

The Russia – Algeria strategic partnership

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Defense and military ties between Algiers and Moscow go back decades, since the Soviet Union and Algeria's armed forces are almost entirely equipped with Soviet – Russian made weapons and military systems.

Algerian Parliamentary Vice Speaker Bouteldja Allel said in November 2022 that Algeria is a “strategic ally” and “friend partner” of Russia and the relations between the two countries have been and will continue to be strategic for many decades.¹

Algeria is one of Russia's most important military allies in Africa and it's also the largest customer of Russian weapons on the continent and among the top three buyers of Russian arms behind China and India.

Algeria's armed forces have to respond to three main challenges:

The hostilities with Morocco.

A quest for regional strategic dominance.

The terrorist threats (mainly from Libya and the Sahel region).

In 2022, Algeria deepened and expanded military cooperation with Russia when it held 3 joint military exercises and is in talks to sign a large-scale arms deal.

Algerian media has reported that a huge contract was being prepared for an amount of more than 11 billion dollars to acquire more weapons from Russia as Algeria allocated a \$23 billion defense budget for the fiscal year of 2023.²

Russia and Algeria have conducted in November 2022 the joint military exercise “Desert Shield 2022” with the participation of about 200 soldiers from Russia and Algeria. It was the first time that soldiers from both countries have trained together on Algerian soil, and it was the third time this year that Russia and Algeria have held joint exercises.³

On November 10,2022, Dmitry Shugayev, the director of Russia's Federal Service of Military and Technical Cooperation, met with Algerian General Saïd Chengriha in Algiers “as part of the execution of the Algerian-Russian bilateral military cooperation program,” according to the Algerian press.⁴

Algeria abstained twice this year from voting on UN resolutions condemning the war in Ukraine and refused to criticize Russia's annexation of parts of Ukrainian territory. In turn, Russia opted for a neutral stance regarding the dispute over Western Sahara.

Algeria's growing ties with Russia has alarmed Western governments at a time of a global energy crisis sparked by Russia's war on Ukraine and escalation in the relations between Algeria and Morocco. The inflow of Algerian Petro-dollars into Russia will fuel Putin's invasion and aggression against Ukraine and its western allies.

The Ukraine war has in some ways served Algeria's interests. Europe's post-February 24, 2022, energy dilemmas have increased Algeria's strategic importance to the West.⁵

Algeria has lately played a major role in supplying gas to Europe to offset the energy crisis that has been exacerbated by Russia's war in Ukraine, while in the same time forging closer ties with Moscow.⁶

Algeria – Russia joint military exercises

Exercise “Vostok-2022”- in 1 – 7 September 2022, around 100 Algerian soldiers took part in the Command and General Staff strategic military exercises “Vostok-2022,” which were held in Russia.⁷

The Russian strategic exercise Vostok 2022 brought under one roof troops, operational forces and observers from many countries, including Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan,

Belarus, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Laos, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Syria and Tajikistan.⁸

The series "Desert Shield" exercises

The first joint Russian-Algerian tactical exercise was held in October 2021 at the Tarskoye training ground in North Ossetia. Some 200 Russian and Algerian soldiers took part in the exercise, which involved around 40 pieces of military and special equipment.⁹

Exercise Desert Shield 2022 - the Algerian and Russian armed forces conducted in November 2022 a joint military exercise at the Hammaguir testing ground in Bechar Province near the border with Morocco.¹⁰ Desert shield 2022 exercise is the first on Algerian soil between the armies of the two countries.

