

Algeria-Russia Relations After the Ukraine Invasion

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Brief Analysis

The North African country has maintained a close rapport with its traditional security partner, but a perpetual desire for balance and autonomy could offer opportunities for Western countries, including the United States.

When Algerian president Abdelmadjid Tebboune phoned his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in January, the two leaders discussed bolstering a bilateral relationship “rooted in the longstanding traditions of friendship and mutual respect,” according to the Kremlin [readout \(http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/keywords/82/events/70419/print\)](http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/keywords/82/events/70419/print). Beyond the boilerplate niceties, however, the conversation was more likely focused on the status of Russia’s Ukraine invasion and its [reportedly \(https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2022/09/29/Bipartisan-letter-to-Blinken-calls-for-sanctions-on-Algeria-after-Russia-arms-deal\)](https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2022/09/29/Bipartisan-letter-to-Blinken-calls-for-sanctions-on-Algeria-after-Russia-arms-deal) massive multibillion-dollar arms sale to Algeria. There was also speculation that Tebboune would visit Moscow soon, and a post-call [announcement \(https://www.arabnews.com/node/2242396/middle-east\)](https://www.arabnews.com/node/2242396/middle-east) from the Algerian leader’s office even noted a trip planned for May, which has not yet materialized.

While Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has upended and even challenged some of Moscow’s historic partnerships

elsewhere, Algeria does not look set to deviate too greatly from its historically close relationship with Moscow any time soon. Instead, the Ukraine war has presented new challenges to Algeria's long-held aims of achieving a more autonomous foreign policy.

A Balancing Act for Algiers

Algiers and Moscow began to develop economic and security ties in the 1960s, when Russia became Algeria's primary weapons supplier as the newly independent nation sought to build up its military. The closeness of this defense relationship endures today. Since 2002, approximately 76 percent of Algeria's **arms imports** (https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php) have come from Russia, and Algiers is consistently a top-five destination worldwide for Russian arms. In October 2022, Algeria **hosted** (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221024-algeria-russia-hold-joint-naval-drill-in-med-sea-ahead-of-desert-shield-2022/>) the Russian navy for joint maritime exercises, and the two sides reportedly conducted another joint exercise along the Moroccan border the next month, although Algerian officials **denied** (<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2022/11/29/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA>) that the latter occurred, perhaps to avoid international criticism. In the months that followed, however, Algiers hosted senior Russian security officials Nikolai Patrushev, who serves as secretary of Russia's Security Council, and Dmitry Shugaev, who heads the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation. The relationship extends into the diplomatic arena as well. Algeria **announced** (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/algeria-officially-applies-to-join-brics-bloc/2731976>) in November that it was planning to join the group known as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), a gesture Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov quickly **welcomed** (<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2023/02/353873/sergey-lavrov-confirms-depth-of-russias-alliance-with-algeria>). And Algerian officials are not shy in praising Moscow, while regularly **lauding** (<https://www.echoroukonline.com/president-tebboune-to-visit-russia-fm-lamamra-says>) the bilateral relationship, which they describe as being grounded in a shared "wide-ranging and long-term cooperation program."

Despite this closeness, however, Algeria has consistently tried to balance the perception of its relationship with Russia against a desire to maintain nonalignment on the global stage. This position has on occasion challenged its historical relationship with Moscow, most recently at the United Nations following Russia's invasion. In April, Algeria voted in favor of a UN General Assembly **resolution** (<https://www.kyivpost.com/post/16484>) recognizing "the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine," and since the start of the war, Algeria has **abstained** (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4003921?ln=en>) on five General Assembly votes involving the war. Algeria has also taken advantage of the secondary effects of Russia's invasion, most notably the European desire to wean itself off its reliance on Russian natural gas. For instance, Algeria is **now** (<https://www.euronews.com/2022/07/18/italys-draghi-visits-algeria-for-gas-talks-while-political-crisis-continues-at-home>) the top supplier of natural gas to Italy, which previously sourced most of its natural gas from Russia. And earlier this year, Tebboune **urged** (<https://www.newarab.com/news/algerian-president-urges-mali-drop-russias-wagner-group>) the Malian government to disassociate from Russia's Wagner Group, which has around a thousand troops as well as interests in the neighboring country. Although Tebboune couched his advocacy in Algeria's longstanding commitment to noninterference in external affairs, it is possible Algiers sees an opportunity to dislodge Wagner's destabilizing presence to its south.

