



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND INNOVATIVE STUDIES

Advancing Knowledge, Inspiring Innovation

www.ijsrisjournal.com





PEER REVIEWED
Rigorous & Transparent



DOI: CROSSREF
Member



OPEN ACCESS
For Global Visibility



BI-MONTHLY
Timely Publication



WIDE READERSHIP
High Impact & Visibility



AUTHOR FRIENDLY
Fast | Supportive | Reliable



RECEIVED
17 August 2026



ACCEPTED
09 September 2026



PUBLISHED
1 October 2026



October 2026



Volume 5



Number 5

Pages from:
715 to 726

A psycho-geopolitical analysis of the shift of inter-state conflicts towards strategic peripheries: a theoretical contribution on the cognitive projection of major conflicts in spaces of hybrid competition: The case of the Russia–Ukraine conflict in West Africa

Stéphane SOGBOU LOYEM¹

¹PhD student in Social Psychology of Work and Organisations at the University of Dschang; Researcher in Political Science and International Relations at IRIC; associate researcher at the Centre for Diplomatic and Strategic Research and Studies (CRÉDIS), Cameroon, stephansogbou@yahoo.fr; elstephy4@gmail.com ; (+237) 673274509

LICENSE



This article is licensed under the
Creative Commons Attribution
4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



PREFIX :

10.63883

IJSRIS JOURNAL

OPEN ACCESS



This is an open access article
distributed under the terms of
open access.

ABSTRACT

The Russia–Ukraine war is a key indicator of contemporary transformations in the international order and the diversification of forms of power projection. This article examines how an inter-state conflict, the main theatre of which remains Eastern Europe, produces geopolitical, strategic, informational and psychological effects in the African peripheries, with a particular focus on West Africa. The aim is to move beyond a strictly territorial interpretation of the ‘transfer’ of the conflict and to propose the concept of **the psychogeopolitical projection of major conflicts**, defined as the process by which representations of threat, strategic narratives, identity-based antagonisms, instruments of power and practices of influence stemming from a major conflict are projected into peripheral spaces, and then reinterpreted in the context of local vulnerabilities. Using a qualitative, comparative and process-oriented approach covering mainly the period 2014–2026, the study compares two contrasting scenarios: Mali, characterised by a strong Russian security and military-political projection, and Benin, which is more exposed to spillover effects, security pressures and information warfare. Burkina Faso is used as an intermediate case to understand the consolidation of the Russian–Sahelian alignment. The analysis shows that war does not automatically ‘spill over’ into Africa: rather, it produces a multidimensional projection, the effects of which depend on the interaction between external strategies, local structures, perceptions of threat and the capacity of African actors to take ownership of the situation. The article also demonstrates that Africa is not a passive arena for rivalry between powers: African governments possess their own *agency* and utilise international competition to diversify their partnerships and strengthen their strategic autonomy. The theoretical contribution thus lies in the integration of geopolitics, political psychology, strategic narratives and hybrid competition within a single explanatory model. The empirical and theoretical findings, the methodological approach and the construction of the psychogeopolitical model significantly corroborate our research hypothesis.

Keywords: psychogeopolitics; cognitive projection; the Russia–Ukraine war; West Africa; hybrid competition; threat perception.

1. Introduction

Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a major turning point in the evolution of the international system. Beyond the military confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, it has reignited power rivalries, accentuated normative divisions concerning sovereignty and

the use of force, accelerated strategic competition between powers, and revealed the limitations of a strictly regional interpretation of contemporary conflicts. Although the epicentre of this conflict remains clearly situated in Eastern Europe, it is now self-evident that the conflict has increasingly spread to other regions, notably Africa. The United Nations General Assembly condemned, by a large majority, several Russian actions, notably the illegal annexation of Ukrainian territories in October 2022 and, in February 2023, the principles relating to a just and lasting peace in Ukraine – a resolution adopted by 141 votes to 7, with 32 abstentions.

The behaviour of African states in these diplomatic developments cannot, however, be reduced to a simple dichotomy between ‘pro-Russian’ and ‘pro-Western’ states. It reflects varied calculations involving sovereignty, strategic autonomy, the legacy of colonialism, economic interests, security dependencies, regime constraints and the pursuit of diversified partnerships. This diversity confirms that Africa is not merely an object of international competition, but a collection of actors capable of formulating their own strategic calculations.

It is precisely within this analytical framework that the present research is situated. The question is not whether the Russia–Ukraine war has been literally transported from Europe to Africa, but **how its antagonisms, instruments, narratives and perceptions are projected into peripheral spaces and how these, in turn, transform local configurations of security and power.**

This line of inquiry requires us to move beyond an exclusively material conception of power. The work of Jervis (1976), Stein (2013) and, more recently, Landau-Wells (2024), shows that the perception of threat constitutes a fundamental variable in international behaviour. Landau-Wells, in particular, emphasises the need to better integrate cognitive mechanisms into the study of threat perception in international relations.

