


Algerian-Italian Relations: From Economic Cooperation to the Prospect of Strategic Partnership

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Abstract :

This article examines the evolving relationship between Algeria and Italy, asking whether their deepening economic cooperation—particularly in energy, trade, and regional diplomacy—can serve as a foundation for a formal strategic partnership.

Drawing on a qualitative case study approach, the analysis identifies the key political, economic, and geopolitical drivers shaping bilateral ties. It explores shared interests in energy security, Mediterranean stability, and migration management, while also assessing structural and institutional challenges that hinder deeper integration.

The findings suggest that while energy interdependence has created significant momentum, the transformation into a strategic partnership remains constrained by asymmetries in foreign policy orientation, limited high-level coordination, and the influence of external actors such as the European Union and global energy markets.

By analyzing the conditions for strategic alignment, this study contributes to understanding Algeria's growing role in Southern Mediterranean affairs and offers policy-relevant insights for strengthening bilateral cooperation beyond transactional dynamics. The analysis confirms that energy interdependence and regional geopolitics are decisive drivers, while political will is present but inconsistently institutionalized and structural challenges remain the most significant barrier to a formal strategic partnership.

Keywords: *Algerian-Italian relations, Strategic partnership, Economic cooperation, Mediterranean diplomacy, foreign policy drivers.*

Jel Classification Codes: F15 – F14 – F51 – O53 – O55.

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1. Introduction.

The relationship between Algeria and Italy has evolved significantly over the past two decades, shaped by deepening energy interdependence, shared regional challenges, and shifting geopolitical dynamics in the Mediterranean. As Italy seeks to diversify its energy supplies and enhance stability in North Africa, and as Algeria aims to strengthen its diplomatic and economic partnerships beyond traditional powers, there is growing momentum toward a more structured and forward-looking bilateral framework. This raises a critical question: could the current economic partnership between Algeria and Italy serve as the foundation for a formal strategic partnership?

This article examines the key drivers shaping the evolution of Algerian-Italian relations, assessing the extent to which political, economic, and geopolitical factors support such a transformation. It argues that while energy cooperation provides a strong basis for deeper ties, the realization of a strategic partnership will depend on greater political will, institutional coordination, and alignment in regional outlook — conditions that remain unevenly met. While bilateral energy cooperation between Algeria and Italy is well-documented, few studies have examined the institutional and geopolitical conditions required for this cooperation to evolve into a formal strategic partnership. This study addresses this gap by situating Algerian–Italian relations within broader debates on EU–Mediterranean energy diplomacy and asymmetrical strategic partnerships.

To explore this, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach, drawing on official documents, bilateral agreements, policy statements, and academic and media sources. The analysis is structured around four central dimensions: (1) the historical evolution of economic cooperation, particularly in hydrocarbons; (2) contemporary political and diplomatic dynamics; (3) the influence of regional geopolitics and external actors; and (4) the structural and institutional challenges to deeper integration.

1.1. Research Main Question:

The central research question is: *What are the key drivers shaping the evolution of Algerian-Italian relations and to what extent could they support the establishment of a strategic partnership?*

1.2. Research Sub-Questions:

The research main question is supported by four sub-questions:

1. What have been the historical milestones of economic cooperation?
2. Which political and diplomatic factors currently shape the relationship?
3. How do regional dynamics and external actors affect the prospects for strategic alignment?
4. What structural opportunities and constraints exist in moving beyond economic interdependence?

1.3. Research Hypotheses:

The study advances four testable hypotheses:

- **H1)** Economic cooperation forms a strong basis for evolving toward a strategic partnership;
- **H2)** Political will is essential to deepen ties beyond economics;
- **H3)** Regional geopolitics significantly influence the bilateral relationship;
- **H4)** Structural and institutional challenges hinder the formalization of a strategic partnership.

1.4. Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the evolution of Algerian-Italian relations from the early 2000s to the present, with particular emphasis on energy cooperation, trade dynamics, and regional diplomacy — notably joint efforts related to migration management, counterterrorism, and Mediterranean stability.

Due to limited availability of official documentation on high-level negotiations, the analysis relies exclusively on publicly accessible sources. These include official communiqués, think-tank reports, and reputable media outlets. The events and agreements examined were selected based on their political salience, formal status, and corroboration across multiple credible sources. While the lack of access to confidential records imposes certain constraints, the use of open sources ensures both transparency and replicability.

1.5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the evolution and current dynamics of Algerian-Italian relations. It relies on document analysis of publicly available sources, including official communiqués, bilateral agreements, policy statements, academic publications, and reputable media reports.

The case study method allows for an in-depth exploration of the economic, political, and diplomatic dimensions of bilateral cooperation, particularly in the areas of energy, trade, migration, and regional security. Selection of materials was based on their relevance, credibility, and triangulation across multiple sources to ensure accuracy and reduce bias.

The article is organized as follows:

- **Section 1** provides a historical overview of Algerian-Italian relations, highlighting key milestones in economic cooperation.
- **Section 2** analyzes the main drivers of the current relationship.
- **Section 3** discusses principal challenges to deeper integration.
- **Section 4** offers a prospective evaluation of the conditions under which a strategic partnership could emerge, concluding with policy implications for both countries and the broader Mediterranean region.

2. Historical Evolution of Algerian-Italian Relations: From Energy Ties to Deepening Interdependence

The bilateral relationship between Algeria and Italy has evolved over six decades, shaped by a combination of geographic proximity, energy interdependence, and shifting geopolitical alignments. While diplomatic ties were formally established shortly after Algeria's independence in 1962, it was not until the 1980s that the relationship began to acquire a structured economic dimension, particularly in the energy sector. Today, Italy ranks among Algeria's top European partners, while Algeria has become one of Italy's most important suppliers of natural gas — a role that has gained renewed strategic significance in the context of Europe's post-2022 energy crisis.