Algerian defense news outlet MENA Defense confirmed that the place where the exercise took place "has a symbolic significance, being the site where French forces developed ballistic weapons and conducted space experiments before Algeria regained in 1967, five years following Algeria's independence".¹¹

The objectives and outlines of the drills were discussed during a March 25, 2022, visit to Algeria by Director of Russia's Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation Army Gen. Dmitry Shugaev.¹²

The second – final planning conference to prepare for the joint Russian-Algerian exercise was held in Beshar

province. The representatives of the Southern Military District (SMD) and the Algerian People's National Army approved the timing, concept and scenario of the exercise, the composition of forces and equipment, and defined the theme, objectives, tasks and phases of the joint exercise. They also agreed on the logistical support, including accommodation and catering for the troops.¹³

The media office of the "Russian Southern Military District" had earlier stated that the maneuvers "are tactical and aimed at searching for, detecting and destroying illegal armed groups," noting that they are the first on Algerian soil between the armies of the two countries.¹⁴

The exercise involved about 200 soldiers from both countries' counterterrorism forces. During the exercise, the forces practiced search, detection and elimination of terrorist groups in the desert setting.¹⁵

The exercise considered the largest since Algiers and Moscow established military cooperation during the Soviet Union.

Although both Russia and Algeria confirmed the holding of the joint exercise, on December 1, 2022 the Algerian Ministry of Defense announced that no joint exercise between the armies of Algeria and Russia took place.¹⁶

It seems that the Algerian denial comes against the backdrop of demands from members of Congress in the US

and members of the European Parliament to impose sanctions on Algeria due to the joint exercise with Russia.

Since the announcement came after the planned date of the end of the joint exercise, it is definitely possible that it was carried out as planned and the announcement came after the exercise had already ended and the Russian force had left Algeria.

The joint naval exercises

The Algerian Defense Ministry said on October 22, 2022 that a Russian fleet, consisting of Stoiky 545 and Soobrazitelny 531 docked in the waters of Algeria for four days, and carried out the 2022 joint naval exercises with the participation of Algerian naval forces. “The exercises aim to exchange experiences between the Algerian naval forces and their Russian counterparts, as well as to develop operational capabilities and joint interaction in the areas of maritime security,” according to the Algerian statement.¹⁷

The exercises that took place in the Mediterranean were part of a long series of joint military exercises launched since 2017 between Algiers and Moscow.¹⁸

Other joint naval exercises in 2022:¹⁹

In July 2022, the Black Sea Fleet reconnaissance ship Kildin and the small sea tanker Vice-Admiral Paromov entered the port of Algiers on a three-day visit.

In September 2022, a Russian minesweeper docked at the Algerian port of Jijel to take part in joint exercises with the Algerian navy.

Algeria – Russia arms deals

Since its independence in 1962, Algeria has turned to the Soviet Union, and later to Russia, as its main weapons supplier and Algeria acquires Russian weapons on a regular basis and in large quantities.

President Vladimir Putin took a strategic long view of Russia's weapons sale relationship with Algeria. In 2006, President Putin cancelled Algeria's \$4.7 billion Soviet-era military debt in exchange for a promise to purchase \$7.5 billion in new Russian weapons in the future. When Algeria's oil and natural gas revenues rose.²⁰ As a result, Algeria's arsenals are full of relatively proven, less expensive and tried Russian weapons.

Since 2013 Algeria has bought a significant amount of military equipment from Russia including:

Air force – Algeria has a fleet of aging Su-30, MiG-29, Su-24 and MiG-25 fighter jets. In November 2020, Algeria bought 14 Su-57 fighters from Moscow worth \$2 billion, with expected deliveries by 2025.

Air defense - 38 Pantsir-S1 air defense missile/cannon systems and 100 SA-17 Buk-M2 air defense missile systems installed on tracked vehicles.²¹

Ballistic missiles - Algeria received 4 regiments of Iskander E systems from 2014 to 2017. A missile regiment consists of about fifty vehicles and 48 missiles: 12 launchers, 12 missile carriers and loaders, 11 vehicles of command and personnel, and other vehicles.²²

Armor – Algeria received 203 T-90SA main battle tanks and ordered 300 BMPT-72 armored fire support vehicles.²³

Algeria acquiring 300 BMPT-72 armored fire support vehicles, Israel defense, March 21, 2021.