At the same time, research on strategic narratives shows that powers seek to construct coherent representations of the past, present and future in order to influence the behaviour of national and international audiences (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013). Contemporary narratives are particularly significant in the case of Russia: recent work highlights, in particular, the revival of anti-colonial and anti-hegemonic themes in Moscow’s strategic communication.

The central hypothesis of this article is therefore that **the projection of a major conflict in a strategic periphery is simultaneously material, institutional, narrative and cognitive.** It becomes particularly powerful when imported

narratives encounter pre-existing vulnerabilities: a crisis of institutional trust, a sense of abandonment in terms of security, social frustration, historical memory, resentment towards certain foreign powers and the quest for greater sovereignty.

2. Theoretical framework: from geopolitics to psychogeopolitics

Morgenthau's (1948) classical realism and Waltz's (1979) neorealism provide an essential initial foundation. The competition between Russia and the West in Africa can indeed be understood as a quest for positions, resources, partners and spheres of influence within an international system characterised by uncertainty and competition.

However, this approach remains incomplete when it comes to explaining why certain partnership offers are accepted whilst others are rejected. Wendt's (1992) constructivism helps to supplement this interpretation by showing that interests are not entirely determined by the material structure: they are also shaped by identities, norms and social representations.

Strategic narratives constitute a key link here. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2013) distinguish, in particular, between narratives relating to the international system, the identity of actors and specific policies. Their relevance to our research lies in the fact that an international actor does not merely seek to gain a material advantage; they also seek to define the political significance of events.

This dimension helps to explain why contemporary competition centres on the definition of the aggressor, the victim, the threat, sovereignty and the desirable international order. A power capable of influencing these definitions can produce strategic effects without directly controlling the territory in question.

We therefore propose the concept of **the psychogeopolitical projection of major conflicts (PPCM)**. This refers to the process by which the representations, antagonisms, strategic narratives, perceptions of threat, identity categories and instruments of power produced by a major international conflict are projected into peripheral spaces, where they encounter local structures and are reinterpreted by political and social actors.

Psychogeopolitical projection comprises five interdependent levels: material, security, narrative, cognitive and institutional. Their interrelationship can be represented as follows: **Major conflict → projection of power → circulation of narratives → encounter with local vulnerabilities → cognitive reinterpretation →**

transformation of perceptions → political repositioning → security reconfiguration → international feedback.

The theoretical contribution, therefore, does not lie in replacing geopolitics with psychology, but in showing that **geopolitical power becomes politically effective when it encounters cognitive structures capable of absorbing, transforming or rejecting it.**

3. Methodological framework

The study adopts a qualitative, comparative and process-oriented approach. It draws on documentary analysis, the analysis of strategic narratives, case comparisons and the chronological reconstruction of geopolitical transformations between 2014 and 2026.

The period 2014–2026 has been selected because it encompasses both the 2014 Russian–Ukrainian rift, the gradual consolidation of Russian influence in Africa and the strategic rupture triggered by the invasion of February 2022. The 2022–2026 period, however, constitutes the empirical core of the analysis.

Mali has been selected as **a case study of significant security and geopolitical projection**. Benin represents a **contrasting case of peripheral projection**, whilst Burkina Faso serves as an intermediate case through which to observe the consolidation of a Sahelian strategic orientation favourable to Moscow.

The corpus prioritises primary and institutional sources, peer-reviewed academic articles, scholarly works and specialist reports. Media sources are used primarily to document recent events where the academic literature remains insufficient.

A methodological caveat is essential: the fact that the Russia–Ukraine war coincided with geopolitical developments in Africa does not, in itself, constitute proof of causality. Russia had an established presence in Africa prior to 2022, and the crises in the Sahel have deep-rooted internal causes. The proposed model therefore aims to explain **an acceleration, a reconfiguration or an instrumentalisation of pre-existing dynamics**, rather than the creation of African crises ex nihilo.

4. Findings of this research: A psychogeopolitical analysis of the shift of inter-state conflicts towards strategic peripheries. The geopolitical reconfiguration of West Africa

4.1. Mali: from security diversification to peripheral confrontation

Mali represents the most significant case of multidimensional projection. The coups d'état of 2020 and 2021, the deterioration of relations with France, the withdrawal of MINUSMA and the search for new partners have created an environment conducive to strategic realignment. Russia has gradually consolidated its security presence, initially through Wagner, and subsequently by restructuring certain operations around the Africa Corps. SIPRI highlights that the Africa Corps has absorbed some of the personnel and functions previously associated with Wagner, and that the Malian government benefits from its support amidst ongoing clashes.

It would, however, be mistaken to interpret this development as a simple, automatic replacement of Paris by Moscow. It stems from an interaction between **African demand for security and Russia's offer of power**. A SIPRI analysis highlights that the leaders of the AES have confirmed Russia as a preferred partner and that the Russian strategy aligns with the security demands articulated by the states concerned.