2.1. Early Foundations (1960s–1980s)

In the immediate post-independence period, Algerian foreign policy prioritized non-alignment and anti-colonial solidarity, which limited deep engagement with Western European states. Nevertheless,

Italy distinguished itself early on by maintaining a relatively independent foreign policy toward North Africa, avoiding overt alignment with French or American positions. This allowed for the gradual development of diplomatic and commercial contacts (Chikhaoui).

The turning point came in the 1980s, when Algeria began opening its hydrocarbon sector to foreign investment under the leadership of late President Chadli Bendjedid. In 1981, Italy's national energy company, Eni, signed its first major agreement with Algeria's state-owned Sonatrach, paving the way for joint exploration and production projects (Eni, 2023). This marked the beginning of a long-standing partnership that would become central to bilateral relations.

By the late 1980s, Algeria had become a key supplier of natural gas to Italy via the Trans-Mediterranean Pipeline (Transmed), also known as the Enrico Mattei pipeline. Stretching from Hassi R'Mel in Algeria through Tunisia to Sicily and onward to mainland Italy, the pipeline — inaugurated in 1983 — was a landmark infrastructure project that symbolized the deepening energy interdependence between the two countries (Ghilès, 2022). At its peak, the Transmed transported over 40 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas annually, meeting up to 30% of Italy's gas demand (Del Buono, 2023).

2.2. Consolidation and Institutionalization (1990s–2000s)

The 1990s were a challenging period for Algeria due to the internal crisis that followed the cancellation of the 1991 elections, which disrupted many aspects of governance and foreign relations. Despite this internal turmoil, Italy maintained a consistent diplomatic presence and refrained from overt political interference, reflecting its long-standing approach of prioritizing stability and dialogue in North Africa (Sanguini, 2016). Rome's measured stance helped preserve bilateral trust and laid the groundwork for renewed cooperation once security conditions improved. While written before the post-2022 energy crisis, Sanguini's (2016) analysis captures the enduring foundations of the relationship — foundations that have enabled its recent revitalization.

With the gradual stabilization of the country after 2000, economic and institutional ties between Algeria and Italy began to deepen. A key milestone was the establishment of the **Algeria–Italy High-Level Joint Commission (HLJC)** in 2003, following a bilateral defence cooperation agreement signed in Rome on 15 May 2003 — a formal mechanism designed to coordinate collaboration across energy, trade, investment, migration, and cultural exchange (Italian Defence Technologies, 2022). The HLJC was intended to provide a structured framework for high-level dialogue, meeting periodically at ministerial level to review ongoing projects and identify new areas for cooperation.

During this period, Eni expanded its operational footprint in Algeria, participating in major gas developments such as **Hassi Berkine** and **In Salah**, often in joint ventures with Sonatrach. These projects reinforced technical and managerial collaboration between the two national energy firms. In 2009, Eni and Sonatrach signed a **strategic partnership agreement** that extended cooperation beyond upstream production to include liquefied natural gas (LNG), pipeline infrastructure, and early discussions on renewable energy (Sonatrach, 2025). This agreement marked a significant step toward long-term interdependence, signaling a shift from transactional energy contracts to a more integrated and forward-looking relationship.

Nevertheless, while institutional mechanisms like the High-Level Joint Commission (HLJC) existed on paper, their implementation was often inconsistent. Meetings were irregular, and follow-up on agreed initiatives lacked momentum, reflecting broader bureaucratic inertia on both sides. As a result, the relationship remained largely driven by energy executives and technical officials, with limited strategic direction from the highest levels of government — a structural weakness that persists today.

This technocratic character is evident even in supportive accounts. As Armando Sanguini (2016), former Italian Ambassador to Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, notes, the partnership is rooted in “a strong feeling of friendship and... deep respect for Algeria’s political sovereignty: two states, two peoples, two partners on an equal basis.” Yet he emphasizes “hundreds of visits” and “a long series of agreements,” with no mention of the HLJC or its outcomes. Instead, cooperation is framed around personal diplomacy, company-level collaboration, and symbolic projects like the Transmed pipeline — suggesting a relationship built on goodwill and operational continuity, not institutional depth.

2.3. Recent Developments (2010s–2024)

The 2010s saw fluctuations in the Algerian-Italian relationship, shaped by volatile global energy markets, internal reforms in Algeria, and evolving Italian foreign policy priorities. The sharp decline in oil and gas prices after 2014 placed significant pressure on Algeria’s hydrocarbon-dependent economy — a sector that, as Sanguini (2016) notes, accounts for about 35% of GDP and two-thirds of exports — prompting a strategic reassessment of its investment framework (Sanguini, 2016). This culminated in the 2019 Hydrocarbons Law, designed to attract foreign investment while preserving state control through Sonatrach’s dominant role (World Bank, 2024).

Despite the challenging climate for international investors, Italy — through Eni — stood out as one of the few Western companies to not only maintain but gradually expand its operational presence in Algeria. This continuity reflects a deeper strategic commitment. As Sanguini (2016) observes, energy cooperation has long been the “powerful driving force” behind bilateral ties, rooted in a shared vision of mutual interest and reinforced by a “strong feeling of friendship and deep respect for Algeria’s political sovereignty.” Italy’s sustained engagement during a period of economic and political uncertainty underscores the resilience of this partnership — one that continues to be seen in Rome as central to its Mediterranean strategy.

The post-2022 energy crisis accelerated Italian-Algerian alignment, culminating in the 2025 Intergovernmental Summit and a series of energy and security agreements. Rooted in a shared history of mutual respect since the independence era, this cooperation reflects growing political will — yet remains constrained by institutional fragility and an enduring energy-centric focus.

The geopolitical landscape shifted dramatically following the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, triggering a strategic reorientation in Europe’s energy policy. As the European Union sought to rapidly reduce its dependence on Russian gas, Algeria emerged as a key alternative supplier, leveraging its geographic proximity, existing infrastructure — notably the Transmed pipeline — and available production capacity. Italy, facing acute energy security challenges, elevated its bilateral diplomacy with North African partners, placing Algeria at the center of its Mediterranean energy strategy. In 2022, the two countries signed a joint declaration on strategic partnership, committing to increase annual gas deliveries from 9 billion cubic meters (bcm) to between 18 and 21 bcm by 2024 — a doubling of capacity that underscored the growing centrality of the Algerian-Italian energy corridor (Presidency_of_the_Republic_of_Algeria, 2025).

