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# Strategic Shifts in US Policy Towards Somaliland : Motives and Possible Scenarios



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## Introduction

In recent years, the United States has shown a marked increase in its interest in Somaliland. This attention comes amid significant political transformations in the Horn of Africa and growing international competition, particularly between the United States and China. These developments

have prompted decision-makers in Washington to reconsider relations with Somaliland, raising critical questions about the potential for US recognition and the implications such a move would have for regional and international security.





## Executive Summary

This research paper analyzes the evolving direction of US foreign policy toward Somaliland, a region that has maintained relative political stability despite lacking international recognition as an independent state. The paper examines the primary motives driving a potential US policy shift, including leveraging Somaliland's strategic location, containing China's expanding influence in the Horn of Africa, and addressing eroding confidence in Djibouti as a key US partner. The analysis highlights key indicators of this

policy shift, such as legislative moves within the US Congress to support recognition, the "Project 2025" recommendation to formalize relations, and the increasing frequency of official visits between Washington and Hargeisa. Finally, the paper outlines three possible scenarios for future US policy: full diplomatic recognition, a deepened strategic partnership without formal recognition, or American-led support for a political settlement between Mogadishu and Hargeisa.

## Keywords

Somaliland, American influence, Horn of Africa, Chinese influence.



## Section I : Somaliland's Quest for Recognition: Internal Stability and Diplomatic Outreach

Located in the Horn of Africa with a strategic coastline along the Gulf of Aden, Somaliland shares borders with Djibouti, Ethiopia, and the Somali region of Puntland. Since declaring independence from Somalia in 1991, the region has been on a persistent quest for international recognition. To this end, Somaliland has established a comprehensive political system with executive, legislative, and judicial branches, mirroring the institutional structures of a sovereign state.

### • Executive Authority

The President, who serves as both Head of State and Head of Government, sits at the apex of the executive branch and is directly elected for a five-year term. The current president, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi (Irro), won the presidential election in November 2024. The President appoints ministers to implement government policy, a process that requires careful consideration of tribal and clan representation to ensure political stability and broad-based support. This balancing act is crucial, as neglecting it could fuel internal conflict. The President also functions as a national mediator, resolving tribal disputes to maintain social cohesion.

### • Legislative Authority

Somaliland's bicameral legislature consists of the House of Representatives (Wakilo) and the Senate (Gurti). The 82 members of the House of Representatives are elected from political parties

for five-year terms and perform traditional legislative functions, including proposing laws, approving the budget, and overseeing the executive branch. The Senate also has 82 members, composed of esteemed clan and tribal elders selected through traditional mechanisms. Its primary role is to review legislation passed by the House, particularly on matters of culture, religion, national security, and constitutional law. All draft laws must be approved by the Senate before receiving presidential assent, creating a system that harmonizes modern governance with traditional customs.

### • Judicial Authority

The judiciary is headed by the Supreme Court, with a structure of lower courts of appeal and district courts. The formal judiciary performs essential functions, such as interpreting the constitution, ensuring checks and balances on the other branches of government, and adjudicating civil and criminal cases. Alongside this formal system exists a customary dispute resolution mechanism known as XEER. This traditional legal framework, administered by clan elders, consists of long-standing customs and procedures for resolving conflicts and is particularly prevalent in rural areas.

To complement its internal state-building, Somaliland has engaged in vigorous diplomatic efforts to gain international recognition and break its political isolation.

1 Mariel Ferragamo & Claire Klobucista, Somaliland: The Horn Of Africa's Breakaway State, Council On Foreign Relations, Accessed On 4/7/2025.  
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2 Fathi Garaad, Understanding Somaliland's political system, GEESKA, Accessed on 4/7/2025.  
<https://shorturl.at/PN9cH>

3 Basillioh Rukanga & Ibrahim Aden, Somaliland opposition leader wins presidential election, BBC News, Accessed on 4/7/2025.  
<https://shorturl.at/5zXj5>



## • Diplomatic Visits as a Tool for Recognition

High-level official visits are a key component of Somaliland's diplomatic strategy. A notable example was former President Muse Bihi Abdi's visit to the United States in 2022, which coincided with the introduction of a bipartisan bill by members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to study the feasibility of direct US-Somaliland relations. In June 2025, current President Irro visited Kenya to meet with President William Ruto and other senior officials, building on a previous agreement signed five years earlier to deepen cooperation in trade and air transport. President Irro has also pursued stronger economic ties with the UAE, visiting the Hamriyah Port in Dubai last February, and has worked to de-escalate regional tensions with Djibouti through an official visit last May. A forthcoming visit to Addis

Ababa is expected to focus on reviving a 2024 agreement granting Ethiopia access to the Port of Berbera.

