

Special EDITION

Hypothetical American Recognition of Somaliland: Regional and Global Implications

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Abstract

There are significant grounds for speculation that the new Trump administration could recognize Somaliland as a sovereign state to further American military and economic interests in the region. Historically, American recognition of a contested state has been the catalyst for the separatist state's successful self-determination and acceptance into the international community. For instance, American recognition of Kosovo in 2008 contributed to broader European recognition, leading to the self-determination of Kosovo. This paper explores hypothetical regional and global implications of recognition of Somaliland: while strategically advantageous in some regards for the United States and Somaliland, it could run the risk of destabilizing the Horn of Africa, challenging global norms, and straining a devolving relationship between the United States and China.

Background on Somaliland

Somaliland is a self-governing region of Somalia. It was a British protectorate until it was unified with Somalia in 1960. In the 1980s, insurgent groups from Somaliland, like the Somali National Movement, fought against the Somali military dictatorship that killed approximately 200,000 Somalilanders (Kennard and Einashe, 2018). Somaliland claimed independence in 1991 and formed a new, completely autonomous, multiparty democracy which remains relatively more stable than Somalia. Somaliland is not internationally recognized as a sovereign nation.

Speculation that the United States Will Recognize Somaliland

Under the Biden administration, the United States State Department stated that it recognized the territorial sovereignty of Somalia within the borders established in 1960 (Office of the Spokesperson, 2024). However, the Trump administration may take a different approach. In Project 2025, an alleged Republican blueprint for the second Trump administration, whose authors hold key

positions around the American president, it is suggested that the United States should recognize Somaliland as a state to counter the rise of China and the declining position of the United States in Djibouti, Somaliland's neighbor (The Heritage Project, 2023, p. 218). The possibility of recognizing Somaliland's sovereignty has also been very publicly supported by multiple Republican politicians, including, but not limited to, former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Tibor Nagy, former special envoy for the Great Lakes, Peter Pham, Republican Congressman Scott Perry, and member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Senator Jim Risch.

The President of Somaliland, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, said in an interview with the Guardian that sovereignty was "on the horizon" with the new American administration, that American military officials and delegations have visited the capital, Hargeisa, and the strategic port, Berbera, to evaluate their interests, and that the US ambassador to Somalia has made three visits

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to Hargeisa in five months (Townsend, 2025). Allegedly, the Trump administration has been in discussion with Somaliland regarding the establishment of a US military base near the port of Berbera in exchange for a degree of recognition of Somaliland (Ylönen, 2025). Somalia's signing of a \$600,000 per year deal with right-leaning American lobbyist BGR Group in December 2024 reveals its concern over the possibility of Trump's interest-based approach to Somaliland (BGR Government Affairs, 2024).

While still speculative, it is plausible, based on this evidence, that the United States may be at least considering recognizing Somaliland as a sovereign nation to further American interests.

Regional Implications

Potential for a Regional Proxy Conflict

Somaliland has yet to be recognized internationally despite fulfilling all of the pillars of the Montevideo Convention: a permanent population, a defined territory, a functional government, and the capacity to form relations with other states (Somers, 2023, p. 210). Arguably, even more so than a genuine respect for Somalia's sovereignty, this is because recognizing

Somaliland could set off a chain of events in the Horn of Africa that could risk conflict. If the U.S. were to recognize Somaliland, the nation which must proceed with the most caution is Ethiopia.

In 2024, Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Somaliland: Ethiopia agreed to consider recognition of Somaliland in exchange for coastline access to the Red Sea. In response, Somalia tightened its security relationship with Egypt, arguably Ethiopia's most significant regional rival (Khan and Idle, 2024). Egypt also perceives Ethiopia as an existential threat, given that Ethiopia's building of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile River will jeopardize Egypt's access to water.

Additionally, Eritrea, which also has an independently volatile relationship with Ethiopia (Ethiopia deployed troops along their shared border in March 2025, and the disputed region of Tigray has recently experienced a splintering of their administration into multiple factions), strengthened its relations with, and support for, both Somaliland and Egypt following the MoU (Ross, 2025; Bayeh, 2024). Djibouti is also staunchly against Somaliland's independence, given the competition Somaliland does and will continue to pose to Djibouti's coastal economy.



