

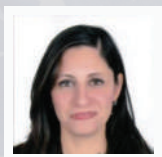


AFRICAN NARRATIVES

A US Base on the Horizon in Somaliland: Why Now? What Next?



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Introduction

In a move reflecting the escalating international competition in the Horn of Africa, the government of Somaliland has proposed hosting a US military base on its territory. Although the initiative is still in its early stages, it carries significant strategic dimensions and raises critical questions about its timing, objectives, and potential reper-

cussions for the regional landscape. Is Somaliland attempting to bolster its international standing, or is it entering the great-power race for influence? This analysis explores the strategic objectives behind the proposal and the potential consequences of such a move.

I. Strategic Objectives

Somaliland's offer to establish a US military base is a geopolitically sensitive move that reflects a clear intersection of security and strategic interests for both Hargeisa and Washington. While Somaliland seeks to leverage a military partnership to enhance its international standing, the United States views the potential site as an opportunity to deepen its influence in a vital region marked by increasing international competition.

1. The Geopolitical Significance of Somaliland and the Port of Berbera

Somaliland occupies a unique geopolitical position that gives it immense strategic importance. Located in northern Somalia, it overlooks the Gulf of Aden near the Bab al-Mandab Strait, one of the world's most critical maritime passages, through which nearly a third of global shipping traffic passes. Its proximity to Djibouti and Ethiopia makes it a vital crossroads between the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Gulf.

This strategic importance is magnified by the Port of Berbera, Somaliland's primary commercial gateway and one of the most prominent ports on the Red Sea. Recent strategic investments by DP World have significantly enhanced its operational capabilities, positioning it as a critical logistics hub not only for Somaliland but also for landlocked countries like Ethiopia. This development has transformed the port from a commercial facility into a pivotal platform for regional and international influence, attracting the attention of global powers like the United States, China, and the UAE, all of whom see it as a strategic asset for securing trade routes and projecting power.

2. Bolstering US Influence and Securing Vital Interests

For the United States, establishing a military base in Somaliland aligns with a broader strategic vision to consolidate its influence in the Horn of

Africa and around the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Such a move would help Washington protect its strategic and economic interests, including investments in the energy and mining sectors, and enhance its ability to monitor regional geopolitical shifts. A base in Somaliland would also bolster US efforts to combat terrorism, counter maritime piracy, and contain threats from the Houthi group in Yemen. Amid escalating competition with China, Russia, and Turkey, a new military posture in the region is essential for Washington to maintain its strategic superiority.

3. Countering Chinese Expansion

The Horn of Africa has become a pivotal arena in the US-China competition for global influence. Washington views with growing concern what it considers "Chinese military entrenchment" in the region, particularly after Beijing established its first overseas military base in Djibouti. The US fears that China's expanding presence near critical trade and energy supply lines threatens the regional balance of power.

In this context, Somaliland's offer presents a strategic opportunity for Washington to reposition itself in the Red Sea. A base in Berbera could serve as an alternative or complement to Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, enhancing the US's ability to respond rapidly to crises in both East Africa and the Middle East. It would also expand maritime surveillance capabilities in the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait at a time when Chinese influence is on the rise. This move is not merely about securing a new ally but is part of a heated international race to reshape the balance of power in a strategically vital region.

4. Political Recognition: Somaliland's Ultimate Goal

For the internationally unrecognized entity of Somaliland, hosting a US military base is a strategic lever to achieve its primary objective: formal

political recognition from a major world power. By presenting itself as a reliable security partner in a turbulent region, Hargeisa aims to redefine its position on the international stage.

Beyond the political dimension, Somaliland hopes that military cooperation with Washington will strengthen its defense and security capabilities, enabling it to better confront regional challenges such as terrorism and tensions with the federal

government in Mogadishu. Furthermore, a closer relationship with the United States could enhance its economic legitimacy, attracting foreign investment and development aid that would solidify its de facto independence. The offer to host a military base is thus a multifaceted political tool aimed at achieving long-awaited international recognition.



II. Potential Implications

While a US base in Somaliland could enhance economic and security cooperation, it also carries the risk of significant repercussions that could destabilize the region and affect the interests of neighboring states.

1. Escalating International Competition

The establishment of a US base is expected to exacerbate international competition in the Horn of Africa, particularly between the United States and China. This is compounded by Somaliland's recent maritime cooperation agreement with Taiwan, a move that Beijing, which considers Taiwan a renegade province, views as a direct threat to its "One China" principle.

In response, China may strengthen its ties with the Somali federal government and could consider establishing its own military base on Somalia's coast or expanding its presence in Djibouti. This

could trigger a regional and international arms race, transforming the Red Sea into a flashpoint between major powers and posing a direct threat to the national security of countries like Egypt.

2. Shifting Regional Balances

A US base and political recognition of Somaliland would likely be met with reservations from regional actors. Egypt and Djibouti may view the move as a challenge to the existing balance of interests. For Djibouti, it could undermine its leverage over Ethiopia, as approximately 95% of Ethiopia's foreign trade currently passes through its ports.

For Egypt, this development could pose a clear threat to its national security by strengthening American and Israeli influence in the Red Sea at the expense of its own interests. It could also weaken Egypt's role in strategic ports such as

Berbera, Djibouti, and Port Sudan, limiting its strategic maneuverability. Meanwhile, the UAE, which operates the port of Berbera, and Israel, which seeks to enhance its intelligence capabilities in the region, may benefit from a US presence, further complicating the strategic landscape.

3. Threats to Somalia's Unity and Stability

A US base in Somaliland and formal recognition would pose a direct threat to Somalia's unity and undermine the legitimacy of the central government in Mogadishu. This could fuel separatist

movements in other regions, leading to the disintegration of the state and deepening societal divisions. It might also provoke military confrontations between federal and Somaliland forces in disputed areas.

This move could also fuel popular hostility toward the United States, prompting the Somali government to seek support from rival powers like China, Russia, or Iran to counterbalance foreign influence. If international competition further destabilizes Somalia, the repercussions could extend to neighboring countries, posing a threat to regional security, particularly in Egypt's southern strategic vicinity.

III. Possible Scenarios

Three potential paths emerge for the proposed US base in Somaliland:

1. Direct Acceptance

The US could formally accept the offer, establishing a base in Berbera and signing diplomatic and economic agreements with Somaliland. This would likely be met with rejection from Mogadishu and could escalate tensions with other regional powers, creating a complex web of conflicting interests.

2. Conditional Acceptance

Washington could adopt a more cautious approach, engaging in limited and unannounced

logistical and intelligence cooperation with Somaliland while coordinating with the federal government in Mogadishu to preserve Somalia's territorial integrity and avoid regional tensions.

3. Rejection

The US may choose to reject the offer to avoid provoking its regional partners. However, this could push Somaliland to turn to alternative powers like China or Russia, which would further escalate international competition in the Horn of Africa.





Conclusion

The proposal for a US military base in Somaliland is a complex development where local ambitions intertwine with global geopolitics in a fragile and volatile regional context. This new equation demands that regional powers like Egypt adopt a more visible and influential approach to protect their interests in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa amidst growing international competition.