

The Debate Between Principles and Interests in the Context of International and Regional Transformations: Algerian Foreign Policy After 2020

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Introduction

Algerian foreign policy has undergone significant transformations since 2020, reflected in the redefinition of diplomatic priorities, the expansion of its international relations, and its engagement in new spheres of influence. These transformations emerged within a domestic context characterized by political stability following the election of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune in December 2019, as well as rapid regional and international developments that compelled Algeria to undertake a strategic repositioning.

The debate between enduring principles and national interests represents the primary driving force behind these transformations. Algeria seeks to reconcile its commitment to an independent foreign policy and its support for just causes on the one hand, with the requirements of engaging with a changing international environment on the other. This article aims to analyze the trajectories of Algerian foreign policy in light of this ongoing debate and to explore the various dimensions of Algeria's use of its geographical position and political and economic weight to restore its regional and international role.

The study addresses the following central questions: What historical and structural determinants have influenced the direction of Algerian foreign policy? How has this policy adapted to successive regional and international transformations? And what are the most prominent new characteristics distinguishing the current changes in Algeria's diplomatic approach?

Algerian Foreign Policy in Light of International Transformations

The study of Algerian foreign policy requires a theoretical framework that facilitates an understanding of the complex dynamics governing its formulation and implementation. One useful approach is the interaction between domestic and external factors, which holds that a state's foreign policy is not merely a response to external challenges but also a reflection of internal balances and the political project of the ruling elites (1).

In the same context, **Strategic Balance Theory** provides a valuable framework for understanding state behavior within a multipolar international system. As analysts argue, Algeria seeks to preserve the independence of its strategic decision-making by diversifying its international partnerships and avoiding exclusive alignment with any single bloc. This orientation is reflected in the policy of positive neutrality that Algeria has pursued since the Cold War period and which, in one form or another, has continued amid successive international transformations.

Likewise, **Regional Security Theory** offers a framework for understanding interactions among states within their immediate geographical environment. Algeria's foreign policy cannot be separated from its Maghreb and African regional contexts, where it faces shared security challenges as well as regional competition over influence and resources (2). Recent developments in the region, particularly the implications of the Western Sahara issue and the Algerian-Moroccan crisis, have significantly reshaped the priorities of Algerian foreign policy at the regional level.

Principles and Interests in Foreign Policy: The Enduring Debate

The debate between principles and interests constitutes one of the oldest dilemmas in international relations theory. It is manifested in the tension between ideological and utilitarian orientations in foreign policy. This debate evolved alongside the development of the realist school, which views national interests as the foundation of foreign policy, in contrast to the liberal school, which places greater emphasis on international values and norms.

In the Algerian context, this debate assumes particular significance. The principles guiding foreign policy are closely linked to the traditions of Algerian diplomacy, which are rooted in the country's liberation struggle and anti-colonial experience. Consequently, independence and non-alignment have become constitutional constants deeply embedded in the collective memory. Nevertheless, adherence to these principles does not eliminate the necessity of serving economic and developmental interests, especially in light of declining oil prices and the challenges of economic transition.

Several analysts have argued that Algeria seeks to adopt a form of "pragmatic principle," combining adherence to core values with tactical flexibility, without compromising red lines related to sovereignty and territorial integrity (3).

The 2020 Constitution and Its Impact on Foreign Policy Orientation

The new Constitution, approved through the November 2020 referendum, established a renewed reference framework for Algerian foreign policy. It reformulated several principles governing external relations, stipulating that Algeria “defends the right of all oppressed peoples to self-determination,” “supports all liberation movements throughout the world,” and “opposes racial discrimination in all its forms.” (4)

The Constitution also incorporated provisions that reinforce the principles of non-alignment and preventive diplomacy, thereby expanding the range of instruments available to Algerian diplomacy. Some observers have noted that these constitutional amendments provided significant momentum to **security diplomacy**, which has become a central pillar of Algeria’s foreign policy orientation.

Furthermore, the constitutional provision concerning the fight against terrorism and the proliferation of weapons has been employed as a justification for strengthening security cooperation with a variety of international partners (5). This development illustrates the continuing tension between the principled dimension and the pragmatic dimension of Algerian foreign policy.