The incident at Tinzaouaten in July 2024 marked a major turning point. Malian forces and Wagner Group fighters suffered heavy losses during clashes with armed groups in the north of the country. The Ukrainian authorities subsequently claimed to have played an intelligence role in the defeat inflicted on Russian forces, whilst Mali accused Kyiv of involvement in the attack; Ukraine contested Mali's account and diplomatic relations between the two states were severed in August 2024.

From a scientific perspective, the significance of Tinzaouaten lies less in the possibility of demonstrating a 'Ukrainian front' in Mali than in the fact that a **local event was incorporated into the strategic narrative of the Russia–Ukraine conflict**. The perception of Ukrainian involvement itself produced diplomatic and strategic consequences. The phenomenon thus illustrates the fundamental distinction between **material action and the cognitive effect of the supposed action**.

Mali thus appears as a space where the Russia–Ukraine war intersects with a local security crisis and produces a feedback loop: Russian presence → local confrontation → international interpretation → accusation of interference → diplomatic rupture → consolidation of strategic alignment.

4.2. Burkina Faso: consolidation of a Russia–Sahel axis

Burkina Faso presents a different but complementary picture. Since Captain Ibrahim Traoré came to power in 2022, Ouagadougou has deepened its relations with Moscow against a backdrop of a persistent security crisis and the gradual withdrawal of certain Western partners.

It would, however, be scientifically excessive to describe this relationship as a 'fruitful partnership' without specifying the indicators used. Russian-Burkinabe cooperation has undeniably become politically and security-wise significant, but the available data do not allow for the conclusion that the insecurity has been structurally resolved. Burkina Faso continues to face high levels of armed violence and considerable economic and institutional constraints.

Burkina Faso's strategic interest therefore lies less in the absolute success of the partnership than in its geopolitical and symbolic value. Moscow can use it to present its model of cooperation as an alternative to the Western approach, whilst Ouagadougou can leverage the relationship with Russia to assert its sovereignty and its break with certain traditional partners. This phenomenon corresponds precisely to a logic of competition between models and narratives, rather than mere military cooperation.

4.3. Benin: peripheral projection

Benin represents a more indirect scenario. Unlike Mali, it is not a major theatre of Russian military presence linked to the Russia–Ukraine war. Its vulnerability stems chiefly from its geographical position bordering a Sahel in crisis, the advance of armed groups towards coastal areas, and the information and diplomatic competition accompanying this transformation.

Recent data show that violence linked to jihadist groups has spread towards the southern Sahel, notably in the direction of Benin and Togo. A recent United Nations report cited by Reuters also highlights the expansion of JNIM's operational capabilities in several Sahelian and coastal countries.

Benin thus provides a particularly useful case study for our model: **the projection of a major conflict does not necessarily require the presence of Russian or Ukrainian combatants**. It can manifest itself through spillover effects, shifts in perceptions of threat, narrative campaigns, competition between security offerings, and diplomatic pressure exerted on coastal states.

The contrast between Mali and Benin therefore allows us to distinguish between two forms of projection: an **intensive**,

militarised and institutional **form** in Mali, and an **extensive**, informational, security-focused and diplomatic **form** in Benin.

5. The psychopolitical dimension: the battle for perception

The model's major contribution lies in its analysis of what occurs between the geopolitical event and the political decision: **perception**.

A population does not react directly to an objectively given international reality; it reacts to an interpreted reality. This distinction, fundamental to Jervis (1976), is reinforced by contemporary research on the perception of threat (Stein, 2013; Landau-Wells, 2024).

In societies characterised by high levels of political frustration, low institutional trust or a history of external domination, certain narratives may resonate with pre-existing cognitive frameworks. The Russian narrative portraying Moscow as a sovereignist power opposed to neo-colonialism may thus resonate with certain African historical experiences. Recent research on Russian strategic narratives specifically highlights the revival and adaptation of anti-colonial themes in Moscow's contemporary political communication.

However, we must avoid an analytical error: **the reception of a narrative does not necessarily imply its successful manipulation**. African populations and governments are not passive recipients. They can select, adapt or instrumentalise foreign narratives according to their own interests.

The relationship can therefore be conceptualised as: **External narrative → exposure → local interpretation → congruence with social experiences → possible appropriation → political behaviour**.

This chain explains why the same message produces different effects in different societies.

6. Contribution of the psychogeopolitical projection model to existing theories

Realism explains the competition for power; neorealism explains the structural constraints of the system; constructivism explains the social construction of interests and identities; strategic narrative theory explains the production of interpretative frameworks; political psychology explains perceptions and biases; and studies on hybrid competition explain the combination of instruments.

The concept of **psychogeopolitical projection** seeks to link these levels.

Its specific contribution lies in the view that the projection of a major conflict should not be measured solely by the number of soldiers, weapons or military agreements transferred to a peripheral area. It must also be measured by the conflict's capacity to **transform the cognitive categories through which local actors define their interests**.

Thus, controlling or influencing the definition of the aggressor, the victim, the threat, legitimacy and the international order constitutes a form of strategic power. Strategic narratives can precisely produce this cognitive structuring (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

The proposed model can be summarised by five mechanisms: **projection, resonance, appropriation, institutionalisation and feedback**.