This political momentum was sustained through a series of high-level engagements and cooperative initiatives:

- In February 2023, Eni and Sonatrach signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to enhance gas flows via the Transmed pipeline and explore joint projects in green hydrogen production (Eni, 2023).

- In July 2023, the two governments agreed to upgrade existing pipeline infrastructure and conduct feasibility studies for a new undersea interconnector, potentially enhancing regional energy integration ([Eni, 2023](#)).
- By 2024, discussions had intensified around joint investments in renewable energy, carbon capture, and decarbonization technologies, signaling a potential broadening of cooperation beyond fossil fuels ([Al-Shaghel, 2024](#)).

This trajectory culminated in the Fifth Italy-Algeria Intergovernmental Summit on 23 July 2025, co-chaired by the highest authorities of both countries in Rome. The summit, marked by a signing ceremony and joint participation in the Italy-Algeria Business Forum, reaffirmed the bilateral commitment to deepening cooperation across economic, energy, and strategic domains ([Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale Italy, 2025](#)). This high-profile event reinforces H2 (political will) but illustrates the persistent gap in H4 (institutionalization), as no permanent joint council or enforcement mechanism was established.

These developments reflect a deepening alignment rooted in a long-standing partnership. As Armando Sanguini (2016) observed, the relationship has been nurtured by a “strong feeling of friendship and... deep respect for Algeria’s political sovereignty: two states, two peoples, two partners on an equal basis.” This ethos — dating back to Enrico Mattei’s principled refusal to negotiate oil concessions before Algerian independence — has contributed to the resilience of the bilateral dynamic, even during periods of regional upheaval.

Nevertheless, the relationship remains predominantly centered on energy, with limited integration in other strategic domains such as defense, industrial value chains, or comprehensive trade. Bilateral trade stood at approximately €5–6 billion in 2023, heavily skewed toward hydrocarbon exports, with non-energy trade remaining underdeveloped ([European Commission, 2025](#)). While the 2025 summit included discussions on broader cooperation, most agreements remain in the form of non-binding MoUs, and no permanent institutional mechanism — such as a joint strategic council or secretariat — has been established to ensure continuity. As a result, political dialogue, though improving, still lacks the depth, regularity, and cross-sectoral coordination seen in Italy’s relations with other Southern Mediterranean partners such as Egypt or Tunisia.

The evolution of Algerian-Italian relations has been marked by significant diplomatic and energy milestones over six decades. These events reflect a gradual deepening of bilateral cooperation, rooted in mutual respect and strategic necessity.

Table 1. Major milestones in Algerian-Italian bilateral relations (1962–2025).

Year	Key Event	Source
1962	Diplomatic relations established after Algerian independence	Sanguini (2016)
1983	Inauguration of the Transmed ("Mattei") pipeline	Sanguini (2016)
2003	Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Good Neighbourliness	Presidency of the Republic, Algeria (2003)
2012-2015	Italy emphasizes Mediterranean strategy under PMs Monti, Renzi	Sanguini (2016)
2022	Joint declaration of strategic partnership; gas to double from 9 to 18–21 bcm/year by 2024	Presidency of the Republic, Algeria (2003)
2023	Eni-Sonatrach MoU on green hydrogen and gas flows	Eni (2023)
2025 (July 23)	5th High-Level Intergovernmental Summit in Rome	Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Italy (2025)

Sources: Compiled by the researchers from Sanguini (2016), Presidency of the Republic, Algeria (2003–2025), and Eni (2023).

This timeline illustrates a relationship marked by long-term continuity and periodic renewal, often catalyzed by energy dynamics or regional shifts. While the frequency of high-level agreements reflects growing political ambition, their implementation has often lagged, revealing a persistent gap between diplomatic symbolism and institutional depth.

3. Political, Economic, and Geopolitical Drivers of the Bilateral Relationship

The evolution of Algerian-Italian relations in the 21st century has been shaped by a confluence of political, economic, and regional factors that have both reinforced cooperation and exposed its limitations. While energy remains the cornerstone of the partnership, broader strategic considerations — including Italy's search for energy security, Algeria's pursuit of diplomatic diversification, and shared concerns over Mediterranean stability — have elevated the relationship beyond a purely transactional framework. This section analyzes the key drivers that are pushing both countries toward deeper integration, assessing their potential to support a formal strategic partnership.

3.1. Energy Interdependence as a Core Economic Driver

Energy cooperation continues to be the most dynamic and institutionalized aspect of Algerian-Italian relations. As of 2023, Algeria supplied approximately 25% of Italy's natural gas imports, making it the second-largest supplier after Azerbaijan and ahead of Qatar and Nigeria (IEA, 2023). This level of dependency is not accidental but the result of deliberate policy choices on both sides.

For Italy, diversifying away from Russian gas has become a national strategic priority since 2022. The European Commission's REPowerEU plan emphasized the role of Southern Gas Corridors, with Algeria identified as a key partner (European Commission, 2022). Italy, due to its geographic position and existing infrastructure (notably the Transmed pipeline), is uniquely positioned to act as a gateway for North African gas into Southern Europe.

For Algeria, Italy represents a stable, long-term buyer with minimal political pressure on domestic affairs — in contrast to some EU actors. Sonatrach officials have repeatedly emphasized that Italy is

“a reliable partner based on mutual respect” (Eni, 2022). Moreover, increased gas exports to Italy generate much-needed foreign currency, especially as Algeria seeks to manage fiscal deficits amid fluctuating hydrocarbon revenues (World_Bank, 2023).

This mutual dependence supports Hypothesis 1 (H1): that economic cooperation forms a strong basis for evolving toward a strategic partnership. However, as will be discussed in Section 3, energy interdependence alone is insufficient to drive deeper political alignment.

3.2. Political Will and Diplomatic Momentum

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in high-level political engagement between Algiers and Rome. This diplomatic momentum reflects a shared interest in upgrading the bilateral relationship.

