

How does the strategic perception of Russia as a minor threat to the US reshape American alliance accountability and long-term stability in European security architectures?

September 3, 2026 | SnugLab Research

Executive Summary

The strategic perception of Russia as a minor threat to the US, particularly under the current administration, has primarily reshaped American alliance accountability by eroding European confidence and fostering a more transactional, conditional US posture. This shift destabilizes long-term European security architectures by incentivizing fragmentation in defense capabilities and creating predictable political fracture lines that Russia can exploit. While European nations are increasing defense spending and pursuing indigenous capabilities, the evidence suggests that divergent national priorities, industrial fragmentation, and slow consensus mechanisms dilute NATO's collective readiness rather than consolidating into a self-reliant deterrent.

Key Findings

Erosion of European Confidence and Alliance Accountability

The US perception of Russia as a secondary challenge, distinct from China, has eroded European confidence in American commitment, shifting alliance accountability towards conditional burden-sharing [4, 6]. Washington has signaled less interest in long-term engagement in Europe, increasing demands for allies to assume greater defense responsibilities [4, 6, 8]. While the US provided approximately \$69.7 billion in military assistance to Ukraine since 2014, including over 40 HIMARS systems and Patriot batteries [2], this support proved conditional. A decisive policy change occurred with the pause in US aid to Ukraine beginning in March 2025, raising immediate questions about Europe's ability to fill the gap [9].

European confidence is further undermined by explicit transactional threats from Washington, with President Trump questioning the value of defending Europe and threatening to "encourage them to do whatever the hell they want" to NATO allies failing

to meet defense spending targets [8]. A majority of Republicans now believe the United States does not benefit from NATO membership [8]. These developments amplify doubts about the scale, speed, and reliability of US intervention, leading European nations to plan for scenarios of reduced, delayed, or inconsistent US support [1, 3, 8, 11]. A 2025 survey found that 59% of European foreign policy elites view Russia as a near-term threat, yet 79% prioritize capabilities for independent territorial defense over contributions to American operations [2].

Industrial Fragmentation and Capability Gaps

The accelerated European fiscal redirection toward defense, driven by the US perception of Russia as a secondary challenge, has exposed the fragility of nationalized procurement [4, 6]. While Eastern flank states are rapidly increasing investment-Lithuania targeting 5.38% of GDP, Estonia 5.1%, and Latvia 4.9% for 2026-divergent threat perceptions across the continent create asymmetric capability gaps [5]. Baltic nations prioritize high-end deterrence against Russia, whereas Western and Southern European countries focus on regional instability and migration, leading to fragmented defense priorities [5].

Industrial fragmentation further undermines a unified deterrent. Despite EU initiatives like the €150 billion Security Action for Europe (SAFE) facility and the Readiness 2030 plan, which calls for at least 40% of defense procurement to be conducted jointly, national security exemptions and unanimity requirements maintain industrial silos [12]. European defense budgets remain heavily weighted toward personnel costs, constraining investment in essential warfighting enablers such as air power, reserves, and sustainment logistics [8, 12]. Consequently, European militaries still struggle to conduct high-end operations without significant US assistance [8]. When American support wanes, these structural weaknesses delay unified response mechanisms, as NATO's consensus-based decision-making is slow, allowing Russia to exploit the time required for political agreement [12].

Beyond SAFE, the EU utilizes the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework and the European Defence Fund (EDF) [8]. The European Defence Industry through Joint Procurement (EDIRPA) instrument, with a €300 million budget until the end of 2025, promotes cross-border cooperation [12]. The Regulation on the Promotion of Ammunition Production (ASAP) mobilized €500 million to expand ammunition and missile production [12]. However, EU primary law, specifically Article 346 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), protects national autonomy in essential

security matters, complicating joint procurement efforts [12].

Exploitation of Divergent Threat Perceptions by Russia

The strategic divergence between Eastern European existential threat perception and Western/Southern economic prioritization functions as a predictable political fracture line that Moscow can exploit. Eastern flank nations view Russia as an immediate danger, rapidly increasing defense spending [5]. In contrast, Western and Southern European countries maintain a less acute threat perception, prioritizing Mediterranean instability, migration, and economic insecurity [4, 5].

This split directly undermines NATO's long-term stability by exploiting the alliance's slow, consensus-based decision-making [11]. Moscow's strategy relies on fracturing the alliance through gray zone tactics-such as cyberattacks, disinformation, and weaponized migration-to undermine democratic institutions and disrupt cohesion before a conventional response can be coordinated [6, 7, 8]. While the 2022 invasion initially boosted cohesion, signs of erosion appeared two years into the war, and higher tensions with Russia surprisingly decrease NATO cohesion due to these divergent threat perceptions [10, 11]. Domestic political shifts, including pro-Moscow electoral victories in Slovakia (September 2023) and opposition from Hungary and Turkey, further solidify this fracture line [11].

