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# SOMALILAND: A PARTNER FOR AN AMERICA FIRST AFRICA APPROACH

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## TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ A U.S. partnership with the breakaway region of Somaliland would be beneficial for both U.S. national security and economic goals.
- ★ The prior U.S. “One Somalia” policy has failed to protect U.S. interests in Somalia and Somaliland
- ★ Somaliland is a willing partner of the U.S., having shunned adversarial approaches in hopes of a potential partnership.
- ★ There is pre-existing support for Somaliland as a partner both within the current Trump administration and within Congress.

## OVERVIEW

Somaliland—the breakaway region in northern Somalia along its border with Ethiopia and Djibouti—is unfamiliar to most Americans, yet this territory could be an anchor for a robust America First approach to Africa. Located in the Horn of Africa, the geography of Somaliland makes it central to addressing conflicts and protecting world trade, particularly in its Port of Berbera which has strategic importance on one of the world’s busiest trade routes. Also, given its location on the Gulf of Aden, removed from the war-torn areas just outside of Mogadishu, it is within range of striking both the Houthis in Yemen to the north and al-Shabaab to the East.

With the region having declared itself a breakaway region from the larger Somalia in 1991, it has faced a persistent terror threat in al-Shabaab. However, unlike Somalia, Somaliland has seen success in keeping al-Shabaab at bay, with the last major attack in Somaliland occurring in 2008 ([ACLED, 2024](#)). With the Trump Administration’s increased focus on drone strikes against ISIS and al-Shabaab as well as its new strategic mantra of “trade not aid,” the current situation may be prime for a closer look at



Somaliland ([Vandiver, 2025](#); [Goko, 2025](#)). Following the November 2024 election of new president Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, there has been a willingness on the part of Somaliland for increased engagement with the United States. As the threats of malign actors in the Horn of Africa grow, a partnership with Somaliland could bring economic benefits to the United States while also securing a key strategic site on the continent, thereby preventing threats from materializing.

## AMBITIONS OF RUSSIA AND CHINA VIS-A-VIS SOMALILAND

U.S. adversaries, namely Russia and China, understand the value of Somaliland's geographic area. In previous years, China and Russia have aggressively made advances to court the Somaliland government. However, Somaliland has, for the most part, rebuffed these efforts, with a rejection of Russia's inquiry to build a naval base on the Port of Berbera ([Le Grange, 2025](#)). The Somaliland government has in recent years deepened its ties to Taiwan—a direct snub of China and evidence of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) failure to leverage its economic largesse to advance its agenda ([Askar, 2020](#)).

However, these initial failures have not stopped the CCP from continuing to pursue Somaliland. The CCP views Somaliland as a pivotal piece of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) due to its coastal access and potential opportunities for CCP-led infrastructure development. The continued exertion of effort by the CCP towards Somaliland can also be seen through an increase in CCP investment within Somalia. Somalia, which due to its constant political uncertainty and weak governance has historically not engaged in international financial agreements, recently entered into a ~\$1.2 billion deal with China to develop its infrastructure, energy and agriculture sectors ([FTL Somalia, 2024](#)). While none of these investments look set to be in Somaliland, these investments in Somaliland's immediate neighborhood represent a real source of pressure for it to join China's BRI.

The Russian government has engaged directly with Somaliland, including sending a delegation led by the Chairman of the Russian Trade Association to the region late February of 2025 ([Eurafrica, 2025](#)). While no formal military agreements have yet been made, from Russia's standpoint, this visit could set the stage for future engagements to build towards such arrangements ([Rodrigues, 2025](#)).

The Russian interest in Somaliland is less overt in nature and lies in the military opportunities presented by Somaliland and seem urgent to Russia, given its regional footprint. Having previously held a heavy military presence in the Gulf of Aden-Red Sea region (GARS) in the 1960s and 1970s, Russia today has a new need to look to the Horn of Africa, given its loss of a naval base in Tartus, Syria—Russia's only formal military installation in the Mediterranean. Russia's loss of Tartus coincides with its overall diminished influence in the Syria in light of the fall of Bashar al-Assad ([Sutton, 2024](#)). The Port of Berbera, which was under Soviet control from 1972-1977 ([Hanhimaki, 2012](#)), therefore presents Russia with an opportunity to maintain and potentially expand its military presence in the Mediterranean.

Further pursuing its maritime goals on the continent, in February of 2025, Moscow finalized an agreement with Sudan allowing for the construction of a naval base in Port Sudan ([Sudan Tribune, 2025](#)). Coupled with a potential presence in Somaliland, this arrangement would also provide Russia with dominant influence over economic and military activity along the Red Sea.



## SOMALILAND'S NEW CHALLENGES

Somaliland has effectively been functioning as an autonomous region—including for five days June 1960 as an independent nation with international recognition from 35 nations—following the conclusion of its status as a British protectorate. Despite attempts to unify the former British protectorate with its Italian protectorate counterpart, Somaliland—which redeclared its independence in 1991—has consistently maintained its own form of government throughout this period. There is moreover precedent for direct U.S. engagement with Somaliland, including in 1960 when the United States conveyed its official congratulations to Somaliland on its independence ([Republic of Somaliland, 2025](#)).