These attempts by Algiers to navigate its post-Ukraine relationship with Moscow have corresponded with a

redoubled effort to craft an assertive and independent foreign policy. With Italy specifically, deepening economic ties have been paired with diplomatic momentum likely aimed at balancing out Algeria's recent friction with Spain over the Western Sahara issue, on which Spain has taken Morocco's side since mid-2022, leading to a [freezing \(https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/10/14/trade-relations-between-spain-and-algeria-at-a-standstill_6000267_124.html\)](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/10/14/trade-relations-between-spain-and-algeria-at-a-standstill_6000267_124.html) of Spanish-Algerian trade. This balancing is especially important given Morocco's normalizing of relations with Israel in 2020, because it [suggests \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/italy-algeria-closer-ties-bring-closer-west\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/italy-algeria-closer-ties-bring-closer-west) Algeria is refusing to let itself be isolated as it maintains its historically strong pro-Palestinian position. Algeria has also managed to restore relations (for now) with France, with which it had a brief falling out in February when a critic of the Algerian leadership who also holds French nationality was received by Paris. The Algerian presidency has even [announced \(https://www.facebook.com/AlgerianPresidency/posts/614295790732152\)](https://www.facebook.com/AlgerianPresidency/posts/614295790732152) that Tebboune plans to visit Paris in the second half of June. If realized, this would mark only the third state-level visit since independence, although this past January saw a rare [meeting \(https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230125-le-chef-d-%C3%A9tat-major-alg%C3%A9rien-sa-%C3%AFd-chengriha-re-%C3%A7u-%C3%A0-paris\)](https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230125-le-chef-d-%C3%A9tat-major-alg%C3%A9rien-sa-%C3%AFd-chengriha-re-%C3%A7u-%C3%A0-paris) in Paris between the two countries' defense chiefs to discuss regional security concerns.

Realigning Defense Priorities?

Algeria's historical reliance on Russia's military support may also turn into a vulnerability as the effects of the Ukraine war hinder Moscow's ability to sell arms and arms-related equipment. Already, the invasion has hampered Russia's arms exports worldwide. A recent [study \(https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/surge-arms-imports-europe-while-us-dominance-global-arms-trade-increases\)](https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/surge-arms-imports-europe-while-us-dominance-global-arms-trade-increases) found Russian arms had decreased by more than 30 percent between the 2013–17 and 2018–22 periods. And Russia's longtime customers have found sourcing parts and components for existing purchases, as well as making new purchases, increasingly difficult. A March report by the Indian Air Force [noted \(https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/24/india/india-russia-arms-delivery-ukraine-war-intl-hnk/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/24/india/india-russia-arms-delivery-ukraine-war-intl-hnk/index.html) that Russia would be unable to complete a "major delivery" of a system to India due to the Ukraine war. Algiers will have to decide whether to double down on its security relationship with Russia and potentially use its status as a legacy customer to negotiate better deals, or start to look elsewhere for its military supplies.

If Algiers were to contemplate looking elsewhere, it would have no shortage of potential suitors given its status as a major arms importer. Beyond Russia, Algeria has—since 2002—[sourced \(https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php\)](https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php) most of its defense equipment from China (about 7%), Germany (about 6%), and Italy (about 3%). China, in particular, would likely be keen to fill the Russian gap. The United States [described \(https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf\)](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf) China in 2019 as the fastest-growing global arms exporter in the previous fifteen years, and the People's Republic has [used \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-security-presence-middle-east-redlines-and-guidelines-united-states\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-security-presence-middle-east-redlines-and-guidelines-united-states) its armed drone sales to Algeria and elsewhere in the region as a foothold to market other, more advanced platforms.

Washington, too, may consider using the prospect of arms sales and security cooperation—particularly on counterterrorism—as a way to lure Algiers out of Moscow's orbit. Such a desire helped propel then secretary of defense Mark Esper's [trip \(https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/01/politics/mark-esper-algeria-visit/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/01/politics/mark-esper-algeria-visit/index.html) to Algiers in 2020—the first from a sitting U.S. defense secretary since 2006—at a time, according to one U.S. defense official, when there was "a chance to maybe push the door open a little bit" on the bilateral defense relationship. Algiers has since received a series of other high-level American officials, including most recently Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs [Bonnie Denise Jenkins \(https://www.emb-argelia.pt/us-](https://www.emb-argelia.pt/us-)

<https://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2022/9/rubio-calls-for-sanctions-on-algerian-purchase-of-russian-weapons>) to impose Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions against Algeria for past purchases of Russian arms, Washington will need to align its messaging if it wants to pitch Algeria on deepening security cooperation, especially as the latter expands deals with European countries such as [Germany](https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-arms-sales-to-algeria-have-increased-dramatically-a-866690.html) (<https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-arms-sales-to-algeria-have-increased-dramatically-a-866690.html>).

Conclusion

The Ukraine war has created a dilemma for Algeria, as it has for many of Russia's other traditional partners. President Tebboune's actions since the invasion show Algeria wants to balance its historically close relationship with Moscow against its long-held aspirations for a more independent foreign policy. The best approach for Washington at this stage is to continue to treat Algiers as a partner in the security realm and create openings for deeper engagement. This could include strengthening investment partnerships with other sectors of Algeria's economy such as agriculture and renewable energy, and continuing to encourage a more stable and friendly Algerian investment climate. Additionally, the United States should engage Algeria in discussions about regional stability, particularly given the latter's concerns over potential economic collapse in neighboring Tunisia and growing instability in the Sahel. Emphasizing a shared vision for a more independent Algeria may be the best way for Washington to actually facilitate such an outcome.

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