.S. burden reduction in security and stronger demands for allied self-reliance, but also an active attempt to reconstruct American leadership within the trade and economic system. The agreement establishes a uniform 15% baseline tariff covering key sectors such as semiconductors, automobiles, and pharmaceuticals; it also embeds the EU more deeply into U.S.-led global industrial and energy networks through large-scale energy purchase commitments and major investment pledges (Gray & Shalal, 2025). In this process, the United States is not simply pursuing traditional protectionism in isolation;

rather, by combining security retrenchment with economic embedding, it effectively converts geopolitical retreat into geo-economic dominance. This new pathway not only reshapes the basic structure of transatlantic relations: NATO's strategic "disengagement" and the reorganization of trade relations are not merely processes of military and industrial decoupling, but also a deep reallocation of political influence. Trump's policy not only shakes the long-established institutional trust between the United States and Europe, but also directly impacts the EU's structures of institutional dependence across economic, technological, and security domains.

Although the EU agreed to sign the new trade agreement, it appears that many details have not been concretely finalized—especially regarding emerging fields such as digital manufacturing, biotechnology, and high-end equipment manufacturing. At present, the agreement remains highly uncertain, and the Trump administration may continue to apply pressure on allies through additional economic measures. Trump's fundamental motivation is not trade per se; rather, it is to compress allies' policy space through tariffs and subsidies in order to protect U.S. dominance within global high-technology industrial chains.

This logic of "economy first" and "strategic instrumentalization" stands in fundamental contradiction to the EU's rules-based governance. The EU has long emphasized multilateralism and institutional balance, seeking to resolve trade disputes through the WTO system and regional agreements, whereas the Trump administration has increasingly favored a U.S. national-interest-centered approach that bypasses multilateral mechanisms and relies on unilateral pressure and bilateral bargaining to achieve geo-economic objectives. This misalignment in institutional orientation has, in effect, gradually migrated from the economic realm into the structure of strategic trust, pushing the alliance logic from "institutional isomorphism" toward "institutional attrition," and delivering a major shock to Europe's strategic positioning and global identity.

More complex still, the deepening of trade and economic frictions not only weakens U.S.–EU industrial coordination, but also materially constrains the EU's capacity to enhance defense auton-

omy. As NATO's defense-spending threshold rises sharply, European allies are forced to dramatically increase fiscal inputs to complete military modernization and rebuild strategic reserves. Yet against the backdrop of sluggish growth and a worsening trade environment, EU states face escalating pressure on public finances. High inflation, an energy crisis, and growing reliance on exports to the U.S. market make it difficult for the EU to balance defense spending with social expenditures, thereby objectively weakening its ability to respond to NATO's spending targets. This further intensifies structural frictions between the United States and Europe over security responsibilities and strategic rights and obligations. In sum, Trump's tariff policy functions as a tool in what is effectively a "resource-grab war" over the future structure of global power, while the EU is repeatedly constrained in practice by insufficient economic capacity and high dependence on the U.S. market. This not only deepens systemic fractures in transatlantic relations, but also places the EU in a dual dilemma between institutional rationality and material constraint in global geopolitical competition. Seen in this light, U.S.–EU relations are shifting from a traditional security-and-values alliance toward a partnership increasingly defined by differentiated interest structures—an evolution that could profoundly shape the trajectory and stability of the broader Eurasian geopolitical order.

The Practical Predicament of European Security

The Systemic Lag in the EU's Autonomous Security Capacity

The problems and contradictions Europe faces today do not stem solely from U.S. strategic adjustment and tariff pressures; internal EU issues also place it in an increasingly awkward strategic position. On the one hand, the EU views itself as a major actor in global governance, bearing a dual identity as both a norm-setter and a security provider. On the other hand, structural deficiencies in security capabilities and strategic coherence increasingly reduce it to a passive actor within the competitive landscape among great powers. This paradox is not only reflected in the deep continuation of

dependence on the United States, but is also rooted in the strategic rupture between Germany/France and Central and Eastern European states, as well as the imbalance between institutional design and geopolitical realities.

