Algerian–Russian Relations: Strategic Cooperation

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Abstract

Over the past twenty years, Algerian–Russian relations have improved markedly following changes in political leadership. Officials from the two countries have exchanged visits and signed a strategic partnership agreement. This paper examines the development of Algerian–Russian relations since independence and highlights the main areas of political, economic, and military cooperation between the two countries.

Keywords: relations; Algeria; Russia; military cooperation; strategy.

Relaciones argelino-rusas: cooperación estratégica

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Resumen

Durante los últimos veinte años, las relaciones argelino-rusas han mejorado notablemente tras los cambios en el liderazgo político. Los representantes de ambos países han intercambiado visitas y firmado un acuerdo de asociación estratégica. Este artículo examina la evolución de las relaciones argelino-rusas desde la independencia de Argelia y destaca los principales ámbitos de cooperación política, económica y militar entre ambos países.

Palabras clave: relaciones; Argelia; Rusia; cooperación militar; estrategia.

Introduction

Algerian–Russian relations have undergone important developments throughout their history, beginning with the Algerian War of Liberation, when the Soviet Union supported the Algerian revolution within the context of the rivalry between the Eastern and Western blocs and its support for liberation movements after the Second World War. Following Algeria's independence, relations gained considerable momentum as Algeria adopted a socialist approach to politics and the economy. The Soviet Union supplied experts in various fields and trained Algerian personnel. Cooperation also developed in military affairs and arms procurement, as Algeria relied on Soviet weapons for its armed forces. Relations cooled during the 1990s because of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's political and economic crises, and Algeria's security crisis. Since the beginning of the new millennium, however, Algerian–Russian relations have developed significantly through exchanges of high-level visits, economic cooperation agreements, and major arms deals intended to modernize the Algerian armed forces. This paper examines the development of Algerian–Russian relations and identifies the areas of cooperation between the two countries. It addresses the following questions:

How have Algerian–Russian relations developed?

What are the main areas of economic and military cooperation between Algeria and Russia?

In light of these questions, the study investigates Algerian–Russian relations amid global and regional developments and considers how a long historical relationship evolved into a strategic partnership encompassing political, military, and economic fields.

The study is based on the central hypothesis that Algerian–Russian relations have been shaped by historical circumstances and political and military ties at different stages. These relations are expected to continue developing because global and regional factors reinforce their interconnectedness and depth.

The study aims to trace the historical development of Algerian–Russian relations from the Algerian War of Liberation to the present, examine the influence of domestic and regional variables on the strengthening or cooling of bilateral ties at different periods, and develop a forward-looking perspective on how these relations might be reinforced and advanced in ways that serve both countries' interests.

The study adopts an integrated methodological approach. The historical method is used to examine the development of Algerian–Russian relations across different periods; the case-study method is used to investigate the relationship in its political, military, and economic dimensions; and foreign-policy analytical approaches are used to understand the orientations of each country's foreign policy toward the other.

The study is divided into three sections. The first traces the history of Algerian–Russian relations; the second examines economic and trade relations; and the third explores military cooperation, which has considerable strategic importance in the relationship between Algeria and Russia.

Section One: History of Algerian–Russian Relations

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union supported liberation movements in the developing world, presenting them as struggles against Western imperialism. This raises the question of how the Soviet Union responded to the Algerian War of Liberation and whether its position was clearly supportive, particularly during the revolution's early years.

The Soviet Union was not enthusiastic about the Algerian revolution at its outset. Several strategic considerations shaped its position, with political and strategic interests taking precedence over ideological interests, including the possibility of winning over France, a European-oriented power, at a time when Moscow sought to limit American influence in Europe. President Nikita Khrushchev did not conceal the Soviet view of the Algerian War as a French problem that should be resolved internally. He characterized it as "a problem among the peoples of the French Union," implying that the Soviet Union could intervene in the internal affairs of that state.[1]

