

WESTERN SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA AND THE EMERGENCE OF AN ANTI-WESTERN COALITION – IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GLOBAL ORDER

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Abstract. *The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has profoundly reshaped the international order, triggering unprecedented sanctions imposed by Western powers. This article analyzes the impact of these sanctions on Russia's internal stability and external orientation, emphasizing the emergence of an anti-Western bloc centered around Russia, Iran, and North Korea. By examining bilateral relations and strategic cooperation among these states, the study highlights how sanctions have not only attempted to constrain Russian aggression but have also catalyzed the reconfiguration of global power dynamics, accelerating the transition towards a multipolar world order.*

Keywords: *sanctions, Russia, Iran, North Korea, multipolarity, global order*

Introduction

The Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, launched on February 24, 2022, marked a turning point in contemporary international relations, reactivating the logic of geopolitical confrontation between major powers. While the post-Cold War era was characterized by the consolidation of a unipolar world order, in which the United States and its Western allies held political, economic, and military supremacy, recent events have revealed the fragility of this system (Allison, 2022).

In this context, the concept of "world order," as defined by Henry Kissinger, is based on "a balance between power and legitimacy; when either element collapses, the system enters a phase of crisis" (Kissinger, 2014, p. 9). Thus, the Ukraine crisis has exposed fundamental imbalances within the contemporary international system.

One of the main instruments employed by Western states in response to Russia's aggression was the swift implementation of an extensive regime of economic, financial, and diplomatic sanctions—imposed at an unprecedented pace and with remarkable coordination. The European Union, the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia, and other allied countries acted in concert to isolate Russia from international markets, with the aim of weakening its economy and reducing the Kremlin's capacity to sustain its war effort (Charap & Shapiro, 2022).

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These sanctions—unparalleled in scope in recent international history—targeted strategic sectors such as banking, energy, high-tech trade, and the assets of individuals close to Vladimir Putin. Unlike the sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the new measures were far more comprehensive, affecting not only political and economic elites but also the entire structure of the Russian economy (Connolly, 2022).

However, the effects of these sanctions extended beyond the economic realm. In the medium and long term, they contributed to a global geopolitical realignment, prompting Russia to strengthen its relations with states that share an anti-Western vision. In particular, Iran and North Korea have become strategic partners for Moscow, providing military resources, diplomatic support, and alternative routes for trade and financing (Fulton et al., 2023). This rapprochement has led to the crystallization of an anti-Western bloc that openly challenges international norms and institutions dominated by the West.

Within the framework of offensive realism, as articulated by John J. Mearsheimer, great powers "are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 29). This theory offers a valuable framework for understanding Russia's strategic reorientation toward alternative alliances, as it seeks to counteract Western-imposed isolation and demonstrate its capacity to unite other so-called "pariah" states within the international system.

This paper aims to analyze how Western sanctions—initially designed as coercive tools—have generated unintended geopolitical effects, fostering alignment among authoritarian states and accelerating the transition toward a multipolar world order. The analysis will be structured along four main axes: the impact of sanctions on Russia, the formation of the anti-Western bloc, a case study on Russia's relations with Iran and North Korea, and the broader implications of these developments for the contemporary global order.

1. Methodology of the Study

The methodology of this study is based on a qualitative and analytical approach, aimed at highlighting the effects of Western sanctions on Russia and their implications for the global order. The research employed a combination of document analysis, comparison of international relations, and strategic analysis tools. Within the document analysis, government reports, academic publications, studies conducted by international think tanks, and specialized media articles were systematically examined to identify Russia's economic, political, and military developments following the imposition of sanctions, as well as to assess strategic relations with states such as Iran, North Korea, and China. Sources were selected and evaluated for credibility and relevance, applying academic criteria to verify the accuracy of information.

