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Recognizing Somaliland: A geopolitical game-changer for West Asia?

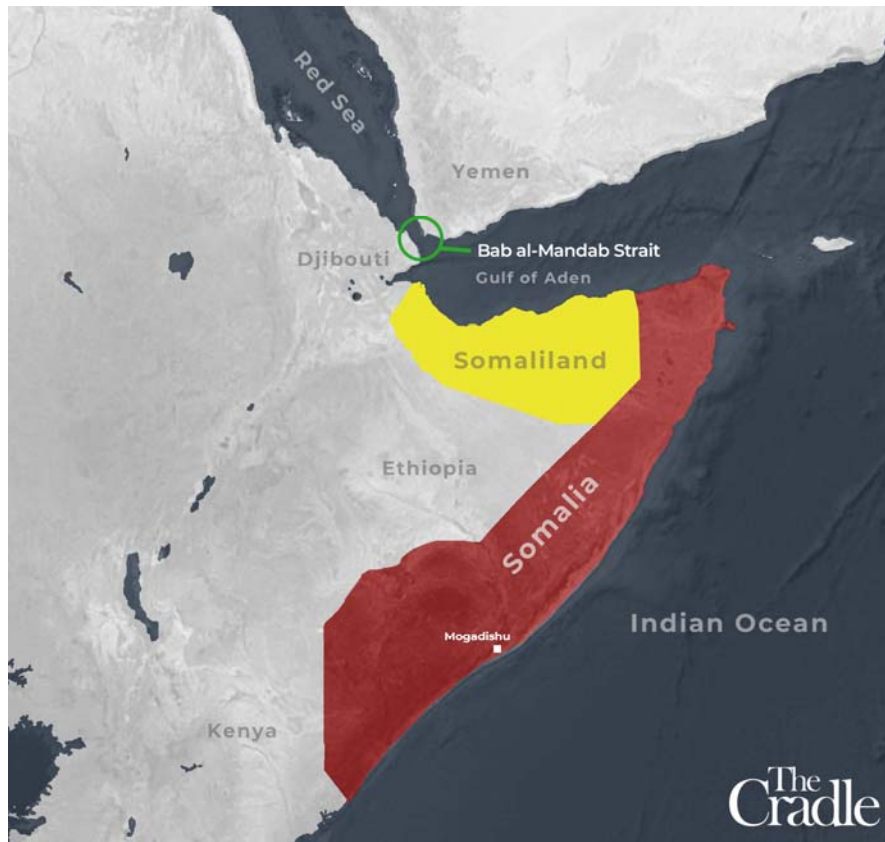
Trump plans to recognize Somaliland in order to bolster the west's foothold in the Horn of Africa against Yemen and counter Chinese influence, but in doing so, risks alienating key regional allies critical for Israel's wars in West Asia.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

In a move that surprised many, US President-elect Donald Trump is set to recognize Somaliland as an independent state. This unprecedented decision, revealed by former British Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson and reported by Semafor, could dramatically reshape geopolitics in the Horn of Africa and the waterways of West Asia.

Positioned near the Arabian Peninsula, Somaliland's recognition would give the west a new strategic foothold in its war against Yemen, which has since October 2023 blockaded ships heading to Israel. However, this move risks straining US relations with key regional allies like Egypt and Turkiye, both of whom maintain strong ties with Somalia.



A current map of the Horn of Africa.

A rising country in the region

Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991 but remains unrecognized by any sovereign state. Despite this, the region has carved out a distinct identity. Home to a third of Somalia's population, Somaliland is roughly the size of Florida and has maintained relative stability, unlike its war-torn neighbor.

While clashes in its eastern regions have intensified since 2023, the bulk of Somaliland remains peaceful. Strategically located near the Gulf of Aden, it commands a crucial maritime corridor for vessels heading to the Suez Canal and Yemen.

Since the onset of the 2014 Yemen War, the UAE has sought partners in the Horn of Africa against the Ansarallah-dominated government in Sanaa. In 2016, the UAE signed a \$442 million deal to build a port in the Somaliland city of Berbera, which is only 260 kilometers away from the Yemeni port city of Aden.

A year later, the port was expanded to include a naval and airbase and, since 2018, has been used to strike inside Yemen. The military base continues to expand, with hangars under construction for more planes.

Possible normalization with, and recognition of Israel

The UAE is now reportedly working on securing a deal between Somaliland and Israel. Interested in securing a foothold near the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, in 2010 Israel became one of only a few countries to establish diplomatic relations with Somaliland, albeit without formal recognition.

Israeli interest in the region has only increased since Yemen began striking them directly in retaliation for the ongoing genocide in Gaza, and it already maintains a joint military and intelligence presence with the UAE on the occupied Yemeni island of Socotra.

Under the UAE-brokered deal, Israel would establish a military base in Somaliland in return for recognition. This foothold would allow Tel Aviv to respond directly to Yemen instead of relying on western countries to do so.

Yet despite the UAE and Israel's ambitions, neither state has recognized Somaliland. In 2010, it was rumored Israel would formalize relations, but they backed down. Doing so would have risked alienating a number of countries in the region.

