

Policy Brief

Somaliland and the Great Powers

By Hisham Aidi

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As China's presence has expanded into the Horn of Africa, Somaliland has opted to distance itself from Beijing and presented itself as a democratic ally of the West – and Taiwan. On March 17, 2022, three Republican Congressmen introduced a bill titled the "Somaliland Partnership Act," requiring the American Secretary of State to submit annual reports to Congress on assistance provided to Somaliland and conduct a feasibility study on establishing a security partnership with Somaliland. The goal is Washington's recognition of the territory "as a separate and independent country." This piece examines Somaliland's emergence as a de facto state, an entity that has gradually acquired "empirical sovereignty," but not "juridical sovereignty."



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges to Somaliland. The self-declared independent territory in the Horn of Africa is not internationally recognized as a sovereign state. Much has been said about how Somaliland's status of nonrecognition affected its economic and health situation during the pandemic. Given Somaliland's ineligibility for assistance from international financial institutions or bilateral aid from donor countries, aid earmarked for Hargeisa is routed through the government of Somalia in Mogadishu. Tensions with Mogadishu, however, combined with border closures and travel restrictions, have made foreign aid even more scarce. In January of this year, Somaliland Foreign Minister Essa Kayd visited Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, pleading for direct assistance from Western states. Kayd told reporters, "Ninety-eight percent of [the aid] is going to Somalia, and perhaps 2 percent is reaching Somaliland."¹ He also claimed that last summer, Mogadishu delivered COVID vaccines to Somaliland just days before their expiration date, dropping the shipment on the border between the two jurisdictions. Kayd added that Taiwan then stepped in to provide COVID 19 vaccines for Somaliland after the expired delivery was discarded.² Somaliland established relations with Taiwan in July 2020.

As China's presence has expanded in the Horn of Africa, Somaliland has opted to distance itself from Beijing and present itself as a democratic ally of the West – and Taiwan. In March, Somalia's President Musa Bihi Abdi visited Washington, meeting with officials in the Biden administration, congressional leaders, and think tank types. Bihi pressed for the recognition of Somaliland's independence, underlining that while Mogadishu was signing agreements with Beijing, Somaliland was spurning China's offers. "If we were to sign an agreement and accept China as our ally, it means that the freedom of the waterways of that region could be compromised," Kayd said, "That's why we have the Americans paying more attention."³ A number of Republican lawmakers were swayed by Kayd's pitch. On March 17, three Republican Congressmen introduced a bill titled the "Somaliland Partnership Act" that would require the Secretary of State to submit annual reports to Congress on assistance provided to Somaliland, and to conduct a feasibility study on establishing a security partnership with Somaliland, with the ultimate objective being Washington's recognition of the territory, "as a separate and independent country."⁴

This piece examines Somaliland's emergence as a de facto state, an entity that has gradually acquired "empirical sovereignty," but not "juridical sovereignty," and maneuvering through Great Power rivalries since the end of the Cold War.

"COLONIAL LEGACIES"

When the Berlin Conference took place in 1884 and 1885, France had established a foothold in present-day Djibouti, Britain was controlling the northern coast of Somalia, and Italy had conquered the area south of Cape Asir to the border with Kenya. By 1936, the Italians had consolidated their holdings in Italian East Africa including Jubaland in the far south. In 1960, British- and Italian Somaliland united to create the independent Republic of Somalia.

1. <https://saxafimedia.com/somaliland-canada-superpower-rivalry-horn-africa/>

2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-tries-hand-covid-diplomacy-again-with-somaliland-vaccine-gift-2022-01-31/>

3. <https://www.somtribune.com/2022/03/29/the-us-china-battle-for-the-horn-as-somaliland-successfully-charms-the-west/>

4. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/3861/text>

(In 1977, French Somaliland would gain independence as the Republic of Djibouti.) For some months in 1960, Somaliland was an independent state, but the parliament voted to join former Italian-ruled Somalia. In 1961, a national referendum was held wherein a majority of northerners (of present-day Somaliland) voted against unification, but a majority of Southerners voted in favor. Northern army officers would subsequently launch a rebellion to gain Somaliland independence which quickly quelled. Tensions continued to simmer between North and South. In 1969, Siyad Barre, a major general of the gendarmerie, came to power through a coup and overthrew the Somali Republic. As Somalia turned into a Marxist autocracy, Barre's would prove heavy-handed, especially towards the north.