The comparative study of international relations allowed for highlighting differences between Russia's partnerships, analysing relations with Iran and North Korea in terms of duration, complexity, and strategic objectives, including military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation, thereby identifying the role of each partner in strengthening the anti-Western bloc and countering the effects of sanctions. For structuring and evaluating information, the study employed SWOT analysis for Russia's partnerships and applied scenario analysis to anticipate potential geopolitical and economic developments in the medium and long term, including the impact of sanctions on multipolarity and the fragmentation of the international order.

This methodology provides an integrated and contextualized understanding of how sanctions influence Russia's behavior and the structure of the international system, combining academic rigor with a practical strategic perspective, and offering a solid foundation for the study's conclusions.

2. Strategies of the Russian Federation to Adapt to Western Sanctions

The implementation of Western sanctions against the Russian Federation aimed at several key objectives: demonstrating that violations of international norms would not go unpunished, discouraging aggression, limiting the Kremlin's ability to finance and sustain the war in Ukraine, and isolating Russia internationally (European Council, 2025; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022). The sanction regime stood out for its scope, rapid adoption, and remarkable coordination among the European Union, the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia, and other strategic allies (Smith, 2023).

Sanctions targeted strategic economic and political sectors, such as the banking sector through the exclusion of certain Russian banks from the SWIFT system, restrictions on oil and gas exports to the West, trade in advanced technologies, limitations in air and maritime transport, and the freezing of assets belonging to oligarchs close to Vladimir Putin (European Council, 2025). Complementary measures included diplomatic sanctions, such as Russia's exclusion from international organizations, suspension of cooperation in education, research, and culture, and sanctions against individuals supporting the regime and the invasion of Ukraine (NATO, 2022).

In the first months following the sanctions, the Russian economy suffered a significant shock. The ruble depreciated sharply, and the financial market experienced record losses. In March 2022, the MOEX stock index fell by over 30% in a single day, prompting the Central Bank of Russia to raise the key interest rate to 20% to stabilize the currency (Central Bank of Russia, 2022).

The military and technological sectors were among the most affected due to restrictions on the export of essential components. The shortage of microchips and other advanced technologies reduced Russia's capacity to produce modern military equipment, forcing the Kremlin to seek external alternatives (Economic Analysis, 2022). This situation favored closer ties with Iran and North Korea, both willing to supply equipment and ammunition in exchange for economic and technological benefits (International Report, 2022).

In the medium term, the Russian economy demonstrated unexpected resilience due to several factors, including increased energy exports to countries not participating in sanctions, such as China, India, and Turkey (World Trade Organization, 2022); the implementation of strict domestic currency and market controls (Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation, 2022); and the development of alternative trade routes through Central Asia and the Caucasus (Trade Report, 2022). This adaptability allowed Russia to avoid the economic collapse anticipated by some Western governments. However, long-term costs remain significant, particularly due to loss of access to modern technologies, reduced foreign investment, and progressive isolation from the global economy (Economic Study, 2022).

Domestically, Vladimir Putin's regime used sanctions as a propaganda tool, presenting them to the population as evidence of a Western conspiracy against Russia (International Crisis Group, 2024). This strategy strengthened support for the Kremlin, especially in the early months of the conflict, when the official narrative of the "special

military operation” was heavily promoted in state-controlled media (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Ideologists in the Kremlin played a significant role in shaping this narrative over several years; for example, Aleksandr Dugin’s writings and speeches advocate the concept of a “distinct nation” that is different from the rest of the world, unable to follow pre-existing development paths or fully adopt European or Asian models, and thus destined for a “third way” (Dugin, 2009). In this context, the invasion of Ukraine, opposition to the West, and creation of a distinct identity are viewed as typical expressions of Russian imperialism embraced by both the political establishment and broad segments of the population (Lucchese, 2023). At the same time, sanctions had indirect effects on civil society, further restricting space for opposition and dissent. Numerous NGOs, independent journalists, and activists were subjected to repression under the pretext of collaboration with “foreign agents” (Amnesty International, 2024). Rather than weakening the regime, sanctions contributed to the consolidation of authoritarianism, giving Putin a pretext to eliminate critical voices (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Externally, Russia’s diplomatic isolation was partial. Although the West significantly reduced contacts with Moscow, several emerging powers—including China, India, Brazil, and South Africa—adopted a neutral stance or even supported Russia in certain contexts (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). This situation highlighted the limits of Western coercive power and created opportunities for Moscow to build alternative alliances outside the Euro-Atlantic sphere of influence (Pew Research Center, 2024).