## • Representative Offices to Enhance Global Standing

To solidify its international presence, Somaliland has established a network of representative offices in key global capitals. These include offices in the United States (opened in 2017), Ethiopia, Djibouti, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, Sweden, and Turkey.

Through these diplomatic initiatives, Hargeisa aims to build practical relationships and create shared interests with a wide array of countries, paving the way for eventual legal recognition despite the turbulent political landscape of the Horn of Africa.

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## Section II: US Strategic Calculations: Motives and Indicators of a Policy Shift

Although Washington does not officially recognize Somaliland, political and diplomatic engagement has grown significantly in recent years. This shift is driven by a convergence of strategic interests as the United States navigates increasing competition from global powers in the Horn of Africa.

### Washington's Motives for Engaging Somaliland

#### 1. Leveraging Somaliland's Strategic Location:

Somaliland possesses a geopolitically vital location, with an 850-kilometer coastline on the Gulf of Aden at the crossroads of global trade. Its Port of Berbera, situated near the critical Bab al-Mandab Strait, offers the United States a strategic asset. Control over this port would enable Washington to protect maritime trade, conduct counter-terrorism operations, and enhance maritime surveillance in one of the world's most important commercial waterways. Amid rising threats from Houthi attacks on shipping, a stable partner in Somaliland—which remains largely outside of Chinese influence—presents a valuable opportunity to secure this vital corridor.

#### 2. Countering Chinese Influence in the Horn of Africa:

China has been systematically expanding its influence across Africa, with a particular focus on the Horn. Its first overseas military base is in Djibouti, a country Beijing considers a key node in its Belt and Road Initiative. China has financed

the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway and established the largest free trade zone in Africa there, solidifying its economic and military presence. Despite the US paying approximately \$60 million annually for its base in Djibouti, China's deep investments in infrastructure and its military footprint have shifted the balance of power in Beijing's favor. Somaliland, being relatively free of Chinese influence, offers the US a strategic foothold to counterbalance Beijing's regional dominance.

#### 3. Eroding Confidence in Djibouti as a Strategic Partner:

While the US maintains its largest permanent military base in Africa at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, confidence in the partnership has waned. Djibouti's refusal to allow the United States to launch attacks against the Houthis from its territory, coupled with its deepening ties to China, has raised concerns in Washington. The "Project 2025" policy proposal explicitly voices this concern, recommending the recognition of Somaliland as a preemptive measure against the deterioration of US influence in Djibouti. Somaliland's location and the potential of the Port of Berbera provide an ideal alternative for projecting US power in the region.

#### 4. Alignment of Somaliland's Foreign Policy with US Interests:

Hargeisa has adopted foreign policy positions that align with Washington's, most notably by establishing diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 2020. This, combined with its stable political institutions, makes Somaliland an attractive and reliable potential partner for the United States.

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9 Eimhin McGann, China Tightens its Grip on Djibouti, I Globe News, Accessed on 7/8/2025.  
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## Second: Washington's preliminary moves to recognize Somaliland.

Although the United States has not yet recognized Somaliland as an independent state, recent changes in Washington's policy toward Hargeisa indicate that Washington is close to implementing this step, regardless of the form of this recognition.

### Indicators of a US Policy Shift

#### 1. Congressional Support for Recognition:

The issue of recognizing Somaliland is gaining traction in US decision-making circles. Last June, Representative Scott Perry introduced legislation to recognize Somaliland as an independent state, arguing that its stability warrants American support amid great-power competition. This bill has received support from other members of Congress, including Representatives Andy Ogles and Tom Tiffany, who have publicly praised Somaliland's democratic progress and reliability. This growing support creates a political foundation for a formal shift in US policy, whether through full recognition or a deepened partnership.

#### 2. "Project 2025" and its Recommendation:

"Project 2025," a policy roadmap developed by the right-leaning Heritage Foundation for a potential second Trump administration, specifically recommends recognizing Somaliland. It frames this as a necessary step to counter the decline of Washington's strategic position in Djibouti. If implemented, this would represent a fundamental departure from the long-standing US policy of supporting Somalia's territorial integrity.