In the early 1980s, a group of exiles from Northern Somalia, primarily members of the more prominent Isaaq clan formed the Somali National Movement to oppose the Barre regime.⁵ As other opposition groups appeared in the northeast, northwest, and south (United Somali Congress), a civil war erupted that culminated with the overthrow of the Barre government in 1991. Somaliland proclaimed its independence that same year. Three decades later, Somaliland has yet to gain international recognition. Still, it has the trappings of a Weberian state, including a bureaucracy, an army, a currency, and perhaps most improbably, an electoral democracy. As one study published in the *Review of African Political Economy* put it, "Somaliland has many of the attributes of a state, with a constitution, a functional parliament and government ministries, an army, a police force and judiciary, and many of the symbols of statehood, such as a flag, its own currency, passports and vehicle license plates. Furthermore, although Somaliland has been unable to secure international recognition, there is a creeping informal and pragmatic acceptance of Somaliland as a political reality."⁶

"REVENUE-BARGAINING"

Political scientists have argued that Somaliland's "ineligibility for foreign assistance" and Hargeisa's need to collect tax revenue locally necessitated "revenue-bargaining" between state officials and societal actors, which in turn produced inclusive, representative, and accountable institutions. This argument, advanced by Nicholas Eubanks, claims that the rise of democratic institutions in Somaliland thus supports the classic thesis about state formation in medieval Europe, whereby a representative state emerged as a result of negotiations between authoritarian state officials in need of revenue and societal actors who agreed to taxation only in exchange for greater government accountability.⁷ Numerous studies have found revenue bargaining and demands for greater accountability in less developed countries, including Ghana, Senegal, and Mauritius.⁸ This, however, does not mean taxation will inevitably lead to accountability: Africa abounds with examples of states that extract local revenue and are highly exclusionary. (As Carles Boix has shown, a particular kind of authoritarianism emerges in countries rich in natural resources (like oil), which state elites can monopolize, as opposed to states where the property regime is more mixed and based on mobile assets.)⁹ Thus, in this argument, foreign aid can reduce a

5. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somaliland/somaliland-democratisation-and-its-discontents>

6. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03056244.2003.9659778>

7. <https://www.amazon.com/Taxation-State-Building-Developing-Countries-Capacity/dp/0521716195>

8. https://books.google.com/books?id=fGTLQCQAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=oil+to+cash+senegal,+ghana&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjLgKiwjaH3AhVMhYkEhb3wACIQ6AF6BAgGEAI#v=onepage&q=oil%20to%20cash%20senegal%2C%20ghana&f=false

9. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/298544195_The_roots_of_democracy

state's reliance on tax revenues, impeding the development of institutions of accountability. State-building in Somaliland has been deeply implicated with the development of a tax base. Somaliland receives a small amount of aid administered by NGOs and development agencies, but this revenue does not accrue to the government.¹⁰ As Eubanks recounts, Somaliland's government was initially unaccountable and exclusionary. The turning point was when the new government tried to take over the port of Berbera by force, and met armed resistance from the clan controlling the area. That confrontation would lead to negotiations and national peace conferences: the private sector agreed to provide much-needed investment, and in exchange, the government began establishing checks and balances and representative institutions.

Somaliland has since rebuilt northern cities ruined by civil war, and improved the economic situation such that average income and infant mortality rate are higher in Somaliland than in southern Somalia.¹¹ Moreover, since 1997, Somalia has held presidential, parliamentary, and district local elections (with a new Constitution ratified in 2001 with broad public support.) In 2009, Human Rights Watch would describe Somaliland's achievements as "both improbable and deeply impressive." As the report stated: "Somaliland has done much to build the foundations of democratic governance grounded in respect for fundamental human rights.... There is a vibrant print media and an active and independent civil society. Somaliland has accomplished these things primarily on its own, in one of the world's most volatile regions. All of this stands in marked contrast not just to the chaos in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, but also to the records of governments across the Horn of Africa."¹² This school of thought suggests that if Somaliland were to gain international recognition and access to foreign aid, that could undermine the social contract underpinning the country's fledgling democracy. Yet international recognition has become a priority for Somaliland's leadership, who has signed strategic and infrastructure agreements with Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates (the latter has signed a contract to manage the port of Berbera for 30 years),¹³ and established representative offices in Washington and Taiwan.