As one of the biggest global customers of Russian weaponry, it's likely that Algeria may eventually acquire Russia's top- technology that Moscow seeks to export.

Algeria is considering signing a new 10-year-long arms deal with Russia worth US\$17 billion for the purchase of Su-57 stealth fighters, but it's also likely that Algeria may start importing Su - 75, once it goes into production. Algeria will purchase also advanced air-defense systems including the S-400 and submarines.²⁴

The 10-year contract may be finalized during a visit to Moscow in December 2022 by Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune.²⁵

In the last decade, Algeria began to diversify its sources of purchasing weapons, with China becoming the second most important source after Russia in the sale of weapons to Algeria

Since the 2010s, China has provided a large amount of land military equipment to Algeria including PLZ-45 155mm self-propelled howitzers, 120mm Chinese self-propelled mortars, SR-5 MLRS Multiple Launch Rocket Systems as well as APC (Armored Personnel Carrier) vehicles Type-07 and WZ-502G.²⁶

Beijing has also supplied five CH-3s and five CH-4s drones and five CH-5 reconnaissance and strike drones.

In 2020, Algeria bought Red Arrow-12 anti-tank systems, also known as the HJ-12, from China.

In 2022 an Algerian delegation approached China's North Industries Group Corporation Limited (Norinco) for the procurement of the SY-400 short-range ballistic missile launcher (SRBM) during the Zhuhai Air Show. The SY-400 also called DF-12A is a mobile ballistic missile system designed and manufactured by the Chinese defense industry. It was unveiled in 2008.²⁷

Morocco – west arm deals²⁸

Morocco has in recent years bought heavily from the US defense industry. Rabat went under contract for 25 F-16C/D Block 72 aircraft in February 2019, and the Royal Moroccan Air Force is expecting the delivery of the new aircraft to start 2025.

Adding to this Morocco signed a contract with Boeing in June 2020, for 24 of its AH-64 Apache helicopters, with deliveries to commence by 2024.

Morocco has two large combat aircraft contracts for F-16 Block 72 and Apache helicopters to be received by 2025.

For Morocco, the infamously long approval times by the US for defense sales, and the associated political conditions Washington puts on its weapons, means they may look to other options.

“There is a wider trend among Arab states in the MENA region to seek strategically significant weapons systems when the US is less forthcoming. Besides Germany, France, and Italy, Turkey and Israel have emerged as key suppliers of cutting-edge weapons technology.

Algeria is currently showing interest in local serial production of the L-39NG trainer, produced by Czech Republic firm Aero Vodochody. The L-39 platform is originally the trainer for eastern fighters, and 30 L-39 trainers are still currently operational with the Algerian air force.

However, with Algeria being such a prominent user of the L-39 platform in the past, we naturally do see a very big potential for the L-39NG. Should the interest and the volume be significant enough, Aero is experienced and will offer partial transfer of workshare to a local industrial entity. Everything depends on the customer’s requirements and the capability of local industry, which we believe to be high,” Filip Gunnar Kulštrunk, vice president of sales and marketing at Aero Vodochody, told.

Breaking Defense

With a budget of \$9.45 billion for the current fiscal year, Algeria is Africa's largest defense market and is the world's sixth-largest arms importer.

Algeria has increased its 2023 defense budget to 23 billion dollars including 17 billion dollars that are planned as part of Russian arms procurement.

Russia has unrivaled access to Algeria's defense market and supplies nearly 75 percent of its existing equipment and analysts expect Russia to continue filling the lion share of Algerian demand.

The Algerian army has a human force of approximately 465,000 soldiers and is one of the biggest armies of Africa. Military modernization drives Algeria's demand for new defense systems.

Russia enjoys preferential status as the result of a long-lasting competition with Algeria's Western-supplied neighboring rival, Morocco.

The risks in arms deals with Russia

Algeria and other nations' reliance on Russian armaments is now putting their defense systems at risk:

Many analysts predict that Russia's traditional clients may face supply shortages due to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, with Russia quickly depleting its own military arsenal and

domestic manufacturers under serious pressure to meet the demands of their own army.