Projection refers to the transfer of resources and representations; resonance occurs when these encounter local frustrations or identities; appropriation denotes their incorporation by African actors; institutionalisation transforms these representations into policies, alliances or security mechanisms; finally, feedback means that African transformations in turn alter the calculations of external powers.

It is this final dimension that distinguishes psychogeopolitical projection from a classical theory of influence: **the periphery is not merely influenced; it also reshapes international competition**.

7. Geopolitical implications for Africa and strategic repositioning on the global stage

The first consequence is the acceleration of multipolarisation. African states have a growing number of partners and can pit different diplomatic, military, economic and technological offers against one another. This diversification can strengthen their autonomy, but it can also increase the risks of multiple dependencies.

Secondly, the Western monopoly on security partnerships has eroded in several areas. The Russian example demonstrates that alternatives exist, even when they are controversial. SIPRI notes in particular the transition from Wagner to the Africa Corps and the increased institutionalisation of certain Russian mechanisms.

Thirdly, regional architectures are undergoing transformation. The consolidation of the AES, the break with ECOWAS and the diversification of military partnerships are evidence of a profound reshaping of the regional order.

Fourthly, this transformation is accompanied by a weakening of West African multilateralism. Institutional fragmentation may reduce the collective capacity to address cross-border threats, even as these threats become more complex.

Fifthly, competition between major powers may, paradoxically, enhance African agency. Governments can exploit this competition to secure better terms for cooperation. However, this agency remains asymmetrical and can turn into dependence where national economic and institutional capacities are weak.

Sixthly, the militarisation of international relations is intensifying. Private military companies, defence agreements, arms transfers and intelligence mechanisms are becoming commonplace instruments of geopolitical competition. SIPRI documents in detail the transformation of Wagner and the emergence of the Africa Corps as a Russian vehicle for projecting power in Africa.

Finally, Africa is becoming a space of hybrid competition where resources, infrastructure, weapons, data, the media, social media, identities and perceptions are simultaneously becoming objects of power.

8. Discussion: from geopolitical projection to psychogeopolitical projection

The empirical analysis conducted on Mali, Burkina Faso and, by contrast, Benin shows that the phrase ‘the transfer of the Russian-Ukrainian war to Africa’ must be used with great conceptual caution. Strictly speaking, this is not a territorial relocation of the European war to the African continent. The available data do not support the existence of a ‘second African front’ comparable, in its military reality, to the Ukrainian theatre. They do, however, allow us to identify a more complex process of **trans-regional projection of rivalries, instruments of power, strategic narratives and perceptions of threat**. This distinction is fundamental to avoiding confusion between direct causality and systemic effects. The Russian presence in the Sahel, notably through Wagner and subsequently Africa Corps, forms part of an African strategy whose origins predate February 2022; the war in Ukraine has, however, profoundly altered its strategic significance, its intensity and its relationship with the Russia–West rivalry (Minde, 2024; SIPRI, 2024).

The Sahelian case thus reveals a **convergence between a local demand for security and an external offer of power**. The military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger cannot be analysed as mere passive recipients of a Russian strategy. Their rapprochement with Moscow also stems from internal

political trajectories, the deterioration of their relations with certain Western partners, opposition to previous military arrangements and a quest for strategic autonomy. SIPRI specifically notes that Russia has been able to establish a foothold in these states by responding to a demand for security cooperation where traditional partners were perceived to have failed or to no longer adequately meet the expectations of local authorities (SIPRI, 2024).

This observation leads to a reformulation of the causal relationship. It would be scientifically inadequate to assert that **Russia influences Africa simply because it disseminates its propaganda there**. The mechanism is more complex: external actors produce narrative and material offerings that intersect with local structures of frustration, vulnerability and the quest for sovereignty. When these offerings correspond to representations already present within a society, the likelihood of them being embraced increases. This is precisely what research on strategic narratives helps us to understand: an international narrative derives its effectiveness not only from its reach, but also from its ability to resonate with the experiences, identities and social networks of its audiences (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, 2013; Szostek, 2017).

The psychogeopolitical contribution of this research therefore lies in shifting the level of analysis. Classical geopolitics primarily asks **who controls what, with what resources and in what space**. The proposed approach adds a complementary question: **who succeeds in determining how actors interpret this control, this threat and this legitimacy?** This line of inquiry brings geopolitics closer to political psychology. Levy’s work shows that foreign policy decisions are influenced by beliefs, cognitive biases, past experiences, learning mechanisms and perceptions of risk (Levy, 2013). Stein, for his part, emphasises that the international threat is never merely an objective property of an adversary’s capabilities: it is also a perceptual construct involving available information, emotions, heuristics and attribution processes (Stein, 2013; 2023).

