

Maritime Competition and the Recognition–Security Nexus: The Case of Somaliland

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of intensifying maritime competition in the Red Sea on international engagement with politically unrecognized entities. Focusing on Somaliland, it addresses a key puzzle in international relations: why do external actors pursue long-term economic and security partnerships with de facto states in the absence of widespread formal diplomatic recognition? Drawing on structural realism, the article develops the concept of the Recognition–Security Nexus to explain how geopolitical and security imperatives can partially decouple functional engagement from juridical recognition. In strategically contested maritime regions, external actors may prioritize access, logistical reliability, political stability, and strategic geography over formal sovereign status. Somaliland's location along the Gulf of Aden, combined with its relative stability and governance capacity, has enabled it to attract infrastructure investment and security cooperation despite its contested international status. Such engagement reflects increasing functional integration, although it remains constrained by legal ambiguity, external dependency, and geopolitical risk. The article contributes to debates on de facto statehood by demonstrating how strategic competition can increasingly shape patterns of international engagement independently of formal diplomatic status.

Keywords: Recognition, security, maritime security, Somaliland, Red Sea geopolitics, Bab el-Mandeb Strait

Introduction

The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden have emerged as major arenas of geopolitical competition, reflecting broader changes in global maritime security and supply-chain resilience. The strategic importance of the Horn of Africa has grown alongside the increasing significance of maritime trade routes connecting Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (World Bank, 2023; IISS, 2022). Consequently, regional and extra-regional powers have expanded their presence through military bases, port-development projects, and security partnerships designed to protect maritime trade and project influence across this critical corridor. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, an important maritime chokepoint connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, is central to this changing geopolitical environment. The narrow passage is of considerable importance to international trade and security because a substantial share of global trade and energy shipments passes through it. Approximately 12% of global trade and 30% of container traffic transit the corridor (UNCTAD, 2022). As geopolitical rivalry intensifies, external actors are increasingly seeking reliable logistics hubs and secure coastal partners capable of supporting both commercial and security operations.

The strategic consequences of dependence on maritime chokepoints were brought into sharp relief in 2026, when Iranian attacks on shipping, launched in retaliation for U.S.–Israeli strikes on Iran, effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz for months, stranding more than a thousand vessels and tens of thousands of mariners and forcing carriers to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope (CSIS, 2026). The episode illustrates how disruption at a single contested chokepoint can reverberate throughout the global trading system, reinforcing the premium that external actors place on cultivating alternative and reliable maritime partners. This emerging pattern of

engagement raises an important theoretical question in international relations: why do external actors pursue long-term economic and security partnerships with politically unrecognized entities? Traditional approaches to international recognition have generally regarded sovereign recognition as an important condition for meaningful participation in the international system (Pegg, 1998; Caspersen, 2012). Yet patterns of engagement in strategically contested regions increasingly suggest that geopolitical and security imperatives can, under certain conditions, outweigh the constraints associated with formal diplomatic non-recognition.

With more than three decades of relative stability, democratic governance, and effective control over a strategically important coastline, Somaliland has remained in diplomatic limbo, without widespread formal international recognition from UN member states, except Israel, which unilaterally recognized Somaliland as an independent state in December 2025. Traditional approaches to *de facto* statehood often associate non-recognition with diplomatic isolation, limited external agency, and restricted participation in international institutions (Pegg, 1998; Caspersen, 2012). However, worsening maritime insecurity in the Red Sea and growing competition over port access in the Horn of Africa have produced an increasingly visible paradox: external actors are engaging Somaliland strategically while continuing, in most cases, to withhold formal diplomatic recognition. Existing scholarship has not sufficiently explained how maritime-security imperatives can partially decouple functional international engagement from juridical recognition. This article addresses that gap by developing the Recognition-Security Nexus as a framework for explaining why operational utility may, under conditions of heightened geopolitical competition, outweigh formal legal status in shaping patterns of external engagement.