Besides logistical difficulties and supply shortages, Russia's buyers will also find it extremely difficult to conduct any kind of business transactions, especially with the Russian defense sector.

Moreover, the introduction of heavy controls aimed to block Russia from acquiring semiconductors, aircraft components, and other advanced technologies crucial for Russia's defense industry may hamper its production efforts and consequently affect the potential for further exports.²⁹

Russia's defense industries are already scrambling to replenish its own weapons stocks, depleted by the war in Ukraine.

The country's access to advanced components used in its weapons systems is restricted due to sanctions.

That means they may be unable to fulfill orders in the pipeline.

Algeria is predominantly reliant on Russia for their military assets. These have to be maintained and fixed or replaced if something goes wrong and it needs spares for them. But export controls restrict the availability of parts.

Russia's suspension from global finance systems also makes it difficult for Algeria to receive and pay for such services from Moscow.

The inflow of Algerian petro-dollar into Russia will only fuel Putin's invasion and aggression on the Ukrainian people, the MEPs said in the letter.

The western policy

European parliament urged to review deal with pro-Russia Algeria, North Africa post, November 17, 2022.

A group of 17 MEPs called on European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen to re-open the European Union's association agreement with Algiers in a letter which expresses 'deep concern' at Algeria's close political and economic ties to Russia.

Algeria's regime is "among the top four buyers of Russian arms worldwide, culminating with a more than €7 billion arms deal in 2021," the MEPs warned.

The letter also criticized Algeria's decision to abstain on a United Nations resolution censuring Russia's attempts to annex Ukrainian regions, a move the MEPs described as "astonishing taking into account that Algeria has always tried to abide by international law and it respects nations' sovereignty."

"However, it seems that is all about Algerian double standards," said the letter.

Algeria abstained twice this year from voting on UN resolutions condemning the war in Ukraine and refused to criticize Russia's annexation of parts of Ukrainian territory.

In turn, Russia opted for a neutral stance regarding the dispute over Western Sahara.

In September, a letter, signed by 27 Democrats and Republicans, called on the Biden administration to use the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) to sanction Algeria's purchase of Russian arms.

CAATSA allows the US government to impose sanctions on those who are engaged in "a significant transaction with a person that is part of, or operates for or on behalf of, the defense or intelligence sectors of the Government of the Russian Federation."

"This recent Algeria-Russia arms purchase would clearly be categorized as 'a significant transaction' under CAATSA. Yet, no sanctions available to you have been crafted by the State Department," said the letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

"The United States needs to send a clear message to the world that the support for Vladimir Putin, and his regime's barbaric war efforts will not be tolerated," said the letter

"Therefore, we request you begin to immediately implement significant sanctions on those in the Algerian government who were involved in the purchase of Russian arms," it added.³⁰

The response of the "West"

Algeria's growing ties with Russia has alarmed Western governments amid efforts to isolate and sanction Moscow over its war in Ukraine.

In October 2022, a group of bipartisan US lawmakers sent a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken calling for sanctions against officials in the Algerian government over arms deal with Moscow reportedly worth over \$7 billion.

"This recent Algeria-Russia arms purchase would clearly be categorized as 'a significant transaction' under CAATSA [Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act]. Yet, no sanctions available to you have been crafted by the State Department," the letter, which was signed by 27 members of Congress, stated.³¹

Once announced, exercise "Desert Shield" has prompted several condemnations from (MEP). A group of 17 Members of the European Parliament (MEP) called on European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen to re-open the European Union's association agreement with Algiers in a letter which expresses 'deep concern' at Algeria's close political and economic ties to Russia.³²

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Algeria and the European energy crisis³⁵

Algerian natural gas exports to Italy have risen 20 percent this year. Earlier this month, the Italian energy giant ENI stated that it expects a doubling of Italian imports of Algerian gas by 2024 and a 50 percent increase in Algeria's gas exports to France is possible.