This leads to an important theoretical proposition: **the strategic periphery is not merely a geographical space; it is also a cognitive space**. A state can become peripheral to a conflict without being militarily involved in it, once the categories produced by the conflict — aggressor, victim, resistance, imperialism, sovereignty, threat, ally, enemy — begin to shape political debates, social perceptions and local diplomatic choices. The conflict thus becomes present without being physically transferred. It becomes present in representations, institutions, alliances and security practices.

This proposition also helps to explain why two neighbouring states may be exposed to the same geopolitical environment whilst producing radically different responses. Mali has gradually become a heavily militarised sphere of Russian security projection. Burkina Faso has followed a comparable trajectory, but with a particularly significant dimension of political and symbolic mobilisation centred on sovereignty, anti-imperialism and the figure of Ibrahim Traoré. Benin, by contrast, remains embedded in a different political and security architecture and is more directly confronted with the spillover effects of Sahelian instability, cross-border risks and competing narratives. The differences between these cases confirm that **exposure to an external power does not automatically lead to alignment: it is mediated by the political structures, institutions, collective perceptions and historical trajectories specific to each state.**

8.1. Burkina Faso: consolidation of a Sahelian hub and the symbolic value of the Russian-Burkinabe relationship

Burkina Faso represents a particularly interesting intermediate case between Mali, where the Russian presence has taken on a significant operational dimension, and Benin, which remains more exposed to the peripheral effects of the Sahelian realignment. Since Ibrahim Traoré came to power in October 2022, Ouagadougou has gradually deepened its relations with Moscow whilst reducing its traditional security ties with several Western partners. In particular, Russia has strengthened its security presence with the initial deployment of elements of the Africa Corps to Ouagadougou in January 2024. This development forms part of Moscow's strategy to further institutionalise its presence in Africa following the Wagner crisis and to place part of this cooperation under the direct control of the Russian Ministry of Defence (Minde, 2024; SIPRI, 2024).

What sets Burkina Faso apart, however, is the **political and symbolic dimension** of this relationship. The partnership with Russia is not exclusively a security arrangement. It forms part of a broader political narrative in which sovereignty, decision-making autonomy, criticism of the international order dominated by Western powers, and the promotion of a radical form of pan-Africanism are mobilised as sources of legitimacy. The case of Burkina Faso thus demonstrates that an external power can become a **source of internal identity**. Russia therefore does not merely provide military resources; in certain discourses, it is gradually becoming the symbol of a potential for strategic diversification and emancipation from former partners.

This aspect must, however, be viewed critically. Any improvement in certain macroeconomic indicators or the

political consolidation of power does not, in itself, allow us to conclude that the Russian–Burkinabe partnership has been a success. Apparent political stability should not be confused with security stabilisation, let alone with institutional consolidation. Research on the Sahel shows that the rise of military authoritarianism, persistent insecurity and shifting alliances are simultaneous phenomena that must be analytically distinguished (Wilén, 2025; SIPRI, 2024).

Burkina Faso is thus becoming a **focus of geopolitical and psychopolitical competition**. For Moscow, its importance lies not only in its geographical position or its resources; it also lies in its demonstrative value. The political success of a regime claiming to be able to distance itself from Western partners whilst developing a partnership with Russia can serve as a narrative that can be exported to other African societies. Conversely, for Western powers, Burkina Faso's trajectory serves as an indicator of a potential loss of influence in a region where perceptions of the effectiveness, sovereignty and legitimacy of foreign partnerships are deeply contested.

Burkina Faso's relevance to our model is therefore significant: **psychogeopolitical projection does not always require large-scale military intervention to produce strategic effects**. The symbolic value of a partnership, its endorsement by political elites and its coverage in the media may be sufficient to alter perceptions of what constitutes a legitimate alliance, a credible power or a desirable international order.

8.2. The cognitive dimension of competition: perception, emotion and the construction of the threat

The main originality of the proposed model lies in the systematic integration of political psychology into geostrategic analysis. An international threat never exists solely on the basis of its material capabilities. It also exists because it is **perceived, interpreted, categorised and emotionally invested in**. Jervis (1976) pioneered the demonstration that misperceptions and attribution mechanisms could lead decision-makers to interpret an adversary's intentions in a manner radically different from their actual intentions. Stein's more recent work expands on this approach by showing that threat assessment depends on cognitive processes, emotions, available information and the heuristics employed by decision-makers (Stein, 2023).

In the West African context, this dimension is particularly important because external geopolitical narratives intersect with pre-existing historical memories. Experiences of colonialism, asymmetrical relationships with former colonial powers, foreign military interventions, frustrations linked to the outcomes of certain security policies, and feelings of

international injustice all constitute cognitive reservoirs into which new narratives can be embedded. It would, however, be scientifically erroneous to regard these populations as inherently ‘manipulable’. The reception of a narrative is an active process: audiences select, interpret, challenge and reappropriate information according to their own frames of reference.

The literature on strategic narratives confirms this interaction. Szostek (2017) demonstrates that the reception of a foreign narrative depends, in particular, on **the social and communicational ties** that link individuals to the state producing it. This conclusion is particularly relevant to the analysis of in contemporary Africa, where digital media, social media, diasporas, transnational communities and messaging platforms enable geopolitical narratives to circulate rapidly across borders.