Key milestones include:

- The **2022 Algiers Declaration**, in which Prime Minister Mario Draghi and President Abdelmadjid Tebboune announced a “strategic partnership” and agreed to double gas deliveries (Presidency_of_the_Republic_of_Algeria, 2025).
- The **2023 Memorandum of Understanding** between Eni and Sonatrach to enhance cooperation in gas, green hydrogen, and carbon capture (Eni, 2023).
- Recurrent meetings of the High-Level Joint Commission (HLJC), with renewed emphasis on non-energy sectors such as agriculture, health, and vocational training (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale Italy, 2025).

Italy has also positioned Algeria as a central pillar of its "Southern Dimension" in foreign policy — a framework aimed at strengthening ties with North African states on energy, migration, and counterterrorism (Varvelli, 2023). From the Italian perspective, Algeria is seen as a key stabilizer in the Sahel and Central Mediterranean, with influence over Libya, Mali, and Niger.

From Algeria’s side, engagement with Italy is part of a broader strategy of multipolar diplomacy — maintaining balanced relations with Europe, Russia, China, and regional powers to preserve strategic autonomy (Sanguini, 2016). Unlike some EU countries, Italy has avoided public criticism of Algeria’s internal affairs, which enhances trust.

This growing political engagement supports Hypothesis 2 (H2): that political will is essential to deepen ties beyond economics. However, the term “strategic partnership” remains uninstitutionalized — no formal agreement or joint strategy has been adopted, and coordination remains ad hoc. This limited institutional depth explains why H2 is only partially met despite visible political engagement.

As Roggero (2023) notes, the relationship between Italy and Algeria is best described as a pragmatic “marriage of convenience,” grounded in shared interests such as energy cooperation, migration management, and regional stability. Rather than stemming from deep institutional integration or ideological alignment, this partnership relies on low-profile, results-oriented diplomacy (Roggero, 2023). This practical approach has allowed the relationship to remain resilient despite regional volatility and political shifts.

3.3. Regional Geopolitics and External Actors

The bilateral relationship cannot be understood in isolation from broader Mediterranean and global dynamics. Regional instability — particularly in Libya, Tunisia, and the Sahel — has created shared security concerns that incentivize cooperation.

- **Migration management:** Italy views Algeria as a crucial transit and control point for migration flows toward Europe. Although Algeria is not a primary departure country, it hosts thousands of sub-Saharan migrants and has intensified efforts to crack down on human smuggling networks near its southern borders. According to Algeria's Interior Ministry, the country has adopted a "comprehensive and multidimensional approach" to combating migrant smuggling and trafficking in border regions (APS, 2025). These efforts align with Italy's interest in strengthening Algeria's role in regional migration management. While Rome has expressed appreciation for Algiers' contributions in this area, no formal readmission agreement currently exists between the two countries.
- **Counterterrorism:** Both countries share concerns about jihadist groups in the Sahel. Algeria has long positioned itself as a frontline state in the fight against terrorism, while Italy contributes to EU training missions in Niger and Mali. However, operational coordination remains limited.
- **Libya:** Algeria and Italy have overlapping interests in stabilizing Libya, though their approaches differ. Algeria favors a political, inclusive solution with limited foreign interference, while Italy supports the UN-led process and maintains close ties with certain Libyan factions (Saini Fasanotti, 2023).

Crucially, external actors shape the scope of Algerian-Italian cooperation:

- The **European Union** influences Italy's policy through its energy and neighborhood frameworks, but Algeria remains skeptical of EU conditionality.
- **Russia** maintains strong defense and energy ties with Algeria, which limits Italy's ability to position itself as a sole strategic interlocutor.
- **China** is increasingly present in infrastructure projects in both countries, adding a competitive dimension to economic diplomacy.

These dynamics confirm Hypothesis 3 (H3): that regional geopolitics significantly influence the relationship — sometimes enabling cooperation, other times constraining strategic alignment.

3.4. Emerging Areas of Cooperation

Beyond energy and security, new areas of potential collaboration are emerging:

- **Green hydrogen:** Eni and Sonatrach are exploring joint production of green hydrogen in southern Algeria, leveraging the region's strong solar potential and existing energy infrastructure. According to a 2023 article by the African Energy Council, the two companies have agreed to collaborate on renewable energy development and green hydrogen production as part of a broader strategy to accelerate the energy transition in Algeria (AEC, 2023).
- **Digital transformation and youth employment:** As part of its broader engagement with Algeria under the Mattei Plan—outlined during the Italy–Africa Summit in January 2024—Italy has invested in educational cooperation initiatives aimed at promoting digital transformation and youth employment. According to a report by ISPI titled "*Algeria and Italy: A New Era, Scattered with Challenges*", this includes the creation of a research and vocational training center in Algiers, supported by SIMEST. The initiative focuses on priority sectors

such as information technology and renewable energy, reflecting Italy's commitment to skills development and sustainable growth in Algeria (ISPI, 2024).

- **Academic and cultural exchanges:** Although initiatives like the informal *Italy–Algeria University Network (IAUN)* remain relatively limited, the May 2024 memorandum of understanding in higher education and scientific research between the two countries provides a stronger institutional basis for cooperation. The MoU outlines frameworks for student and faculty mobility, joint academic programming, and research collaboration, effectively reflecting IAUN's aims to strengthen people-to-people and institutional ties between Italy and Algeria (APS, 2024).

While still in early stages, these initiatives suggest a potential broadening of the partnership — a necessary step toward a comprehensive strategic framework.

Italy has developed strategic partnerships with several North African countries, but the depth and scope vary significantly. This comparative assessment highlights the distinctive features of the Algerian-Italian relationship.

Table 2. Comparative assessment of Italy's key partnerships in North Africa (2020–2025).