Theoretical Framework: The Recognition-Security Nexus

Drawing on structural realism, this article examines changing patterns of engagement between external actors and politically unrecognized entities in strategically contested regions. In an anarchic international system, states act primarily in pursuit of survival, security, and relative power, responding to changes in the distribution of capabilities across the international system (Waltz, 1979). Under such conditions, strategic geography—particularly access to maritime chokepoints, ports, and logistical infrastructure—can significantly influence patterns of interstate behavior. From a structural realist perspective, intensified geopolitical competition tends to increase the importance of material and strategic considerations relative to normative or legal constraints. Control over, or access to, vital maritime routes enhance a state's capacity for power projection, trade protection, and supply-chain resilience (Mearsheimer, 2001). Territories located near such corridors may therefore acquire strategic value irrespective of their formal diplomatic status.

The 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis illustrates this logic. When Iranian attacks rendered the chokepoint commercially unnavigable, states and shipping companies sought alternative routes and coastal partners capable of sustaining the movement of goods, irrespective of the formal diplomatic standing of those partners (CSIS, 2026). Such circumstances demonstrate how immediate security, and logistical requirements can reshape external actors' calculations. The literature on *de facto* and unrecognized states provides a complementary perspective on the political status of such entities. *De facto* states are generally understood as political entities that exercise internal sovereignty, effective territorial control, and functioning governance while lacking widespread international recognition (Pegg, 1998). Caspersen (2012) similarly emphasizes

that these entities are not merely passive anomalies within the international system; rather, they may develop political institutions, consolidate internal legitimacy, and engage externally despite diplomatic isolation.

This literature, however, has generally treated recognition as a central variable shaping external relations, emphasizing legitimacy deficits, survival strategies, and patron-client relationships. Comparatively less attention has been paid to how systemic geopolitical pressures can reshape the incentives of external actors to engage with politically unrecognized entities. This limitation becomes particularly significant in strategically contested regions such as the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, where global commercial routes intersect with major security concerns. In such contexts, juridical or *de jure* sovereignty may not always be the primary consideration for external actors seeking reliable access, territorial control, and politically stable partners. Operational utility may instead assume greater importance. Politically unrecognized entities capable of maintaining effective governance and relative stability may therefore become attractive partners for economic, logistical, and security arrangements.

Building on these literatures, this article introduces the concept of the Recognition-Security Nexus. The concept describes a pattern of international engagement in which strategic and security imperatives partially decouple functional relations from formal diplomatic recognition. Within this framework, recognition is treated not as an absolute prerequisite for external engagement but as one variable among several shaping the form, depth, and durability of international interaction. The framework also highlights how systemic pressures may change the practical significance of recognition. Liberal institutionalists emphasize the role of formal institutions, legal frameworks, and interdependence in facilitating international cooperation (Keohane, 1984), while constructivists emphasize norms, identity, legitimacy, and socially constructed understandings of sovereignty (Wendt, 1999). These perspectives remain valuable, but they may provide only partial explanations for engagement outside formally recognized frameworks, particularly under conditions of acute geopolitical competition.

A structural realist perspective may therefore offer greater explanatory leverage in situations where strategic necessity and security considerations dominate external decision-making. The Recognition-Security Nexus shifts the analytical focus from recognition as an absolute gateway to international participation toward recognition as one component within a wider strategic environment. It provides a framework for understanding why external actors may engage with *de facto* states when strategic geography, political stability, territorial control, and logistical capacity align with wider security objectives.

In the case of Somaliland, the framework helps explain the emergence of long-term economic and security relationships despite the absence of widespread international recognition. Somaliland occupies a strategically important position along the Gulf of Aden and combines this geographic advantage with relative internal stability and functioning governance. Intensifying competition for maritime access and secure logistical infrastructure has increased the value of these attributes, enabling Somaliland to achieve a degree of functional integration despite the constraints associated with its unresolved international status. As Gurjar (2023) argues, the geopolitics of ports and maritime competition demonstrates how strategic infrastructure development can reshape regional power relations and patterns of international engagement.

Bridging *De Facto* Statehood, Maritime Contestations, and Geopolitical Strategy

A substantial body of literature examines the political, economic, and security dynamics of *de facto* states within the international system. In an early foundational work, Pegg (1998) conceptualizes *de facto* states as entities possessing internal sovereignty but lacking widespread international recognition, emphasizing their exclusion from formal international society. Caspersen (2012) similarly highlights the importance of internal legitimacy, governance capacity, and external patronage in explaining the durability of such entities. This scholarship provides an important basis for understanding the survival strategies of *de facto* states, although it remains primarily concerned with questions of recognition, legitimacy, dependency, and political endurance. Less attention has been paid to how such entities become embedded within broader geopolitical and security processes, particularly in strategically contested maritime environments.