The strategic implications are considerable: **the information environment itself is becoming a battleground**. However, a distinction must be drawn between information and persuasion, and between persuasion and manipulation. An influence campaign may seek to persuade; a disinformation campaign aims to introduce or amplify false or misleading representations; a narrative strategy, on the other hand, may offer a coherent interpretation of the international system without every element of it being factually incorrect. This conceptual distinction prevents us from indiscriminately labelling all strategic communication as ‘propaganda’.

Cognitive projection works particularly well when three factors combine: **informational vulnerability, political dissatisfaction and strong narrative congruence**. The more an external narrative corresponds to a local experience already perceived as unjust, the more rapidly it can be adopted. Geopolitical competition then becomes a contest over the definition of the meaning of events. Whoever succeeds in imposing the dominant interpretation of a crisis can influence political preferences without necessarily exercising direct control over material resources.

8.3. Legal and institutional implications of geopolitical reconfiguration

The transformation observed in West Africa also has an international legal dimension that should not be treated as secondary. African diplomatic repositioning takes place within a legal order founded in particular on the principles of sovereignty, the sovereign equality of states, non-intervention and the peaceful settlement of disputes. At the same time, the United Nations Charter places the prohibition on the use of force at the heart of the international legal regime, subject to

the exceptions provided for under international law, notably self-defence and measures authorised by the Security Council.

The contemporary challenge lies precisely in the rise of forms of engagement that fall between formal peace and open warfare: private military and security companies, advisers, military assistance, intelligence, information operations, cyber cooperation and indirect support for local actors. Wagner’s evolution into Africa Corps illustrates this trend towards the gradual institutionalisation of a presence that had initially been largely associated with a legally and politically ambiguous paramilitary actor. SIPRI notes that following Wagner’s rebellion in 2023, Russia sought to regain greater control over its African operations, with the creation of Africa Corps and its closer integration into Russian state structures (SIPRI, 2024).

This development raises questions of **international responsibility, attribution, effective control and the protection of civilian populations**. The more a foreign force acts with the support, coordination or under the authority of a state, the more the question arises as to the legal attribution of its acts under the relevant rules of international law on responsibility. Conversely, the use of intermediary actors can create grey areas of political and legal attribution. This ambiguity is precisely one of the strategic characteristics of contemporary forms of indirect competition.

The implications for African states are twofold. On the one hand, diversifying partnerships can strengthen their strategic autonomy and negotiating capacity. On the other hand, it can expose them to **risks of security dependence**, human rights violations, international liability and normative fragmentation. The choice of a military partner cannot therefore be assessed solely on the basis of the number of weapons supplied or the number of advisers deployed; it must be evaluated in terms of legality, accountability, operational effectiveness, the protection of civilians and institutional sustainability.

8.4. Reformulation of the model: the psychogeopolitical loop of projection

In light of the preceding discussions, the initial model can be strengthened by introducing a **psychogeopolitical loop of projection**. This is based on five interdependent sequences.

The first is that of **material projection**, comprising weapons, funding, infrastructure, advisers, security forces and economic resources. The second corresponds to **narrative projection**, through which actors ascribe political meaning to their actions and present their presence as legitimate, necessary or

emancipatory. The third is **cognitive reception**, during which populations, elites and institutions interpret these narratives based on their experiences, beliefs and identities. The fourth is **political conversion**, when these transformed perceptions lead to concrete decisions: the breaking of alliances, a change of partner, a shift in doctrine, diplomatic voting or institutional reform. Finally, the fifth stage is that of **international feedback**, when decisions taken on the periphery in turn alter the calculations of external powers.

The model can thus be summarised as follows: *Major conflict → projection of power → narrative projection → cognitive reception → transformation of perceptions → political decision → strategic realignment → feedback on the international conflict.*

This cycle enables us to move beyond linear models of geopolitical diffusion. Africa is not merely a receptacle for European rivalries. African actors **interpret, select, transform and sometimes turn the instruments offered by external powers against them**. This dimension of *agency* is essential to a scientifically balanced analysis.

It also leads to a reformulation of the concept of the ‘strategic periphery’. A periphery is not necessarily passive. It can become a **strategic hub**, that is to say, a space whose importance stems precisely from its capacity to alter the calculations of external powers. The Sahel today constitutes such a space: its geographical position, its resources, its security crises, its political transformations and its relations with coastal states confer upon it an importance that extends far beyond its borders.

9. Implications for the future: towards a sustained competition between models of international order

The Russia–Ukraine war and its spillover effects must ultimately be viewed within the context of a more profound transformation of the international order. The phenomenon observed is not merely a competition between Russia and the West. China, Turkey, the Gulf States, the European Union, the United States and other powers are also pursuing their interests in Africa. African multipolarisation is therefore a broader phenomenon than the Russian presence alone.