To counter the effects of sanctions, the Kremlin implemented several adaptation strategies designed to maintain both the regime and the war effort (JPMorgan Chase & Co., 2025; Chatham House, 2025).

De-dollarization of the economy – Russia reduced its dependence on the U.S. dollar, promoting trade in national currencies with partner states, particularly China and India. This strategy aims to create a parallel financial system independent of Western infrastructure (JPMorgan Chase & Co., 2025; Gis Reports Online, 2025).

Import substitution – The Russian government encouraged the development of domestic industry to compensate for the lack of Western products. However, success has been limited, as many advanced technologies cannot be easily replicated in Russia (Chatham House, 2025).

Pivot to the East – Moscow accelerated economic and political relations with Asian and Eastern states, strengthening cooperation with Iran and North Korea. This orientation was not only an economic necessity but also a geopolitical strategy to create a common front against the West (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2025a; CSIS, 2025b).

External military support – In the military sphere, sanctions affected Russia’s capacity to produce modern weaponry. In this context, Iran and North Korea became essential suppliers of drones, ammunition, and other equipment, deepening bilateral relations between these states (Chatham House, 2025; CSIS, 2025b).

3. Russia and the Core of the Anti-Western Bloc: Strategic Cooperation with Iran and North Korea

As Western sanctions intensified, Russia was pushed toward an informal alliance with states that challenge the liberal international order. This alliance, referred to as the

“anti-Western bloc,” does not have a formal institutional structure but is based on converging interests and a shared discourse against Western hegemony (Chatham House, 2025).

Russia, Iran, and North Korea constitute the core of this bloc, united by opposition to NATO expansion and Western influence, authoritarian regimes led by charismatic leaders, shared experience with international sanctions, and the desire to create alternative trade and financing routes outside the Western system (CSIS, 2025; Lucchese, 2023).

Russia plays a central role due to its energy resources, military capabilities, and position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The invasion of Ukraine has reinforced Moscow’s status as a declared adversary of the West, forcing a redefinition of its foreign policy (Pew Research Center, 2024).

Putin promotes the idea of an anti-Western “Global South,” using forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to support a multipolar agenda. Sanctions have provided a narrative that the liberal international order is discriminatory and unfair (Gis Reports Online, 2025).

Iran’s experience in managing sanctions became valuable for Russia after 2022, facilitating the circumvention of EU and U.S. restrictions. Russian-Iranian cooperation spans military, economic, and diplomatic spheres, including the provision of Iranian drones for attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure and Russian support for Iran’s nuclear program and air defense modernization. This interdependent relationship allows both states to withstand Western pressure (CSIS, 2025).

North Korea supplies conventional ammunition and weapons for the war in Ukraine, and Pyongyang symbolizes resistance to Western hegemony, demonstrating political survival despite international isolation. Kim Jong-un’s visits to Russia and the diplomatic support provided to Moscow at the UN underscore the consolidation of the alliance and its relevance to global security (Amnesty International, 2024).

The invasion of Ukraine and the stringent sanctions imposed by the West compelled the Russian Federation to seek new strategic partnerships. Moscow turned to states that are themselves in conflict with the West and have experience avoiding international isolation (Chatham House, 2025). In this context, Iran and North Korea emerged as essential allies, providing Russia with material support, diplomatic legitimacy, trade alternatives, and access to military resources (CSIS, 2025).

Relations with these states are not a recent development but are grounded in a consolidated historical and geopolitical foundation. Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine has accelerated cooperation in an unprecedented manner. Both Iran and North Korea have become key elements in Russia’s efforts to counter the effects of Western sanctions and promote a multipolar world order that challenges U.S. hegemony (Lucchese, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2024).

