



The Berbera Nexus: Port Development, Geopolitics, and Security in the Horn of Africa

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Executive Summary

Berbera, a city and port in Somaliland, is one of the most strategically vital seaports in the East African region. Its infrastructure is a key asset, hosting the Port of Berbera, a major cement factory, oil terminals, and one of the longest airstrips on the continent. This concentration of critical resources makes Berbera a focal point for geopolitical competition among external powers. The modernization of the Port of Berbera, driven by a 30-year concession with Dubai Ports World (DP World) – a global port operator owned by the Government of Dubai – is a development of paramount geopolitical and security significance for the Horn of Africa. While the DP World investment is offering economic opportunity for the Republic of Somaliland on one hand, the investment has intensified great power competition and exposed new layers of vulnerabilities and complexity to regional security on the other. The Horn of Africa, and the Red Sea basin more broadly, have become a contested sphere, where Middle Eastern powers—primarily the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia—and other global actors like China, Turkey, the United States, and most recently Taiwan, are contesting for influence through port investments, military agreements, and economic partnerships. It is evident that, the recent development in Berbera is a central piece in this newly emerging great game among the Middle Eastern and global actors.

Berbera's importance and its strategic value is inextricably linked to its location near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a vital global chokepoint for maritime trade and energy supply. The UAE's strategic interest in Somaliland is primarily related to its security concerns regarding the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea maritime space in the context of the war in Yemen by controlling strategic ports and islands, and its aspiration to be a major investor, economic and extractive actor, and logistics provider in the Horn of Africa. This is widely perceived as part of a broader effort to project power, secure sea lanes, and counter the

influence of rivals, notably Turkey, which invested in Somalia's infrastructure, such as the Mogadishu airport and the port, and built the largest Turkish Embassy in the world in Mogadishu, and also established the first Turkish military base outside its territories. This has enabled Turkey to gain a strong foothold. Consequently, Somaliland's investment in Berbera has been enveloped in the geopolitical crossfire of the Gulf Arab, straining its already antagonistic relationship with the UN-sponsored Government in Mogadishu, which publicly denounces and opposes any development deal engaged by Somaliland which it considers as a violation of its sovereignty.

The Horn of Africa is a fragile and volatile region due to a number of factors, including external intervention both near and afar, ecological factors, and inter- and intra-state conflicts. Therefore, the development in Berbera offers both opportunities and profound risks. The deepened partnership of Somaliland with wealthy and powerful Middle Eastern states like the UAE, or possibly with the United States, could provide a security assurance, deterring potential aggression and strengthening its statehood in a vulnerable and fragile region. However, it also risks militarizing an already fragile Somaliland by drawing it into external conflicts, for example, any possible conflict with the Houthis in Yemen, who attack the commercial ships passing through the waters of the Red Sea basin. Domestically, the flow of resources and shifting economic power centered on Berbera could exacerbate internal tensions and division, or competition over Berbera itself, if not managed equitably. Externally, the development in Berbera has heightened tensions with Djibouti, which views Berbera as a potential competitor. Djibouti monopolized Ethiopia's import-export activities after the 1998-2001 Ethiopia-Eritrea border war.

Therefore, urgent strategic and pragmatic dialogue and discussion, both at local and external levels, are needed to navigate this complex landscape and mitigate the associated

risks. The paper proposes key recommendations to guide policymakers in Somaliland; therefore, it recommends:

- Fortify diplomatic engagement and development-oriented foreign policy to articulate its sovereign rights and the benefits of the port for regional stability and economic development, both for the region and beyond.
- Formalize and publicize security agreements with any external actors, including the UAE, and possibly with the United States. Somaliland should negotiate clear, transparent, and publicly declare the security agreements with Somaliland partners. These agreements must explicitly define the terms of security cooperation, strictly prohibit the use of its territory for offensive military operations, and reaffirm respect for Somaliland's sovereignty. This will prevent mission mismanagement, manage public perception, and provide a legal framework to counter allegations that Somaliland is becoming a foreign military base.
- Pursue a multi-vector foreign policy to avoid over-dependence and becoming a client state of a single power. Therefore, Somaliland should strategically diversify its international partnerships. While the UAE has a long intimate relationship which has both commercial and cultural dimensions with the people of Somaliland, maintaining its relationship with the UAE is crucial, but on the other hand, it should actively engage other actors, including the European Union, the United States, Taiwan, and key African nations, on economic, development, and security issues. This diversification will enhance Somaliland's bargaining power and provide a counterbalance to over-reliance on a single partner.
- Strengthening internal cohesion is also important. The Government of Somaliland must implement robust strategies to ensure that the economic benefits generated from investments are distributed equitably across Somaliland's citizens. A transparent wealth distribution is critical to maintaining the internal peace and social contract that form the bedrock of Somaliland's stability, thereby neutralizing internal grievances that could be exploited by external adversaries.
- Championing a regional framework for Red Sea security is crucial. Somaliland is a stakeholder of the Red Sea basin; therefore, it is important for Somaliland to position itself as a responsible stakeholder by advocating for and participating in inclusive, regional security dialogue focused on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Engaging with forums that include other coastal states can help to multilateralize the security of

the region, build confidence, and legitimize Somaliland's role as a contributor to regional maritime security, rather than an isolated, and passive stakeholder of these crucial waters.

Introduction

The Horn of Africa, which has a history of conflict and instability, is now becoming an epicenter of global strategic competition (Humza & Irum, 2025). These contestations are reminiscent of Cold War-era rivalries and the international militarization of the region (Ali et al., 2025). The region's proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a narrow maritime passage through which a significant portion of global trade and oil shipments pass, renders it inherently strategic (Juned & Saripudin, 2025). In the twenty-first century, this geostrategic significance has attracted intense interest from Middle Eastern and global powers, who are investing heavily in port infrastructure, securing military bases, and forging new alliances to protect their national interests and counter their rivals (Melvin, 2019). This modern-day scramble is reconfiguring the Horn of Africa's political and security landscape creates both opportunities and profound risks for the regional states (Daniel, 2013; Verhoeven, 2018; ICG, 2019; Redie, 2024; Ylönen, 2024). It is within this changing context that the development in Berbera must be understood within a changing, competitive, and geopolitically contested landscape.

The transformation of Berbera from a traditional seaport into a modern container terminal, led by DP World, is far more than a commercial investment and logistical development hub. It is a profoundly geopolitical venture that has elevated Somaliland's international profile while simultaneously placing it in a dangerous position (ICG, 2019). The development of the port of Berbera is a critical node for the UAE and DP World's strategic network, extending from the Arabian Gulf into the Horn of Africa region, allowing it to project commercial and military power, secure its vital trade routes, and counter the influence of its regional rivals, such as Turkey and Qatar, who have established significant footholds in the region (Horoz & Telci, 2018; Ali, 2019; Donelli, 2024). This has drawn Somaliland directly into the complex and often volatile geopolitics of the Gulf Arab region. The 2018 Gulf crisis, which saw a blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, is a classic example of Somaliland siding with the Saudi-UAE bloc.

Politics and the economy are deeply intertwined in the global system, with each influencing the other. Political decisions shape the conditions for economic growth, while economic factors can

also impact political dynamics. In contemporary times, the interaction between these realms of governance is growing increasingly intricate and diverse (Daineko et al., 2025). This was demonstrated in 2017 when DP World's concession agreement for the Port of Berbera with Somaliland severely strained its relations with the government of Djibouti (Cannon, 2017; Vertin, 2019). On another note, more than 95% of Ethiopia's cargo is handled through the Red Sea port of Djibouti, which has served as Ethiopia's primary trade route since Eritrea's independence in 1993. However, this dependence comes at a high cost, with Ethiopia paying \$2 billion a year in port fees to Djibouti, a significant burden for a country where a quarter of its 129 million people are still dependent on food aid. With a population of 129 million, Ethiopia's need for diversified sea access is driven by its demographic size (Humza & Irrum, 2025). Therefore, the Port of Berbera, 135 nautical miles southeast of Djibouti, is the potential competitor of Djibouti's port.