A related body of International Relations scholarship examines state behavior under conditions of anarchy. Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001), among others, emphasize the importance of power, security, and strategic competition. From this perspective, states remain primarily concerned with material interests and survival and may therefore enter pragmatic partnerships that override normative or legal considerations. This provides a useful lens for understanding why external actors may engage with politically unrecognized entities when such engagement advances strategic objectives. At the same time, scholars of maritime security have highlighted the growing importance of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden as arenas of geopolitical competition and economic vulnerability. This has contributed to increased involvement by regional and extra-regional actors seeking to secure global maritime routes, particularly around strategically important chokepoints (Murphy, 2020; UNCTAD, 2022). Much of this literature, however, focuses on naval operations and state-centric security approaches, with comparatively limited attention to the role of adjacent coastal territories in supporting maritime security.

Recent scholarship has also increasingly examined the geopolitics of infrastructure, particularly ports and logistics corridors, as instruments of strategic influence. Port investments are increasingly understood not merely as commercial projects but also as mechanisms through which external actors extend political and security influence (IISS, 2022). This pattern is particularly evident in the Horn of Africa, where external actors have shown growing interest in strategically positioned coastal territories offering both commercial and geopolitical advantages (Ali et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the literature remains relatively silent on the intersection between *de facto* statehood, maritime competition, and strategic infrastructure development. Studies combining these three dimensions within a unified analytical framework remain limited. Consequently, cases such as Somaliland remain under-theorized, particularly in relation to their functional integration into regional security and economic systems.

This article addresses that gap by developing the Recognition-Security Nexus as a framework for explaining how security imperatives and geopolitical competition can encourage engagement with *de facto* states independently of formal diplomatic recognition. In doing so, it connects scholarship on *de facto* statehood with wider debates in international relations, maritime security, and infrastructure geopolitics. Although previous scholarship has generated important insights into the durability and legitimacy of *de facto* states, some approaches may understate the agency of these entities in shaping strategic relationships and may insufficiently account for how systemic geopolitical pressures influence the behavior of external actors. The intersection

between *de facto* statehood and maritime-security dynamics therefore remains under-theorized, particularly in areas of intense geopolitical competition such as the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and, by extension, the western Indian Ocean.

Maritime Competition and Strategic Engagement in Somaliland

Intensifying maritime competition in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has substantially increased the strategic importance of littoral territories situated along major global trade routes. The Red Sea constitutes a critical maritime corridor connecting the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal and has consequently become an important arena of geopolitical competition, infrastructure investment, and security cooperation (UNCTAD, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Within this changing environment, Somaliland has emerged as a strategically relevant actor despite the absence of widespread formal international recognition. Much of its strategic importance derives from geography. Located along the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden and in proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, Somaliland sits adjacent to one of the world's most important shipping routes, through which a substantial share of global trade and energy supplies passes. Growing maritime insecurity, piracy, regional instability, and disruption to commercial shipping have encouraged external actors to seek reliable logistics hubs and operational footholds throughout the region (IISS, 2022; Murphy, 2020). A prominent example of this strategic engagement is the expansion of the Port of Berbera. In 2016, Dubai-based global port operator DP World secured a concession agreement to develop and operate the port, marking an important step in Somaliland's integration into regional and global logistics networks (Ali et al., 2025; Ylönen & Ali, 2025). The project includes the modernization of port infrastructure, expansion of container-handling capacity, and development of a free trade zone intended to strengthen Berbera's position as a regional logistics hub.

The UAE's interest in Berbera has extended beyond commercial investment to include security cooperation and the development of logistical infrastructure capable of supporting maritime monitoring and regional operations (ICG, 2018). The dual-use character of port infrastructure—combining commercial and potential strategic functions—illustrates how economic investment can intersect with wider security objectives. Somaliland's relationship with Ethiopia further demonstrates the regional dimensions of maritime competition. As a landlocked state, Ethiopia has long sought to diversify its access to maritime trade routes and reduce its dependence on Djibouti. Agreements concerning access to the Port of Berbera and the development of associated transport corridors reflect Ethiopia's efforts to diversify trade routes and strengthen economic resilience (World Bank, 2020). Such arrangements further integrate Somaliland into regional economic and geopolitical networks.