3.1. Russia and Iran: A Strategic Alliance Facing International Isolation

The relations between Russia and Iran have historically been complex, oscillating between cooperation and mutual suspicion. After 2022, however, the geopolitical context transformed their relationship into a deep strategic partnership based on shared objectives. Both states face economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, aim to limit U.S. influence in their regions, and seek to establish alternative trade and security networks (Chatham House, 2025). A central element of this cooperation is the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a project designed to connect

Russia to the Indian Ocean through Iran and India, reducing Moscow's dependence on Western-controlled maritime routes (Gis Reports Online, 2025).

In terms of military cooperation, a key aspect of the Russia–Iran rapprochement, the relationship intensified starting in summer 2022, when Russia began deploying Iranian Shahed-136 and Mohajer-6 drones in Ukraine. These drones proved effective and relatively inexpensive, allowing Russia to compensate for the lack of Western components and target Ukraine's energy and logistics infrastructure. In return, Moscow provided Iran with advanced technology to modernize air defense systems and develop its space program, reinforcing interdependence between the two states (CSIS, 2025).

This collaboration has raised concerns among Middle Eastern countries, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, which perceive the Moscow–Tehran alliance as a direct threat to regional security (Amnesty International, 2024).

Economically, Iran has become a vital hub for Russian trade, providing access to Persian Gulf ports and facilitating commercial exchanges with Asian countries. The INSTC project offers Moscow a strategic export route, particularly after losing access to European ports. The energy companies of both countries have begun collaborating in gas field exploitation and oil production, creating a deep economic interdependence (Pew Research Center, 2024).

Evaluating the partnership between the two states through these lenses, a SWOT analysis can be applied to highlight strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, providing a structured framework for understanding the strategic value and limitations of the Russia–Iran alliance.

Tab.1. SWOT analysis for the Russia–Iran partnership

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Strategic and long-term alliance based on converging interests. - Mutual experience in managing Western sanctions. - Strong military cooperation (e.g., drones, air defense technology). - Economic interdependence, including energy and trade projects (INSTC corridor, gas and oil collaboration). - Enhances Russia's access to alternative trade routes and ports. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Risk of involvement in regional conflicts (Middle East tensions). - Dependence on Iran for specific military technologies. - Potential exposure to secondary sanctions by Western states. - Coordination challenges due to differences in political priorities and internal dynamics.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Development of alternative trade and finance networks independent of the West. - Strengthening multipolarity and reducing reliance on Western infrastructure. - Expansion of joint military-industrial projects. - Diplomatic leverage in international forums (BRICS, SCO). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Escalation of tensions with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors. - Western countermeasures could target joint projects. - Potential misalignment of strategic goals between Moscow and Tehran. - Volatility in global energy markets affecting joint economic ventures.

Thus, the Russia–Iran partnership emerges as a long-term strategic alliance, based on converging interests and the necessity of survival in the face of Western

pressure. The success of this relationship, however, depends on the ability of both states to avoid direct involvement in regional conflicts and to maintain geopolitical coordination in an increasingly multipolar world.

3.2. *Russia and North Korea – a Pragmatic and Military Partnership*

Unlike the relationship with Iran, the partnership between Russia and North Korea is predominantly pragmatic. North Korea is one of the most isolated countries in the world, under a strict regime of international sanctions due to its nuclear program. This situation has led Pyongyang to seek alliances that provide diplomatic protection and access to resources. At the same time, the war in Ukraine has offered Russia a crucial supplier of ammunition and armaments, essential for sustaining the front (CSIS, 2025). Military cooperation between the two states forms the core of their bilateral relationship. The North Korean defense industry, although modest technologically, is specialized in mass production, allowing the rapid provision of shells, rockets, and other conventional equipment needed by the Russian army. In return, Moscow provides Pyongyang with technological support for its ballistic and space programs — an exchange that undermines the international non-proliferation regime and strains relations with the United States and its allies (Reuters, 2024).