At the United Nations, the Soviets adopted a position on Algeria similar to that taken on Morocco and Tunisia. They supported placing the Algerian question on the UN agenda. Soviet representative Kuznetsov proposed that the United Nations examine the Algerian issue and support a peaceful settlement that took the interests of the parties concerned into account. He called for the question to be included on the agenda, but, as the resolution indicated, the Soviet representative did not discuss the merits of Algeria's case. Moscow's objective appears to have been to affirm its leadership in the struggle against colonialism. Moreover, the Soviet vote was not decisive at the United Nations, and because it resembled the previous vote, it did not risk jeopardizing French–Soviet relations. Algerian nationalists nevertheless appreciated this position at the United Nations.[2]

The rapprochement between France and West Germany in 1961–1962 dashed Soviet hopes of breaking up the Western alliance. Consequently, when the French government and the National Liberation Front signed the Évian Accords in March 1962 to establish the conditions for a referendum in Algeria, the Soviet government eventually extended formal recognition to the National Liberation Front. Recognition of the Algerian government strained French–Soviet relations, and France and the Soviet Union severed diplomatic relations.[3]

The Soviet Union's recognition of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic on 3 October 1960 came after France had effectively acknowledged that government by negotiating with its representatives in October 1960. The Soviet decision was not the result of ideological conviction alone; several other factors influenced it:

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, developments—including the Évian negotiations—were increasingly pointing to the inevitable victory of the Algerian War of Liberation. Continuing to withhold recognition from the Provisional Government could have undermined the establishment of friendly Soviet relations with an independent Algeria after it regained sovereignty.

Continued Soviet non-recognition of the Provisional Government could have encouraged Algerian leaders to engage more closely with China, a rival power seeking influence in the Global South.

Soviet mass organizations influenced the Soviet Union's approach to liberation movements worldwide, particularly through recurring demonstrations condemning colonial repression.

The Algerians persuaded the Soviets to recognize the Provisional Government, following a visit to the Soviet Union by Ferhat Abbas, who led an Algerian government delegation.[4]

After independence, Algerian–Soviet relations made significant advances in several fields. Similar political orientations facilitated closer ties. The Soviet Union was the first country in the world to establish diplomatic relations with independent Algeria, on 23 March 1962. Algeria formally recognized the Russian Federation on 26 December 1991.

The principal factor bringing Algeria and the Soviet Union closer was the newly independent state's need to modernize its armed forces. Western countries, especially France and the United States, refused Algeria's requests for weapons, leaving Algiers little choice but to turn to Moscow. Between 1964 and 1966, Algeria received substantial military equipment from the Soviet Union. This enabled the Soviets to establish a limited presence in Algeria without exercising extensive influence. The overthrow of Ahmed Ben Bella in 1965 by Houari Boumediene, who was anti-communist, strained Soviet–Algerian relations for a time, but did not seriously damage the friendly relations between the two governments. Economic relations were good, although they were far less significant than Algeria's economic relations with capitalist countries.[5]

Boumediene admired the political and economic model offered by the Soviet Union, but his Arab nationalist orientation did not fully align with Soviet policy. This led him to distance himself to some extent from the superpower, which he did not regard as a genuine ally, particularly after the June 1967 Six-Day War.[6]

Defence cooperation resumed in the context of the Western Sahara conflict, which began in the mid-1970s. Throughout that conflict, Moscow sought to ensure that the Algerian army maintained a tactical advantage over Morocco.[7]

Soviet experts contributed significantly to the development of the Algerian economy, and thousands of Algerian students studied at Soviet universities. Russian–Algerian trade and economic cooperation began in the 1960s, when the Soviet Union provided Algeria with loans worth two billion dollars for economic development. It also assisted in establishing a national industrial base and developing sectors such as energy, mining, iron and steel, machinery manufacturing, and water infrastructure. Major projects implemented with Soviet assistance included the iron and steel complex at El Hadjar in Annaba, the thermal power station in Jijel, the Arzew–Hassi Messaoud gas pipeline, and the Beni Zid dam. Training national personnel for the various branches of the Algerian economy was consistently an important component of bilateral cooperation.[8]

