



A Strategic Partnership for Somaliland: Lessons from Taiwan

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Executive Summary

This briefing explores the growing bilateral relationship between the Republic of Somaliland and the Republic of China (Taiwan) and its implications for the broader geopolitical contestations both in the Horn of Africa and the South China Sea, and more specifically, the Taiwan Strait. Both countries are situated in strategic regions vital for global supply chains. Despite lacking widespread recognition, both Somaliland and Taiwan function as sovereign states, maintaining internal stability and pursuing economic development. However, Taiwan's remarkable success as a global economic power and robust democracy, despite its formal diplomatic isolation, stands as a potent model for Somaliland. The partnership, formalized in 2020 with the reciprocal opening of representative offices in Hargeisa and Taipei, has yielded immediate benefits. These include educational scholarships for Somaliland students and Taiwanese investment in health, infrastructure, and the oil and gas sectors. However, the relationship's strategic significance, far surpasses these initial engagements. This partnership positions Somaliland at the nexus of major power competition. It has drawn vehement opposition from the People's Republic of China (PRC), which actively seeks to undermine the ties.

Taiwan's economic development has historically been bolstered by privileged access to the U.S. market and the implicit security alliance with the United States, including military support. Somaliland

should capitalize on its geopolitical location by actively promoting itself as a stable and trustworthy partner in a perpetually shifting regional landscape. This would help it gain access to international markets and forge strategic partnerships. This would involve intensifying diplomatic engagement to build a coalition of nations that recognize its *de facto* statehood and have a strategic interest in the stability of the Horn of Africa. By proactively offering its unique assets, Somaliland can negotiate with regional and distant countries for preferential trade agreements, rather than waiting for unilateral concessions. Ultimately, the goal is to translate its geographic and political significance into tangible economic and diplomatic partnerships, creating a compelling case for engagement that aligns with the interests of foreign countries and their markets.

However, the Somaliland-Taiwan relationship faces significant challenges, including the intense pressure from the PRC to sever ties, a significant developmental disparity between the two partners, and institutional weaknesses within Somaliland's state apparatus. For the partnership to succeed, Somaliland must implement a strategic framework focused on overcoming existing obstacles and driving national development. To this end, the paper recommends Somaliland must:

1. Develop a clear and strategic foreign policy framework and moving beyond ad hoc diplomacy. Establishing clear, long-term objectives and strategies for managing the Taiwan relationship will ensure the delivery

of tangible, sustainable benefits across multiple sectors.

2. Prioritize institutional and human development by learning from Taiwan's experience—developmental, governance, and foreign policy strategy—and focus intensely on building the capacity of the state institutions and investing in human capital through education and training, which is a foundation for effective governance and international collaboration.
3. Leverage its geographic position for economic gain and actively market its strategic location on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This will attract Taiwanese and other international investments in logistics, supply chains, and the Berbera Special Economic Zone, transforming the country into a regional trade and logistics hub.
4. Diversify its cooperation with Taiwan and expand the collaboration beyond the current initiatives—rather move into critical areas and disciplines desperately needed by the state, such as agriculture, technology transfer, maritime and cyber security, engineering, health, fisheries and marine sciences, water sciences, green and renewable energy, and tourism. Using Taiwanese expertise and technology will modernize the key sectors of Somaliland's economy.
5. Finally, and more importantly, Somaliland must foster internal commitment and good governance by fostering a leadership culture dedicated to the national interest, and developing inclusive, transparent policies to build resilient and legitimate state institutions capable of engaging with international partners, such as Taiwan.

The Taiwan-Somaliland partnership represents a unique opportunity for Somaliland to accelerate its development without waiting for formal recognition. By adopting a coherent strategic vision and learning from Taiwan's pragmatic resilience, Somaliland can strengthen its sovereignty and become an indispensable partner in a critically contested region.

Introduction

Taiwan is a country in East Asia that is

officially called the Republic of China (ROC). It is separated from mainland China by the Taiwan Strait. The political status of Taiwan is complex and is a subject of international dispute (Glenzer, 2025). The PRC claims sovereignty over Taiwan, asserting that it is an inalienable part of its territory (Al Banna, 2024). In contrast, Taiwan is an island nation, separate from continental China (Chen, 1998), that functions as a distinct polity with its own democratically elected government, robust legal system, and sovereign institutions, presenting a stark contrast to the PRC's single-party rule, the Chinese Communist Party.