Diplomatically, the partnership gained significant visibility with the visit of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to Russia in September 2023. His meeting with Vladimir Putin at the Vostochny Cosmodrome sent a clear signal to the international community: both states are willing to defy sanctions and Western pressures (BBC, 2023). Within the UN Security Council, Russia used its veto power to block the adoption of new resolutions against North Korea, consolidating bilateral political support (Chatham House, 2024).

A SWOT analysis was also conducted in this case to highlight the interests between the two states.

Tab.2. SWOT analyses Russia – North Korea relationship

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Russia gains rapid access to munitions and conventional equipment necessary for the war in Ukraine. - North Korea provides diplomatic support and limited legitimacy, especially in international forums. - Possibility of technological exchange (support for North Korea's ballistic and space programs). - The relationship is pragmatic and adaptable to Russia's immediate needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -North Korea cannot support long-term projects or major investments. - Pyongyang's industrial and technological capacity is limited. - The relationship depends on specific conflict contexts (war in Ukraine). - Potential reputational risk for Russia in the international community.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Consolidation of an anti-Western front through pragmatic partnerships. - Possibility to discreetly expand military and technological cooperation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Dependence on a highly isolated and sanctioned state with potential internal instability. - Potential conflict between international sanctions and the need for military support.

- Creation of alternative channels for supplying armaments and strategic resources.	- Tensions with major states (USA, Japan, South Korea) that may respond to this cooperation. - Vulnerability to detection and blocking of arms shipments through external sanctions.
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3.3. *Comparing the Two Partnerships*

Although Russia cooperates with both Iran and North Korea, the nature of these relationships differs fundamentally. Iran constitutes a long-term strategic partner, capable of contributing to the development of complex projects in the energy, trade, and military sectors, designed to reduce Moscow's dependence on Western infrastructure and strengthen its global position (Katz, 2023). In contrast, North Korea plays a predominantly tactical and limited role, providing Russia with ammunition, conventional equipment, and diplomatic support at a critical moment in the Ukraine conflict, without possessing the resources necessary to sustain a long-term partnership (CSIS, 2025; Reuters, 2024).

Thus, cooperation with Iran offers Russia strategic stability and economic prospects, while the relationship with North Korea represents a temporary solution dictated by wartime needs. Overall, these two partnerships illustrate the Kremlin's pragmatic approach in the face of international isolation: combining long-term alliances with opportunistic ones to counter Western pressure and maintain great power status (BBC, 2023).

Together, these relationships contribute to consolidating the anti-Western bloc, providing Russia with vital alternatives for political, military, and economic support. This combination of strategic and tactical alliances allows Moscow to navigate a fragmented international system, continuing to promote a multipolar order and a position as a relevant global actor, despite sanctions and diplomatic isolation (Chatham House, 2024).

4. **The Impact of Sanctions on the World Order**

Western sanctions against Russia were initially designed as instruments of coercion, aimed at limiting Moscow's ability to continue its aggression against Ukraine. However, their effects have gone beyond the immediate goal, generating profound consequences for the global balance of power. Instead of completely isolating Russia, the sanctions have accelerated the fragmentation of the international order and stimulated the emergence of alternative alliances, consolidating opposition to Western hegemony (Allison, 2023; Chatham House, 2024).

In the post-Cold War period, the international order was dominated by a unipolar system, in which the United States and its allies dictated the rules of global political and economic engagement. Institutions such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, and NATO were pillars of this order, based on the principles of liberal democracy, market economies, and respect for human rights (Ikenberry, 2018). The invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia have highlighted the limits of the West's ability to control geopolitical dynamics. Numerous states in the "Global South" have refused to join the sanctions regime, preferring neutrality or economic cooperation with Moscow. Platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have emerged as alternatives to the US-dominated system (Lissovolik, 2023).