#### 3. Somalia's Inability to Offer a Viable Alternative:

In an attempt to dissuade Washington from recognizing Somaliland, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud offered the United States control over the Port of Berbera and a nearby airbase. This offer, which Mogadishu has no authority to make, was rejected by Hargeisa and met with reservations in Washington, highlighting its lack of feasibility and reinforcing the view that Somaliland remains a distinct and necessary partner for engagement.

#### 4. Exchange of High-Level Official Visits:

Recent visits signal deepening engagement. The US Ambassador to Somalia, Richard Riley, and General Michael Langley, Commander of US Africa Command (AFRICOM), recently met with President Irro in Hargeisa to discuss shared security interests. The US delegation also visited the Port of Berbera to assess its infrastructure, a clear sign of growing security cooperation.

Despite these indicators, a formal recognition of Somaliland faces significant challenges. Such a move could destabilize the Horn of Africa, undermine Turkish mediation efforts between Somalia and Ethiopia, and provoke a strong negative reaction from China, which would likely reaffirm its support for a unified Somalia and could expand its own military presence in the region.



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11 Congressman Scott Perry, "Congressman Scott Perry Introduces 'Republic of Somaliland Independence Act'", Accessed on 10/7/2025.  
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12 Mike Brest, "US Officials Traveled to Somaliland for Meeting to Discuss Shared Interests", Saxafi Media, Accessed on 10/7/2025.  
<https://shorturl.at/JHFOT>

## Section III: Three Possible Scenarios for US Policy

As Washington calibrates its approach, its policy toward Somaliland is likely to follow one of three possible paths. The chosen scenario will reveal the future direction of American foreign policy in the Horn of Africa and define Somaliland's role in the regional and international landscape.

### Scenario 1: Full and Formal Recognition of Somaliland

In this scenario, Washington would officially recognize Somaliland as a sovereign state, becoming the first country to do so. This path is supported by the motives outlined above, including the "Project 2025" recommendation and backing from influential members of Congress. Recognition would allow the US to fully consolidate its influence in Hargeisa, secure its interests at the Port of Berbera, and create a powerful counterbalance to China.

However, this scenario carries significant risks. It would be vehemently rejected by Mogadishu, likely leading to a collapse in US-Somali relations and potentially creating a power vacuum that could be exploited by terrorist groups like Al-Shabaab. It would also provoke strong opposition from regional and international actors, including China, and could destabilize ongoing diplomatic efforts in the Horn of Africa. Given these severe potential repercussions, this scenario may be seen as a long-term possibility rather than an immediate option.

### Scenario 2: Deepened Strategic Partnership without Formal Recognition

To avoid the destabilizing effects of full recognition, the United States could pursue a policy of deepening its partnership with Somaliland across

security, economic, and diplomatic domains without extending formal recognition. This pragmatic approach would allow Washington to achieve many of its strategic goals—such as security cooperation and access to the Port of Berbera—while maintaining its official policy on Somali unity.

This scenario represents a mutually beneficial middle ground. The US would gain a reliable new security partner, and Somaliland would receive de facto legitimacy and tangible support for its development and security. This path would allow Washington to advance its interests while minimizing regional fallout.

### Scenario 3: US Support for Reconciliation Between Hargeisa and Mogadishu

In this scenario, the United States would actively support a political settlement between Somaliland and the federal government of Somalia. This could involve mediating a compromise that grants Somaliland broad autonomy within a unified federal framework. Such an approach would align with the policies of many of Washington's international partners and would preserve regional stability by resolving the long-standing crisis peacefully.

This path would avoid the risks of formal recognition while addressing Somaliland's grievances. By fostering a durable political consensus, the United States could help create a more stable and unified partner in the Horn of Africa, capable of resisting external pressures and internal fragmentation.





## Conclusion

**T**he relationship between the United States and Somaliland is evolving rapidly, driven by geopolitical shifts and critical US strategic interests in the Horn of Africa. While a formal declaration of recognition has not yet occurred, all indicators suggest that Washington is moving toward a more direct and substantial engagement. The ultimate form of this engagement—whether full recognition, an informal strategic partnership, or a mediated political settlement—remains to be seen. The decision will

be fraught with challenges, as the strategic benefits of a closer relationship with Hargeisa are weighed against the profound risks of destabilizing the Horn of Africa. The path Washington chooses will have lasting consequences for the security and stability of the entire region.