



Libya as a Russian Strategic Foothold

From Wagner to Africa Corps:

The Evolution of Russia's Military Footprint in Libya

Executive Summary

Russia's military presence in Libya has evolved beyond the requirements of the Libyan conflict itself. Between 2024 and 2026, the network of airfields, logistics sites and maritime access points established during the Wagner period increasingly functioned as part of a wider Russian expeditionary architecture linking the Mediterranean with the Sahel and other African theatres.

The strategic significance of Libya derives from geography and access. Eastern and central Libya provide military infrastructure south of Europe, close to the central Mediterranean and positioned between Russia's Middle Eastern logistics network and sub-Saharan Africa. The country also offers several airfields capable of supporting transport aviation, territory controlled by Russian-aligned local actors and ports through which heavy equipment can enter the theatre.

The network is distributed rather than concentrated. Al-Khadim provides an eastern reception and sustainment function. Al-Jufra remains the most important central operational node, with access toward the Mediterranean coast and southern Libya. Qardabiyah supports the Sirte axis, while Brak al-Shati and Tamanhint extend the network into the Fezzan. Maaten al-Sarra adds potential depth toward Chad and Sudan. Tobruk increasingly provides a maritime entry point for Russian military logistics.

The September 2026 arrival of Russian cargo and landing ships at Tobruk illustrated the maturity of this architecture. Equipment delivered by sea could be moved to Libyan bases and, according to reporting from Libyan security sources, redistributed farther south. Maritime delivery, strategic airlift, internal movement and forward staging now form complementary parts of the same logistics system.

This does not make Libya a conventional Russian overseas base. Moscow still depends on access granted by Khalifa Haftar's network and on the continued fragmentation of Libyan authority. The strategic effect, however, is already significant: Russia has secured a persistent military platform that supports African deployments while maintaining a presence inside the central Mediterranean security environment.

Assessment: Libya has become a strategic military platform rather than simply a theatre of Russian intervention. Its value lies in the combination of Mediterranean access, African depth, distributed basing and a permissive local political environment. The Russian presence provides sustained options across North Africa and the Sahel and creates a persistent military and intelligence concern on NATO's southern flank.

Scope of the Analysis

This final report examines the strategic function of the Russian military presence in Libya after the transition from Wagner to Africa Corps. It focuses on the period from 2024 through 2026 and assesses regional logistics, strategic mobility, maritime access, basing, force protection and support to deployments elsewhere in Africa. The report also considers the implications for the central Mediterranean, NATO's southern flank and Italy. It does not assume that every Russian activity in eastern Libya forms part of a single centrally directed campaign; the emphasis is on the operational options created by persistent access to multiple locations and the strategic effects generated by that access.

Key Analytical Judgments

High confidence	Libya has become one of the principal logistics hubs supporting Russia's military presence in Africa. Its airfields and ports connect Mediterranean access with deployments in the Sahel and other African theatres.
High confidence	The Russian posture remains distributed across several Libyan facilities rather than concentrated at a single base. This improves resilience, complicates monitoring and reduces dependence on any one political or military location.
High confidence	Al-Jufra remains the most important central operational node, while Al-Khadim continues to provide an important eastern reception and logistics function.
Moderate-high confidence	Tobruk is becoming increasingly important as a maritime gateway for Russian military cargo. Repeated deliveries demonstrate an established logistics role, although available evidence does not yet support describing the port as a permanent Russian naval base.
High confidence	Brak al-Shati, Tamanhint and other southern locations extend the network toward the Sahel. Maaten al-Sarra adds potential depth toward Chad and Sudan, although attribution of all activity there exclusively to Russia remains uncertain.
High confidence	Strategic airlift and maritime logistics now operate as complementary components of the same regional sustainment architecture.
Moderate-high confidence	The Russian position creates military options relevant to NATO's southern flank, but its present value lies primarily in access, logistics, intelligence and regional mobility rather than in a large conventional strike force directed against Europe.
High confidence	For Italy, the immediate implications concern maritime situational awareness, monitoring of Russian logistics, Libyan stability, arms flows, influence over local actors and the proximity of Russian-accessed infrastructure to the central Mediterranean.
Moderate confidence	The Russian posture remains vulnerable to political change in eastern Libya, competition among Haftar-aligned actors, logistical disruption and wider pressure on Russia's expeditionary system.

1. Libya's Strategic Value in the Russian African Posture

Libya occupies a distinctive position within Russia's African military architecture. Unlike the landlocked Sahelian states where Moscow has expanded its security relationships, Libya combines direct Mediterranean access with established military airfields, ports and relatively short routes toward both the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. That geography gives Moscow a logistics interface that Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger cannot generate independently.

