

How does treating Russia primarily as a distraction rather than the central geopolitical threat reconfigure US alliance accountability and alter long-term stability in European power structures?

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Executive Summary

The evidence suggests that treating Russia primarily as a distraction, defined as a deliberate resource reallocation toward China, fundamentally reconfigures US alliance accountability from unconditional security guarantees to transactional burden-sharing. This shift compels European allies to internalize long-term security costs and pursue greater strategic autonomy, yet it simultaneously entrenches persistent inefficiencies in European defense industrial structures and maintains a structural dependency on US technological backstops, thereby altering long-term stability in European power structures by fostering fragmentation rather than cohesive self-reliance.

Key Findings

US Strategic Recalibration Defines Russia as a Distraction, Compelling European Self-Reliance

"Treating Russia as a distraction" is operationally defined as a deliberate, sustained resource reallocation toward China that temporarily downgrades Moscow's systemic threat to Europe, rather than merely a rhetorical posture masking ongoing containment. The 2025 US National Security Strategy and 2026 National Defense Strategy explicitly prioritize deterring China in the Indo-Pacific and protecting the homeland/Western Hemisphere above competition with Russia [13, 16]. This is evidenced by concrete "resourcing tradeoffs" from Europe to the Pacific, a gradual disengagement from European security architectures, and a shift toward treating Europe as a "group of aligned sovereign nations" rather than through multilateral organizations [13]. While some experts argue that Russia's war in Ukraine remains foundational to US global leadership against China [11], the Trump administration has actively undermined Western unity over Ukraine and NATO credibility, creating opportunities for Russia's revanchist agenda [14].

This resource-based definition better predicts actual alliance behavior. Because the US is executing a tangible drawdown of strategic focus and military presence in Europe, European allies are compelled to internalize their defense burdens and pursue rapid self-reliance [11, 16]. Alliance behavior reflects this reality: European governments are planning for scenarios of reduced or delayed US support, increasing defense spending toward new NATO targets (e.g., 3.5% of GDP by 2035), and building forces for contingencies like the Baltics under conditions of inconsistent American backing [13, 16]. Furthermore, Europe is increasingly comfortable debating its own nuclear deterrent as a hedge against US retrenchment, confirming that allies view the US resource shift as a structural change in alliance accountability rather than a temporary rhetorical adjustment [13, 15].

US Alliance Accountability Shifts to Transactional Burden-Sharing, Fragmenting European Force Planning and Cohesion

Framing Russia as a secondary priority fundamentally reconfigures US alliance accountability from unconditional security guarantees to transactional burden-sharing. The 2025 US National Security Strategy ranks Europe below other regional priorities and casts Europe, not Russia, as the primary object of concern in US security policy [13, 16]. This strategic reclassification drives "resourcing tradeoffs" that necessitate a shift toward transactional expectations, with the US intending to deal with Europe as a "group of aligned sovereign nations" rather than through multilateral organizations [13]. This is evidenced by President Trump questioning the value of defending Europe and suggesting he would "encourage them to do whatever the hell they want" to NATO allies failing to meet defense spending targets [16].

The specific causal pathway by which this shift alters European force planning and political cohesion operates through conditional resource tradeoffs that trigger capability mismatches, while transactional incentives fragment collective defense. Regarding force planning, the expectation of reduced, delayed, or inconsistent US support forces European governments to plan for Baltic contingencies under scenarios where American military support is limited or withheld [16]. However, if the US rapidly draws down military forces from Europe before European capabilities can scale, it risks immediate capability gaps and suboptimal defense investments [1]. Regarding political cohesion, the shift alters alliance dynamics by using US commitments and military presence to reward or punish individual allies based on their burden-sharing metrics, which incentivizes them to focus on national rather than collective defense [12]. This transactional approach aids

Russia's core strategic objective to fracture the NATO alliance and undermine confidence in the North Atlantic Treaty [16]. Furthermore, the fragility of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture is demonstrated by the 2025 Hague Summit's reaffirmation of Article 5, which some interpret as a sign of structural weakness rather than strength [13]. Additionally, as the US reorganizes around a forward-leaning policy to address China, Europe faces significant pressure to develop its own geopolitical capabilities and defense industrial base to match its economic clout [1, 11].