Slovenia too has turned to Algeria for help staying warm this winter. Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon and Infrastructure Minister Bojan Kumer went to Algeria earlier this month to secure a deal between Sonatrach (Algeria's national state-owned oil company) and Geoplin (Slovenia's largest distributor of natural gas) whereby Algeria will cover one third of the Central European country's gas needs for the upcoming three years beginning on January 1, 2023.

The Algeria – Morocco conflicts

The Moroccan-Algerian border has now become a new hotspot of geo-strategic competition between the West and Russia.

Tensions between Morocco and Algeria have escalated in recent years thanks to a dispute over the Western Sahara, which Morocco claims to be its own territory, while Algeria backs the Polisario Front rebel group. As a result, both nations have begun investing heavily in their militaries.

Tensions between the two countries have simmered for years, but intensified in December 2020 after Morocco normalized ties with Israel and the US recognized the kingdom's sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

In August 2021, Algeria cut diplomatic relations with Morocco.

after what it called “hostile actions by its most populous neighbor with which it has had strained relations for decades.” Algerian Foreign Minister Ramdane Lamamra accused Morocco of using Pegasus spyware against its officials, supporting a separatist group and failing in bilateral commitments, including on the Western Sahara issue.

In the last few months, the verbal attacks between the two countries have increased. In January 2020, Morocco's King Mohammed VI declared the creation of a new “eastern

military zone” along its border with Algeria, a move described in media reports as “a statement of intent meant to indicate Morocco’s readiness to confront any military provocations from its eastern neighbor.”

And just weeks ago, Algeria suspended a two-decade old cooperation treaty with Spain, after Madrid backed the position of Morocco on the disputed Western Sahara.

Given the regional geography where both countries are located — large territory, long distances — air force capabilities are crucial for monitoring, ISR and combat.

It appears that both countries seek to bolster their military capabilities with new technologies, with high priority of air force and air defense.

Morocco is an ally of the US and the EU countries and normalized relation with Israel. The North African kingdom, has earlier this year held joint “African Lion” military drills with the US army on its soil close to the Algerian border.

The anti-terrorism exercise “Desert Shield 2022”, took place from November 16 to 28, 2022, for the first time in Algeria in the southwestern region of Béchar, about fifty kilometers from the Moroccan border.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova had asserted that the exercise is not directed against third parties and was e planned beforehand, in implicit reference to Morocco and its tense relations with Algeria with which ties have been severed since the summer of 2021. ³⁶ But

Russia's joint military exercise with Algeria just 50 km from Morocco's border is a kind of indirect message that Russia will support Algeria in case of military conflict between Morocco and Algeria.

Algeria abstained twice this year from voting on UN resolutions condemning the war in Ukraine and refused to criticize Russia's annexation of parts of Ukrainian territory. In turn, Russia opted for a neutral stance regarding the dispute over Western Sahara.

The Western Sahara issue is always central to Algerian foreign policy decision-making. Algiers views growing Western support for Morocco on this front as problematic and reason to safeguard strong relations with Russia.³⁷

Algiers believes it must continue buying Russian arms while feeling increasingly threatened by the situation in Western Sahara and Moroccan-Israeli normalization.

The conflict in Ukraine has raised questions about the quality of Russian military equipment and the war in Ukraine is damaging the reputation of Russian weapons.³⁸

Algeria is becoming the world's largest importer of Russian arms. According to the Algerian press, a huge contract valued at over \$11 billion is being prepared.

Summary

Algeria's growing ties with Russia has alarmed Western governments at a time of a global energy crisis sparked by Russia's war on Ukraine and escalation in the relations between Algeria and Morocco.³⁹

Despite the "cancellation" of the military exercise "Desert Shield," Algerian-Russian military partnership is far from over.

Algerian Parliamentary Vice Speaker Bouteldja Allel said that the "Desert Shields" exercises confirm the depth of the strategic partnership between Moscow and Algeria.

