

How does the strategic reclassification of Russia from a peripheral distraction to a primary existential threat for the United States reshape domestic political accountability and long-term stability within US governance structures?

August 23, 2026 | SnugLab Research

Executive Summary

The strategic reclassification of Russia as a primary existential threat for the United States has, according to available evidence, primarily destabilized US governance by exacerbating fiscal strain and institutional gridlock, thereby eroding long-term stability and domestic political accountability. While this reclassification has fostered some consensus on the threat, it has also led to sustained defense appropriations without corresponding revenue reforms, driving structural deficits and intensifying inter-branch budgetary disputes. This fiscal fragility, coupled with the erosion of arms control frameworks and the exploitation of societal divisions by hybrid warfare, complicates traditional oversight mechanisms and challenges the endurance of US institutions.

Key Findings

Fiscal Strain and Eroding Governance Stability

The sustained elevation of defense appropriations to deter Russia is not the sole driver of structural deficits, but it significantly exacerbates broader macroeconomic factors, particularly the rising cost of servicing national debt, which in turn erodes governance stability. In FY2024, federal interest payments on the national debt reached \$882 billion, surpassing total discretionary defense outlays of \$874 billion [9]. This illustrates that debt service is a larger fiscal burden than defense spending, even as defense spending as a share of the national economy fell to a historic low of 3.0% of GDP in 2024 [9].

However, the reclassification of Russia as an immediate threat compounds these fiscal challenges by locking in high baseline defense spending and removing cost-saving guardrails [5, 9]. The expiration of the New START treaty in February 2026 without a successor agreement eliminates verifiable limits on nuclear modernization, forcing the

U.S. to maintain expensive worst-case assumptions and sustain elevated appropriations [4, 9]. This situation intensifies inter-branch budgetary gridlock, as partisan debates over deficits lead to Congress's inability to pass annual appropriations bills on time [12]. Overreliance on continuing resolutions, which base funding on prior-year levels, strains military readiness and constrains long-term investments [12, 9].

Budget brinkmanship has quantitatively impacted congressional oversight capacity. House committee staff levels have fallen below pre-1995 benchmarks, and the elimination of the Office of Technology Assessment removed dedicated analytical capacity [10]. The FY2026 defense budget process was historically disjointed, with top-line justifications arriving four months past the February deadline and containing roughly \$10 billion in accounting discrepancies [13]. Despite these strains, the Department of Defense has never passed its required audit, complicating Congress's ability to track previously appropriated funds [11].

Erosion of Arms Control and Strategic Predictability

Russia's reclassification has eroded bipartisan arms control, trading institutional stability for strategic agility while introducing fiscal and predictability risks. The United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002, terminated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019, and exited the Open Skies Treaty in 2020 [9]. Most recently, the New START Treaty expired on February 5, 2026, with no successor agreement in place, marking the first time in decades that the US lacks a bilateral nuclear arms control treaty with Russia [9]. This dissolution of formal treaties has made the strategic relationship less stable, secure, and predictable [9].

Historically, treaties like New START provided a framework for bipartisan consensus, passing the Senate with a decisive bipartisan vote [9]. However, the reclassification of Russia as a primary threat has frayed this political unity, with growing skepticism toward arms control within Congress [9]. To compensate for the loss of verifiable constraints, US governance is shifting toward modern strategic agility, prioritizing unilateral capabilities that use commercial innovation, such as artificial intelligence and resilient space architectures, to build deterrence without strict dependence on Russian participation in treaties [9]. This agility, however, comes at a cost; without the transparency of data exchanges and on-site inspections, the US must make expensive worst-case assumptions about Russian military modernization [9]. This strategic pivot also contributes to fiscal strain, as the financial burden of sustaining a high-threat posture is exacerbated by the national debt [9].

The loss of strategic predictability has also shifted NATO allied defense planning. A 2025 survey of foreign policy elites across 26 allied countries found that 59% of European respondents view Russia as a near-term threat [3]. Despite this, 79% of allied elites prioritize capabilities for independent territorial defense or in-region conflict, with only 5% favoring out-of-area contributions to American operations [3]. This indicates that allies largely expect the United States to shoulder most of the combat burden even as strategic predictability declines [3].