European Defense Autonomy Efforts Entrench Inefficiencies and US Dependency

Despite increased spending targets, such as NATO's goal of 3.5% GDP on hard military capabilities by 2035 [13], the causal mechanism of fragmented national procurement and divergent threat assessments is more likely to entrench persistent inefficiencies and reposition Europe as structurally dependent on US technological backstops. First, the European Defense Industrial Base (EDIB) remains highly fragmented, with national firms producing low volumes and lacking economies of scale [2]. This fragmentation is exacerbated by divergent national incentives; when the US uses its military presence and commitments to reward or punish individual allies, it incentivizes them to prioritize national defense over collective European architecture [12]. Furthermore, while front-line states like Poland, Sweden, and Finland are adopting a "full spectrum comprehensive approach" to defense [15], broader EU mechanisms struggle to align these disparate national strategies into a unified force.

Second, higher spending does not automatically translate into strategic independence because Europe remains heavily reliant on American industrial capacity. Currently, 78% of EU member states' procurement goes to foreign suppliers, with 63% of that spending flowing directly to US defense firms [2, 31]. Even as Europe attempts to reduce this reliance through initiatives like the SAFE program's 65% European content rule [5], the US actively opposes these measures to protect its own companies and maintain control over alliance procurement [5]. Finally, this structural dependency extends to nuclear deterrence. British and French nuclear capabilities would struggle to independently offer credible extended deterrence against Russia without US backing [13]. Consequently, treating Russia as a secondary distraction reconfigures US alliance accountability by allowing Washington to enforce transactional burden-sharing. The US uses its industrial dominance and conditional commitments to guide European spending, ensuring that increased European investment sustains long-term stability primarily by preventing

overextension, while simultaneously locking Europe into a dependent relationship with American technological and industrial backstops rather than fostering true autonomy.

Historical Precedents Indicate Capability Hollowing Under Reduced US Predictability

Drawing on historical precedents like the post-1990 drawdowns, the evidence indicates that periods of reduced US predictability and the resulting "peace dividend" typically lead to European capability hollowing once political urgency fades [15, 16]. During these intervals, European allies outsourced defense to the United States, which triggered reductions in armed forces and defense industries across the continent [15]. This structural reliance on American security guarantees resulted in "hollowed out" capabilities and major readiness shortfalls that persisted long after the initial drawdowns [15, 16]. Even when European governments pursue aggressive new spending trajectories to achieve self-reliance (such as targeting 3.5% of GDP by 2035), these efforts often fail to translate into sustainable deterrence because budgets remain heavily weighted toward personnel costs rather than warfighting capacity [13, 16]. Additionally, rapid US military drawdowns risk creating immediate capability gaps and suboptimal defense investments as allies scramble to fill the void [1]. Ultimately, the historical pattern demonstrates that without sustained political urgency and deep structural reform, European burden-shifting initiatives tend to produce hollowed-out capabilities rather than durable, self-sustaining deterrence.

Treating Russia as a Distraction Creates a Dual Dynamic of US Leverage and Forced European Internalization

Treating Russia primarily as a distraction rather than the central geopolitical threat reconfigures US alliance accountability by creating a dual dynamic: it grants Washington enhanced transactional influence to enforce burden-sharing conditionality, while simultaneously catalyzing European strategic autonomy by forcing allies to internalize long-term security costs. On one hand, treating Russia as a secondary threat enables the United States to maintain dominant influence over alliance accountability through stricter conditionality. By shifting its primary focus to China, the US treats Europe not as a unified multilateral bloc but as a "group of aligned sovereign nations" [13]. This structural shift allows Washington to use its commitments and military presence to reward or punish individual allies, incentivizing them to prioritize national interests over collective defense [12]. The US uses this position to enforce stricter burden-sharing, presenting greater

European support for US Indo-Pacific priorities as a guarantee for continuing American backing in Europe [11]. Furthermore, the US uses its conditionality to guide European spending toward interoperable capabilities, mitigating the risks of fragmentation that plague uncoordinated European procurement efforts.

On the other hand, this strategic recalibration genuinely catalyzes European strategic autonomy by compelling allies to internalize long-term security costs rather than relying on transatlantic risk insurance. The US is perceived as becoming a less predictable and dependable ally, creating a critical leadership vacuum within the Euro-Atlantic security architecture [13]. Consequently, European governments are advised to plan for scenarios where American military support is limited or withheld, avoiding binary assumptions about US involvement [16]. This pressure has driven concrete initiatives toward self-reliance, including binding defense investment targets, joint procurement white papers aiming for significant shared acquisition rates, and multi-billion-euro facilities with strict European content rules designed to foster a self-sustaining European defense industrial base resilient to US foreign policy shifts [5].