Despite its contested international status, Taipei has leveraged its strategic position and cultivated extensive diplomatic and unofficial relations with countries across Asia, Oceania, Europe, the Americas, and Africa (Al Banna, 2024). These relations are multifaceted, encompassing strong economic ties, informal political dialogue, cultural exchanges, and security cooperation. A key example is the relationship between Taipei and Washington, where the United States maintains strong, multifaceted, albeit unofficial relations with Taiwan covering political, security, and trade matters (Gordon et al. 2023). This relationship is underpinned by significant economic interdependence: Taiwan is the United States' 7th largest merchandise trading partner (\$158.6 billion in total goods trade), 10th largest export market (\$42.3 billion), and 8th largest source of imports (\$116.3 billion), according to 2024 U.S. data (Sutter, 2025). Therefore, the U.S. and Taiwan are major trading partners, with trade growing significantly. Not only the economy, but also the security and military dimension is the cornerstone of the Taiwan-U.S. relationship.

Despite limited formal diplomatic recognition, sustained international engagement has greatly benefited Taiwan. Strategic support, particularly from the United States and Japan during critical times, was instrumental in developing Taiwan's major infrastructure and education systems in the twentieth century. This foundation, along with ongoing economic and security partnerships, gave it the stability

it needed to develop so rapidly (Chou, 1995; Tun-jen, 2001). Therefore, Taiwan's story is not one of isolation but of thriving through substantive, practical international relationships that exist alongside its unique political situation.

Despite being *de facto* independent states, Taiwan and Somaliland stand at different stages of development; Taiwan, a global economic powerhouse with advanced infrastructure, is at the forefront of development, while Somaliland, an emerging state facing economic challenges, is struggling to rebuild fragile institutions from the aftermath of conflict. Despite this stark contrast in economic strength and institutional development, their parallel status as diplomatically isolated entities creates a unique foundation for mutually beneficial relations. This engagement can be strategically leveraged, with Taipei offering expertise in economic development, technology, and governance capacity-building, while Somaliland provides a critical strategic foothold in the volatile but geopolitically significant Horn of Africa region, offering access to vital maritime routes and potential recognition.

Taiwan in the Global Economy

Despite its relatively small geographical size compared to neighboring China, Taiwan has transcended any potential for isolation by leveraging its unique strengths and innovative spirit to unlock immense potential. This strategic mindset has propelled the island nation to become a critical node in the global economy, home to corporations with formidable worldwide reach (Cuong & Hoang, 2023). Taiwanese companies hold a 68% market share in the manufacture of semiconductors. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) is the world's largest contract chipmaker and produces around 90% of the world's leading-edge semiconductors. No other company can produce chips at scale as sophisticated as the ones TSMC manufactures. These chips provide computing power for everything from smartphones to weapons and cars, many of which require thousands of chips to function and form the foundation of military, economic, and geopolitical power (Gordon et al., 2023). This means that Taiwan is not only an important part of the global supply chain,

but also an essential one.

Despite these successes and achievements in both concrete infrastructure and soft economic power, Taiwan's trajectory is not without profound challenges. The most significant challenge is the persistent pressure employed by China, which asserts a claim over Taiwan under the "One-China" principle (Glenzer, 2025). Beijing regards Taipei as an inalienable part of China and employs a dual pressure strategy, discouraging countries worldwide from establishing or maintaining formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, while simultaneously offering development projects to those who sever existing ties. This continued diplomatic pressure creates a complex and enduring obstacle to Taiwan's full participation on the international stage, existing in stark contrast to its outsized global economic role.

