

How does the reclassification of Russia from the primary to a secondary threat reshape Western democratic governance structures and long-term strategic accountability in response to emerging systemic risks?

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Executive Summary

The reclassification of Russia from a primary to a secondary threat significantly reshapes Western democratic governance structures and long-term strategic accountability by compelling a pivot towards integrated great power competition and resilience planning, particularly for the United States [1, 16]. However, this shift simultaneously creates structural misalignments in European defense capabilities, increases exposure to gray-zone systemic risks due to procurement delays, and fragments accountability in holistic threat tracking, often exacerbated by electoral short-termism [3, 8, 12, 19].

Key Findings

Shift to Resilience and Great Power Competition, Complicated by Short-termism

The reclassification of Russia as a "persistent but manageable threat" within a broader authoritarian axis, while elevating China as the primary strategic competitor, drives a structural pivot in Western governance [1, 2]. This compels a transition from crisis-driven counterterrorism to long-term resilience planning and sustained strategic accountability, adapting instruments of national power (DIME-FIL) [16, 17]. European defense spending has increased significantly, rising by 14% to \$864 billion in 2025, with 22 of 29 European NATO members meeting the 2.0% GDP target [11].

However, this shift is complicated by the "slow-burn" nature of Russia's gray-zone and irregular warfare tactics, such as cyber operations and critical infrastructure sabotage, which can trigger electoral short-termism [2, 7, 12]. The EU identifies a disruptive hybrid strike on critical infrastructure as Europe's top risk in 2026, capable of paralyzing daily life and triggering a crisis of governability if resilience is neglected [12]. This short-termism is

concretely demonstrated by Germany's "frantic, short-term attempt" to amend its constitutional "debt brake" following the May 2025 appointment of Chancellor Friedrich Merz, driven by the need to manage populist factions opposing increased defense spending [4, 13, 20]. Similarly, the Bundestag budget committee has acted as a "choke point" for defense procurement, pausing a €262.67 million tank container order and imposing conditions on the €6.3 billion F128 frigate program in April 2026, delaying deliveries based on political scrutiny [19]. Italy also reclassified the €13.6 billion Messina bridge project as having "military relevance" to meet NATO spending targets without unpopular tax increases, delaying genuine new investment in military capabilities [4, 6, 12, 18].

Structural Misalignment in European Defense Self-Reliance

The U.S. pivot in threat prioritization has created a structural misalignment in transatlantic strategic accountability, where increased European fiscal commitment has not yet translated into durable defense-industrial self-reliance. Despite the significant rise in European military spending [11], European geopolitical stability remains largely dependent on Washington's political will due to persistent gaps in unified defense industry scale, military command structures, and procurement fragmentation [2, 5, 6]. A substantial portion of EU member states' defense procurement, 78%, goes to foreign suppliers, with 63% of that spending flowing directly to U.S. defense firms [2]. Consequently, Europe is not yet structurally capable of defending itself against Russian coercion without reliable U.S. enablers [5].

This misalignment is compounded by European perceptions of American reliability, with experts viewing a potential U.S. withdrawal of security guarantees as a "strategically seismic" and "plausibly imminent" risk [12]. This forces European governments to plan for contingencies under conditions of reduced, delayed, or inconsistent U.S. support [8]. The strategic accountability gap created by fragmented European procurement practices is explicitly documented by several multinational defense program failures and national industrial policy audits. These include the "valley of death" for serial production in most of the 83 Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects [21], long delays in the Franco-German-Spanish Future Combat Air System (FCAS) and Main Ground Combat System (MGCS) programs [6, 10, 14, 15, 22], and the EU's initial shortfall in delivering one million 155mm artillery shells to Ukraine by March 2023, fulfilling the commitment only by November 2024 [5, 12, 14]. Audits like the European Defence Agency's (EDA) Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) reports consistently show that

collaborative defense investment remains far below targets, with only 18% in 2022 [8, 12].

Bifurcated Impact: Increased European Gray-Zone Exposure and Freed U.S. Bandwidth

Reclassifying Russia as a secondary threat produces a bifurcated impact: it systematically increases European exposure to gray-zone systemic risks while freeing up U.S. strategic bandwidth for other competitors.