Reconfiguration Fragments European Power Structures and Destabilizes Long-Term Deterrence

The reconfiguration of US alliance accountability under a framework that treats Russia as a distraction rather than the central geopolitical threat fundamentally alters the internal hierarchy of European power structures by shifting from unconditional security guarantees to transactional burden-sharing [12, 16]. As Washington prioritizes China and executes resource tradeoffs away from Europe, it creates a leadership vacuum and compels European allies to rapidly develop their own geopolitical and defense capabilities [11, 13]. However, this dynamic is more likely to trigger new intra-European security dilemmas that fragment collective decision-making rather than creating a stable, multipolar Euro-Atlantic architecture. The US strategy of using its military presence and commitments to reward or punish individual allies incentivizes front-line states to focus on national defense priorities over collective NATO objectives [12]. This transactional approach exacerbates existing fissures, as evidenced by the 2025 Hague Summit's need to reaffirm Article 5, which signaled the fragility of the Euro-Atlantic Security Architecture (EASA) [13].

Furthermore, rising defense capabilities among front-line states like Poland, Sweden, and Finland are not translating into a cohesive European security backbone due to persistent structural inefficiencies [15]. While Europe is rearming with a new NATO target of 3.5% of

GDP on hard military capabilities by 2035 [13], national procurement remains highly fragmented. A significant portion of European defense spending flows directly to US firms, meaning increased European investment often reinforces transatlantic dependency rather than fostering true strategic autonomy [2]. The internal hierarchy is further destabilized by divergent threat assessments and nuclear dependencies. While front-line states adopt comprehensive defense approaches [15], the expected drawdown of US conventional forces casts doubt on the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence, as British and French capabilities alone may struggle to cover the full range of Russian threats without American backing [13]. Consequently, Russia's persistent revisionism and ongoing gray zone campaigns are well-positioned to exploit these emerging intra-European divisions, threatening long-term deterrence stability [14, 16].

Transactional Accountability is Operationalized Through Conditional US Military Presence and Spending Targets

The primary mechanism conditioning US military presence on spending thresholds is the 5 percent of GDP defense investment target established at the June 2025 NATO Hague Summit [21]. European allies pledged this ambitious goal by 2035 explicitly to "mollify" President Trump and secure continued US commitment to the alliance [21]. This threshold divides spending into 3.5 percent for core defense requirements and up to 1.5 percent for security-related infrastructure [21].

Specific force-posture adjustments and restructuring decisions that operationalize this transactional accountability include:

- **May 2026 German Troop Reduction Threat:** President Trump threatened to withdraw 5,000 troops from Germany in response to Chancellor Friedrich Merz's criticism of the US war on Iran, which would reduce the US footprint in Europe from four to three brigade combat teams [20]. This directly used US presence as a bargaining chip for higher European defense spending [20].
- **NATO 3.0 Restructuring Proposal:** A framework proposed scaling back the US European security presence from 80,000 to 20,000 troops over the next decade [19]. This proposal included clauses stating that European countries must meet burden-shifting requirements before any new members are admitted, and suggested funding restrictions for new entrants [19].
- **Missile Deployment Cancellation:** In 2024, the Biden administration recommended permanently canceling the deployment of Tomahawk and SM-6 missiles in

Germany to prioritize dwindling US munitions stocks and encourage European autonomous capabilities [19].

- **Tariff Enforcement Mechanisms:** The Trump administration discussed imposing higher tariffs on imports from allies deemed "under-spending," blurring the lines between economic and security commitments to enforce defense requirements [18].

These decisions reconfigure alliance accountability by shifting the focus from collective geopolitical deterrence against Russia to quantifiable financial returns. By treating US presence as a conditional transaction rather than an enduring guarantee, the US forces allies like Estonia and Lithuania to explicitly pledge to meet the 5 percent target due to both US pressure and existential needs [23]. However, this approach risks eroding long-term stability; trust in the US fell to 4 percent in Finland in 2025, similar to trust in Russia and China [22]. Furthermore, some experts argue that European pledges may be fulfilled through creative accounting rather than genuine capability increases, potentially leaving a gap in conventional defense if the US scales back its footprint while European capabilities remain underdeveloped [12]. Ultimately, monetizing security commitments prioritizes US domestic economic interests like reindustrialization over traditional alliance cohesion, incentivizing European strategic autonomy and altering the long-term stability of European power structures [18].

Fragmented European Procurement Hinders Cohesion Despite Some Successes

While some joint European defense procurement initiatives have achieved economies of scale, persistent national industrial policy divergences and veto points continue to delay major rearmament programs and sustain European reliance on US supply chains.