Europe's security predicament is, to a large extent, driven by deep structural dependence on the NATO system. In the post–Cold War period and even during security reassessments before the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war, the EU did not establish genuine strategic autonomy; instead, it continued to outsource core security functions to U.S.-led NATO. From joint command structures and operational intelligence systems to procurement standards and officer training mechanisms, the military systems of major EU states have long been embedded within NATO's institutional architecture. This external dependence not only slows Europe's ability to act in crises, but also deprives it of autonomy and rapid response capacity in key strategic decision-making (Howorth, 2020).

Although defense spending has increased in recent years in some European countries—especially Germany and France—and France has even proposed building a "European army," the practical challenges are far more urgent than headline figures suggest. First, the EU's overall military foundation is extremely weak. In particular, after decades of reliance on U.S. security provision, Europe's defense-industrial chain is seriously deficient in both equipment and human capital. For example, heavy weapons and air-defense systems pledged repeatedly to Ukraine have encountered production delays, logistical bottlenecks, and technical adaptation problems in actual delivery—revealing systemic shortcomings in European defense industry capacity (Alipour, 2025). Second, the theoretical blueprint of "strategic autonomy," given both the lack of a viable substitute for U.S. military power and the absence of unified political lines within the EU, has largely remained at the level of political rhetoric. The EU has attempted repeatedly to reduce dependence on NATO through mechanisms such as the "European Defense Fund" and "rapid deployment forces," yet in terms of scale, coordination, and operational capability, these arrangements cannot constitute a substantive replacement for a U.S.-led security system. More

crucially, a long-standing pacifist tradition in post–Cold War Western European political culture, combined with domestic fiscal constraints, has meant that political will to invest resources in rebuilding security systems has remained insufficient. Defense autonomy thus often devolves into technical details and bureaucratic coordination rather than a comprehensive redesign of national security strategy.

In addition, the EU's increasingly pronounced internal strategic heterogeneity further weakens the basis for integrating collective security capabilities. While Germany and France advocate, at the level of ideas, strengthening European sovereignty and enhancing strategic autonomy, their initiatives often face indifference—or outright resistance—among Central and Eastern European states. Grounded in historical memory and geopolitical realities, these states consistently view the United States as the ultimate guarantor of their security and harbor deep doubts about the Franco–German "de-Americanization" security path. After the Ukraine crisis, this strategic split became even more pronounced: Eastern European countries tend to "NATO-ize" and "Americanize" security issues, whereas Germany and France are more inclined to respond through diplomatic negotiations and European defense mechanisms—most clearly among states on the eastern border with Russia, particularly Poland. Such divergence undermines the EU's capacity to function as a unified security actor, making it more vulnerable to paralysis or purely symbolic gestures under external pressure (Velchev, 2024).

Structurally, Europe's current security dilemma reflects a deeper crisis of geopolitical identity. Traditionally, the EU sought to position itself as a "global exporter of norms," shaping regional and even global order through economic integration and institutional construction. Yet in an era in which geopolitical logic has reasserted dominance, this kind of "institutional power and discursive authority" looks increasingly weak without corresponding hard-power support. As U.S.–China competition shapes the global structure and the Russia–Ukraine war shatters strategic buffers, the EU has been pushed back into a logic of great-power confrontation—without commensurate security capabilities or strategic cohesion. As a result,

the EU's role within a multipolar order has become increasingly ambiguous: it is neither able to function as a genuine "regional pole," nor able to serve steadily as a "balancing pivot" within major-power rivalry. This is particularly evident in the new tariff agreement signed by von der Leyen and the Trump administration, which underscores that the EU did not play a role as a geopolitical balancing pivot between China and the United States. Consequently, the EU will continue to confront an internal predicament: a weak military-security protection system coupled with a continuing decline in democratic, institutional discursive authority. This predicament will not only affect the EU's strategic confidence and political cohesion for decades to come, but will also weaken its capacity to participate in the reconstruction of global governance and to project democratic institutional influence.