In 2018, the Government of Djibouti confiscated the Doraleh Container Terminal, a port facility that was invested in and operated by DP World. The government justified this action by stating that the agreement with DP World violated both the nation's sovereignty and the best interests of its people (Záhořík, 2025). This move can also be viewed as a strategic effort to preempt competition, as any significant improvement to the Port of Berbera in Somaliland would directly challenge Djibouti's dominance in regional port services (Ali, 2018). Consequently, Djibouti's decision to revoke DP World's contract and replace it with a Chinese partner strained bilateral relations and intensified the legal conflict (Ali, 2019; Záhořík, 2025). In 2025, Djibouti won an arbitration case against DP World in a UK court.

This briefing examines the multifaceted geopolitical and security dimensions of the Port of Berbera's development. It explores how the investment exacerbated the longstanding political dispute between Somaliland and the UN-protected Government in Mogadishu, which viewed the DP World agreement with Somaliland as a violation of its sovereignty. It analyzes the regional security implications, including the potential for Berbera to be used for military purposes and how its development challenges the economic and strategic primacy of Djibouti. Furthermore, the briefing assesses the internal security challenges for Somaliland, as the concentration of wealth and power in Berbera could upset delicate internal balances that have been fundamental to the country's stability. The central question this briefing addresses is: how can Somaliland manage the immense geopolitical pressures and security risks associated with Berbera's critical infrastructures development to

secure its own national interests and ensure its long-term stability, without becoming a hostage in a larger conflict between external powers?

Geopolitics, Conflict, and Regional Ambition

The Port of Berbera has long been a vital seaport and source of revenue, both before the Somali state's collapse in 1991 and in its aftermath. Its strategic significance is historical; during the Cold War, Berbera was used as a military base, first by the Soviet Union and later by the United States, generating millions of dollars in rental fees for Somalia (Perlez, 1989). Despite enduring a destructive war with the Somali military government in the 1980s and declaring independence in 1991, Somaliland subsequently began building politically stable governance structures. This stability enabled new forms of economic production and growth (Kaplan, 2008; Jhazbhay, 2010). Located on Somaliland's coastline along the strategic Gulf of Aden, the Port of Berbera has been central to these state-building efforts, continuing its role as a crucial economic and geopolitical asset.

The development of the Port of Berbera from a geopolitical and security perspective produces several critical points that are significantly important to analyze (ICG, 2019). First and foremost, the development of the port has intensified the geopolitical contestation of the Horn of Africa, aligning states in the region with competing Gulf Arab powers. The UAE's investment in Berbera and its interest in Assab, especially during the UAE war against Yemen, solidifies an axis that includes Somaliland with the Saudi-UAE bloc, which stands in opposition to a Turkey-Qatar axis centered on its strong support for the UN-sponsored Government in Mogadishu (ICG, 2019; Donelli, 2024). This external patronage of different regional states within the Red Sea basin has internationalized the Horn of Africa's internal dynamics once again and heated the region's political atmosphere, making any negotiated settlement more difficult and transforming a domestic political issue into a proxy element of Gulf Arab rivalries (Daniel, 2013). A case in point is the Sudan's ongoing war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The UAE is allegedly supporting and airlifting weapons to the RSF.

Equally important, the development of the critical infrastructures in Berbera, such as the Berbera Special Economic Free Zone modeled on the Jebel Ali Free Zone of Dubai, is likely to attract new businesses and foreign investments both from the region and beyond (DP World, 2023). In addition, the renovation of Berbera Airport has created a serious flashpoint in Somaliland-Somalia

relations, with significant security implications. The Mogadishu-based government's consistent and intense opposition to the DP World deal, the UAE, and possibly the United States is not merely rhetorical; it defines the dispute as an existential challenge to its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Africa News, 2024; Humza & Irum, 2025). The ongoing Somaliland and Somalia tensions escalated into open conflict, exemplified by the violence that erupted in Las Anod in 2022. While rooted in political grievances, the conflict also had a significant economic dimension linked to the Eastern Corridor—a vital trade route connecting the Port of Berbera to central Somalia and Puntland regions. The advanced facilities at Berbera had made it the preferred shipping hub for commercial goods from these regions, making control over the corridor a high-stakes economic issue.