The Rise of Somaliland-Taiwan Relations

Somaliland is a country in the Horn of Africa, a region of immense geopolitical significance due to its proximity to the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Gulf of Aden. The region has become a key battleground in the escalating rivalry between the United States and China. The Republic of Somaliland was a British protectorate, which gained its independence on 26 June 1960. In less than a week, Somaliland voluntarily united with Italian Somalia as part of the Pan-Somalism ideology sweeping the Somali regions in the Horn of Africa (Krennerich, 1999). The Somali Republic that formed in the 1960s was a unification of two different and politically independent entities that emerged from two different colonial regimes, the British Somaliland Protectorate and the Italian colony in Somalia (Duyvesteyn, 2005). Throughout the thirty years of the union (1960-1991), the people of Somaliland came to regret the unification with Somalia and finally managed to overthrow the military dictator in 1991, subsequently declaring their independence within the colonial boundaries inherited from Great Britain in June 1960.

Despite its location in a volatile region, Somaliland has established itself as the only constitutional democracy in the Horn of Africa. This fact is demonstrated by its history of contested local, parliamentary, and presidential elections, including peaceful transfers of power from a ruling party to

an opposition (The Brenthurst Foundation, 2021). In an African context, where post-election conflicts are frequently prevalent and change is often achieved through violent means, this milestone is particularly noteworthy.

Although Somaliland has not acquired formal international recognition from any UN member state, it, nevertheless, interacts and engages with global powers (ICG, 2006). Its strategic location and natural resources have made it increasingly attractive for great and middle powers. For example, Ethiopia, the U.S., the UK, the UAE, and most recently, Taiwan work directly with Somaliland seeking political, economic, and security influence through military bases and trade partnerships. Therefore, Somaliland has positioned itself as a stable, democratic, reliable, and cooperative partner, offering strategic advantages to competing powers.

In 2020, Somaliland and Taiwan declared a formal relationship, prompting Beijing to send a delegation to Somaliland attempting to convince Somaliland to revise their relationship with Taiwan in return for Chinese development projects, a proposal that was not accepted by Somaliland. Since then, Somaliland and Taiwan have exchanged official diplomatic offices in Hargeisa and Taipei, the capitals of the two countries—the Taiwan Representative Office in the Republic of Somaliland and the Republic of Somaliland Representative Office in Taiwan (Ylönen & Ali, 2022). These two offices served as the gateway for Hargeisa-Taipei's thriving relations.

The bilateral relationship has yielded tangible benefits. A key achievement is an educational exchange, with approximately 140 Somaliland graduate students receiving scholarships to study in Taiwan. This figure is significant when compared to the national context. For example, in 2019, the entire African continent accounted for only 1,399 students, or 1.07% of all international students in Taiwan (Lin, 2020). Equally important, CPC Corporation, a state-owned petroleum, natural gas, and gasoline company in Taiwan, joined the oil exploration sector in Somaliland in 2022 (CPC, 2022) in an agreement with a UK-based company, Genel Energy.

There are multiple areas in which the two countries can collaborate; in particular,

Taiwan can provide support to Somaliland in agriculture, green and renewable energy, maritime and cyber security, tourism, transportation and logistics (both air and sea), and business sectors where Taiwan products can be exported to Somaliland markets and beyond, among other areas.

In a significant move, Somaliland and Taiwan have signed a bilateral agreement on maritime security, a pact expected to inaugurate a new chapter of cooperation between the two countries. This partnership serves Taiwan's strategic interest in bolstering the international legitimacy of Somaliland and supporting its capacity and presence on the world stage. A key stated objective is to collaborate through multilateral platforms to achieve the strategic goal of a secure Somaliland coastline (ICRT, 2025; Taiwan Focus, 2025). This development occurs within a highly contested geopolitical landscape, notably with China maintaining a significant and growing military presence in neighboring Djibouti.

Overcoming the Existing Challenges

A Somaliland-Taiwan partnership navigates dual political challenges. In line with its "One-China" principle, China rushed to prevent Somaliland from developing ties with Taiwan and attempted to subvert it; however, the new relations between Somaliland and Taiwan are a significant geopolitical factor, and a more fundamental challenge lies in the vast developmental disparity between the two countries. Taiwan is a developed economy with strong institutions, while Somaliland is a post-conflict state with institutions that are still nascent and fragile (Jhazbhay, 2010). This significant gap in administrative capacity and institutional maturity presents a substantial obstacle to effective bilateral cooperation. Weaknesses in Somaliland's state institutions have prevented the relationship from yielding substantial tangible benefits, apart from the considerable number of scholarships secured.