These developments illustrate the logic of the Recognition–Security Nexus. External actors engage Somaliland not necessarily because of formal diplomatic recognition but because of its strategic utility, geographic position, infrastructure, and relative political stability. Under such conditions, juridical sovereignty may become less decisive than access to critical infrastructure and proximity to strategic maritime routes. This pattern of engagement also reflects a broader trend in maritime geopolitics in which infrastructure investment functions as an instrument of influence and power projection. Ports, corridors, and logistics hubs are not merely commercial assets; they are increasingly intertwined with security policy and geopolitical competition (Gurjar, 2023).

Somaliland is therefore not simply a passive recipient of external attention. It has actively sought to leverage its geographic position and infrastructure to enhance its strategic relevance. In this respect, parallels can be drawn with Djibouti, where commercial port infrastructure and military facilities coexist within a highly securitized maritime environment (Ylönen & Ali, 2025). Nevertheless, there are clear limits to this expanding engagement. The absence of widespread formal recognition continues to restrict Somaliland's access to international financial institutions, legal protections, and formal diplomatic arrangements. Dependence on external partners also exposes Somaliland to shifting geopolitical alignments. More broadly, competition in the Red Sea maritime arena has created new opportunities for engagement with politically unrecognized entities. Somaliland demonstrates how a *de facto* state, by virtue of its strategic location, relative stability, and infrastructure development, may become functionally integrated into regional trade and security systems. Yet this engagement remains conditional, reflecting the persistent tension between functional inclusion and formal exclusion within the contemporary international order.

The Israel–Somaliland Recognition and the Red Sea

Israel's recognition of Somaliland as an independent state in the Horn of Africa represents a significant diplomatic development with contested strategic and political implications. As the first UN member state to extend formal recognition, the decision marks an important milestone in Somaliland's long-standing pursuit of international recognition. The subsequent appointment of Ambassador Michael Lotem in April 2026 further elevated Somaliland's diplomatic visibility, reinforcing its position as a *de facto* state engaged in limited but expanding external relations (Ibrahim, 2026). Strategically, Israel's recognition reinforces Somaliland's geopolitical relevance within the Red Sea corridor, particularly because of its proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint, one of the world's most critical maritime routes. This geographic position potentially enhances Somaliland's value as a partner in maritime-security governance, including cooperation in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), security-sector capacity building, and coastal surveillance (Ali, 2026).

In practical terms, such cooperation could strengthen border-control mechanisms, improve maritime-domain awareness, and contribute to counter-piracy and counter-trafficking efforts along Somaliland's coastline. Economically and diplomatically, recognition may also incrementally improve Somaliland's attractiveness to selected foreign investors and international partners by signaling a degree of political acceptance and potentially facilitating limited forms of development assistance, security cooperation, and diplomatic engagement. However, these developments also entail important risks and constraints. Israel's decision has been criticized by the African Union and the Arab League, reflecting concerns that unilateral recognition could undermine established principles of territorial integrity and complicate regional diplomatic consensus. Such opposition could expose Somaliland to heightened diplomatic pressure and potentially constrain broader multilateral engagement rather than expand it.

Closer security alignment with particular external actors could also deepen Somaliland's involvement in wider geopolitical rivalries across the Red Sea, increasing its vulnerability to external pressure and the politicization of its strategic location. Moreover, expectations that Israel's decision will automatically generate a broader "domino effect" of recognition may be overstated, as most states continue to prioritize established norms of non-recognition of secessionist entities in the absence of wider international consensus. The Israel–Somaliland

relationship should therefore be understood less as a definitive breakthrough in Somaliland's international status than as an incremental development within the Recognition-Security Nexus, in which limited diplomatic gains coexist with structural constraints and regional sensitivities. Somaliland's strategic location and relative internal stability strengthen its bargaining position, but these advantages do not automatically translate into widespread diplomatic recognition or sustained economic transformation.