This development offers African states unprecedented room for manoeuvre. The diversification of partnerships makes it possible to negotiate simultaneously with several powers, and to compare offers relating to security, investment, infrastructure and diplomatic cooperation. It can thus contribute to the continent’s **strategic autonomy**. However, this opportunity carries a corresponding risk: the proliferation

of partners can turn into proxy competition when governments become dependent on competing external powers.

The major strategic challenge for Africa is therefore not to choose mechanically between ‘Russia’ and ‘the West’. It lies in building an **autonomous African capacity for selecting, regulating and by negotiating international partnerships**. This approach is consistent with the need to strengthen African *agency* rather than replacing one form of dependence with another.

The real strategic question for West African states thus becomes: **how can international multipolarity be transformed into a resource for autonomy rather than a new structure of dependence?**

The solution lies in strengthening national and regional institutions, economic diversification, enhancing intelligence capabilities, information resilience, regional cooperation and the establishment of joint mechanisms for monitoring influence campaigns. It also requires reframing security within a broader concept that encompasses governance, development, justice, social cohesion and the protection of populations.

Recent data indeed show that instability in the Sahel cannot be explained solely by competition between major powers. The specific dynamics of armed groups, illicit economies, local conflicts and institutional vulnerabilities remain key factors. In 2026, the expansion of JNIM’s activities into Benin and Togo particularly illustrates the cross-border nature of the threat and the need to distinguish the effects of the Russia–West rivalry from the autonomous dynamics of Sahelian insurgencies.

This distinction is essential: **no contemporary African security phenomenon should be artificially reduced to the Russia–Ukraine war**. The scientific value of the psycho-geopolitical model lies precisely in its ability to identify interactions rather than to wrongly attribute a single cause.

10. Scientific contribution: from the geopolitics of space to the geopolitics of representations

The main contribution of this research can ultimately be formulated as an extension of the traditional field of geopolitics. Classical approaches generally focus on territories, resources, military capabilities, alliances and power relations. Constructivist approaches have demonstrated the importance of norms, identities and representations. Research in political psychology, for its part, has demonstrated the influence of cognitive and emotional

mechanisms on the perception of threats and international decision-making (Jervis, 1976; Levy, 2013; Stein, 2013). Finally, research on strategic narratives has demonstrated the capacity of states to shape interpretations of the international system (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013; Szostek, 2017).

This paper aims to integrate these traditions into a single causal model. The projection of a major conflict is not merely a distribution of resources; it is a distribution of meanings. It becomes geopolitical when these meanings transform the choices made by great powers; it becomes psychopolitical when they alter perceptions of threat, identity and legitimacy; it becomes strategic when they produce observable behaviours; it becomes systemic when these behaviours, in turn, alter the calculations of the great powers.

It is in this interplay that the concept of **the psychogeopolitical projection of major conflicts** lies.

It helps us understand why a conflict in Eastern Europe can have political, diplomatic, security, economic and cognitive effects in West Africa without Africa having become merely a 'second theatre' of war. It also helps us understand why the consequences are neither uniform nor mechanical: they depend on states' geostrategic position, their history, their institutional architecture, their security vulnerabilities, their economic resources and, above all, the way in which populations and elites **interpret competing narratives of the international order**.

The contemporary shift in the nature of conflict must therefore be understood less as a **geography of war** than as a **geography of competition for control over perceptions**. It is this theoretical shift that gives the proposed concept its heuristic significance.

Psychogeopolitical projection thus refers to the process by which a major conflict, without necessarily shifting physically to a new space, reproduces certain aspects of its logic of confrontation there through the circulation of resources, alliances, narratives, perceptions of threat and categories of legitimacy, to the point of bringing about a reconfiguration of political behaviour and security architectures.

This formulation allows us to maintain a crucial distinction between military expansion, security spillover, internationalisation, hybrid competition, projection of influence and psychogeopolitical projection. It thus avoids the pitfall of an overly broad concept and endows the model with genuine discriminatory power.

Ultimately, the article's central hypothesis can be formulated as follows: the Russia–Ukraine war is not 'spreading' to West Africa in the strict territorial sense; rather, it **is projected there** through distinct mechanisms of power, security, diplomacy, economics, information and cognition. This projection becomes particularly formative when imported narratives encounter local vulnerabilities and succeed in transforming the way in which actors define the threat, sovereignty, allies, enemies and the legitimate international order. The cases of Mali and Burkina Faso illustrate a highly politicised and security-driven form of projection, whilst Benin provides an example of a more peripheral, cross-border and preventive form. This differentiation constitutes precisely one of the model's most significant empirical findings.

Finally, the most recent events call for continued empirical caution: the security dynamics of 2026 in Mali and the coastal states are also fuelled by the autonomous expansion of Sahelian armed groups, war economies and local vulnerabilities. In particular, the recent advance of JNIM towards Benin and Togo illustrates that cross-border violence has its own causal logic and cannot be reduced to a Moscow–Kyiv confrontation. This caveat strengthens rather than weakens the model: the psychogeopolitical projection must be conceived as a mechanism of interaction between external conflict and local structures, and not as a monocausal theory of foreign influence.