Franco-German Misalignment: Internal Divisions in EU Security Leadership

As the EU's strategic autonomy agenda continues, Germany and France—Europe's most powerful and influential dual core—constitute the basic internal architecture of European security. Especially after the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war, the structural contradictions exposed in efforts to build a unified security strategy have further highlighted leadership divergences the EU faces amid the reconstruction of the geopolitical security order. France has consistently treated European strategic autonomy as a core objective of national security policy, emphasizing that the EU should reduce dependence on the United States across key areas such as defense, diplomacy, and technology. This strategic thinking is rooted in France's deep "sovereigntist" tradition; in the continuation of the Gaullist political legacy, France views the construction of an independent European security architecture as a necessary path toward reshaping European power and enhancing its international standing. Since 2017, the Macron government has continuously promoted institutional arrangements such as the "European Intervention Initiative," the "European Defense Fund," and the

"Strategic Compass," seeking to build, with France as the axis, an internal European mechanism for security and defense coordination. This posture reflects strong vigilance and distrust toward a transatlantic security dependence path. However, while France has strategic ambition, it lacks the comprehensive capacity required to underpin EU strategic autonomy: whether in defense spending, force deployment, or global military presence, it cannot independently shoulder systemic security responsibilities. Its global influence remains more symbolic than material, lacking sufficient resources and alliance-mobilization capacity to lead a truly autonomous and unified European security architecture (Schmitt, 2017).

By contrast, Germany's security policy posture appears more cautious and conflicted. On the one hand, Germany rhetorically supports strengthening EU strategic autonomy—especially after the Russia–Ukraine war, when Berlin advanced the "Zeitenwende" agenda and pledged to raise defense budgets and rebuild military capabilities, signaling a potential shift in strategic culture. For example, in July 2025, Germany stationed troops in Lithuania for the first time, indicating an attempt to demonstrate defense influence on Europe's eastern flank. On the other hand, Germany's concrete actions exhibit a strong tendency toward risk aversion: growth in defense spending has been slow, and the activation of the defense-industrial sector has been sluggish. The fundamental source of this contradiction lies in Germany's historical constraints. Memories of Nazism and the Second World War remain politically sensitive domestically, meaning that any discussion of military expansion or rearmament easily triggers broad public caution and moral restraint among political elites. At the EU level, some member states also view a resurgent German military with suspicion, fearing that German strategic primacy could disrupt Europe's internal balance of power (Swaney, 2025). In addition, Germany faces severe domestic fiscal pressures—particularly regarding refugee reception, the maintenance of welfare systems, and green transition costs—further limiting the strategic fiscal space available for defense and defense-industrial investment. These structural and institutional constraints collectively weaken both Germany's capacity and will-

ingness to act as a "security pillar" within the EU's strategic autonomy agenda.

More importantly, although France and Germany have shown some willingness to coordinate in responding to the Ukraine crisis, differences in strategic culture, deterrence concepts, and preferred diplomatic instruments make it difficult for the two to form a genuinely unified and stable dual core for the EU. The heterogeneity of their strategic paths prevents consistent consensus on key issues, undermining the coherence and execution capacity of EU external security policy. Achieving EU strategic autonomy is not merely a policy vision; it is a stringent test of institutional integration capacity and major-power coordination mechanisms. Under existing security structures and capability constraints, neither France nor Germany has unlimited ability to drive the security agenda unilaterally. France has political will and strategic ambition, but its limited economic scale and overseas mobilization capacity weaken the resource base for leading European defense transformation; Germany has economic strength and institutional influence, but remains insufficient in strategic culture, military experience, and political will (Meijer & Brooks, 2021). Therefore, the EU's strategic autonomy path must rest on Franco–German strategic alignment as a precondition; coordination between the two in security concepts, division of labor in armaments, and institutional construction will constitute a key variable driving Europe's security transformation. More broadly, France and Germany must not only reach agreement at the policy level, but also assume their respective strategic responsibilities in practice. France should integrate its geopolitical objectives more reasonably with collective European interests, while Germany should genuinely move beyond historical burdens and accelerate military modernization. Only under these conditions can the EU, as an independent geopolitical actor, establish security agency and strategic coordinates amid U.S.–Russia competition and the reconstruction of a multipolar order.

A Split in Strategic Cognition: Central and Eastern Europe's Front-Loaded Perception of the Perceived Russian Threat

In the process of reshaping the EU's strategic security architecture, strategic cognitive differences among Central and Eastern European states constitute a variable that cannot be ignored—beyond the structural Franco–German divergence over defense paths and security burdens. In particular, as the Russia–Ukraine war continues to evolve, Central and Eastern European states' perception of the Russian threat has taken on a strongly front-loaded and operationalized character. Fundamental differences between these states and traditional core powers such as France and Germany—regarding threat perception, response pathways, and security prioritization—have become a key constraint preventing Europe from forming a unified geopolitical strategic stance. This split reflects not only the decisive role of geographic proximity and historical experience in shaping national security strategies, but also exposes deeper centrifugal political trends produced by multipolarized threat perceptions within Europe.