Successful Initiatives: Established projects like the Airbus A400M transport aircraft [3, 5], Boxer armored fighting vehicle [26], Eurofighter jets [25], and Franco-Italian FREMM frigates [25] successfully deliver capabilities. Minilateral efforts also yield results: the German-Norwegian submarine cooperation [26], Belgian-Dutch Benesam naval project [26], European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) [24], joint Patriot missile orders by four nations [31], and a seven-state 155mm ammunition order [31]. Even within stalled mega-programs, sub-pillars like FCAS's combat cloud and the New Generation Fighter Engine (NGFE) managed by EUMET demonstrate successful collaboration models [24].

Failed or Delayed Initiatives: Conversely, flagship programs struggle to achieve scale. The Future Combat Air System (FCAS) saw its centerpiece New Generation Fighter

(NGF) cancelled by June 2026 due to infighting over workshare and specifications [3, 9, 24, 25]. The Main Ground Combat System (MGCS) faces similar collapse risks [3, 13], and France is reviewing its Eurodrone participation amid cost and schedule overruns [24].

National Industrial Divergences and Veto Points in German Rearmament:

Germany's Heeresmodernisierung 2023+ and broader rearmament are hampered by specific industrial policy divergences:

- **Protectionism:** A preference for national production or co-production added 4 to 17 percent to procurement costs, while complex co-production programs added another 12 to 18 percent due to specific national requirements [28]. The "juste retour" principle further inflates costs by prioritizing partner-country subcontracts over the most competitive suppliers [28].

- **Legal and Structural Veto Points:** Article 346 TFEU allows member states to exempt defense from common market competition rules, enabling protectionist practices for national contractors [6, 8]. Member states consistently resist transferring decision-making power to supranational bodies due to fears over national security control and domestic political pressures from defense industries [6, 8].

- **Strategic and Industrial Rivalries:** Diverging requirements cause paralysis. For instance, Germany's lack of need for a nuclear-capable, carrier-borne fighter led to FCAS's cancellation, while German unions and industry associations demanded protection of domestic jobs [3, 4, 10]. Germany's strong transatlantic reflex contrasts with France's push for strategic autonomy, creating friction over European security leadership [4, 13].

- **Procurement Inefficiencies:** Structural hurdles persist, such as an 18-month drone certification process in Germany [30], and a procurement office still transitioning from bureaucracy reduction to growth management [29].

These national vetoes and industrial divergences explain why Europe struggles to achieve the economies of scale needed for true strategic autonomy. The fragmentation costs the EU €18 to 57 billion annually [27] and sustains heavy reliance on US imports, which accounted for 55 percent of European arms imports between 2019 and 2023 [27]. When the US becomes unpredictable, as seen with recent NATO capability withdrawals, Europe's fragmented industrial base cannot rapidly scale production to fill deterrence gaps [7, 17]. Consequently, treating Russia as a secondary distraction allows national industrial protectionism to persist, leaving European power structures structurally tethered to US supply chains and accountability rather than building an independent, scalable European defense pillar.

Implications

Treating Russia as a distraction fundamentally reconfigures US alliance accountability by shifting it from an unconditional security guarantee to a transactional framework. This implies that European nations will face sustained pressure to meet specific defense spending targets and align their procurement with US-guided interoperability standards, rather than developing fully independent defense industrial bases. While this approach compels European allies to internalize their security costs and invest more in defense, it simultaneously risks exacerbating intra-European divisions by incentivizing national over collective defense. This fragmentation, coupled with persistent reliance on US technological and industrial backstops, suggests that long-term stability in European power structures will be characterized by a complex interplay of increased European defense spending, continued US conditional influence, and a heightened vulnerability to Russian gray zone campaigns that exploit emerging fissures within the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. The outcome is not a cohesive, autonomous European security pillar, but rather a more heavily armed, yet still dependent and potentially fragmented, European defense landscape.

Limitations and Caveats

The provided research context does not specify the fiscal threshold for "capability hollowing" in NATO force planning models or explicitly predict which three front-line states face the highest risk of intra-European security dilemmas due to divergent procurement timelines. Furthermore, the research lacks specific data on the F-35 versus European FCAS/GCAF programs, including their timelines for EU strategic autonomy or estimated cost differentials over a 20-year lifecycle. Details on specific "guided procurement standards" or conditions attached to US security guarantees that force allies toward particular interoperability frameworks, and their impact on non-NATO European actors, are also not provided. Finally, the research does not identify specific defense industrial primes (European or US) as primary beneficiaries of the transactional burden-sharing shift or project their market share gains by 2030.

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