Russia does not need territorial control in the conventional sense to exploit this advantage. Persistent access to selected installations is sufficient. Transport aircraft can arrive, refuel, unload and redistribute cargo; personnel can rotate through protected facilities; equipment delivered by sea can be moved inland and subsequently transferred by air. The resulting system connects strategic logistics with regional operations farther south while preserving access to the Mediterranean.

The proximity to southern Europe adds a separate strategic dimension. Eastern Libya lies opposite the central Mediterranean and close to sea lanes linking the eastern and western basins. The present Russian posture should not be equated with a conventional

strike force positioned for operations against NATO territory. Its more immediate value is operational optionality: infrastructure, access and a degree of freedom to support aviation, logistics, intelligence activity and naval movements from a geographically advantageous position.

2. The Russian Basing Network: Functional Division and Resilience

The Libyan network is best understood as a functionally differentiated system. Al-Khadim remains an important eastern reception and sustainment node. Its security, infrastructure and proximity to Benghazi and Haftar-controlled command structures make it suitable for transport aviation, storage, maintenance and onward redistribution.

Al-Jufra remains the principal central operational node. Its location permits movement north toward Sirte, east toward Cyrenaica, west toward Tripolitania and south toward the Fezzan. Qardabiyah complements this role by providing access to the central coastal corridor and the Sirte axis. Brak al-Shati and Tamanhint extend the architecture into southern Libya, where they support staging toward Niger and Chad while reducing dependence on coastal facilities.

Maaten al-Sarra potentially extends the network farther southeast. Its location near the borders with Chad and Sudan gives the airfield considerable geographic value, and infrastructure activity observed since 2024 could increase its usefulness for transport aviation and regional staging. Attribution requires caution, however, because the southeastern corridor is also relevant to actors connected with the Sudan conflict and not all activity at the site can be assigned confidently to Russia.

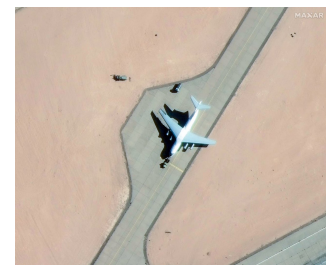
Distribution is itself a form of resilience. If one facility becomes politically constrained, operationally exposed or temporarily unavailable, personnel, aircraft and equipment can be shifted elsewhere. Static inventories at individual bases therefore provide only a partial picture. The more useful indicator is whether the wider network continues to move and sustain personnel and materiel.



Maaten al-Sarra Air Base: runway repaving and new aircraft apron, 2024-2025.
Source: Tearline analytical imagery / commercial satellite imagery



Al-Jufra Air Base: new support infrastructure and protective works observed from 2024.
Source: Tearline analytical imagery / commercial satellite imagery



Il-76 transport aircraft at Al-Jufra Air Base, illustrating the continuing role of strategic airlift.
Source: Maxar Technologies

3. Strategic Airlift and the Libya-Sahel Corridor

Air transport remains central to the Russian regional architecture. Libyan airfields offer the runway length, operating space and geographic position required for strategic transport aircraft. Airlift shortens the distance between external supply nodes and African destinations, allows personnel to rotate without relying on long overland routes and gives Moscow a means to redistribute vehicles and technical equipment that have entered Libya by sea.

This function has become more important as Russian military cooperation expanded with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Direct transport from Russia to each theatre remains possible, but it is resource-intensive and more visible. Libya provides an intermediate staging environment where cargo can be reorganised according to destination and personnel can transit through established infrastructure before moving farther south.

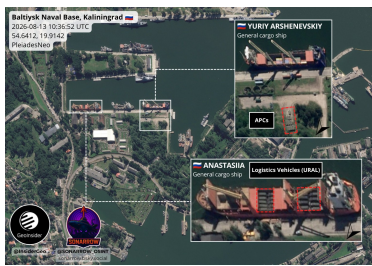
Al-Jufra is particularly important because of its central position and established logistics functions. Southern bases extend the corridor farther into the Fezzan. Reporting in 2026 that vehicles delivered through Tobruk were subsequently moved toward Mali is significant because it indicates integration between maritime entry into Libya and onward air movement to the Sahel. The system therefore offers several possible combinations of sea transport, airlift and internal redistribution rather than a single fixed route.

4. Tobruk and the Maritime Logistics Dimension

Tobruk has assumed increasing importance in the Russian logistics system. The port provides direct access to territory controlled by forces aligned with Khalifa Haftar and allows heavy equipment to enter eastern Libya without relying exclusively on strategic airlift. Russian-associated vessels delivered military equipment through Tobruk during 2024 and subsequent years, establishing a recurring maritime supply function.