The dysfunction of public institutions in Somaliland is often evident in their service delivery. Two interrelated problems contribute to this issue: first, uncompetitive salaries frequently discourage skilled professionals from entering the public sector. Second, Somaliland officials may be reluctant to appoint qualified candidates, fearing they will pose a challenge to their authority or take

over their positions. These intertwined issues create a cycle of institutional weakness that not only hinders public service delivery but also undermines international partnerships and credibility.

To overcome these challenges and build state institutions that are resilient and capable of engaging with international partners such as Taiwan, a dual strategy is essential:

First, a paramount priority must be the systematic investment in human capital. This involves not only education and vocational training but also cultivating a professional, merit-based civil service. Building a skilled and knowledgeable workforce is the foundational step toward creating functioning state institutions and government apparatus that can collaborate effectively with foreign counterparts.

Second, developing and implementing inclusive policies is necessary for the state's development. Such policies must ensure equitable distribution of resources and accountability to the citizenry. By fostering a governance framework that is representative of its citizens' interests, Somaliland can strengthen its social contract and create a more stable and attractive environment for both domestic engagement and international partnership.

In the interconnected world of the twenty-first century, nations pursue their interests within an established global framework of competition and cooperation. It is therefore the primary responsibility of Somaliland to navigate this framework strategically. Somaliland's global friends must help them build institutions that can not only survive but also protect Somaliland's sovereignty and strategic interests. Ultimately, strategic foresight, coupled with effective and inclusive policies, represents the most viable path for Somaliland to unlock its significant potential and ensure its long-term prosperity and stability.

Conclusion

The partnership between Somaliland and Taiwan stands as a testament to the power of pragmatic diplomacy in the face of diplomatic isolation. By forging ties based on mutual benefit rather than formal recognition, both Somaliland and Taiwan have demonstrated

a capacity to exercise strategic agency on the international stage. For Somaliland, this relationship offers a unique pathway to development, providing access to Taiwanese expertise in governance, technology, and economic modernization without having to wait for the elusive prize of widespread sovereign recognition. This engagement positions Somaliland not as a passive recipient of aid but as an active participant in its development and a strategic partner in a critically important and geopolitically contested region.

Ultimately, the partnership's success depends on how Somaliland effectively leverages its strategic position and policies. By adopting a clear strategic vision, prioritizing institutional capacity and human capital development, and fostering a leadership committed to national rather than personal interests, Somaliland can replicate the very model of resilience that has defined Taiwan's success. If it does so, the relationship can serve as a powerful catalyst, transforming Somaliland into a more prosperous, stable, and indispensable actor in the Horn of Africa and securing its sovereignty for generations to come.

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About the Paper

This briefing paper analyzes the strategic partnership between the Republic of Somaliland and the Republic of China (Taiwan). It examines the partnership's geopolitical implications, the challenges it faces from Chinese opposition and Somaliland's institutional capacity, and provides a strategic framework for maximizing its benefits. The paper concludes that committed leadership and strategic engagement, rather than diplomatic recognition alone, are the fundamental prerequisites for Somaliland to unlock its potential and thrive within the contested geopolitics of the Horn of Africa.

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The Laas Geel Academy of International Relations is a premier institute in Somaliland dedicated to world-class teaching, training, and research in international relations, diplomacy, and security. Through innovative research, the Institute produces strategic research papers, briefings, and in-depth analyses on key political, economic, and security issues to offer actionable insights to Somaliland's policymakers. By fostering international collaboration through dialogues, workshops, and seminars with global partners, the Academy fosters cross-cultural exchange and elevates Somaliland's voice in global discourse. Committed to excellence, integrity, inclusiveness, respect, and commitment, its mission is to cultivate skilled professionals and deliver multidisciplinary research on critical areas such as climate change, migration, geopolitics, infrastructure, and regional security, thereby serving as a beacon of knowledge, innovation, and development for Somaliland and the wider Horn of Africa.

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