European Efforts Towards Indigenous Defense

Several European nations are leading the shift toward bolstering indigenous defense capabilities. The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) are planning historically high levels of total defense investment for 2026, with Lithuania targeting 5.38% of GDP, Estonia 5.1%, and Latvia 4.9% [5]. Germany pledged to meet NATO's 3.5% defense spending target by 2029, utilizing a €100 billion fund exempt from the constitutional debt brake [5]. Poland recorded the highest share of GDP dedicated to defense among NATO members in 2024 at 4.12% [9]. These efforts align with the broader strategic shift as European nations prepare to assume primary responsibility for their security amid reduced or inconsistent US support [8, 12].

Specific Gray-Zone Coercion Tactics

Russia has employed gray-zone coercion tactics that successfully exploit the divergence in European threat perceptions. These include drone incursions into Polish and Estonian

airspace, suspected sabotage of undersea cables, weaponized migration through Belarus, disinformation campaigns, and the use of chemical weapons [6, 7, 8, 12]. For example, on September 9, 2025, Russia launched nearly two dozen drones into eastern Poland, followed by unexplained drone sightings over European airports and military facilities [12]. These tactics aim to create a fait accompli before NATO can reach political consensus on whether to invoke Article 5, exploiting hesitation among member states to consolidate control and peel off vulnerable states [8, 10, 12].

Implications

The strategic perception of Russia as a minor threat to the US has profound implications for European security architectures. It necessitates a more self-reliant Europe, compelling nations to increase defense spending and pursue indigenous capabilities. However, this push for autonomy is hampered by existing industrial fragmentation, divergent national priorities, and slow consensus mechanisms within both EU defense initiatives and NATO. This creates a security environment where Europe's capacity for unified, rapid response to Russian gray-zone tactics or conventional incursions is compromised, leaving the continent vulnerable to exploitation of its internal political and threat perception divides. The shift also highlights a broader re-evaluation of transatlantic burden-sharing, where the US expects Europe to assume primary responsibility for its own defense, potentially leading to a less predictable and more transactional alliance.

Limitations and Caveats

The research indicates that direct data for specific national R&D versus procurement allocations for 2030-2035 is limited, with available figures focusing on total defense spending or broader EU procurement goals. While the impact of unanimity thresholds on joint procurement delays is acknowledged, specific quantified impacts are not provided. The evidence also suggests a genuine methodological debate exists on how to interpret the evidence of European defense integration, with some viewing increased bilateral and regional cooperation as consolidation and others as fragmentation.

Sources

[1] [gov] Isab - 2009-2017.state.gov - <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/isab/234902.htm>

[2] [gov] U S Security Cooperation With Ukraine - state.gov -

- <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-political-military-affairs/releases/2025/01/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine>
- [3] Achieving Burden Sharing Retrenchment Vs Conditionality - defensepriorities.org - <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/achieving-burden-sharing-retrenchment-vs-conditionality/>
- [4] The Impact Of Evolving Threat Perceptions On The Transatlant - my.rusi.org - <https://my.rusi.org/resource/the-impact-of-evolving-threat-perceptions-on-the-transatlantic-alliance.html>
- [5] European Cohesion Security And Defense - dgap.org - <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/european-cohesion-security-and-defense>
- [6] The Tipping Point An Emerging Model Of European Security Wit - swp-berlin.org - <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/the-tipping-point-an-emerging-model-of-european-security-with-ukraine-and-without-russia>
- [7] Nato And Asymmetric Threats Blueprint Defense And Deterrence - gmfus.org - <https://www.gmfus.org/news/nato-and-asymmetric-threats-blueprint-defense-and-deterrence>
- [8] Russia Nato Baltics Scenarios Europe Security - belfercenter.org - <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/russia-nato-baltics-scenarios-europe-security>
- [9] Nato Russia Military Comparison - statista.com - https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293174/nato-russia-military-comparison/?srsId=AfmBOopH_HDw56FwJyxeU0B9pFuuiKJYRrK-5TeVlkZzDkZSCnL_OG6A
- [10] Alliance Cohesion In Crisis Determinants Of Nato Cohesion In - sto.nato.int - <https://www.sto.nato.int/document/alliance-cohesion-in-crisis-determinants-of-nato-cohesion-in-a-changing-world-order/>
- [11] [peer-reviewed] Assessing NATO's cohesion: methods and implications - Authors: Kunertova, Dominika; Schmitt, Olivier - Journal: International Politics - <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41311-024-00641-1>
- [12] [gov] Contesting Russia Preparing For The Long Term Russian Threat - csce.gov - <https://www.csce.gov/publications/contesting-russia-preparing-for-the-long-term-russian-threat/>