Somaliland in the Regional Security Architecture

Increasing maritime insecurity and geopolitical competition have substantially reconfigured security arrangements across the Red Sea region (Horn Review, 2026). Within this changing environment, Somaliland has increasingly been incorporated as a functional actor within what may be described as an emerging regional security architecture, despite its lack of widespread formal recognition. Maritime security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has traditionally focused heavily on critical chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. However, growing threats from piracy, regional instability, and disruption to commercial shipping have highlighted the limitations of concentrating security resources exclusively within narrow maritime corridors (Mediterranean Observatory for Security, 2024). External actors have consequently adopted more flexible strategies, extending their operational reach into surrounding littoral zones while strengthening surveillance, logistics, and rapid-response capabilities.

In this context, Somaliland offers what may be described as strategic maritime depth. Its location along the Gulf of Aden, combined with its relative political stability, enables it to function as a supplementary security zone capable of increasing operational flexibility and reducing reliance on congested chokepoints. Somaliland is consequently shifting from being perceived primarily as a peripheral political territory toward becoming a potentially useful node within wider maritime-security networks (Horn Review, 2026). This development reflects the emergence of a sub-sovereign security architecture in which cooperation may be organized around functional capabilities rather than formal diplomatic status. External actors engage Somaliland on issues such as port security, maritime surveillance, and institutional capacity building, potentially prioritizing effective territorial control and political reliability over juridical sovereignty (EUCAP Somalia, n.d.; Addis Standard, 2026). From a structural realist perspective, this pattern illustrates the role of strategic necessity in shaping international engagement, particularly in high-risk geopolitical environments.

The shift is also visible in the engagement of actors such as the UAE. Maritime monitoring and logistical coordination have been supported by the UAE's presence in Berbera through infrastructure investment and security cooperation (Osman, 2026). Similarly, engagement with Ethiopia underscores the strategic importance of securing alternative maritime access and strengthening regional connectivity (Horn Review, 2026). Although Somaliland lacks widespread formal recognition, these relationships are driven primarily by the strategic value it offers. At the same time, Somaliland is not merely a passive host for external security actors. Its relative stability and governance capacity contribute to a more secure coastal environment, thereby supporting broader efforts to protect maritime trade routes (Ali & Nyelade, 2025). Somaliland can therefore be understood not only as a recipient of external security engagement but also as a potential contributor to regional maritime-security provision. Somaliland's role in Red Sea security dynamics consequently reflects a broader change in contemporary international relations. It demonstrates

how *de facto* states can become functionally incorporated into regional security systems through strategic relevance, territorial control, and operational reliability despite unresolved questions of formal political recognition.

Risks and Limitations of Strategic Engagement

The Recognition–Security Nexus helps explain the growing involvement of external actors in Somaliland, but such engagement is not without significant limitations and risks. The same mechanisms that promote Somaliland’s integration into regional security and economic networks also generate structural vulnerabilities that constrain the depth, durability, and sustainability of such participation. The most significant structural constraint remains the absence of widespread international recognition. Despite increasing functional cooperation, Somaliland remains excluded from many key international institutions and legal frameworks. This limits its access to development financing, international agreements, and formal security arrangements and often results in politically ambiguous or informal relationships (Ylönen & Ali, 2025). Such engagement is therefore frequently institutionally fragile and vulnerable to disruption, renegotiation, or shifts in external political priorities.

A second limitation concerns dependence on external actors. Strategic relationships with countries such as the UAE and Ethiopia are shaped partly by changing geopolitical interests rather than permanent political commitments. These relationships may provide infrastructure investment, security cooperation, and economic opportunities, but they can also generate asymmetric dependencies (Ali & Nyelade, 2025). Somaliland’s strategic position may therefore remain contingent upon its continuing utility to external partners rather than being secured through stable diplomatic recognition. Expanded engagement also risks drawing Somaliland more deeply into broader geopolitical competition. As its strategic relevance increases, it may become increasingly entangled in competing regional alignments. While certain actors have expanded their engagement with Somaliland, others, including Turkey and Egypt, have strengthened political and security relations with the Federal Government of Somalia (Ismail, 2026).