Country	Energy Cooperation	HLJC	Defense Agreement	MOUS Signed 2020-2025	Joint Energy Projects
Algeria	Very High (gas: 25% of IT imports)	Yes (irregular)	Yes (2025)	~15	Eni-Sonatrach, H ₂ , CCS
Egypt	High (gas, LNG)	Yes	Yes (2021, 2023)	~12	East Med Gas Forum, LNG
Tunisia	Low-Moderate	Yes	Limited	~8	Solar, migration tech

Sources: Compiled by the researchers from Eni (2023); Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Italy (2023); ICG (2023); Presidency of the Republic, Algeria (2025).

This comparison reveals that the Algerian-Italian partnership is among the most advanced in energy cooperation, yet lags in institutional depth and defense integration compared to Italy's ties with Egypt or Tunisia. While energy interdependence provides a strong foundation, the absence of a defense agreement and lower MoU implementation rate underscores the transactional nature of the relationship. Compared to Italy's partnerships with Egypt and Tunisia, the Algerian relationship stands out for its high level of energy interdependence but lags in defense integration and institutionalization. This contrast suggests that energy alone, while a powerful driver, is insufficient to produce a comprehensive strategic partnership without parallel security and governance frameworks.

4. Challenges and Limitations

Despite expanding political and energy ties, the Algerian–Italian relationship remains constrained by deep structural, institutional, and geopolitical barriers. This section examines the asymmetries, policy gaps, and external pressures that limit the partnership's evolution into a more strategic and sustainable framework.

4.1. Structural Asymmetries in Power and Development Models

Despite the rhetoric of equality and partnership, the Algerian-Italian relationship is marked by deep structural asymmetries in political influence, economic diversification, and global alignment.

Italy, as a member of the European Union, NATO, and the G7, operates within a multilateral, rules-based framework, with foreign policy shaped by Brussels and transatlantic coordination. Algeria, by contrast, maintains a non-aligned, state-centric model, prioritizing strategic autonomy, regional leadership, and resistance to external conditionality — a posture that limits institutional compatibility.

Economically, Italy's diversified industrial base contrasts with Algeria's hydrocarbon dependency, which accounts for about 35% of GDP and two-thirds of exports (Sanguini, 2016). This makes Algeria vulnerable to energy price fluctuations and dependent on energy exports as the primary lever of diplomacy, while Italy can afford a broader, more flexible engagement.

These asymmetries do not prevent cooperation — they shape it. The partnership functions best in technical, energy-driven domains, where power imbalances are less visible, but struggles in areas requiring shared norms, transparency, or joint decision-making.

4.2. Institutional and Policy Barriers to Deep Integration

While high-level summits and declarations signal political will, the institutional machinery of the partnership remains underdeveloped.

The High-Level Joint Commission (HLJC), established in 2003, was meant to coordinate cooperation across sectors. Yet, as Sanguini (2016) notes, the relationship has been sustained by “hundreds of visits at government levels” and “a long series of agreements” — but not by systematic follow-up or a permanent secretariat. This reflects a diplomacy of events, not institutional continuity (Maurizio & Giacomo, 2008).

Moreover, bureaucratic inertia in both countries remains a significant obstacle to effective policy implementation. In Algeria, investment reforms have been notably slow, and regulatory unpredictability—highlighted in the World Bank's *Algeria Economic Update*—continues to deter foreign investors (World Bank, 2020). In Italy, formal mechanisms such as inter-ministerial committees exist, yet coordination—particularly among the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Energy, and Defense—is often fragmented and reactive, lacking centralized direction unless driven by the Prime Minister's Office (SGI, 2024). As a result, most bilateral agreements between the two countries take the form of non-binding memoranda of understanding (MoUs), with no enforcement mechanisms or joint monitoring bodies. This prevailing “MoU culture” allows both sides to claim symbolic progress without committing to structural reform—undermining the development of a genuinely strategic partnership.

4.3. External Influences and Competing Geopolitical Alignments

The strategic relationship between Algeria and Italy is shaped less by institutionalized cooperation than by competing external alignments and divergent geopolitical doctrines. While both countries share interests in energy security and regional stability, their broader foreign policy orientations are pulled in different directions by overlapping great-power influences and contrasting normative frameworks.

To illustrate these asymmetries across key domains of engagement, Table 3 compares the strategic positions of Algeria and Italy in governance, defense, economic cooperation, and regional stability.

It highlights how external actors—such as the European Union, Russia, and China—reinforce contrasting policy preferences, ultimately constraining deeper bilateral alignment.

Table 3. External Influences Shaping the Algeria–Italy Strategic Relationship

Policy Domain	Italy's Orientation	Algeria's Orientation	Key External Actors	Impact on Bilateral Alignment
Governance & Norms	Aligned with EU agenda on human rights, rule of law, and governance conditionality; supports mobility partnerships.	Emphasizes sovereignty, non-interference, and resistance to political conditionality.	European Union	Limits political integration; creates friction in migration and governance cooperation (Wouters & Ovádek, 2020).
Security & Defense	Dependent on NATO/EU frameworks; limited defense exports to Algeria	Reliant on Russia for ~75–80% of military equipment; conducts joint exercises with Moscow.	Russia	Constrains Italy's strategic leverage; reinforces Algeria's autonomy from Western security architectures (SIPRI, 2023).
Economic Engagement	Focuses on energy, hydrocarbons, and infrastructure tenders; faces competition	Increasingly partners with China on large-scale infrastructure (e.g., East–West Highway, smart cities).	China	Intensifies economic competition; Chinese firms have secured over \$7 billion in Algerian contracts (Chatham House, 2020; Dzekashu & Anyu, 2021).
Regional Stability (Libya, Sahel)	Supports UN-led initiatives, EU missions (EUTM Mali), and multilateral intervention	Adheres to strict non-intervention; favors political solutions without foreign presence.	-	Divergent approaches hinder joint crisis management and regional coordination (Zoubir, 2022).

Source: Compiled by the researchers from (SIPRI, 2023), (Chatham House, 2020), (Dzekashu & Anyu, 2021), (Zoubir, 2022).