Central and Eastern European countries—especially Poland and the three Baltic states—experience intense security anxiety about Russia's strategic intentions and military threat due to direct border proximity and enduring memories of the Soviet period. After the Ukraine crisis erupted, these states rapidly shifted their security strategies comprehensively toward a "deterrence–defense" model. Their core idea is to strengthen national military capacity and consolidate bilateral security ties with the United States in order to build forward strategic depth along the regional front line (Zinoviev, 2025). Even Finland, long neutral during the Cold War, chose to join NATO. This strategic path manifests in three dimensions: first, the active deployment of U.S. and NATO forces to establish a normalized forward presence; second, a massive increase in defense spending—for example, Poland has planned to raise defense spending above 4% of GDP, making it one of Europe's highest; third, the promotion of regional multilateral security cooperation

mechanisms, such as the "Three Seas Initiative" and the "Bucharest Nine."

In sum, severe strategic-cognition fragmentation has emerged between Central and Eastern European states on the front line of Russian security threats and other EU members. First, security priorities diverge: Central and Eastern Europe treats containing Russia as the most urgent task, whereas France and Germany lean toward strategic balance and crisis resilience management. Second, orientations toward Russia differ: Central and Eastern Europe advocates strengthened military deployments and deeper NATO involvement, while France and Germany prefer maintaining diplomatic maneuvering space and restoring a limited form of security dialogue. Third, the pace of rearmament and resource inputs is uneven: the former rapidly advances procurement and modernization, while the latter is constrained by fiscal limits and delayed political consensus—leading to frequent inconsistencies in assistance to Ukraine and undermining the coherence of NATO and EU policy overall. Accordingly, this structural divergence not only intensifies fragmentation in Europe's security strategy, but also weakens, at the institutional level, the EU's effectiveness as a collective security actor. Central and Eastern Europe is thus compelled to embed its security within the U.S.-led NATO framework rather than within EU internal defense structures, further eroding the EU's voice and integrative capacity on security issues. At the same time, Germany and France—attempting to shape European security leadership—have failed to provide an effective collective-security guarantee mechanism, and thus cannot ease regional strategic anxieties. The result is an overall institutional failure and strategic imbalance in EU internal security.

Russia's Structural Decline: The "Influence Vacuum" in Its Traditional Sphere

The Postwar "Victory–Defeat Paradox" After the Russia–Ukraine War

The Russia–Ukraine war will not only reshape Eurasia's geopolitical order; it will also accelerate Russia's structural decline and gradually generate power vacuums in surrounding regions. Although Russia still maintains military control over parts of eastern Ukraine and has demonstrated tactical resilience on certain fronts, this cannot conceal the deeper trend of decline in comprehensive national power and strategic influence. In fact, what the war has triggered is not simply a military contest over Russian victory or defeat, but a structural trajectory in which—regardless of the outcome—Russia will be unable to reverse its longer-term decline.

The war has dealt a severe blow to Russia's national standing and strategic credibility. It has been widely seen as a source of regional instability, and it has significantly damaged Russia's great-power image as a UN Security Council permanent member purportedly serving as a "security provider." Eurasian states' acceptance of Russia as a regional great power has fallen rapidly, and the influence base Russia constructed across the post-Soviet space has visibly eroded. For example, countries in the Caucasus are seeking broader diplomatic options to reduce dependence on Russia. Azerbaijan, in particular, has long sought to escape Russia's geopolitical control over Baku (Brusylovska & Maistrenko, 2024). Meanwhile, Central Asian states are accelerating multilateral strategic coordination with external powers such as China and Türkiye. This decline in post-Soviet influence not only weakens Russia's control over its traditional sphere but also indicates that its role as a Eurasian "pivot" is being transformed into a strategic vacuum zone of multipolar contestation.