On one hand, the U.S. Department of Defense's pivot of resources and intelligence focus toward interstate competition with China leaves European allies planning for reduced or inconsistent American support [8]. This erosion of pre-positioned deterrence assets is evident in the surge of Russian-linked gray-zone attacks across Europe, which increased from 2022 to 2025 and include sabotage of undersea cables, pipelines, and drone factories as recently as September 2026 [8, 9]. Europe's top risk in 2026 is a disruptive hybrid strike on critical infrastructure, capable of paralyzing daily life and triggering a crisis of governability [12].

On the other hand, treating Russia as a manageable threat allows the U.S. to prioritize deterrence of China in the Indo-Pacific [1, 8]. This reallocation of focus enables a whole-of-government approach to integrated strategic competition, adapting diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement instruments (DIME-FIL) to build long-term resilience at home [16]. It also allows for the modernization of counterterrorism and intelligence budgets, shifting away from a purely military-centric posture toward models focused on sensors and data management [17].

Procurement Accountability Gap Undermines Deterrence

The treatment of Russia as a secondary threat has created a predictable accountability gap in Western procurement and industrial policy. Perceived lower urgency, particularly for Europe, has delayed mass-production scaling of critical systems [3]. NATO's procurement practices are "insufficiently geared toward mass production" that matches battlefield consumption rates, causing air defenses and affordable unmanned combat systems to lag behind both Ukraine and Russia [3]. This industrial shortfall directly undermines long-term deterrence credibility if Moscow exploits this pacing advantage to wage a prolonged, attritional campaign, as demonstrated by the four-year war in Ukraine [3]. The gap is further exacerbated by European governments planning for contingencies under conditions of reduced or delayed U.S. support [8].

Fragmented Accountability in Threat Tracking

Russia's secondary classification simultaneously drives centralized strategic formulation while fragmenting budgetary oversight and holistic threat tracking across agencies. The shift to great power competition compels centralized strategy formulation across agencies using DIME-FIL metrics [16]. Specialized units, such as the State Department's Bureau of Counterterrorism, are adapting their mandates to coordinate against new geopolitical threats, including malign influence operations [15].

However, this pivot also fragments accountability. Counterterrorism intelligence budgets must be disentangled from larger military budgets to prevent a loss of support as the Defense Department pivots resources, risking siloed oversight metrics [17]. Russia's persistent gray-zone and irregular warfare tactics are tracked differently than traditional state-on-state threats [2]. This compartmentalization is exacerbated by divergent regional priorities, with the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy ranking Europe below other regional priorities to focus on deterring China [8, 11], even as European experts identify hybrid strikes on critical infrastructure as a top regional risk [12]. The intelligence community also lacks sufficient technology infrastructure for data management, hindering comprehensive threat tracking and necessitating investment in artificial intelligence and machine learning capabilities [17].

Implications

The reclassification of Russia necessitates that Western democracies:

- **Reconcile Strategic Planning with Electoral Cycles:** Develop mechanisms to insulate long-term resilience investments, particularly in cyber and critical infrastructure, from short-term domestic political pressures and electoral cycles [12, 19].
- **Accelerate European Defense-Industrial Integration:** Prioritize and fund the development of a unified European defense-industrial base to reduce institutional dependency on the United States and enhance self-reliance against Russian coercion [2, 5, 6, 21]. This requires overcoming procurement fragmentation and ensuring mass production capabilities for critical assets like air defenses and unmanned systems [3].
- **Balance U.S. Strategic Priorities:** The U.S. must carefully balance its pivot to the Indo-Pacific with ensuring sufficient deterrence and support for European allies to manage persistent gray-zone risks from Russia [8, 9].
- **Integrate Threat Tracking and Budgetary Oversight:** Implement holistic,

cross-agency frameworks for tracking Russian malign influence operations alongside traditional interstate risks, supported by modernized data management infrastructure and AI/ML investments, to prevent fragmentation of accountability and ensure comprehensive threat awareness [16, 17].

Limitations and Caveats

The available research lacks specific quantitative thresholds that formally define the transition from 'crisis-driven' to 'resilience planning' in Western governance frameworks, beyond general defense spending targets [11]. Furthermore, the findings do not identify specific European defense industrial primes by name that have failed to achieve self-reliance metrics, nor do they provide projected timelines for resolving this structural misalignment [3, 21]. Specific numerical estimates for the cost differential or production delays (in months/units) caused by the accountability gap in unmanned systems and air defense procurement are also not provided [3]. While fragmentation in intelligence and budgetary oversight is identified, specific measurable gaps in holistic threat tracking data are primarily described in terms of technology infrastructure needs rather than precise metrics [17].

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