As shown in Table 3, Italy's foreign policy is closely aligned with the European Union's normative agenda, particularly on governance, human rights, and conditionality in mobility partnerships. In contrast, Algeria consistently emphasizes sovereignty and non-interference, resisting external political conditionality—a stance that has increasingly complicated cooperation since the 2015 migration crisis (Wouters & Ovádek, 2020). In the security domain, Russia supplies an estimated 75–80% of Algeria's military equipment, reinforcing its strategic autonomy and limiting Italy's leverage in defense diplomacy (SIPRI, 2023). Economically, China's growing footprint—exemplified by over \$7 billion in contracts awarded to Chinese firms for the East–West Highway and other infrastructure projects—intensifies competition for Italian companies in key sectors (Chatham, 2020) ; (Dzekashu & Anyu, 2021). Regionally, Italy supports multilateral interventions in Libya and the Sahel through UN and EU mechanisms, whereas Algeria adheres to a strict doctrine of non-intervention, favoring state-led political solutions without foreign involvement (Zoubir, 2022).

These structural divergences, while not precluding cooperation in specific areas, underscore a fundamental misalignment in strategic culture and external orientation. As a result, the bilateral relationship remains transactional rather than transformational, constrained by the broader geopolitical contest shaping the Southern Mediterranean.

4.4. Areas of Potential Conflict and Misalignment

Despite strong diplomatic goodwill, several latent sources of friction could undermine the partnership.

- **Migration Management:** Italy views Algeria as a key partner in controlling migration flows, but Algeria is not a primary departure country and resists being framed as a “buffer state.” Disagreements over readmission agreements and border control could escalate.
- **Defense and Security Cooperation:** While a 2025 agreement on counter-terrorism was signed, operational coordination remains limited. Algeria’s close ties with Russia and its cautious approach to NATO-linked initiatives constrain deeper military collaboration.
- **Energy Transition:** Italy is pushing for green hydrogen and renewables, but Algeria’s economy remains tied to fossil fuels. Without a shared vision for the energy transition, long-term alignment is uncertain.
- **Trade Imbalance:** Bilateral trade is heavily skewed toward Algerian hydrocarbon exports (€5.8 billion in 2023), with minimal Italian exports in return ([Agenzia, 2025](#)). This limits mutual economic interdependence beyond energy.

These areas do not constitute open conflict — but they represent structural misalignments that must be addressed for the partnership to evolve beyond its current form.

Despite growing political momentum, the Algerian-Italian relationship faces persistent structural and institutional challenges that constrain deeper integration. The following table synthesizes the key limitations across political, economic, and governance dimensions, highlighting the gap between diplomatic ambition and operational reality.

Table 4. Key structural and institutional challenges in the Algerian-Italian relationship

Challenge	Manifestation	Impact on Strategic Partnership	Source
Power Asymmetry	Italy: EU/NATO member; Algeria: non-aligned, state-centric model	Limits institutional compatibility and shared strategic culture	Sanguini (2016)
Energy-Centricity	25% of Italian gas imports from Algeria; 35% of Algerian GDP from hydrocarbons	Overdependence on one sector; trade imbalance	IEA (2023), Sanguini (2016)
Weak Institutionalization	HLJC exists but meets irregularly; no permanent secretariat	Cooperation remains ad hoc, not systemic	Sanguini (2016), Presidency of the Republic, Algeria (2003)
Bureaucratic Inertia	Slow investment reforms in Algeria; fragmented coordination in Italy	Delays implementation of agreements	World Bank (2020)
External Influences	EU conditionality (Italy) vs. resistance to interference (Algeria); Russian defense ties with Algeria	Constrains alignment on governance and security	ICG (2023), Colombo (2023)
MoU Culture	Many agreements are non-binding memoranda of understanding	Low enforcement; symbolic over substantive cooperation	Eni (2023), AlgerieInvest (2025)

Sources: Compiled by the researchers from Sanguini (2016), World Bank (2020), IEA (2023), Eni (2023), and AlgerieInvest (2025).

As Table 4 illustrates, the Algerian-Italian relationship, while strong in political rhetoric and energy cooperation, continues to face deep structural constraints. The absence of a permanent coordination mechanism, combined with Algeria's hydrocarbon dependency and Italy's fragmented inter-ministerial approach, limits the partnership's ability to evolve into a truly strategic framework. These challenges — institutional, economic, and geopolitical — reinforce Hypothesis 4 (H4): those structural and institutional barriers remain the most significant obstacle to a formal strategic partnership.

5. Prospects for a Strategic Partnership

The evolution of Algerian-Italian relations since 2022 has generated a new wave of momentum, raising the question of whether the current cooperation can evolve into a formal strategic partnership. While Section 4 highlighted the structural and institutional constraints that continue to hinder deeper integration, recent developments suggest a growing political will and economic diversification that could, if sustained, overcome these limitations.

This section examines the emerging prospects for a strategic partnership by analyzing three key dimensions: (1) the diplomatic and institutional momentum, (2) the broadening of cooperation beyond energy, and (3) the symbolic and historical continuity that reinforces bilateral trust.

5.1. Diplomatic Momentum and Institutional Renewal

A significant turning point occurred in July 2025, with the Fifth Italy-Algeria Intergovernmental Summit held in Rome. Co-chaired by the highest authorities of both countries, the summit was followed by a high-level Italy-Algeria Business Forum, marking a revitalization of the bilateral framework after years of irregular high-level engagement.

The summit reaffirmed the 2022 Joint Declaration of Strategic Partnership, with both sides committing to double gas deliveries from 9 to between 18 and 21 billion cubic meters (bcm) annually — a target largely achieved by mid-2024 ([Presidency of the Republic, Algeria, 2022](#)). More importantly, it demonstrated a shared intent to institutionalize the relationship through regular summits, with the next meeting scheduled for 2027 in Algiers ([Presidency of the Republic of Algeria, 2025](#)).

While the High-Level Joint Commission (HLJC) remains underutilized, the summit format itself has become a de facto institutional mechanism, providing a platform for political coordination and public commitment. This shift from ad hoc diplomacy to cyclical high-level dialogue is a necessary, if still insufficient, step toward strategic alignment.