The ideological compatibility of the two sides fostered political ties that extended beyond "revolution and liberation" to a shared commitment to similar values. From the Algerian leadership's perspective, Algeria was politically closer to the Soviet Union than to the United States. The Soviet Union was viewed as a friendly state, although past experiences sometimes damaged that friendship, particularly during difficult periods and despite differences over various issues. Trust and a sense of responsibility were especially important in establishing the foundations of friendship and respect. Trust was a reciprocal feature of Soviet–Algerian interaction and should be taken into account when assessing the relationship.[9]

Chadli Bendjedid adopted a more pragmatic, reformist, and moderate approach than Boumediene. He helped mediate the American hostage crisis in Iran and attempted to liberalize the Algerian economy. He also sought to diversify the sources of military equipment rather than rely entirely on Soviet weapons. Bendjedid visited the Soviet Union in 1981, after the Reagan administration supplied weapons to Morocco and amid an Algerian–American dispute over natural-gas prices. Moscow was aware of President Ronald Reagan's new strategy toward the developing world and understood that relations with Morocco could affect the regional balance of power in the Maghreb. The Soviet Union supported self-determination for Western Sahara, while Algeria feared that American support for Morocco could alter the balance between the two countries.[10]

During the 1990s, bilateral relations practically came to a halt, owing on the one hand to Algeria's domestic problems and, on the other, to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Russia's economic and political crisis. By the end of the decade, as these two obstacles receded, the countries renewed their engagement around shared strategic interests. For Russia, relations with Algeria acquired major geostrategic importance: Algeria was a key actor in North African regional dynamics; it could exert influence in the Arab world; it was geographically close to and connected with Europe; and it was a hydrocarbon producer, especially of natural gas, whose markets overlapped with Russia's. These factors made relations relevant to Russia's external energy strategy through both cooperation and competition.[11]

Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's official visit to Russia in early April 2001, including meetings with President Vladimir Putin, other Russian leaders, and representatives of Russian business circles, confirmed that Algeria regarded Russia as a priority partner. An important outcome was the signing of a joint declaration on strategic partnership, intended to strengthen and develop cooperation in political, trade, economic, military, scientific, and cultural fields.[12]

Cooperation developed substantially after Bouteflika's visit. The two countries signed the Strategic Partnership Declaration in Moscow on 4 April 2001 and a protocol on political consultations between their foreign ministries on the same date. An agreement on economic, trade, and financial relations and debt settlement was signed in Algiers on 10 March 2006.[13]

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Algerian–Russian relations gained new momentum through high-level visits and the signing of several political, military, and economic agreements. These agreements gave impetus to the development of relations in economic, trade, and military affairs, which are examined in the following sections.

Section Two: Economic and Trade Relations

Economic relations have accounted for a considerable part of exchanges between Russia and Algeria, particularly during the Soviet period. Algeria adopted a socialist economic orientation and received Soviet loans to support economic development after independence. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and Algeria's domestic problems during the 1990s harmed economic and trade relations. A new phase began at the start of the new millennium, when the two countries resumed their relationship with renewed momentum.

The importance of economic relations was highlighted by Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Algeria in 2006. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Algerian counterpart, Mohammed Bedjaoui, signed an agreement to settle Algeria's debt of US$7.4 billion. Under the agreement, Algeria would purchase Russian industrial goods worth at least the amount of the cancelled debt. The two sides also signed three protocols concerning economic and financial relations, the avoidance of double taxation between Algeria and Russia, and the promotion of investment and cooperation between the two countries' chambers of commerce and industry. Algeria agreed to purchase Russian fighter aircraft, air-defence systems, and other weapons in a deal valued at US$5.7 billion.[14]

Russia also sought to establish a stronger presence in Algeria's important oil and gas sectors. However, Algeria, then described as Europe's third-largest supplier of natural gas after Norway and Russia, viewed Russia more as a competitor than a partner in energy. The Russian company Gazprom owns assets in Algeria and has won contracts for oil and gas exploration and development, but strict rules governing foreign investment in Algeria limit the investment opportunities available to these companies.[15]