Returning to the International Stage: Strategies of Diplomatic Outreach

The period from 2020 to 2024 witnessed a broad diplomatic resurgence by Algeria. Available figures confirm both quantitative and qualitative transformations in Algerian foreign policy. The budget allocated to Algerian diplomacy increased from approximately \$850 million in 2019 to \$1.2 billion in 2023, representing an increase of about 41%. This expansion was reflected in the activation of new diplomatic missions and the strengthening of relations with emerging powers (6).

New embassies were opened in several African and Asian countries, demonstrating a strategic shift toward diversifying partnerships beyond the traditional framework centered on France and the European Union. By 2024, the Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported the opening of more than 15 new embassies since 2020, with a particular focus on Asian and African states (7). The number of diplomatic missions increased from 96 embassies in 2020 to 112 in 2024.

In the field of trade cooperation, Algeria hosted commercial delegations from more than 70 countries between 2020 and 2023 (8). Furthermore, the country received approximately 35 visits by foreign ministers since the beginning of 2024, reflecting growing diplomatic dynamism. Algerian officials have described these initiatives as an “active and proactive diplomacy” aimed at “protecting the supreme interests of the nation,” according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This diplomatic return is characterized by a new geographical balance, with Russia, China, and countries of the Global South gaining prominence at the expense of the Western-oriented approach that had dominated Algerian diplomacy for decades.

Relations with the European Union and the Mediterranean Region

Algeria continues to maintain its position as a strategic partner of the European Union, particularly in the energy sector. In 2022, Algeria signed new agreements with the European Commission to strengthen cooperation in renewable energy and green hydrogen. European investments in Algeria reached approximately **\$11 billion** during the period 2020–2023, accounting for nearly **35% of total foreign direct investment**.

Within the Mediterranean framework, Algeria actively participates in the Union for the Mediterranean and has committed €6 million to the PRIMA (Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area) program for the period 2025–2027 (9).

Nevertheless, the relationship is not free from tensions, particularly regarding the issue of Schengen visas faced by Algerian citizens and the recurring human rights concerns raised by the European side. Algeria has repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with what it describes as European “double standards” in addressing human rights issues, reflecting the persistent tension between principles and interests in these relations.

Relations with Neighboring Countries

Algerian-Moroccan relations represent one of the clearest examples of the tension between principles and interests in Algerian foreign policy. Algeria severed diplomatic relations with Morocco in August 2021, accusing the latter of engaging in “hostile acts” and “plotting against Algeria’s security,” particularly following Morocco’s alliance with Israel.

Since then, tensions have intensified. In March 2023, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune stated that relations had reached a “point of no return” due to what he described as “continuous Moroccan provocations.” In the context of this dispute, Algeria closed its airspace to Moroccan aircraft in September 2021, a decision that some observers viewed as reflecting strategic interests behind an ostensibly principled position (10).

Trade between the two countries declined sharply. Algerian exports to Morocco amounted to approximately \$64.2 million in 2023, down from previous levels that had exceeded \$166 million. Joint projects were frozen, and coordination on several regional issues came to a halt (11).

This crisis constitutes a clear example of the intersection between narrow economic interests and profound political disagreements, particularly concerning the Western Sahara issue and border-related disputes.

Transformations in the Sahel Region and Emerging Dynamics

The Sahel region has undergone dramatic transformations since 2020, directly affecting Algerian foreign policy. A series of military coups overthrew legitimate governments in Mali (2020 and 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). These developments were followed by the withdrawal of French forces and the arrival of Russian-linked paramilitary groups, most notably the Wagner Group.

Algeria found itself confronted with an unprecedented regional challenge, as it became increasingly concerned about the expansion of these groups' influence near its southern borders. Algeria's decision to raise the issue of Wagner's presence close to its southern frontier during sessions of the United Nations Security Council attracted attention from observers, some of whom viewed it as a form of diplomatic escalation (12).

At the same time, Algeria sought to re-engage with Sahel countries, particularly Niger and Burkina Faso, after a period of strained relations. Both countries expressed openness to improving ties with Algeria, whereas Mali has remained more cautious in its approach (13).

