BREAKBULK INSIGHTS 2026

Navigating Fragmentation, Volatility, and Execution Challenges in Global Trade

Market Context

The 2026 edition of Breakbulk Europe, held from June 16 to 18 in Rotterdam, offered a comprehensive and forward-looking perspective on the evolving dynamics of the project cargo and breakbulk industry. While global trade continues to demonstrate resilience in volume, the broader operating environment is undergoing a profound transformation. What emerges from this year's discussions is not a narrative of contraction, but one of increasing complexity, volatility, and structural change.

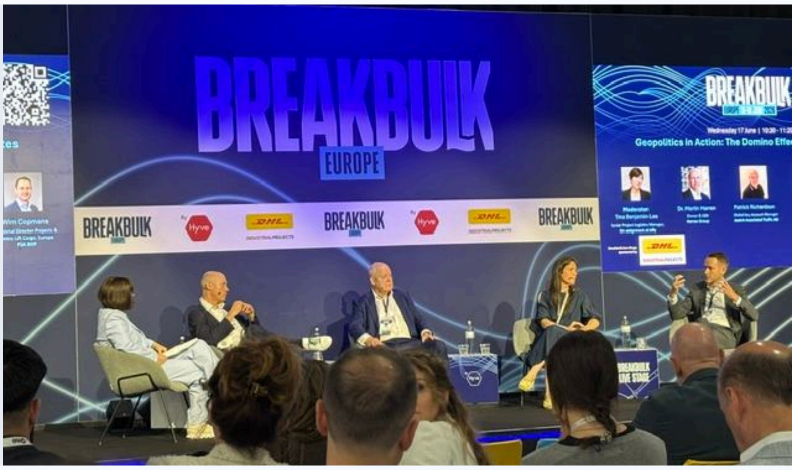
The central question for industry leaders is no longer whether demand will persist, but whether organizations are equipped to operate effectively in a world where predictability is diminishing and execution risk is rising. This report synthesizes the key insights from the event and outlines the implications for companies navigating this new landscape.

A Market Defined by Resilient Volumes and Fragile Execution

Global trade remains robust, supported by sustained demand in key sectors and regions. Maritime transport continues to dominate global exchange, carrying the vast majority of goods (over 80% of world merchandise trade by volume), while air cargo has experienced renewed growth momentum (+11.3% growth in cargo tonne-kilometers-CTK). These indicators confirm that the underlying need for global logistics and project cargo capabilities remains strong.

However, this volume resilience increasingly contrasts with execution fragility. The operating environment has become more volatile and less predictable, driven by a combination of geopolitical disruptions, trade rerouting, regulatory complexity, and cost pressures. The result is a structural shift in how the industry functions: what was once a relatively stable and efficiency-driven system is now characterized by uncertainty, longer lead times, and reduced reliability.

Five structural tensions illustrate this transformation. First, geopolitical instability is reshaping trade routes, creating longer and less efficient pathways while increasing exposure to disruption. Second, profitability is under sustained pressure, as fuel costs, congestion, and labor shortages persist. Third, the transition toward decarbonization reveals a widening gap between long-term ambition and current operational realities. Fourth, digitalization and cybersecurity have become central to operational performance, requiring significant investment and governance attention. Finally, the industry faces a growing leadership and talent gap, particularly in roles requiring a combination of operational expertise, transformation capability, and digital fluency.



From Globalization to Fragmentation: A Structural Reset of the Global Order

Beyond immediate market dynamics, Breakbulk Europe 2026 highlighted a deeper structural turning point: the shift from a previously globalized and relatively predictable economic order toward a far more fragmented and multipolar environment. As Ron Keller - former Dutch ambassador and geopolitical expert - emphasized in his keynote, geopolitics has moved from the periphery to the center of decision-making, becoming a primary force shaping economic trajectories, industrial strategies, and global trade flows.

The post–Cold War model of increasing integration, harmonized trade frameworks, and expanding global cooperation is being replaced by a more complex environment marked by diverging national strategies, regional instability, and intensified competition among major powers. The European Union continues to prioritize economic cooperation but faces challenges in achieving deeper political integration. The United States remains focused on security and strategic leadership, while China is transitioning toward an innovation-driven model amid growing rivalry. Other regions, including India, the Middle East, and Africa, contribute to an increasingly interconnected yet unstable global system.

This fragmentation is reflected in the proliferation of trade barriers, the weakening of multilateral institutions, and the growing misalignment between existing frameworks and contemporary geopolitical and climate realities. Looking ahead, greater geopolitical fragmentation should be expected: conflicts are likely to escalate and become more interconnected, trade barriers are multiplying, foreign investment flows are under pressure, and multilateral frameworks such as the WTO are steadily eroding. What is now underway is not a temporary disruption, but the beginning of a broader reset of the world order - and such transitions historically take time to unfold and stabilize.