President of Somaliland, Muse Bihi Abdi, and the prime minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) granting Ethiopia access to sea and recognition to Somaliland, on January 1, 2024 (Photo Credits: Guleid Ahmed Jama)

Moreover, if Ethiopia were to follow the U.S.' hypothetical lead and recognise Somaliland, these regional alliances would likely be solidified and could produce a proxy conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt. The counter-contingent to contain Ethiopia's Red Sea access ambitions would likely include Egypt, Somalia, Eritrea, and possibly Djibouti.

The likelihood that Ethiopia would take a more cautious route to avoid this potential for conflict is debatable. Recent statements by Ethiopia's current government, led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, signal a potentially aggressive posture: he said, "We want to get a port by peaceful means. But if that fails, we will use force" (de Waal, 2023). However, Ethiopia can theoretically continue to use its leased 20km of Somaliland's coastline without recognizing Somaliland's independence, so it is unclear if the U.S.' hypothetical recognition of Somaliland would truly benefit Ethiopia in accomplishing its existential goal.

A Domino Effect? Providing Legitimacy to Other Secessionist Movements

International recognition of Somaliland could inspire or provide legitimacy to other secessionist movements. Currently, there are several in Eastern Africa. These include, but are not limited to, Puntland and Jubaland (semi-autonomous regional states in Somalia), the Katanga insurgency in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, and liberation movements in Darfur, Sudan. Outside of the immediate region, it could inspire the Biafra separatist movement in Nigeria or the breakaway region of the Western Sahara in Morocco, in addition to countless other movements and autonomous regions around the world.

Historically, there is a pattern of fear or anxiety from the international community that recognizing a secessionist state will set off a domino effect by creating a precedent; this has not been the case. For instance, neither Kosovo nor South Sudan's successful self-determination movements have had significant knock-on effects for other movements, nor does the legal



The flag of Somaliland in Hargeisa on Nov. 8, 2024. (Photo Credits: LUIS TATO/AFP via Getty Images)

precedent apply to other states, given that their recognition was born out of unique historical contexts. This is also true of Somaliland, which justifies its right to self-determination not simply due to grievance, but the fact that it was a distinct British protectorate, separate from Italian Somalia, during the colonial period.

Neither Puntland nor Jubaland is as politically or institutionally developed as Somaliland, and these regions of Somalia, currently engaged in constitutional disputes with the federal government, certainly do not fulfill the pillars of statehood as laid out in the Montevideo Convention. However, U.S. recognition of Somaliland could add fuel to the fire in their disputes against the Somali government, particularly in the oil-rich region of the Nugaal Valley between Somaliland and Puntland (Pinto, 2024). Ultimately, this could severely fragment and destabilize Somalia and hinder its state-building process.

Terrorism

Hypothetical recognition of Somaliland by the U.S. would have implications for counterterrorism efforts. While on the one hand, it would reward the Somaliland government for its relative stability, security, and democratic principles, the instability caused could create security vacuums that Al-Shabaab, a violent Somalia-based terrorist group, would be likely to exploit. Whether recognition would result in the destabilization of Somalia or send the Horn of Africa into the throes of conflict, Al-Shabaab would take advantage of the situation to recruit and radicalize, strengthen its hold, and carry out attacks.

Somalia's signing of a \$600,000 per year deal with right-leaning American lobbyist BGR Group in December 2024 reveals its concern over the possibility of Trump's interest-based approach to Somaliland

Currently, the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) is responsible for supporting the Somali military in maintaining the current state of security against Al-Shabaab. AUSSOM is primarily composed of Ethiopia, Uganda, Djibouti, Kenya, and Egypt. As the majority are Horn nations, it is reasonable to assume that in a time of conflict, the composition of this mission would shift. Somalia has already explicitly stated its opposition to Ethiopia being a part of the AUSSOM given Ethiopia's MoU with Somaliland.

Global Implications

The African Union (AU) does not recognize the self-determination of Somaliland, given the AU's principle of respecting the colonial borders that existed at the time of independence. When Ethiopia informally recognized Somaliland to secure a port deal, the US (under former President Joe Biden), the AU, and the European Union (EU), amongst other significant global actors, stated that Ethiopia should respect Somalia's sovereignty (Ferragamo and Klobucista, 2025).