Russia has exploited this context to promote an anti-Western narrative, presenting sanctions as evidence of the discriminatory nature of the liberal order. This

narrative has resonated among states marginalized by the current system, fueling the idea of a multipolar order based on mutual respect and national sovereignty.

Although the sanctions aimed to isolate Russia, they have had the opposite effect: they have encouraged closer ties between Moscow and other states in conflict with the West, such as Iran and North Korea. This has created an informal anti-Western bloc, lacking formal institutionalization but reinforced by common interests—resisting sanctions, mutual support, and developing alternative trade routes. The military component is the most visible: Iran provides drones and military technology, while North Korea delivers ammunition and conventional weapons. Meanwhile, China supports Russia indirectly through economic cooperation and the promotion of a parallel financial system based on the yuan (CSIS, 2025). Alliances such as BRICS are transforming into platforms for coordinating non-Western economic policies, amplifying the global geopolitical reconfiguration.

China has adopted a strategic balancing position: it has neither condemned the Russian invasion nor provided military support, preferring to intensify economic cooperation (Brookings, 2023). Beijing has become Russia's main trading partner, with exchanges exceeding \$200 billion in 2023, and payments in yuan have reduced Moscow's dependence on the dollar and euro. Simultaneously, China promotes dedollarization and the expansion of the yuan in international transactions (PBOC, 2024), supporting a multipolar order and consolidating its role as a leader within BRICS and the SCO. However, China avoids forming an explicit anti-Western alliance, opting instead for a gradual strategy of global power reconfiguration (Allison, 2023).

An unexpected effect of the sanctions has been the acceleration of the multipolarization of the international system. Russia has demonstrated that total isolation is impossible in a globalized world, and sanctioned states have created parallel commercial and financial networks, such as the North–South Transport Corridor linking Russia, Iran, and India (WTO, 2024). Increasingly, transactions between Russia, China, India, and other states are conducted in local currencies, reducing the influence of the dollar and limiting the effectiveness of sanctions as a foreign policy tool (IMF, 2024).

Although the sanctions have severely affected the Russian economy and restricted Moscow's access to technological resources, the long-term geopolitical effects are ambivalent. On one hand, Russia becomes more dependent on non-Western partners, which may create internal vulnerabilities; on the other hand, these relationships strengthen an alternative global system, reducing the effectiveness of future sanctions. There is also a risk of expanding the anti-Western bloc to states in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, which could transform the world into a bipolar or multipolar system, diminish traditional international institutions, and make geopolitical conflicts more difficult to manage (Carnegie, 2024).

Conclusions

The analysis highlights that Western sanctions against Russia, while effective in the short term in limiting Moscow's economic and military resources, have produced unintended effects with a profound impact on the global order. Rather than isolating Russia, the sanctions have strengthened its relationships with states such as Iran and North Korea, laying the groundwork for the formation of an anti-Western bloc. The relationship between Russia and Iran emerges as a long-term strategic alliance, based on military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation, enabling the development of alternative trade routes, access to energy and technological resources, and the consolidation of

diplomatic legitimacy on the international stage. In contrast, the partnership with North Korea is primarily pragmatic and limited, providing Moscow with vital military resources and diplomatic support at a critical moment, but lacking the potential to sustain long-term strategic objectives. Together, these two relationships allow Russia to withstand Western pressures and promote an alternative narrative to the liberal global order.

In the long term, sanctions risk accelerating the process of multipolarization, prompting non-Western states to establish independent commercial and financial networks, conduct international transactions in local currencies, and develop alternative structures for economic and political cooperation. This trend may lead to the fragmentation of the international system and the emergence of alternative centers of power, with unpredictable effects on global stability.

The study demonstrates that sanctions, although designed as tools of deterrence and coercion, can have complex strategic consequences, reshaping the global balance of power. In an increasingly interdependent world, the complete isolation of a major actor such as Russia becomes impossible, and Western policies must be calibrated to account for these geopolitical realities and the capacity of sanctioned states to build alternative alliances and systems independent of Western influence.

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