He stated that the annually held military exercises are a great chance for both countries to adopt the latest methods of each other's work.

Large-scale war between Morocco and Algeria is highly unlikely, but the probability is high for border skirmishes between the two countries.⁴⁰

Notes

¹ Algeria, Russia Kick Off Military Exercises Near Border with Morocco, Asharq Al-Awsat, November 17, 2022.

² West 'deeply concerned' about joint Russia-Algeria military exercises, Middle East Online, November 11, 2022.

³ Russia pushes military diplomacy in Africa amid Ukraine war, The Telegraph online, November 21, 2022.

⁴ West 'deeply concerned' about joint Russia-Algeria military exercises, Middle East Online, November 11, 2022.

⁵ How long can Algeria's neutrality in the Ukraine war last? The new Arab, November 30, 2022.

⁶ West 'deeply concerned' about joint Russia-Algeria military exercises, Middle East Online, November 11, 2022.

⁷ Algeria, Russia Hold Naval Exercises Ahead of 'Desert Shield 2022', Asharq Al Awsat, October 23, 2022.

⁸ Hana Saada, Algeria to host Anti-Terror Military Drills "Desert Shield 2022" with Russia for first time, DZ breaking, September 2, 2022.

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¹⁰ Algeria, Russia Kick Off Military Exercises Near Border with Morocco, Asharq Al-Awsat, November 17, 2022.

¹¹ Algeria, Russia Hold Naval Exercises Ahead of 'Desert Shield 2022', Asharq Al Awsat, October 23, 2022.

¹² Algeria, Russia Hold Naval Exercises Ahead of 'Desert Shield 2022', Asharq Al Awsat, October 23, 2022.

¹³ Hana Saada, Algeria to host Anti-Terror Military Drills "Desert Shield 2022" with Russia for first time, DZ breaking, September 2, 2022.

¹⁴ Algeria, Russia Kick Off Military Exercises Near Border with Morocco, Asharq Al-Awsat, November 17, 2022.

¹⁵ Algeria, Russia Kick Off First Military Drills on Algerian Soil, Sputnik, November 15, 2022.

¹⁶ Algeria cancels upcoming military exercise with Russia due to threat of Western sanctions, The new Arab, December 1, 2022.

¹⁷ Algeria, Russia holds naval exercises ahead of 'Desert Shield 2022', Asharq Al Awsat, October 23, 2022.

¹⁸ Algeria, Russia Hold Naval Exercises Ahead of 'Desert Shield 2022', Asharq Al Awsat, October 23, 2022.

¹⁹ Algeria, Russia held joint naval drill in Med Sea ahead of 'Desert Shield 2022', Middle East Monitor, October 24, 2022.

²⁰ In North Africa, a fighter jet arms race, with Russia and the US on either side, Break Defense, July 5, 2022.

²¹ Algeria acquiring 300 BMPT-72 armored fire support vehicles, Israel defense, March 21, 2021.

²² Algeria continues military buildup with new Chinese SY-400 ballistic missile acquisition, Military Africa, November 30, 2022.

²³ Algeria acquiring 300 BMPT-72 armored fire support vehicles, Israel defense, March 21, 2021.

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²⁹ How the Ukraine war is impacting Russia's arms sales to the Middle East, The new Arab, October 31, 2022.

³⁰ West 'deeply concerned' about joint Russia-Algeria military exercises, Middle East Online, November 11, 2022.

³¹ Algeria, Russia held joint naval drill in Med Sea ahead of 'Desert Shield 2022', Middle East Monitor, October 24, 2022.

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³⁴ Algeria cancels upcoming military exercise with Russia due to threat of Western sanctions, The new Arab, December 1, 2022.

³⁵ How long can Algeria's neutrality in the Ukraine war last? The new Arab, November 30, 2022.

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³⁹ European parliament urged to review deal with pro-Russia Algeria, North Africa post, November 17, 2022.

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