11. General conclusion and prospective scenarios

The analysis leads us to reject two oversimplified interpretations. The first would be to claim that the Russian–Ukrainian war has simply been 'transferred' to Africa. The second would amount to viewing all African geopolitical transformations as direct consequences of actions by Moscow or Kyiv.

The reality is more complex. The crises in the Sahel have their own historical, political, economic and security determinants. The Russia–Ukraine war, however, acts as **an accelerator, a catalyst and a framework for reconfiguration**. It provides new narratives, new instruments, new opportunities and new fault lines.

Mali illustrates the most advanced form of this projection: militarisation, a Russian presence, local confrontation, a diplomatic rift and the integration of the Ukrainian conflict into national perceptions of the threat. Burkina Faso illustrates a political and strategic consolidation of the Sahel's Russian-orientation. Benin represents a more peripheral projection, characterised by the spillover of security concerns,

information pressures and competition between strategic proposals.

Three scenarios can be envisaged in the medium term:

The first is the **institutionalisation of African multipolarity**, in which states diversify their partnerships without aligning themselves permanently with a single power. This scenario would be compatible with a strategy of African strategic autonomy.

The second is one of **growing geopolitical polarisation**, characterised by a divide between Sahelian regions increasingly aligned with Moscow and coastal states maintaining diversified partnerships with the West. Such polarisation could heighten regional tensions and the risks of spillover.

The third, and most worrying, scenario would be that of a **lasting hybridisation of conflicts**, in which geopolitical rivalries, armed groups, private military actors, economic networks and information operations would become so intertwined as to make it difficult to distinguish between local conflict and international competition.

Preventing this third scenario requires a response that goes beyond the military dimension alone. West African states must strengthen their capabilities in intelligence, cybersecurity, narrative analysis, fact-checking and media literacy, whilst improving governance and institutional trust. The fight against cognitive manipulation cannot be credible if it itself becomes an instrument of state propaganda.

The fundamental strategic implication is therefore as follows: contemporary sovereignty no longer consists solely of protecting physical borders; it also involves protecting the informational, institutional and cognitive space within which a society defines its interests and makes its decisions.

The contribution of this article lies precisely in having proposed a framework for analysing this transformation. The psychogeopolitical projection of major conflicts does not seek to replace existing theories; rather, it aims to link them through a common mechanism: the transformation of a material conflict into a cognitive environment, followed by the conversion of this cognitive environment into geopolitical behaviours.

The scientific question, however, remains open. Future quantitative research will need to empirically test the relationships between informational exposure, threat perception, institutional trust, attitudes towards foreign powers and foreign policy decisions. Longitudinal surveys,

social network analyses, framing *experiments*, computational discourse analysis and interviews with political elites could, in particular, help to measure the mechanisms conceptualised in this study.

Understood in this way, West Africa is neither a mere periphery of the Russia–Ukraine war nor a passive theatre of rivalry between great powers. It becomes an **autonomous space for the reconfiguration of the international order**, in which external conflicts are reinterpreted, appropriated and transformed by African actors. It is precisely this interaction between external power, local vulnerability, political cognition and African *agency* that lies at the heart of the psychogeopolitical phenomenon.

Bibliographical references

- Boås, M., & Strazzari, F. (2026). Borders ending nowhere: The geopolitical imaginaries and practices of Russia's spheres of interest in Africa. *Geopolitics*, 31(4), 1319–1343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2025.2585297> (Taylor & Francis Online)
- Jervis, R. (1976). *Perception and misperception in international politics*. Princeton University Press.
- Landau-Wells, M. (2024). Building from the brain: Advancing the study of threat perception in international relations. *International Organization*, 78(4), 627–667. (Cambridge University Press)
- Levy, J. S. (2013). Psychology and foreign policy decision-making. In L. Huddy, D. O. Sears, & J. S. Levy (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2013). *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*. Routledge.
- Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. PublicAffairs.
- Oates, S., & Ramsay, G. N. (2024). *Seeing red: Russian propaganda and American news*. Oxford University Press.

- Ramani, S. (2023). *Russia in Africa: Resurgent great power or bellicose pretender?* Oxford University Press.
- SIPRI. (2024). *SIPRI Yearbook 2024: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. ([SIPRI](#))
- SIPRI. (2025). *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, disarmament and international security*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. ([SIPRI](#))
- Stein, J. G. (2013). Threat perception in international relations. In L. Huddy, D. O. Sears, & J. S. Levy (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 364–394). Oxford University Press.
- Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Addison-Wesley.
- Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. *International Organization*, 46(2), 391–425.
- Wilén, N. (2025). *Securitising the Sahel: Analysing external interventions and their consequences*. Oxford University Press.
- United Nations General Assembly. (2023). *Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underpinning a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine* (A/RES/ES-11/6). United Nations. ([United Nations Digital Library](#))