The September 2026 convoy provided a particularly clear illustration. The cargo vessels Anastasiia and Yuriy Arshenevskiy, accompanied by the Ropucha-class landing ship Aleksandr Shabalin, reached Tobruk after crossing the Mediterranean. Imagery associated with the shipment showed logistics vehicles and armoured equipment. The port therefore functions increasingly as a reception point connected to the wider inland network.

Maritime access is valuable because heavy equipment can be moved more efficiently by sea than by air, while inland airfields allow subsequent redistribution. This creates redundancy and gives the network a genuinely multimodal character. Repeated Russian use of Tobruk should not, however, be conflated with the establishment of a permanent naval base. A qualitative change would require indicators such as dedicated long-term berthing, maintenance infrastructure, protected ammunition storage, permanently assigned naval personnel and facilities designed for sustained warship support. Available evidence demonstrates persistent logistics use, not a formally established Russian naval installation.



Russian cargo vessels Anastasiia and Yuriy Arshenevskiy at Baltiysk Naval Base with logistics vehicles and APCs visible before deployment.

Source: Pleiades Neo imagery; analysis by GeolInsider and SONARROW OSINT



Russian logistics convoy transiting the Strait of Sicily on 10 September 2026: Aleksandr Shabalin, Anastasiia and Yuriy Arshenevskiy.

Source: Copernicus Sentinel-2 imagery; analysis by SONARROW OSINT



Russian logistics vessels at Tobruk on 13 September 2026: Anastasiia in port, with Yuriy Arshenevskiy and Aleksandr Shabalin offshore.

Source: Copernicus Sentinel-2 imagery; analysis by SONARROW OSINT

5. Africa Corps: Command, Sustainment and Force Protection

The transition from Wagner to Africa Corps increased the role of Russian state institutions in managing the Libyan network. A regional military hub cannot operate through improvised or commercially independent logistics alone. Strategic airlift, maritime shipping, maintenance, fuel distribution, communications and coordination across several theatres require state-level resources. Africa Corps therefore combines elements of the flexible expeditionary model inherited from Wagner with more direct access to Russian military capabilities.

Libya was well suited to this transition because the physical infrastructure and local relationships already existed. Moscow did not need to rebuild the presence after 2023; it needed to bring an established system under tighter authority and sustain it more directly.

Force protection remains a requirement because Russian personnel operate inside fragmented territory rather than sovereign Russian-controlled space. Security therefore depends on local arrangements, perimeter defence, protected infrastructure, air defence and dispersal. Distribution across several facilities reduces the intelligence signature of large concentrations and limits the effect of disruption at any single location. Russian-designed air-defence systems present in Haftar-controlled areas may contribute to this protective environment, although attribution of specific systems and crews is not always possible from open sources.

6. Libya as a Regional Military Platform

The combined effect of basing, maritime entry and strategic airlift has transformed Libya into a platform whose military value extends beyond the country itself. The Fezzan provides depth toward Niger and Chad; southeastern Libya offers potential connectivity toward Sudan and Central Africa; eastern ports connect the network to Mediterranean shipping; and central airfields support redistribution between these directions.

This architecture creates an operational bridge between the Mediterranean and inland Africa. Its strategic effect does not depend on maintaining a large permanent force. The Russian model relies more heavily on access, protected infrastructure and the ability to move people and equipment when required. A comparatively modest permanent presence can therefore support activity over a much larger geographic area if reliable bases, transport and cooperative local actors remain available.

Libya consequently serves two functions at the same time. It remains a host country for Russian military personnel and assets, but it also provides a redistribution platform for an expeditionary system extending into several African theatres.

7. Implications for NATO and Italy

The Russian presence in Libya creates a persistent planning issue for NATO's southern flank. Its significance lies primarily in access, intelligence opportunities, logistics and the ability to move personnel and equipment through the central Mediterranean environment. This is not equivalent to Russia's force posture on NATO's eastern flank; Libya does not currently host a comparable concentration of conventional combat power. Persistent infrastructure south of Europe nevertheless provides options that can be expanded if political or operational conditions change.

For Italy, the issue is geographically immediate. The central Mediterranean forms part of the national security environment, and Italian interests include maritime security, energy infrastructure, stability in Libya, migration management and freedom of movement across sea lanes. A Russian logistics network in eastern Libya therefore creates requirements for maritime surveillance, analysis of port and airfield infrastructure, monitoring of air movements toward the Sahel and continuous assessment of Moscow's relationship with eastern Libyan authorities.

The principal challenge is not necessarily direct military confrontation. It is the coexistence of competing external security architectures inside a fragmented country where access, local patronage and infrastructure can generate influence disproportionate to the number of forces permanently deployed.