A few months after Putin's visit, the state-owned Algerian company Sonatrach and Russia's Gazprom signed a non-binding memorandum of understanding on energy cooperation. It covered liquefied natural gas (LNG), pipeline construction, the acquisition of assets in third countries, and commercial cooperation.[16]

In September 2008, Gazprom signed a memorandum of understanding with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation covering oil and gas exploration. The two sides also began preliminary discussions about a multibillion-dollar trans-Saharan pipeline connecting the Niger Delta to an export terminal on Algeria's Mediterranean coast. The proposed pipeline was intended to connect with Algeria's export pipelines to Europe.[17]

In September 2014, Russia and Algeria concluded an agreement on cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy, and a nuclear power plant in Algeria was identified as a potential major joint project. In October 2014, Rosatom chief executive Sergey Kiriyenko told journalists that Russia had begun consultations with Algeria concerning the construction of a nuclear power plant in 2017. The Algerian Atomic Energy Commission and Rosatom also signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in training personnel for the nuclear sector.[18]

The Gas Exporting Countries Forum is another area of Algerian–Russian cooperation. Founded in 2001, the forum brings together fifteen of the world's largest gas-producing countries. In 2007, its members were reported to account for approximately 73% of global gas reserves and 41% of production. President Putin publicly described the idea of a gas-producer cartel as "interesting" and worthy of consideration. Alongside bilateral coordination, cooperation between Russia and Algeria appeared to be increasing.[19]

The creation of the gas forum raised European concerns that Russia and Algeria might work together to increase the prices Europeans paid for gas. The Russian–Ukrainian gas dispute in January 2006 temporarily reduced Russian gas supplies to Europe. Putin's visit to Algeria in March 2006 and the Gazprom–Sonatrach memorandum of understanding in August 2006 further heightened European concerns about gas prices. Europe's dependence on imported gas was expected to increase over time.[20]

Russian–Algerian energy cooperation remains limited and is shaped by several considerations. Algeria is an important gas supplier to Europe and a competitor of Russia in this market. European and American companies play a major role in energy exploration and production in Algeria, limiting the participation of Russian companies. There are also important differences between gas and oil markets. Gas prices are often governed by long-term contracts, and agreed prices cannot easily be changed; spot markets account for a smaller share of natural-gas trade than long-term contracts.

Section Three: Military Cooperation

Military cooperation is a major component of relations between Algeria and Russia. Since independence, Algeria has relied primarily on Russian weapons for its armed forces. This relationship has also involved training personnel to operate the weapons and educating them at Russian military academies, helping Algeria develop an army capable of protecting and defending the country.

From the beginning of its relationship with the Soviet Union, Algeria was a consistent purchaser of Soviet weapons. When Western countries were reluctant to supply the arms Algeria sought, Algerian leaders turned to Moscow. Between 1962 and 1989, Algeria acquired some of the most advanced Soviet weapons and spent approximately US$11 billion on Russian arms. These included aircraft (MiG-21, MiG-23, and Su-24), tanks (T-55 and T-72), armoured vehicles, various vessels (corvettes, frigates, patrol boats, and submarines), small arms, and ammunition.[21]

When Russia and Algeria signed their strategic partnership declaration in 2001, bilateral ties in the military sector strengthened in particular. In 2006, Russia concluded an arms agreement with Algeria worth US$7.5 billion—described in the source as the largest Russian arms sale since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The agreement included a programme to modernize and train the Algerian armed forces, alongside cancellation of US$4.7 billion in debt dating from the Soviet era. Arms sales in 2010, 2012, 2013, and 2015 supplied Algeria with additional military equipment, including helicopters, tanks, and submarines. In 2016, Algeria and Russia began exchanging intelligence on the movements of terrorist groups across North Africa and announced plans for deeper military cooperation.[22]