5.2. Broadening the Scope of Cooperation

Perhaps the most significant development is the diversification of cooperation beyond energy — a long-standing structural weakness.

At the 2025 Business Forum, over 20 agreements were signed between Algerian and Italian companies, covering sectors previously underdeveloped in the bilateral agenda ([Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale Italy, 2025](#)). Key projects include:

- A \$1 billion feasibility study for a direct reduced iron (DRI) plant, led by Italy's CEIP Scarl and Algeria's Copresud — a rare large-scale industrial collaboration.
- A new submarine data cable between Algérie Télécom and Telecom Italia Sparkle, enhancing digital connectivity and laying the groundwork for joint data centers.
- Joint ventures in circular economy (e.g., Condor–Stemin scrap recycling) and agri-food (e.g., Labelle–CFT tomato processing).
- The establishment of vocational training centers, including a technology school in Oran focused on marble and ornamental stone, to be fully funded and staffed by Italy's ICE Agency.

These initiatives suggest a deliberate effort to build integrated value chains and reduce the energy-centric imbalance of the relationship. They also reflect Italy's broader Mattei Plan for Africa, which seeks to strengthen economic and energy ties with North African states through investment, training, and infrastructure.

While most of these agreements remain in the form of non-binding MoUs, their sectoral breadth signals a strategic ambition that goes beyond transactional energy trade.

5.3. Symbolic Continuity and Shared Historical Narrative

A unique strength of the Algerian-Italian relationship is its deep historical and symbolic foundation — a legacy that continues to shape contemporary cooperation.

As Armando Sanguini (2016) observed, the partnership has been nurtured by a “strong feeling of friendship and... deep respect for Algeria's political sovereignty: two states, two peoples, two partners on an equal basis.” This ethos traces back to Enrico Mattei, whose refusal to negotiate oil concessions before Algerian independence earned Italy lasting goodwill.

This legacy is now being reinvigorated through symbolic initiatives:

- The “Enrico Mattei Industrial Park” in Tissemsilt, a joint industrial zone promoting supply chain integration.
- The proposed “Enrico Mattei Agricultural Center” in Algeria, dedicated to research and innovation in agriculture.
- The naming of the Transmed pipeline as the “Mattei pipeline” — a rare tribute to a foreign figure in Algerian public discourse.

These gestures are not merely ceremonial. They reinforce a shared narrative of mutual respect and anti-colonial solidarity, which fosters trust and resilience even amid regional turbulence.

5.4. Conditions for a Strategic Partnership

While the prospects are promising, the transformation into a true strategic partnership remains conditional. It will depend on:

- **Institutionalization:** Moving beyond summits to establish a permanent secretariat or joint strategic council.
- **Implementation:** Turning MoUs into binding contracts and ensuring regulatory stability in Algeria.
- **Balanced Interdependence:** Reducing trade asymmetry and expanding non-energy investment.
- **Regional Coordination:** Aligning on Libya, migration, and EU-Africa relations.

As Sanguini (2016) noted, the relationship has long been driven by personal diplomacy and operational continuity, not systemic governance. The 2025 summit and business agreements suggest a step forward — but the true test will be whether this momentum is sustained and institutionalized.

While significant challenges remain, multiple drivers are pushing the Algerian-Italian relationship toward a broader partnership. This conceptual framework illustrates how diplomatic, economic, and symbolic factors interact — and the conditions under which they could collectively support the emergence of a strategic partnership.

Figure 1. Conceptual diagram

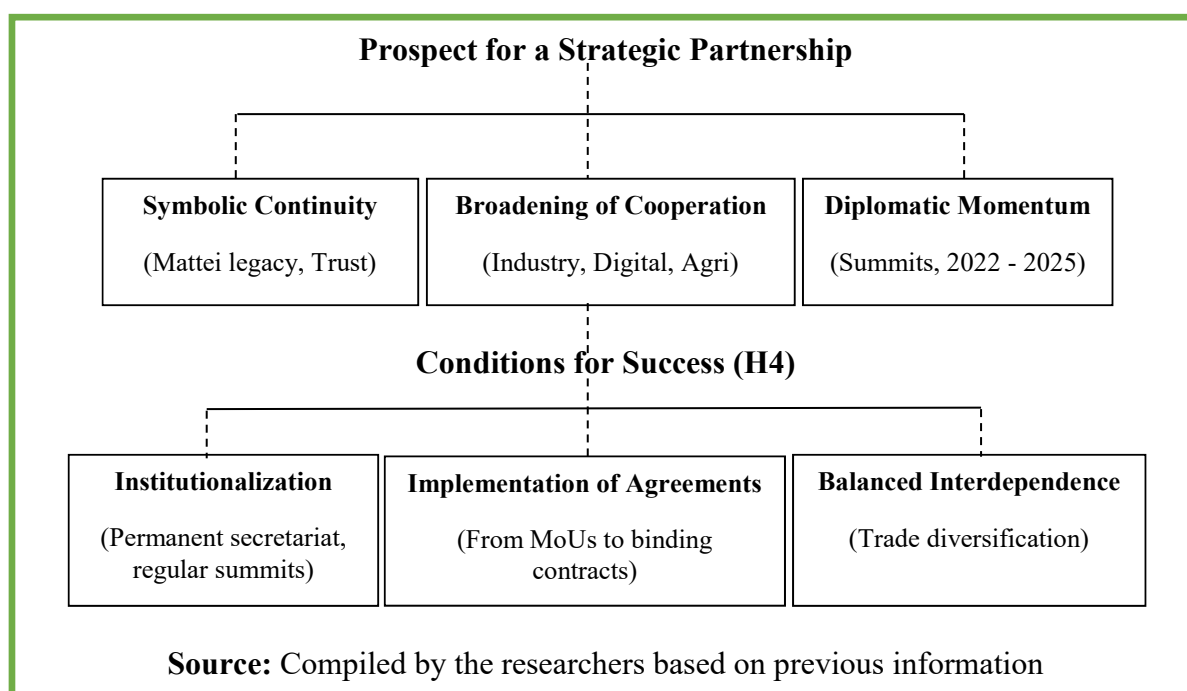


Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of the prospects for a strategic partnership. While diplomatic momentum, economic diversification, and symbolic continuity are pushing the relationship forward, their success depends on overcoming the very structural challenges outlined in Section 4. Without institutionalization and balanced interdependence, the drivers of cooperation risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the evolution of Algerian-Italian relations, assessing whether deepening economic cooperation—particularly in energy, trade, and regional diplomacy—can serve as a foundation for a formal strategic partnership. The analysis reveals a relationship marked by strong functional interdependence, especially in energy, yet constrained by persistent structural, institutional, and geopolitical asymmetries. While recent political momentum and diversification efforts suggest a trajectory toward deeper alignment, the transformation into a truly strategic partnership remains conditional, incomplete, and institutionally fragile.