Given these circumstances and history, U.S. policy does not need to be constrained by the challenges facing re-unification. This is especially the case when the U.S. has a rare opportunity for partnership in a strategically significant region in the crosshairs of our top adversaries. And today, Somaliland may face new threats, particularly as Iran increasing looks to pivot to Africa in its weakened state ([Tan, 2025](#)).

The recent emergence of the Houthi-Al-Shabaab alliance in Somalia and terrorist networks within Sudan amid its civil war point to new threats in the Horn of Africa, and therefore new vulnerabilities for those who seek a better future for the continent through partnership with the United States. Alongside on-going conflicts in neighboring Ethiopia and Sudan, these vulnerabilities have the potential to place the entire region at risk.

Lacking any form of international recognition, Somaliland has few tools on its own to face these new security risks. Despite its achievements, real political, economic, and military obstacles for the region remain. For example, a lack of formal international status prevents Somaliland from being able to access international aid resources, such as those from the United Nations, and limits its ability to make formal trade agreements with other countries.

## A NEW U.S. ENGAGEMENT WITH SOMALILAND

Deepening U.S. engagement with Somaliland requires addressing the region's fraught conditions—specifically the fragile state of Somalia's governance outside of the capital of Mogadishu and the U.S.'s antiquated “One-Somalia” policy that only recognizes official engagement through the government in the capital city. As part of this policy, from 2002 to -2022, the U.S. provided Somalia with \$2.91 billion in peacekeeping operations assistance—a stark contrast to the entirety of Sub-Saharan Africa, which within same time frame only received \$183.39 million—while conditions both in the country and across the continent have deteriorated ([Yousif, 2023](#)).

A new approach to partnership, therefore, remains necessary. A starting point could be the Somaliland Partnership Act ([S. 3861, 2022](#)). The Act called for the Secretaries of State and Defense to assess the feasibility of a U.S. partnership with Somaliland. Furthermore, on June 12, 2025, Rep. Scott Perry (PA-10) introduced the “Republic of Somaliland Independence Act” ([H.R. 3992, 2025](#)), which, if passed, would authorize the president to officially recognize Somaliland as an independent nation. The



notion of potential statehood has received bi-cameral support, with Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) calling for continued discussion and next steps on the matter ([Brest, 2025](#)).

Towards the end of its first term, the Trump Administration openly praised Somaliland, particularly for its partnership with Taiwan, as a positive sign of the region's alignment ([Somaliland Chronicle, 2025](#)). The Biden Administration, however, not only ignored this appreciation of Somaliland but reverted to the One-Somalia policy, particularly through the efforts of its champion in the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Ilhan Omar. With her removal from the Committee in 2023 and the return of the Trump Administration, there is a renewed hope for more effective engagement ([Nahmias, 2023](#)).

The case of Somaliland—a small region that, despite clear material opportunities and a dangerous neighborhood, rejects our adversaries' advances—represents an opportunity to form a new coalition in the African region, with partners committed to mutual prosperity and to a better future for the region. With Somaliland, that partnership could begin by focusing on counterterrorism and commercial efforts.

On the counterterrorism side, targeted attacks against Al-Shabaab militants in Somalia were among the first actions taken by the Trump Administration ([Copp et al., 2025](#)). With suppressing the group being a priority for both the administration and Somaliland, the U.S. could work with both Mogadishu and Hargeisa—the capital of Somaliland—vis-à-vis joint trainings and increased intelligence sharing. Also, with the U.S. Navy having an installation in neighboring Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, support for a better developed Mogadishu-Hargeisa security force would further deter malign actors in the Red Sea.

Economically, the U.S. could leverage a partnership for presence on Somaliland's ports while also helping to develop Somaliland's critical mineral resources. A deal would not only keep malign actors at bay militarily but would also bolster U.S. supply chains. In line with the Trump Administration's goal of increased bi-lateral investments—such as the deals struck during the President's visit to the Middle East and the proposition for a securities agreement with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)—the framework already exists ([Baskaran, 2025](#)). With Somaliland having already agreed to trade deals with Ethiopia ([Webb, 2024](#)) and the United Arab Emirates ([Hiiraan, 2025](#)), economic engagement could further complement recent U.S. investments in the Lobito Corridor ([360Angola, 2025](#)) and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic corridor ([Pravda, 2025](#)), in addition to access to DRC mineral deposits as part of the U.S. brokered peace agreement between the DRC and Rwanda ([U.S. Department of State, 2025](#)).

## CONCLUSION

With bad actors and our foreign adversaries looking to exploit key parts of Africa, Somaliland's future partnerships with the U.S. will play a role in setting that stage for creating the conditions for prosperity and stability in the continent. With direct access to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden vis-à-vis the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, whoever can gain access to the Port of Berbera will obtain a strategic advantage in the region.



Furthermore, in alignment with the Trump Administration's Africa strategy of "trade not aid," the U.S. could leverage a deeper partnership with Somaliland while striking bi-lateral deals with the Somaliland government, thus developing their critical mineral's infrastructure and reinforcing U.S. supply chains.

Very rarely in Africa is a state so willing to forgo what are most likely lucrative deals in hopes of a partnership with the U.S. The Trump Administration could take advantage of such a rare opportunity, further advancing U.S. interests both domestically and abroad.



**AUTHOR BIO**

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