Between 2000 and 2016, Algeria accounted for more than half of Russian arms exports to the region and was Russia's third-largest overall arms market, after India and China, accounting for 9.1% of exports. Since 2000, Algeria has acquired armoured vehicles (T-90S), fighter aircraft (Su-30MKA), missiles (SA-10 and Kh-31M), and Varshavyanka-class submarines. The two countries also agreed in 2015 to establish a T-90 assembly plant in Algeria.[23]

According to the Russian newspaper Kommersant, citing Sergey Smirnov, director of the Chkalov Novosibirsk aircraft plant, Algeria asked Russia for twelve Su-32 bombers after the beginning of Russia's military campaign in Syria. The Su-32 is the export version of the Su-34. The first batch of Su-32 bombers was estimated to cost Algeria between US$500 million and US$600 million, and Algeria was expected to order another six to twelve aircraft. In parallel, Algeria asked Russia to supply Su-35S fighters and expressed interest in purchasing at least ten, at a reported cost of US$850–900 million.[24]

Russia supplied more than 80% of Algeria's imported weapons between 2006 and 2013. Beginning in 2011, however, Algeria diversified its imports and signed agreements with France, Italy, Germany, and China to purchase ships, associated weapons, personnel carriers, and armed unmanned aerial vehicles. As these contracts were delivered, Russia's share of the market fell to 55% between 2014 and 2016. After 2016, Russia worked to recover its position. In 2020, it reportedly sold and transferred sixteen fighter aircraft, forty-two combat helicopters, and two submarines to Algeria. Maintaining market dominance is important to Russia, but these fluctuations indicate that past sales alone cannot guarantee continued competitiveness, even in its principal markets.[25]

In November 2021, Russian and Algerian naval forces conducted maritime exercises in Algeria. The exercises aimed to strengthen regional security and cooperation between the two fleets. Their principal objectives were to enhance Russian–Algerian military cooperation, exchange experience in carrying out specific naval tasks, and organize and coordinate joint naval exercises. The source notes that such exercises had not previously been conducted between Algeria and Russia in the Mediterranean, making them a sign of a notable development in the countries' strategic relationship.[26]

Moscow continues to strengthen the framework of bilateral cooperation with Algeria, a process that began in the 1950s. Russia continues to supply the Algerian state with advanced Russian weapons and supports the country's political system.[27]

Conclusion

Algerian–Russian relations have developed over many years, beginning during the Algerian War of Liberation. After Algeria gained independence, Russia provided economic support and assistance as Algeria pursued socialist industrialization and economic development. It also supplied weapons to the Algerian army and trained its personnel at Russian military academies.

Russian–Algerian relations declined during the 1990s because of Algeria's security crisis, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Russia's period of political weakness and economic deterioration. These developments adversely affected bilateral relations.

From the first decade of the twenty-first century, relations began to recover. Important milestones included President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's visit to Russia in 2001 and the signing of a strategic cooperation agreement, followed by President Putin's visit to Algeria in 2006 and the conclusion of several important military and economic agreements.

Trade between the two countries outside the arms trade remains limited, although it has grown in recent years. Bilateral trade is dominated by Algeria's imports of Russian weapons, which account for a substantial share of trade between Algeria and Russia.

Algerian–Russian relations are concentrated in the military sphere. Most of the Algerian army's weapons are Russian-made, and this equipment has been particularly important to Algeria since the security crisis of the 1990s and for protecting the country's extensive borders, especially after crises and civil wars intensified in neighbouring states following 2011.

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Editorial and Quality-Control Note

The manuscript has been translated and copyedited into English, and the reference list has been standardized as far as the information supplied in the source permits. The source contains incomplete or inconsistent bibliographic details, including missing publication years, volume or page ranges, and inconsistent author spellings. These details have not been invented; entries requiring verification are explicitly flagged. The source also contains several claims and figures that may require independent factual verification before journal submission.

The original manuscript contains no native Word tables; its substantive content is presented as paragraphs, including references and notes. No standalone figure or chart objects were detected in the source document. Original section order and the three main thematic sections have been retained. Because the source's headings are not consistently numbered, no new numerical heading system has been introduced.

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