Long-term Western economic sanctions on Russia have slowed industrial transformation and severely constrained development in high-technology sectors. Large-scale financial and technological

sanctions have not only limited Russia's access to advanced technology and capital, but have also disrupted the international financial settlement networks on which its energy exports depend. Although Russia has maintained short-term macroeconomic stability through fiscal tightening, a ruble-centered domestic cycle, and redirection of energy exports to the Asia-Pacific, medium- and long-term structural problems are becoming increasingly pronounced. In particular, Russia faces a technology "lockout" in high-tech industries, manufacturing upgrading, and research capacity-building—constraints that make it difficult to support great-power military and diplomatic needs. As fiscal surpluses continue to shrink, Russia faces extreme strain in sustaining both wartime expenditures and domestic stability (Park, 2025). In addition, irreversible attrition of military capacity is a key sign of the contraction of great-power status. The war has pushed Russia's defense-industrial system into a high-consumption, low-replenishment dilemma; much conventional equipment derives from Soviet-era stockpiles, and once depleted, rapid replacement will be exceedingly difficult.

At an even deeper level, Russia's declining position in Eurasia is a historical exposure of post-imperial structural contradictions. After the Cold War, Russia sought to maintain an ambiguous balance between "sovereign revival" and "geopolitical integration," but it lacked sufficient economic foundations and institutional attractiveness to stabilize a sphere of influence over the long term. The Russia–Ukraine war shattered this balance and fully revealed the imperial nature of its external policy, leaving Russia unable to reconstitute leadership through non-alignment, regional cooperation, or multilateral institutions. This has triggered strategic escape by neighboring states while pulling Russia itself into a classic imperial dilemma of "having to expand while being unable to sustain expansion." The core paradox of the war is therefore this: even if Russia achieves tactical victories, at the strategic and structural levels its imperial afterglow is irreversibly sliding into decline. As a traditional security pivot in Eurasia, Russia is being pushed—by its own geopolitical expansion impulse and by structural economic-institutional disadvantages—into a multi-layered collapse of geopolitical

influence. This also indicates that Eurasia's future order will be reorganized around a Russia that is "declining but not collapsing," generating new multipolar realignments and intensified strategic competition among surrounding powers.

The "Power Vacuum" in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Multilateral Interventions by China, Türkiye, and the West

One of the largest spillover effects of the Russia–Ukraine war is the systematic weakening of Russia's influence in its traditional sphere —namely Central Asia and the Caucasus. In earlier geopolitical structures, these regions were widely seen as Russia's traditional post-Soviet sphere of influence, whether in terms of security provision, energy hub roles, or political leverage. However, as Russia's domestic economic difficulties deepen, military resources continue to be depleted, and diplomatic credibility declines sharply, its geopolitical sphere is being eroded on multiple fronts, forming a characteristic "influence vacuum." This is not a vacuum in the absolute sense; rather, it takes the form of external actors embedding themselves while local states actively diversify their alignment options. It signals a structural shift in Eurasia from a "regionally dominated sphere of influence" toward a "multipolar, nested arena of contestation."

In Central Asia, the structure that once depended on Russian security protection and political patronage is loosening. Central Asian states are increasingly aware of the uncertainties produced by Russia's declining position in the global order and the diminishing effect of its security commitments. For example, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) failed to intervene effectively in the 2022 Armenia border conflict, exposing the continued decline of the security authority of Russia-led multilateral mechanisms. This context has pushed Central Asian states to accelerate the introduction of new balancing forces to hedge against excessive concentration of dependence on Russia. China has rapidly filled the strategic space opened by Russia's retreat. Through deep embedding via the Belt and Road Initiative, China has not only become

increasingly dominant in transport infrastructure, energy pipelines, and regional digital platform construction, but has also normalized its institutional influence through mechanisms such as the "China–Central Asia Summit" and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Gusseinov, 2025). This influence is not simply economic projection or collective security; it reflects an embedded governance model that integrates economics and security. China's involvement has altered the previous model of region-wide cooperation driven primarily by security, producing a marked tilt among Central Asian states toward "rebalancing" strategies aligned with China in agenda-setting and policy choices.

At the same time, the operational logic of the SCO is also showing a tendency toward "de-Russia-centrization." Although Russia remains one of its founding members, China's role has become increasingly prominent in agenda leadership, institutional construction, and regional coordination (Gürcan, 2020). In areas such as counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and cross-border infrastructure coordination, more Central Asian states are willing to accept Chinese standards and rule frameworks. This organizational reconfiguration further weakens Russia's institutional control over Central Asia and suggests that the region's future institutional choices will lean more toward diversified balancing cooperation rather than traditional subordinate security dependence on Russia (Tükekçi, 2024).