Furthermore, the conflict has drawn the involvement of external powers, namely Turkey and China, for distinct strategic reasons. Turkey, while publicly upholding its official policy of supporting a unified Somalia and not recognizing Somaliland's independence (Cannon, 2021; Donelli, 2024), seeks to establish a foothold in the Red Sea basin. This objective is pursued by advocating for SSC-Khatumo and seeking a potential station in Las Qoray, a coastal town in the Sanaag region. Conversely, China's involvement is a direct response to the formal relations between Somaliland and Taiwan. As stated by Hagi (2024), China is committed to subverting this partnership and has engaged various actors to that end, including supporting the SSC-Khatumo. The meeting between the Turkish and Chinese ambassadors and the SSC-Khatumo leader in Mogadishu underscores the direct involvement of both Turkey and China in the Las Anod conflict. Without a doubt, the situation in the Horn of Africa is dangerously similar to Cold War-era proxy conflicts (Kanet, 2006) where local disputes were amplified and militarized by external patrons, with devastating consequences for the region's citizens.

Strategically located on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden—a key global oil transit route and trade—the Port of Berbera serves as Somaliland's primary commercial port and a major hub for regional trade (Humza & Irum, 2025; Rashid, 2019). However, any project has its own risks and dangers. Berbera's development is a sharp double-edged sword, when it's viewed from a maritime security perspective. On one hand, the presence of a major international port operator like DP World could enhance maritime domain awareness and contribute to combating piracy, arms smuggling, and human trafficking in the Gulf of Aden. On the other hand, the potential for the port's infrastructure to support military

logistics, particularly for any US-led war against Yemen, risks drawing Somaliland directly into an external war. This militarization could make Berbera a legitimate target for adversarial forces, such as Yemen's Houthi rebels, thereby importing a foreign conflict onto Somaliland's shores and undermining its hard-won internal security and stability.

While the international non-recognition status of Somaliland, indeed, jeopardizes its ability to benefit from and participate in international trade, the Port of Berbera continues to be one of the few viable, accessible trading points in the Horn of Africa. The current emphasis on developing the business corridor with Ethiopia further strengthens Berbera's role as a potential regional center for economic growth and integration (Humza & Irum, 2025). However, this initiative has unveiled new dynamics of regional economic and strategic competition, particularly with Djibouti. As Berbera grows into a viable alternative port for Ethiopian trade, it directly challenges Djibouti's economic model and its position as a host to multiple foreign military bases, i.e., the United States, China, and France (Záhořík, 2025). This economic competition could spill over into the political and security spaces for the region, as Djibouti may feel compelled to strengthen its alliance with the UN-sponsored Government based in Mogadishu or other actors to counter the rise of Berbera as a regional economic hub, leading to a destabilizing regional polarization that pits the two ports and their patrons against each other. The current actions of the Djiboutian government clearly define its position on the implementation of the Port of Berbera.

Forging a Path to Regional Stability

Responding to the intricate geopolitical and security challenges posed by the development of Port of Berbera requires a sophisticated and multi-faceted strategy from the Government of Somaliland, supported by responsible engagement from international partners. Primarily, Somaliland must adopt a proactive and significant diplomatic offensive. This involves moving beyond its traditional recognition-focused diplomacy and must articulate a clear foreign policy doctrine that emphasizes its role as a source of stability and economic opportunity. Somaliland should actively engage with the United States, the UK, and its allies in the region to explain its position on the regional security and stability. The objective should be to secure a pragmatic space and landscape that allows Somaliland to pursue economic investment and cross-border cooperation without requiring full recognition from the outside world.

Equally important, Somaliland must negotiate and publicly formalize its security partnerships with any external power. Any military or security cooperation with the United States or the UAE, or any other power, must be governed by clear, transparent agreements ratified by Somaliland Parliament. These agreements should explicitly prohibit the use of Somaliland's territory for launching offensive operations against neighboring states, and strictly define the limits of foreign military activities. This transparency is crucial for domestic legitimacy, regional reassurance, and establishing Somaliland as a sovereign actor capable of managing its security partnerships, not a passive host.

It is essential to mitigate the risk of internal division and fragmentation as well. The Government of Somaliland must implement a national strategy for equitable development. The economic resources from the investment opportunities must be seen to benefit all citizens of Somaliland. Legally managed resources coupled with strategic national infrastructure investments across the country are essential to prevent the emergence of a wealthy core enclave and a neglected periphery. Maintaining the internal cohesion that has underpinned Somaliland's peace is the single most important defense against external interference and internal destabilization.