US involvement in the Horn of Africa

In 1993, the US invaded Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, in the hopes of overthrowing the government. The battle, which saw bodies of US soldiers dragged through the streets, was "the bloodiest firefight involving US troops since Vietnam," according to PBS, and failed in its objective. A few months later, the final remaining US troops were withdrawn.

Starting in 2007, the US military once again intervened in Somalia with naval operations against pirates and launched air strikes against the Salafist insurgent group, Al-Shabaab. Despite these efforts, Al-Shabaab continued to launch deadly attacks against US troops. A month before leaving office, Trump withdrew US troops. In 2022, Joe Biden reversed course, bringing 500 US troops back to Somalia.

Despite Washington's assistance and the Somali government launching a major military campaign in 2022, the impact on Al-Shabaab has been minimal. Fearing a security vacuum, Somalia requested this year that African Union (AU) troops delay their withdrawal.

Somalia lost further control when the region of Puntland announced its independence. Last week, forces in Jubaland clashed with Somali government forces, resulting in the capture of 83 Somali soldiers and a further 600 troops surrendering themselves to Kenya across the border.

Against this backdrop, the Biden administration signaled a potential policy shift by sending a high-profile delegation to congratulate Somaliland's newly elected President, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi. The move was praised by figures like Senator Jim Risch, who criticized the longstanding "One Somalia" policy as a failure.

Advocates of Somaliland's recognition emphasize its stability and democratic governance. Yet, its strategic value as a hub for western military operations against Yemen and a counterweight to China's growing influence in the region is likely the driving force behind this pivot.

Countering China's influence

China's growing presence in the Horn of Africa is a significant factor in US interests in Somaliland. Since 2017, China has operated a major military base in Djibouti – its first in the world – which borders Somaliland and is a key player in the region's geopolitics.

Once a stronghold for western bases, Djibouti has aligned closely with Beijing, even supporting China's actions in Hong Kong and allowing Iranian ships to dock at its port. Djibouti has also requested the US not to conduct airstrikes on Yemen and has allowed Iranian ships to dock at China's military base.

The threat of China in Djibouti is mentioned in Project 2025, which many see as a blueprint for Trump's incoming presidency. It recommends "the recognition of Somaliland statehood as a hedge against the US's deteriorating position in Djibouti."

Somaliland is one of the few countries in the world to have close relations with Taiwan. China has responded by deepening its relations with Somalia, including elevating their ties to a "strategic partnership" and sending aid.

Were the United States to recognize Somaliland, its allies would likely follow suit, just as they did with Kosovo in 2008. Doing so might be risky given the presence of US troops in Somalia, but Trump is likely to pull them out, just as he did in his previous presidency. As a recognized sovereign state, Somaliland would have greater security, which would benefit the UAE and Israel. It would also be a more reliable partner than Djibouti and become a counterweight to China.

Regional players

But recognizing Somaliland could provoke significant backlash from US allies. Egypt, closely aligned with Somalia due to shared concerns over Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam, may view Somaliland's recognition as a betrayal.

As a landlocked nation, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) this year, which would provide Ethiopia with access to the sea through the Berbera port. In response, Egypt signed a defense agreement with Somalia.

Fellow NATO member Turkiye, another key regional player, has invested heavily in Somalia, including establishing its largest foreign military base in Mogadishu, and providing \$1 billion in aid to Somalia between 2011 and 2022. In return, Turkiye was

given preferential treatment with oil exploration contracts. The Ethiopia–Somaliland MoU would undermine Turkiye’s foothold in the region and its ambition for energy independence. Last week, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan brought the leaders of Ethiopia and Somalia together to sign the landmark Ankara Declaration. Much of the agreement is vague, but it was nevertheless a breakthrough, with Ethiopia and Somalia agreeing to respect each other’s territorial integrity.

Under the agreement, Ethiopia and Somalia will continue to engage in dialogue with the goal of deepening their diplomatic relations. The agreement does not affect Ethiopia’s access to Somaliland’s Berbera port, but does dim the latter’s hope of getting recognition from Ethiopia.

Risking support for US and Israeli interests

The US would, therefore, risk losing two allies that have played an important role in protecting Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Egypt has consistently abetted Tel Aviv by refusing to open its border to Gaza and opening crucial trade routes for Israeli-destined goods, while Turkiye continues to send key exports like steel to Israel. Both countries could reverse these policies in retaliation for Somaliland’s recognition.

Like China, Russia has also increased its role in Africa, with a Russian navy base now being established in Port Sudan on the Red Sea. Russia has played a limited role in Somalia, but recently offered military support against Al-Shabab extremists. The AU also supports Somalia’s territorial integrity, and would oppose recognition of Somaliland.

As long as the genocide in Gaza and the war on Yemen continue, Somaliland will be a key player for the west. Trump’s recognition of Somaliland would secure a critical base for the UAE and Israel while countering China’s influence in Djibouti.

However, this move risks alienating key allies like Egypt and Turkiye, whose support has been crucial for US and Israeli interests in the region. Balancing these competing interests will be a defining challenge for the incoming administration.

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