These global dynamics are also reshaping demand patterns. As highlighted in the IMF's World Economic Outlook – Global Consumer 2026 Outlook, consumers in 2026 are best characterized as resilient yet increasingly defensive. Spending continues, but in a more selective and value-oriented manner. Growth persists, but it is uneven across regions and income groups. Confidence, although improving, remains fragile. More broadly, the World Economic Outlook points to historically low global growth, continued uncertainty around inflation and interest rates, and limited room for either fiscal or monetary stimulus. Consumer and business confidence therefore remain under pressure. At the same time, this more fractured environment is also creating regional opportunities, particularly in Europe, for companies able to reposition around resilience, competitiveness, and strategic autonomy. Consumption patterns are evolving toward greater value discipline, a rebalancing toward essentials and experiences, and the increasing influence of AI-driven personalization and engagement models.

Supply Chains Under Pressure: From Efficiency to Resilience

The combined impact of geopolitical fragmentation, economic uncertainty, and technological disruption is fundamentally reshaping supply chains. Historically optimized for efficiency and cost minimization, supply chains must now be redesigned to prioritize resilience, flexibility, and risk mitigation. Access to key inputs is becoming more uncertain as conflicts, trade restrictions, and climate-related shocks affect upstream availability. Transport chains themselves are increasingly disrupted by geopolitically driven rerouting, regulatory friction, and physical bottlenecks. At the same time, price formation across the chain is becoming more volatile and less predictable, reflecting the instability of the global political environment. In a weaker economic cycle, many buyers also have less negotiating power than in the past, further altering the balance of risk across supply relationships.

Disruptions across key trade corridors - from the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz to the Black Sea and Southeast Asia - illustrate the growing vulnerability of global logistics networks. Long-distance maritime routes are becoming more exposed and fragmented, with rising risks related to security, piracy, and political instability. One of the most significant consequences is the erosion of predictability: the ability to guarantee precise transit times, once a cornerstone of global trade, can no longer be assumed.

In response, companies are being forced to rethink their operating models. Diversification of suppliers, routes, and clients is becoming essential to reduce dependency risks, and procurement systems must evolve accordingly. This includes a greater focus on shorter or more regionalized supply chains where possible, broader supplier diversification, and deeper strategic partnerships capable of strengthening resilience across the value chain. Procurement strategies are also being redesigned to incorporate flexibility and redundancy, while the need for operational and financial buffers is increasing. In parallel, financial risk management is becoming more important, with greater emphasis on contingency planning, shared-risk mechanisms, and more balanced allocation of exposure between counterparties.

Technology plays a central role in this transformation. Artificial intelligence is now being integrated into critical operations, including transport planning, warehousing, and demand forecasting. Robotics and automation are moving from pilot projects to large-scale deployment, while AI agents are enabling more complex and dynamic system coordination. These developments are driving productivity gains but also increasing dependence on digital infrastructure and exposing companies to new cybersecurity risks. For this reason, investment in state-of-the-art digitalization - including AI-enabled planning, monitoring, and predictive capabilities - has become a strategic necessity rather than a discretionary upgrade. Equally important is the continuous monitoring of geopolitical risk, which is now essential to anticipating disruptions, adjusting sourcing and routing decisions, and supporting more resilient executive decision-making.

Leadership as the Critical Lever of Execution

In this increasingly complex and fragmented environment, the primary differentiator is no longer strategy alone, but execution. Many organizations have well-defined strategic visions, yet struggle to implement them effectively due to gaps in leadership capabilities.

Transport and logistics companies are facing a growing need to strengthen their leadership teams, enhance succession planning, and conduct more sophisticated talent mapping. The challenge lies in identifying executives who can operate effectively across multiple dimensions of complexity: international scale, digital transformation, regulatory constraints, and organizational change.

There is a particular need for senior leaders who combine deep technical or scientific expertise with strong data and digital capabilities. These leaders must be able to bridge central governance and local execution, ensuring alignment across regions, business units, and cultures. They must also be capable of navigating ambiguity, managing diverse stakeholders, and driving transformation in environments characterized by uncertainty and rapid change.

In parallel, the rise of geopolitical risk is leading to the emergence of new leadership roles, such as the Chief Geopolitical Officer. This reflects the growing importance of integrating geopolitical intelligence into strategic decision-making. Understanding how shifting borders - whether political, economic, or technological - impact value chains is becoming essential for long-term competitiveness.

Implications for the Future

Breakbulk Europe 2026 confirms that the global freight and project cargo industry is entering a new phase characterized by structural transformation rather than cyclical fluctuation. The underlying market remains strong, but the conditions for operating within it have fundamentally changed.

The shift from globalization to fragmentation, from efficiency to resilience, and from predictability to uncertainty requires a corresponding evolution in how companies define and execute their strategies. Success will increasingly depend on the ability to manage complexity, anticipate risk, leverage technology effectively, and, above all, deploy leadership capable of translating strategy into action. In this context, resilience and agility are no longer defensive concepts, but central pillars of sustained competitiveness.

In this new environment, competitive advantage will not be determined solely by scale or market position, assets or expertise, but by the capacity to navigate uncertainty with discipline, agility, and clarity. Organizations that invest in resilience, embrace technological transformation, and strengthen their leadership capabilities will be best positioned to succeed in a world where stability can no longer be taken for granted.

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