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Strategy Through Opportunism: How Russia's Presence in Africa Actually Works

Russia does not plan its way into Africa. It moves in when a local crisis opens a vacuum and lets the host pay in resources. Also here: who picks the countries, what Moscow counts as success, why the CAR and the Sahel differ, and how gold keeps the model afloat.

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Strategy through opportunism is the author's name for how Russia's presence in Africa actually works. Moscow does not plan its way onto the continent. It moves in when a local crisis opens a vacuum — a coup, a collapse of security, a host state that can pay in resources — and builds from there. This report, dated July 17, 2026, takes the model apart: who chooses the countries, what the embassies really do, how Moscow measures success and how the whole construction is paid for.

Who picks the countries

Decisions on Africa rest with Putin alone, and after Mikhail Bogdanov's departure in 2025 their center of gravity moved from the Foreign Ministry to the Ministry of Defense and military intelligence. The report sets out the conditions under which the Russian presence grows and explains why embassies have been reduced to "couriers from Moscow." Port Sudan serves as the test case. A naval base announced in February 2025 was frozen by the end of the year, and the report reads this as a measure of how fragile the diplomatic side of the model remains.

Strategy through opportunism in the CAR and the Sahel

There is no single playbook. The report contrasts the Central African Republic, where Russia inherited and built on the Wagner construct, with Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, where the Africa Corps was shaped to replace the departing French and American forces.

“ The CAR represents a model of maximal integration. Russia credits itself with preventing a coup d'état in the country in 2020, and the Wagner operatives' business here ranged from gold mining to guarding the president. Yet it is precisely the CAR that shows that even the “exemplary” model is not static: fully replacing Wagner with the Defense Ministry's Africa Corps had still not succeeded by early 2026 — about 1,500 mercenaries remained in the country, Moscow was pressing President Faustin-Archange Touadéra to renegotiate the arrangements, and he publicly distanced himself from the notion that he is “selling off sovereignty.” The mechanism for managing relations is also telling: the post of the president's security adviser went to Dmitry Podolsky, a PMC commander with the call sign “Salem” — that is, a Russian representative is embedded directly into the security-and-defense bloc of the host state.

Sergey Konyashin, Strategy Through Opportunism: How Russia's Presence in Africa Actually Works (From the Inside, Démarche, July 17, 2026)

The author also draws on his own years in the diplomatic service. When he prepared the annual “political report” on bilateral relations, the key indicator Moscow always required was trade turnover. The report sets this long-term yardstick against the short-term ones that count today: loyal regimes kept in power, competitors pushed out and a return in minerals.

Security in exchange for access

The last section follows the money through three channels: payments and resource barter by host regimes, the sale of gold through informal export routes and the United Arab Emirates, and the Russian state budget, which covers the formal Africa Corps but not the shadow operations. It shows how shell companies have outlasted US, EU and UK sanctions and why the model's strength is also its weakness. Strategy through opportunism depends on physical control of mines and routes. Where Russian forces lose ground, as in Mali, the money goes with it.

What the report is based on

The analysis combines the record of agreements, sanctions and personnel changes from 2024–2026 with the author's experience in the Russian diplomatic service. Where a conclusion is the author's assessment rather than established fact, the report says so.

ABOUT

I am Sergey Konyashin, a former Russian diplomat. I spent nearly a dozen years in the Russian Foreign Ministry, with postings in Yemen (2010–2013), Sudan (2014–2018) and Algeria (2019–2021), and left Russia in 2022, after Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Démarche is my independent journal on Russian policy in the Middle East and Africa: analysis from inside the system, for readers outside it. I also write for *The Moscow Times*, *Republic*, *The Insider* and other independent outlets; see konyashin.com/elsewhere for that work.

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