This dynamic reflects a process of counter-securitization in which competing powers respond to perceived shifts in regional influence by developing alternative partnerships (FMES, 2026). Such competition can create the risk of proxy dynamics, whereby Somaliland becomes increasingly exposed to rivalries among external powers. This may constrain its policy autonomy and increase its vulnerability to political and security pressure (Hiiraan Online, 2026; Horn Review, 2026). External engagement may therefore produce immediate security and development benefits while simultaneously limiting Somaliland’s ability to pursue an independent and balanced foreign policy.

Israel’s recognition adds a particularly significant dimension to this strategic exposure. Open alignment with Israel may signal to Israel’s regional partners that Somaliland is willing to engage in security cooperation, but it may also increase the likelihood that Israel-aligned interests or infrastructure in Somaliland are viewed by hostile regional actors—including Iran-aligned actors such as the Houthi movement and groups such as al-Shabab—as potential targets within their wider confrontation with Israel. This places a new geopolitical spotlight on a territory that lacks many of the military and diplomatic protections available to widely recognized states (FMES, 2026). The Recognition–Security Nexus also does not necessarily produce progress toward formal

statehood. External actors may cooperate extensively in areas such as security, infrastructure, and logistics without extending diplomatic recognition. This can generate a prolonged condition of political ambiguity in which Somaliland becomes functionally integrated into regional systems while remaining formally excluded from much of the international community (UNPO Academy, 2026; Atlantic Council, 2026).

Finally, the securitization of economic infrastructure carries inherent risks. Investments in ports and logistics corridors may generate significant economic benefits while simultaneously transforming such infrastructure into strategic assets within wider geopolitical competition. The dual-use nature of infrastructure can therefore make Somaliland both strategically important and increasingly vulnerable to regional instability (Ali & Nyelade, 2025). Somaliland's experience illustrates both the opportunities and the fragility associated with engagement under conditions of contested sovereignty. Its growing involvement in regional security and economic networks reflects a broader shift toward pragmatic forms of international engagement, but such integration remains conditional, reversible, and highly sensitive to external geopolitical change.

Results and Analysis

The preceding analysis suggests that maritime competition in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is reshaping the logic of international engagement with politically unrecognized entities. Somaliland illustrates how a combination of strategic geography, relative political stability, territorial control, and infrastructure capacity can generate forms of external engagement that are increasingly detached from widespread formal diplomatic recognition. The Somaliland case indicates that external engagement is often driven more strongly by strategic utility than by juridical status. External actors place considerable emphasis on access to maritime routes, logistical positioning, infrastructure, and security cooperation. This provides support for the central proposition of the Recognition-Security Nexus: in areas of high geopolitical importance, functional imperatives can outweigh some of the normative and legal constraints associated with non-recognition.

The analysis further suggests that Somaliland has, to some extent, become incorporated into an emerging sub-sovereign regional security architecture. Cooperation in port development, maritime security, and infrastructure investment—particularly involving actors such as the UAE and Ethiopia—demonstrates how *de facto* authorities can function as nodes within wider economic and security systems even in the absence of widespread diplomatic recognition. At the same time, this form of integration remains conditional and potentially reversible. External engagement is closely linked to changing geopolitical objectives and is therefore vulnerable to shifts in foreign policy. Somaliland's strategic relevance is not fully institutionalized; it remains partly contingent upon prevailing regional and international conditions. Its position within emerging regional networks is consequently characterized by a degree of uncertainty.

The analysis also points to increasing dynamics of counter-securitization, whereby competing regional actors respond to Somaliland's expanding external engagement through alternative political and security partnerships, particularly with the Federal Government of Somalia. Such patterns contribute to growing geopolitical rivalry in the Horn of Africa and increase the complexity of Somaliland's strategic environment. Somaliland's experience therefore suggests the emergence of a new "middle ground" for *de facto* states. Functional relevance can generate

substantial external visibility and engagement without producing corresponding progress toward widespread legal recognition. Somaliland may thus be described as increasingly operationally incorporated into regional economic and security systems while remaining diplomatically excluded from much of formal international society. Rather than indicating the disappearance of sovereignty, the Somaliland case may therefore point toward emerging forms of international engagement in which functional capacity increasingly coexists with, and in some circumstances operates partially independently of, formal recognition. The Horn of Africa provides an important setting in which to observe these changing relationships between sovereignty, strategic utility, infrastructure, and security.