American recognition of Somaliland would inevitably challenge regional and global normative frameworks. In practice, many global actors, including the EU, have liaison offices with

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Somaliland or invest in the domestic infrastructure of Somaliland. However, their quiet engagement does not seem to be evidence of a benefit to recognition which would outweigh the geopolitical consequences of an unstable Horn region, given its geostrategic position in counterterrorism efforts and as a critical chokepoint for cost-effective trade.

US Strategy and Implications for US-Sino Rivalry

The Berbera Port, which is located on the Gulf of Aden in Somaliland, across from the Arabian Peninsula, is strategically significant to numerous interested parties. Currently, the port is being developed and managed by DP World, a United Arab Emirates (UAE) port operator. The UAE has strong relations with the Trump administration. The UAE, through DP World, has invested over \$442 million into the Berbera Port and a highway



Special Representative of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission (SRCC) for Somalia and Head of the AU Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), Ambassador El Hadji Ibrahima Diene inspecting the guard of honour (Photo Credit: AUSSOM)

that links it to Ethiopia, a landlocked nation (Gerding, 2022). The vision is to realize the potential of the Berbera Port as a major trade hub that is an alternative to the Doraleh Port in Djibouti.

This is enticing to the United States as its position in Djibouti has fallen relative to that of China, and the two great powers' military bases stand just a few miles away from each other. In 2018, Djibouti terminated an agreement with DP World in favor of a Chinese operator for their Doraleh Port. This was perceived as a major loss to the United States' influence in the region, and it furthered China's Belt and Road Initiative (Cabestan, 2021).

The Belt and Road Initiative is a Chinese economic strategy to develop infrastructure and connect trade routes between Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Dunford and Liu, 2019). American presence at the Berbera Port, an alternative to the Doraleh Port, would be a major setback to China's perceived strategy of establishing dominant influence over these routes.

American military presence in the area and official relations with Somaliland would be a counter to China's relevance in the region. Further, Somaliland's relative democratic stability, in comparison to Somalia, is perceived as being potentially helpful in the United States' counterterrorism campaign against al-Shabaab and disrupting piracy in this crucial global trade route (Ducharme, 2025).

Additionally, US recognition of Somaliland would have severe implications for China's One China Principle as it would challenge the One Somalia Principle. Just as Somaliland is an unrecognized, autonomous nation which declared itself independent from Somalia, Taiwan is an unrecognized, autonomous, nation which

Taiwan has provided Somaliland with military training, educational exchanges and scholarships, medical equipment, and infrastructural support and development, and perceives Somaliland as its gateway into Eastern Africa

declared itself independent from China. Somaliland and Taiwan have strong diplomatic relations. In 2020, Somaliland set up an embassy in Taipei, and Taiwan set up an embassy in Hargeisa (Hagi, 2024).

Since then, Taiwan has provided Somaliland with military training, educational exchanges and scholarships, medical equipment, and infrastructural support and development, and perceives Somaliland as its gateway into Eastern Africa. The Deputy Foreign Minister of Taiwan attended President Abdullahi's inauguration. The relationship between Taiwan and Somaliland was recognised and praised by the Trump administration in 2020 (NSC 25 Archived, 2020).

In response to the relationship, Somalia placed a no-fly ban on Taiwanese citizens in April 2025 (Reuters, 2025). China praised the measure as reflective of "Somalia's firm adherence to the one-China principle" (Global Times, 2024). While this ban may seem insignificant in terms of the number of people affected, it is representative of the much larger geopolitical issue that the potential recognition of Somaliland would pose symbolically (or even legally) for the One China Principle.

Conclusion

While speculative, it is plausible to argue that the United States has much to gain strategically from recognising Somaliland. However, it must be aware that if it were to recognize Somaliland, the newest nation would likely cause a significant deterioration of stability in the Horn of Africa, which would be counterintuitive to American trade and security-based aims, and could aggravate the already deteriorating relationship with its greatest rival, China. Ethiopia must also carefully weigh the potential consequences of supporting the U.S.' hypothetical recognition, if the nation does not wish to set off a regional conflict. Moreover, spearheading international recognition for the small breakaway state of Somaliland could have outsized impacts both regionally and globally, affecting everything from localized counterterrorism efforts to the balance of power in the international system.

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