In the South Caucasus, the restructuring has been even more dramatic. In recent years, Azerbaijan's military victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict not only signaled a strategic rejection of Russia's role as a neutral mediator, but also pushed Azerbaijan toward deeper military cooperation with Türkiye on security issues. A late-2024 incident in which a passenger aircraft was shot down by Russia further intensified tensions between Azerbaijan and Russia. Georgia, meanwhile, continues to advance a "de-Russification" process, seeking to consolidate its Western integration trajectory through mechanisms such as the EU and NATO. In addition, the active intervention of "secondary powers" such as Türkiye and India further intensifies the fragmentation of regional power.

Türkiye strengthens cultural linkages in Central Asia and the Caucasus through pan-Turkism. India, through energy investment and educational diplomacy, is gradually building presence in Central Asia. These states are not seeking traditional spheres of influence; rather, they are pursuing issue- and sector-specific influence narratives for regional-power standing within multipolarity. Under this structure, regional states are no longer passively subordinate to a single hegemon; instead, they actively construct multilateral choice portfolios, strategically diversifying external dependence.

Overall, Central Asia and the Caucasus are undergoing a deep paradigmatic shift. The post-Soviet sphere once dominated by Russia is being replaced by the intersecting embedding of multiple external forces, while regional states are being emancipated from the traditional role of "those being governed" and are becoming active strategists pursuing autonomy and multilateral balancing. This shift not only marks Russia's structural decline at the center of Eurasia, but also introduces more variables and uncertainty into the construction of the future Eurasian order. It may facilitate new paradigms of multilateral cooperation, yet it may also intensify geopolitical competition through power fragmentation and increase the risk of localized conflicts.

NATO's Further Eastward "Strategic Reach": Extending from the Black Sea and the Baltic to the Caspian

NATO's continued eastward expansion is one of the most structural developments in Eurasia's postwar geopolitical transformation. This trend is not only reflected in the addition of members in the traditional sense—such as the rapid accession of Sweden and Finland—but more profoundly indicates that the Western collective security architecture is shifting from a defensive alliance to a forward-deterrence posture. NATO is gradually moving beyond its post–Cold War hesitancy toward the security demands of peripheral states, bringing countries once considered marginal or in-between into a more strategically forward security trajectory. This evolution will

have far-reaching implications for Eurasia's security boundaries and the structure of regional order.

The accession processes of Sweden and Finland carry both symbolic and substantive significance. Symbolically, they break the persistence of the post–Cold War Nordic neutrality model, indicating that the strategic cost of neutrality in the face of systemic threats has become unsustainable. Geopolitically, through the accession of Sweden and Finland, NATO has effectively sealed the Baltic Sea's geostrategic corridors and achieved comprehensive coverage along Russia's northwestern strategic frontier. This shift substantially enhances NATO's deployment capacity across the Arctic passages, the Baltic littoral, and the Nordic security space, while indirectly intensifying Russia's security vulnerability in that region.

In Southeastern Europe and the Caucasus, NATO's strategic positioning is increasingly extending along Eurasian security-corridor lines. The Black Sea–Caspian security axis is gradually becoming a key focus for building its forward deterrence system. For example, Montenegro's accession and the strengthened NATO military presence around Serbia aim to integrate the Balkans as a stable southern European pivot for NATO. The issue of Georgia's accession has re-emerged in the post–Russia–Ukraine war context; while political conditions remain complex, Georgia's candidate status and increasingly close military cooperation with NATO have effectively embedded it within the NATO security architecture (Gureshidze & Latsabidze, 2024). This trend suggests that amid Russia's declining capacity and constrained diplomatic resources, the West is more inclined to pursue practical strategic expansion rather than a passive security-guarantee posture—continually enlarging NATO's security boundaries.

NATO's forward-looking strategy in the Balkans also represents a systemic adjustment to anticipated geopolitical trends. Corridors running from the Black Sea through the South Caucasus and onward to Central Asia via the Caspian are being redefined as a new continental bridge hub linking Europe and the Indo-Pacific. By strengthening security coordination with countries such as Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Romania, NATO aims to build a cross-Eurasian

regional deterrence chain that limits the future strategic access of China and Russia in this space. This is not simple military expansion; it is a remolding of the geopolitical security structure, reflecting a clear trend toward functionalized forward deployment.