Furthermore, and very importantly, Somaliland should champion confidence-building measures with regional actors, such as Djibouti. While the relationship with Djibouti is competitive, Somaliland can propose technical and ministerial-level dialogue on issues of shared interest, such as maritime security, customs and border management procedures harmonization, and infrastructure connectivity. Positioning Somaliland as a cooperative, rather than a solely competitive, regional actor can help to soften its image, reduce fears, and create a more stable environment for its own economic ambitions.

Ultimately, the international community, particularly the United States and the UK, must recognize the strategic importance of a stable Somaliland. Rather than treating it solely through the lens of the Somalia conflict, they should develop a dedicated policy of constructive engagement. This includes providing direct capacity-building support to Somaliland's security and governance institutions, funding projects, and using their diplomatic weight to encourage multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, and the European financial institutions like as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the European Investment Bank to invest in Somaliland's critical infrastructures for investment and social stability, such as energy, roads, and crucial social sectors, such as

health, education, and water. A stable, secure, and economically viable Somaliland, capable of managing its strategic partnerships responsibly, is fundamentally in the interest of regional stability and the security of a vital global trade and energy corridor.

Conclusion

The development of the Port of Berbera has irrevocably inserted Somaliland into the high-stakes of the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea basin. While presenting an unprecedented opportunity for economic growth and international engagement for Somaliland, it has also placed the country at the center of a complex and dangerous web of regional rivalries and security dilemmas. The choices made by the Government of Somaliland and its external partners in the coming years will determine whether investment in Berbera becomes a catalyst for sustained stability and prosperity or a new flashpoint for regional conflict and instability.

The path forward requires Somaliland to walk a delicate tightrope. It must leverage its strategic importance to attract investment and build powerful alliances, without sacrificing its hard-won sovereignty or becoming a hostage in proxy wars. This necessitates a foreign policy of strategic diversification, a domestic agenda of unwavering commitment to internal cohesion and equitable development, and a security posture that is both robust and transparent. The risks of failure are severe, including regional escalation, internal fragmentation, and the importation of external conflicts.

The status quo approach from the international community to Somaliland is increasingly unsound and unsustainable. The geopolitical realities on the ground, driven by actors like the US, the UAE, and Turkey, have outpaced diplomatic conventions. A policy that insists on viewing Somaliland solely through the lens of a unified Somalia, such as Turkey, Egypt, Djibouti, and Qatar are disconnected from the strategic and factual realities. A more pragmatic and engaged approach is required—one that acknowledges Somaliland's self-determination and its *de jure* statehood, supports its capacity to govern effectively and securely, and works to mitigate the risks of regional conflict. The Berbera project is not just Somaliland's challenge; it is a test case for whether the international community can manage the new great power competition in the Horn of Africa in a way that prioritizes stability and the interests of the people who live in a competitive and geopolitically contested region.

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About the Paper

This paper analyzes the development of the Port of Berbera in Somaliland through the lens of geopolitics and regional security. It moves beyond the economic narrative to examine how this strategic infrastructure investment is reshaping power dynamics both in Somaliland and in the region, restructuring regional alliances, and security uncertainties in the Horn. The paper posits that the Horn of Africa, situated at the nexus of the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Gulf of Aden, has become a primary ground for competition among Middle Eastern and major global powers. Therefore, Berbera's development is not an isolated economic project but a key move in a broader geopolitical contest. It is closely linked to the rivalry between the Saudi-Emirati-Egyptian bloc and an opposing axis involving Iran, Turkey, and Qatar. Furthermore, the paper examines the profound security implications of this development. It assesses how the investment in Berbera affects the delicate balance of power between Somaliland and Somalia, fuels regional tensions with Djibouti, and embedding Somaliland within the UAE's network of strategic military and logistics facilities. The analysis also considers the internal security challenges for Somaliland, including managing the expectations of different internal actors on one hand, and mitigating the risks of becoming a target for adversarial actors on the other. Lastly, the paper provides forward-looking policy recommendations designed to help Somaliland navigate these critical geopolitical waters, safeguard its sovereignty, and leverage its position for enhanced security and sustainable stability, while warning regional and international actors of the risks of unrestrained competition.

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