Domestic Political Accountability and Executive War Powers

The existential framing of Russia does not causally insulate the executive from traditional oversight; instead, it heightens the necessity of inter-branch cooperation for enduring domestic accountability and institutional stability. While policymakers' desire for international influence can pressure executive branch lawyers to advance expansive claims of presidential authority, the Truman-era model of claiming broad inherent authority without congressional approval is now viewed as politically risky in major power conflicts [8]. The existential nature of the Russian threat means that unilateral executive action lacks the durability required for sustained deterrence, making statutory authorization a legally and politically preferable approach [8].

Domestic political accountability is operationalized through the enforcement of statutory war powers and public-elite skepticism toward unilateral executive action [8]. The passage of the Iran War Powers Resolution on June 23, 2026, demonstrates Congress's capacity to enforce consequences for executive military decisions by directing the cessation of hostilities even without the President's signature [7]. Furthermore, Americans have grown increasingly skeptical of broad war powers claims since the Vietnam War, a sentiment amplified by dissatisfaction with prolonged campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq [8]. This skepticism ensures that citizens and Congress can enforce consequences for executive foreign policy decisions, making unilateral action a riskier political proposition [8]. No specific statutory amendments, GAO reports, or presidential directives enacted between 2014 and 2026 explicitly altered the legal threshold for executive war powers *solely* in response to Russia's threat reclassification [8]. Instead, the period featured statutory repeals, such as the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolutions in December 2025, which altered the general statutory basis for presidential force but not specifically for Russia [14].

Hybrid Warfare and Public Trust Degradation

Russia's sustained information operations have directly targeted and exploited deep political and social rifts within the United States, making these internal divisions attractive targets for Moscow [6]. The 2016 election interference, characterized by hacking and social media campaigns, served as a critical inflection point that stoked electoral divisions and exposed American vulnerability to foreign exploitation of its domestic processes [1, 2, 6]. This ongoing meddling has tangible consequences for domestic political accountability; for instance, the domestic political costs of negotiating arms control extensions have risen significantly due to public perceptions of Russian treaty violations and election interference [4].

However, the degradation of trust in electoral and institutional mechanisms is not solely caused by Russia's actions. Americans have grown increasingly skeptical of broad claims of presidential war powers since the Vietnam War, a trend amplified by public dissatisfaction over decades-long military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq [8]. This pre-existing skepticism means that while Russia's exploitation of internal divisions complicates the traditional feedback loop for enforcing accountability, it operates within a broader context of institutional distrust [8]. Consequently, the executive branch's historically permissive understanding of constitutional war powers is becoming more constraining in the context of major power conflict, as expansive foreign policy claims are viewed as politically risky [8].

Implications

The reclassification of Russia as a primary existential threat has profound implications for US governance. It necessitates a re-evaluation of fiscal priorities, demanding a balance between sustained defense spending and national debt management to ensure long-term economic and strategic stability. The erosion of arms control frameworks implies a more unpredictable global security environment, requiring the US to invest in unilateral strategic agility while navigating allied expectations for burden-sharing. Domestically, while the existential threat narrative might tempt executive overreach, the enduring public and congressional skepticism towards expansive war powers suggests that sustained inter-branch cooperation, rather than unilateral action, is crucial for maintaining political accountability and institutional resilience. The ongoing challenge of hybrid warfare underscores the need for robust defenses against foreign interference to preserve public trust in democratic processes.

Limitations and Caveats

The report draws from a moderate confidence level, indicating that while the topic is empirically testable, the long-term effects are still unfolding, and reasonable interpretations of the evidence diverge. Specific CBO deficit thresholds for 2026-2030 were not available in the provided research context. Furthermore, direct quantitative data on the degradation of public trust in electoral mechanisms specifically attributed to Russian hybrid warfare between 2024 and 2026 was limited. The analysis relies on expert interpretations and legislative actions up to August 2026, and future developments could alter the trajectory of US governance structures.

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