Algeria's strategy toward the Sahel exemplifies the tension between security principles—such as combating terrorism and preserving stability—and geopolitical interests, including maintaining regional influence and preventing foreign encroachment.

The Eastward Orientation: Partnership with Russia and China

The shift toward the Eastern pole has become a prominent feature of Algerian foreign policy since 2020. Algeria has signed strategic cooperation agreements with Russia covering defense, energy, and technology. According to media reports, Russian arms exports to Algeria tripled between 2018 and 2023, reaching an estimated value of \$3.2 billion, making Algeria the largest purchaser of Russian weapons in Africa (14).

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune visited Moscow twice during 2023, reflecting the deepening of the strategic partnership between the two countries.

Similarly, Algeria has expanded its cooperation with China to include infrastructure projects and digital energy initiatives. Trade between Algeria and China reached approximately \$8.5 billion in 2022, making China Algeria's leading trading partner (15).

This eastward orientation is driven by two additional factors. First, Algeria seeks to diversify its sources of military equipment and technology beyond Western suppliers. Second, it finds a degree of ideological compatibility with Russia and China regarding the principle of strategic autonomy and the pursuit of an independent foreign policy.

Algeria's Role in International Organizations

Algeria has maintained an active presence in international organizations, particularly the United Nations, the African Union, and the League of Arab States. Algeria was elected to the United

Nations Human Rights Council for the 2023–2025 term, despite criticisms that some actors have sought to direct toward its human rights record. It was also elected to chair the Committee on the Enhancement of Cooperation and Assistance under the Convention on the Prohibition of Anti-Personnel Mines for 2024 (16).

International observers have praised Algeria's "strong commitment" to multilateral diplomacy, which has enabled it to avoid becoming drawn into exclusive alliances. In 2023 alone, Algeria participated in more than 250 international meetings and gatherings.

In the field of foreign investment, Algeria attracted an estimated \$2.3 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2023, representing growth of approximately 18% compared to the previous year. The sources of these investments have become increasingly diversified, including a growing share from Eastern countries.

Statistics from the Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicate that Algeria signed 45 new bilateral cooperation agreements between 2020 and 2024. These agreements were geographically balanced across Eastern and Western partners, Africa, and the Arab world.

Algeria has also played a mediating role in several regional conflicts, including the crisis in Libya, where it hosted rounds of dialogue, and the crisis in Mali, where it proposed mediation initiatives. However, this role raises questions regarding the extent to which it aligns with Algeria's national interests, particularly in the Libyan case, where security and energy interests intersect.

Between Principle and Interest: A Critical Assessment

Algerian foreign policy after 2020 can be evaluated through several criteria.

In terms of strengthening strategic autonomy, Algeria has achieved relative success in diversifying its partnerships and reducing its dependence on Western countries, particularly in the fields of defense procurement and technology. Nevertheless, this orientation has generated tensions with traditional Western partners, tensions that could prove costly in the medium term.

Regarding the promotion of economic interests, the results of Algerian diplomacy remain mixed. Diplomatic visits and international delegations have not yet translated into the high-quality investments necessary to support the economic diversification that Algeria seeks.

At the regional level, Algeria has regained part of its influence, especially concerning the Libyan file and the Southern Mediterranean region. However, its relations within North Africa remain strained, limiting its capacity to exercise regional leadership.

Many analysts agree that Algeria faces the challenge of maintaining its ability to negotiate and adapt its principles without compromising their essence—serving immediate national interests while preserving long-term strategic constants.

Conclusion

Algerian foreign policy since 2020 represents a case of complexity and continuous evolution, in which the debate between principles and interests is particularly pronounced. Algeria has succeeded in restoring a stronger international presence, diversifying its strategic partnerships, and moving from a relatively marginalized position to that of an influential actor in regional and international affairs.

At the same time, this orientation has generated significant challenges, particularly in relations with Morocco and Western countries, as well as in managing the Sahel and Western Sahara issues.

The future of Algerian foreign policy will depend on the ability of decision-makers to strike a careful balance between enduring principles and the demands of national interest, within an international environment characterized by rapid transformations that continuously require the reassessment of strategic choices and alliances.

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