ONE SOMALIA/ONE CHINA

The rise of China, the COVID pandemic and the consolidation of Somaliland democracy seem to have accelerated Hargeisa's push for international recognition. Sympathizers in Congress are seeing Somaliland not simply as a democratic oasis in a region dominated by authoritarian regimes,¹⁴ but also as a bulwark against Chinese influence in East Africa. "Somaliland has stayed faithful to democracy when hardly anyone noticed," said Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation. "We need to be clear eyed about the competition we're in with the Chinese Communist Party... Almost alone in Africa [Somaliland] has been immune to Beijing's overtures and threats."¹⁵ Another think tank specialist wrote, "Recognizing Somaliland's independence would enable the U.S. to hedge against further deterioration of its position in Djibouti, which

10. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1621374

11. <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafricaines/14226?lang=en>

12. <https://www.hrw.org/node/255948/printable/print>

13. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/dubais-dp-world-agrees-to-manage-port-in-somaliland-for-30-years-1464549937>

14. <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/11/13/why-somaliland-is-east-africas-strongest-democracy>

15. <https://www.somtribune.com/2022/03/29/the-us-china-battle-for-the-horn-as-somaliland-successfully-charms-the-west/>

is under Chinese sway.”¹⁶ Djibouti, since 2002, has hosted the American military base of Camp Lemmonier; in 2016, China built a base in this East African nation.

In 2020, Somaliland and Taiwan set up representative offices in each other’s capital cities, irking the governments in Beijing and Mogadishu. China would go on to accuse Taiwan of “fanning the flames” and “harming others.” Kayd would retort that Beijing could not dictate his country’s political alliances: “We were born free and we will stay free. We will run our business the way we want. China cannot dictate, no other country can dictate.”¹⁷ (As China has expanded to Africa, Taiwan has lost support on the continent, with only Eswatini (Swaziland) having full relations with the island.) As Mogadishu has signed bilateral agreements with Beijing, Somaliland has distanced itself from China,¹⁸ and, stressing its democratic credentials, sought to cultivate support in conservative political quarters in the U.S. and Britain. Meanwhile, Western organizations that monitor and democracies have observed that Somaliland’s electoral system needs to be more inclusive. A recent report by the International Crisis Group hailed Somaliland’s parliamentary and local elections held in May 2021 as a “milestone,” showing “the strength of Somaliland democratic culture,” but underlined the complete absence of woman from parliament, and called for greater efforts to include women, under-represented communities, and to open dialogue with the restive eastern regions.

Somaliland’s recent diplomatic charm offensive seems to be paying off. In England, the Conservative MP Gavin Williams has called for Somaliland’s independence, stressing Britain’s ties to the territory, saying, “Our nations have long historic ties, and now it is time to make history together.” Republican and thinktank support notwithstanding, the Biden administration has made clear it has no plans to recognize Somaliland. American officials worry that recognizing Somaliland would jeopardize Washington’s relations with Mogadishu, undermining efforts to contain al-Shabaab. Recognizing Somaliland would also violate the African Union’s 1964 resolution (that called on African states to respect their inherited borders)¹⁹ and set a dangerous precedent, inspiring other regions to break away. As former diplomat Cameron Hudson explained, “They’re doing an end run around the African Union and around their own home region trying to get Washington to give them what they can’t get locally,” adding “That would be sort of like the African Union recognizing Puerto Rico as the 51st U.S. state before the U.S. does.”²⁰ As the war in Tigray, Ethiopia drags on, and Somalia struggles to assert control over its territory, and China continues to expand into Africa, Washington and London’s calculus could change, and Somaliland’s independence could come to be seen as a strategic asset. In such a scenario, the African Union’s norms and resolutions would not figure prominently in the Great Powers’ calculations.

16. <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/the-us-should-recognize-somaliland#:~:text=Recognizing%20Somaliland's%20independence%20would%20enable,and%20consistent%20aspirations%20for%20independence.>

17. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/born-free-somaliland-says-china-cant-dictate-it-over-taiwan-2022-02-11/>

18. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china%E2%80%99s-worldwide-expansion-plan-stops-somaliland-191653>

19. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/abs/organization-of-african-unity-and-african-borders/919F4457846E445089B5708140A53369>

20. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/21/somaliland-united-states-independence-recognition/>

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Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of *Redeploying the State* (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of *Black Routes to Islam* (Palgrave, 2009). In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's Encarta Africana project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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