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250 years later, America's ties to its first and oldest friend are getting even stronger

BY YOUSSEF AMRANI, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR 06/01/26 07:30 AM ET



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In 1777, Morocco became the first nation to recognize the United States. I was reminded of that history not in a textbook, but in the Pentagon, seated across from senior American defense officials, as our two countries recently concluded a new 10-year Defense Cooperation Roadmap. In that room, the past did not feel ceremonial — it felt active.

From April 14 to 16, acting on Instructions from His Majesty King Mohammed VI, a Moroccan delegation took part in the Morocco-U.S. Defense Consultative Committee here in Washington. The meetings were detailed and forward-looking. They were not about preserving a relationship for history's sake. They were about preparing it for the next decade.



The roadmap we concluded, covering 2026 to 2036, expands cooperation in defense industry development, cybersecurity, advanced technologies, and deeper operational integration. It gives structure to what has already become one of the most reliable defense partnerships the U.S. has on the African continent.

A framework, of course, is only as strong as its implementation and both sides left the Session understanding that the work ahead is harder than the signing. Under Secretary Elbridge Colby captured that spirit at the signing: "This roadmap will guide our historic defense relationship for the next decade, building on a partnership that began 250 years ago when Morocco was the first nation to recognize the United States." That sentence stayed with me because, later, I stood before the document that began it all.

During the same visit, our delegation went to the U.S. National Archives to view the 1786 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Morocco and the U.S. To stand before that treaty

was to understand the unusual depth of this relationship. Very few diplomatic ties endure across centuries. Fewer still remain strategically relevant.

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The Treaty was not simply an artifact behind glass. It was a reminder that Morocco's relationship with the U.S. began with a decision made before American power was assured. Morocco recognized a young republic when its future was still uncertain. That early act of recognition created a foundation of trust that has survived changes in governments, conflicts, alliances, and global orders. Today, that trust is visible in practical ways.

For example, African Lion 2026 opened in Morocco this week. More than 5,000 personnel from more than 40 countries are participating across Morocco, from Agadir to Tan-Tan, Benguerir and Dakhla. The exercise, now in its 22nd year with Morocco as a central partner, remains U.S. Africa Command's largest annual joint exercise on the continent.

Morocco is America's premiere operational partner in African Lion and all that it entails for security on the continent and in the region. The exercise includes live-fire training, special operations coordination, command-and-control integration, and the testing of emerging technologies. The participation of more than 30 American defense technology companies

adds another dimension: Morocco is not only a security partner, but a platform for innovation, training, and regional capability-building.

African Lion is therefore more than an exercise. It is a proof of concept for what sustained American partnership in Africa can look like when trust, interoperability, technology, and local leadership are built over time. In a region where some partners have chosen posture over substance, and paid for it in strategic isolation, that proof of concept is not a small thing.

The U.S. is also establishing Africa's first permanent drone training hub in Morocco. Morocco was selected not just because our record of reliability and stability in relations in the U.S., but because Morocco has been building something larger than a bilateral defense relationship.

That larger vision includes the Atlantic Initiative, which opens direct ocean access for landlocked Sahel nations; the African Atlantic gas pipeline, linking sub-Saharan energy to Mediterranean and European markets; and a domestic reform process that has steadily strengthened the institutions and governance capacity on which durable partnership depends.

Morocco is not asking others to define its strategic role. It is defining that role itself: as a bridge between Africa, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, Europe, and the Arab world. For the U.S., this matters beyond Morocco. Washington needs a model for effective, durable partnership in Africa. In Morocco, it already has one.

The real question is the one that animated the best moments of our discussions in Washington: how to turn a 10-year roadmap into ten years of genuine innovation: in joint doctrine, in shared technology development, in the speed at which Moroccan and American forces can operate as one. That is the work the signing made possible. It is also the work that cannot be signed into existence.

In the Pentagon, I saw a relationship built on trust and utility. At the National Archives, I saw the document that gave it its first durable form. Between those two moments, separated by more than two centuries, one thing had not changed: Morocco's judgment about where to place its trust.

In 1777, that judgment was made before the outcome was certain. Nearly 250 years later, it is not just a monument to history. It is a working alliance being tested, validated and deepened right now, in continuity, partnership and friendship.

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