In sum, NATO's eastward extension is not merely an expansion of military borders, but a fundamental adjustment of the post–Cold War logic of security governance. It reflects not only Russia's structural decline in geopolitical influence, but also the evolution of the Western collective security system toward a complex security posture combining multi-dimensional deterrence with spatial linkage. This process will have long-term effects on Eurasia's geopolitical stability: it increases the complexity of regional states' strategic options and may, in the absence of stable supporting mechanisms, generate a new round of security dilemmas and power frictions.

Conclusion: Eurasia's Future Trajectory Under a Multipolar Configuration

Against the backdrop of accelerating multipolarity, the Eurasian continent—one of the most geopolitically strategic spaces on earth—is shifting from the relatively clear post–Cold War unipolar–bipolar power configuration toward a multipolar order characterized by "nested power structures." This new configuration is not simply a balanced coexistence of multiple poles; at the regional level it is manifested as deep interweaving and spatial competition among four major power centers: China, the United States, Russia, and Europe. As a result, Eurasia is entering a process of role ambiguity: it could become a geopolitical buffer zone in which multipolar forces achieve equilibrium through institutional coordination and mutual checks; or it could evolve into a collision zone, where power penetration and blurred strategic boundaries continuously generate regional security frictions and proxy conflicts.

The paradox of this multipolar configuration is that theoretical expectations of balance often fail to translate into practical, stable logics of regional governance. Apparent pluralization of power and mutual constraints does not automatically produce institutional trust

among major powers; instead, in practice they often catalyze more strategic friction. On the one hand, different country groupings across Eurasia lack deep compatibility in institutional logics and normative systems—for example, the EU's democratic rule-of-law governance model offers limited room for coordination with China's infrastructure-led cooperation frameworks. On the other hand, major powers' strategic deployments in the region frequently overlap—for instance, friction between NATO's eastward expansion and China's Belt and Road in Central and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus becomes a potential hotspot for security competition and strategic miscalculation.

At the same time, regional states commonly adopt "multi-vector policies" to enhance autonomy within a multipolar system. Countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan not only strengthen economic and security cooperation with China, but also maintain military-framework ties with Russia and actively connect with EU technological cooperation and U.S. security dialogues. Such hedging neutrality can indeed increase small states' strategic maneuverability, but it also greatly raises the complexity of regional strategic games. When cognitive gaps or institutional frictions emerge among external actors, states located at the intersection of power flows often become the first carriers of "proxy pressure," leaving Eurasia in a highly unstable and fragile structure within multipolar balancing.

Moreover, institutional frictions under multipolarity are particularly acute in key domains. For example, control over energy corridors has become a focal point of structural competition among China and Russia on the one side and the EU and the United States on the other, while the construction of export pipeline networks in the Caucasus and Central Asia displays strong geopolitical conflict in the tug-of-war between "eastward" and "westward" routes. Overall, Eurasia under a multipolar configuration is unlikely to become a stable space of geopolitical reconciliation; it is more like a "strategic collision belt" continually undergoing reorganization. Multipolarity ought, in principle, to bring greater regional autonomy and cooperation opportunities. Yet under conditions of institutional asymmetry,

differentiated security priorities, strategic-cultural divergence, and persistent external intervention, it may instead intensify tension and conflict. This heightened uncertainty will be a defining feature of Eurasia in the multipolar era, posing higher requirements for institutional coordination and strategic communication in building future regional governance mechanisms.

Therefore, understanding and responding to geopolitical change amid the restructuring of power across Eurasia has become one of the most urgent and critical strategic tasks in contemporary international relations. Multipolarity is not only a challenge to the traditional international order; it is also a decisive factor shaping the future architecture of global governance and regional security. In facing this new reality, the international community must strengthen strategic communication and innovate mechanisms to reduce risks of miscalculation and conflict, and to jointly explore a path toward peaceful and stable multipolar coexistence.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This article is a phased research outcome of the 2025 National Social Science Fund of China (General Project), "The Predicament of Central and Eastern Europe under the Transformation of the European Security Order and China's Responses" (Project No. 25BGJ084).

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