The findings confirm the study's four central hypotheses. **H1—that economic cooperation forms a strong basis for evolving toward a strategic partnership—is largely supported.** Energy interdependence, anchored in the Transmed pipeline and Eni-Sonatrach collaboration, has become the cornerstone of bilateral ties, with Algeria supplying 25% of Italy's gas imports by 2023. This dependency, amplified by the post-2022 energy crisis, has elevated Algeria's strategic value in Italy's Mediterranean calculus and vice versa. The 2022 Joint Declaration of Strategic Partnership and the doubling of gas deliveries underscore this momentum. However, as the analysis shows, economic interdependence alone is insufficient to overcome deeper political and institutional divides.

H2—that political will is essential to deepen ties beyond economics—is partially confirmed. High-level summits, particularly the Fifth Italy-Algeria Intergovernmental Summit in 2025, reflect a renewed diplomatic commitment and symbolic elevation of the relationship. Italy's "Southern Dimension" policy and Algeria's multipolar diplomacy both benefit from a pragmatic alignment with Rome. Yet, as Table 4 illustrates, this political will has not yet translated into systemic governance. The High-Level Joint Commission (HLJC) remains underutilized, and coordination is often reactive rather than strategic. The absence of a permanent secretariat or joint monitoring body reinforces what [Sanguini \(2016\)](#) described as a "diplomacy of events"—one driven by summits and MoUs rather than institutional continuity.

H3—that regional geopolitics significantly influence the bilateral relationship—is strongly supported. As Table 3 demonstrates, external actors shape the contours of cooperation in fundamental ways. The European Union's normative agenda on governance and migration clashes with Algeria's doctrine of sovereignty and non-interference, creating friction in political dialogue. Russia's dominance in Algeria's defense sector (supplying 75–80% of military equipment) limits Italy's strategic leverage, while China's growing footprint in infrastructure intensifies economic competition. Regionally, divergent approaches to Libya and the Sahel—Italy favoring multilateral intervention, Algeria advocating non-intervention—further complicate alignment. These external influences do not preclude cooperation, but they expose the limits of bilateral autonomy.

Finally, **H4—that structural and institutional challenges hinder the formalization of a strategic partnership—is decisively confirmed.** Despite rhetorical advances, the relationship remains characterized by asymmetries in economic models (Italy's diversified economy vs. Algeria's hydrocarbon dependency), bureaucratic inertia, and a prevailing "MoU culture" that prioritizes symbolic agreements over enforceable commitments. As Table 4 shows, the gap between diplomatic ambition and operational reality remains wide. Without institutionalization, regulatory predictability

in Algeria, and balanced interdependence, the partnership risks remaining transactional rather than transformational.

Looking ahead, the prospects for a strategic partnership depend on **four key conditions**: (1) **Institutionalization** of high-level dialogue through a permanent secretariat or joint strategic council; (2) **Implementation** of MoUs into binding contracts with clear timelines and accountability mechanisms; (3) **Diversification** of trade and investment beyond energy, particularly in green hydrogen, digital infrastructure, and industrial value chains; and (4) **Regional coordination** on shared challenges such as migration, counterterrorism, and Libya, based on mutual respect rather than conditionality.

To this end, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Establish a Permanent Joint Strategic Council**, building on the HLJC framework, to ensure continuity, cross-ministerial coordination, and systematic follow-up on agreements.
2. **Convert MoUs into Binding Agreements**, particularly in emerging sectors like green hydrogen and digital connectivity, with joint monitoring mechanisms.
3. **Launch a Bilateral Investment Facilitation Initiative**, supported by Eni, Sonatrach, and Italian export agencies (SIMEST, ICE), to reduce regulatory barriers and attract Italian SMEs into non-energy sectors.
4. **Develop a Shared Energy Transition Roadmap**, aligning Italy's decarbonization goals with Algeria's renewable potential, particularly in solar and green hydrogen.
5. **Enhance Academic and Security Dialogue**, through expanded university exchanges and discreet counterterrorism coordination, to build long-term trust.

The Algerian-Italian relationship is not a traditional alliance, nor is it a fully institutionalized strategic partnership. Rather, it is a pragmatic, interest-based cooperation rooted in mutual respect and historical continuity. The legacy of Enrico Mattei—symbolized in the “Mattei pipeline,” the proposed agricultural center, and the industrial park—remains a powerful narrative of anti-colonial solidarity and equal partnership. If this symbolic capital is matched with concrete institutional reforms, the relationship has the potential to evolve from a **marriage of convenience** (Roggero, 2023) into a **model of South-South and Mediterranean cooperation**.

While significant challenges remain, the drivers of cooperation—energy interdependence, shared regional interests, and symbolic trust—are real and growing. The transformation into a strategic partnership is not guaranteed, but it is possible. The path forward requires not more summits, but greater substance, sustainability, and symmetry in one of the Mediterranean's most consequential bilateral relationships. Beyond its empirical findings, this study contributes to the literature on asymmetrical strategic partnerships, showing how historical goodwill and functional interdependence can coexist with structural misalignments. It also advances the debate on Mediterranean energy diplomacy by illustrating the constraints that arise when one partner operates within an EU normative framework and the other resists external conditionality.

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