8. Constraints, Vulnerabilities and Indicators of Further Consolidation

Russia's position in Libya is significant but remains constrained. Moscow possesses access rather than sovereignty. The network depends on continued cooperation from Haftar-aligned actors and on the persistence of political fragmentation. Changes within the Haftar family, eastern military structures or a future national settlement could affect Russian freedom of action and the legal status of foreign forces.

The logistics system also has vulnerabilities. Long routes require fuel, maintenance and transport capacity. Ports and airfields are observable, aircraft movements can be monitored and satellite imagery can reveal construction, dispersal and concentration. Distribution improves resilience but does not remove exposure to intelligence collection or political pressure.

Further consolidation would be indicated by dedicated Russian naval-support infrastructure, sustained deployment of additional combat aviation, expansion of hardened shelters and ammunition facilities, an enduring regional command headquarters, formal long-term access agreements, routine use of southern Libyan airfields for Sahel operations and permanent layered air-defence coverage of the network. No single indicator would be decisive, but several appearing together would mark a qualitative shift.

The most likely near-term outcome remains continued consolidation without formal declaration of Russian bases. This preserves operational flexibility and limits political costs for Moscow's Libyan partners. Deeper institutionalisation through bilateral agreements is possible. A partial contraction could occur if political conditions change or Russian resources become constrained, but Moscow would probably prioritise the most strategically valuable nodes rather than abandon the network. Establishment of a permanent naval support facility would represent a higher-impact development and would materially increase the significance of the Russian position for NATO and Mediterranean security.

9. Assessment: Libya as a Russian Strategic Foothold

Russia's intervention in Libya began as support to a local military actor but gradually produced a broader strategic result. Wagner established operational access and local relationships. The Tripoli campaign expanded infrastructure and military involvement. When the offensive failed, Russian personnel and equipment were not withdrawn; they were redistributed toward bases and logistics nodes in central and eastern Libya. The post-2020 period converted campaign support into persistent access, and the post-Prigozhin transition placed much of that architecture under stronger state control.

By 2024-2026, Libya was functioning as a regional military platform. The principal gain is not ownership of a particular base but the integration of several nodes into a logistics architecture connecting maritime access, strategic airlift, inland redistribution and African deployments. Tobruk provides maritime reception; Al-Khadim supports eastern access; Al-Jufra provides central connectivity; Qardabiyah supports the Sirte axis; Brak al-Shati and Tamanhint extend the network into the Fezzan; and Maaten al-Sarra potentially adds southeastern depth.

This architecture would be difficult to reproduce elsewhere in North Africa. It remains dependent on Libyan political fragmentation and cooperation with Haftar-aligned actors, so its permanence is conditional rather than guaranteed. Expeditionary permanence, however, does not require formal ownership. It requires reliable access. Russia has secured enough access to make Libya a strategic foothold linking the Mediterranean with its wider African military posture.

Analytical Focus

The Russian presence in Libya developed through accumulation rather than through a single identifiable decision to create a regional hub. Each phase left behind infrastructure, relationships and operational access that could be used in the next. Wagner's intervention established the initial military footprint; the failure at Tripoli shifted the centre of gravity toward bases and sustainment; the distributed network built after 2020 gave the presence durability; and the Africa Corps transition brought that network under tighter state control.

The resulting architecture is neither a temporary remnant of the Wagner period nor a conventional overseas command. It is a persistent, distributed and state-enabled network whose military value comes from flexibility, connectivity and the ability to support activity beyond Libya. Its principal vulnerabilities remain dependence on local political access, observable logistics and the uncertain evolution of Libya's internal power structure.

Series Conclusion

Across the four reports, the Russian military presence in Libya shows a progression from intervention to consolidation, institutionalisation and regional integration. Wagner initially entered as a specialist force supporting Khalifa Haftar and later contributed directly to the Tripoli campaign. Operational failure did not bring a strategic withdrawal. Russian personnel and equipment were repositioned, the base network was retained and the emphasis shifted toward access and sustainment.

The 2023 leadership crisis then changed the organisational framework without dismantling the physical network. Moscow absorbed the useful parts of Wagner's presence into a more directly controlled structure centred on Africa Corps. By 2024-2026, the same infrastructure was supporting a wider African posture extending from the Mediterranean toward the Sahel.

The enduring lesson is that the outcome of the Tripoli campaign did not determine the long-term strategic value of Russia's intervention. Moscow failed to deliver Haftar's seizure of the capital, but it preserved access to bases, ports and local power networks that could be reorganised for broader purposes. The military network linking North Africa, the central Mediterranean and the Sahel is the principal strategic legacy of Russia's intervention in Libya.