Rethinking Engagement and the Policy Implications

The preceding analysis has important implications for policymakers operating in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa, particularly in relation to strategically important but politically unrecognized entities such as Somaliland. As maritime competition intensifies, considerations of access, stability, territorial control, and operational reliability increasingly shape patterns of external engagement. Without careful management, however, such engagement may deepen geopolitical tensions and reinforce institutional fragility. External actors should pursue clearer and more predictable frameworks for engagement. Informal and flexible arrangements have facilitated cooperation in areas such as port development and maritime security, yet their informal character can limit institutional durability and long-term predictability. Greater transparency and more clearly defined, rules-based mechanisms—particularly in areas such as infrastructure governance, customs cooperation, and maritime safety—could strengthen long-term effectiveness without necessarily requiring a change in formal diplomatic recognition.

Policymakers should also adopt a conflict-sensitive approach to engagement. Somaliland's strategic relevance exists within a complex regional political environment, and unbalanced external intervention can exacerbate existing tensions. Engagement strategies should therefore seek to minimize zero-sum dynamics, particularly among neighboring governments, while avoiding the reinforcement of proxy competition between external powers. Functional participation in appropriate regional and international mechanisms should also be strengthened. Given Somaliland's practical importance to maritime logistics and coastal security, its complete exclusion from technical and sectoral cooperation frameworks may undermine regional effectiveness. Carefully designed engagement in areas such as maritime-safety coordination, trade facilitation, infrastructure standards, and technical cooperation could strengthen regional outcomes without prejudging unresolved questions of sovereignty.

For the Government of Somaliland, priority should be given to strengthening institutional capacity and regulatory credibility. Improvements in strategic sectors such as port management, customs administration, and maritime security would increase Somaliland's attractiveness as a partner while reducing its vulnerability to external political pressure. Sustainable international engagement requires transparent regulatory frameworks, accountable institutions, and consistent policy implementation. Policymakers must also remain attentive to the risks associated with the securitization of economic infrastructure. Ports and logistics corridors in strategically contested regions can carry both economic and military significance. Such investments may support development but can also increase exposure to geopolitical competition if commercial infrastructure becomes excessively militarized or associated with particular strategic blocs.

Infrastructure development should therefore remain grounded in clear economic objectives, accompanied by appropriate safeguards against excessive militarization and geopolitical capture. Engagement with *de facto* states such as Somaliland ultimately requires balancing strategic pragmatism with political sensitivity. Functional cooperation can contribute to regional stability, infrastructure development, and economic integration, but its long-term effectiveness will depend on managing geopolitical risks while strengthening institutional foundations.

Conclusion

The changing security environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is challenging conventional assumptions that formal diplomatic recognition is an absolute prerequisite for meaningful international engagement. This article has argued that the Recognition–Security Nexus provides a useful framework for understanding the increasing willingness of external actors to partially separate functional partnerships from conventional diplomatic recognition. In high-stakes maritime environments, the practical value of a relatively stable and strategically located *de facto* polity such as Somaliland can, under certain conditions, outweigh some of the legal and diplomatic constraints associated with contested sovereignty. Strategic geography, logistical reliability, territorial control, political stability, and infrastructure can therefore enable meaningful forms of external engagement even where formal recognition remains limited.

The 2024 Ethiopia–Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding and Israel’s recognition of Somaliland in late 2025 represent two of the most tangible manifestations of this nexus. Israel’s subsequent appointment of Ambassador Michael Lotem in April 2026 further demonstrates how formal diplomatic recognition can intersect with wider strategic and maritime-security calculations. These developments suggest that engagement with Somaliland is no longer merely an exceptional response to diplomatic ambiguity but increasingly forms part of broader regional competition over maritime access, infrastructure, and security. Nevertheless, this engagement remains inherently unstable. Somaliland has increasingly emerged as a functional node within a sub-sovereign regional security architecture, but its limited formal legal incorporation continues to restrict access to durable international institutions and exposes it to the risks associated with counter-securitization, proxy competition, and shifting geopolitical alignments.

The result is a “middle ground” characterized by functional integration without widespread legal recognition—a hybrid form of international participation that reflects growing tensions within the contemporary international order. Ultimately, the Somaliland case suggests that the Horn of Africa is becoming an important laboratory for emerging forms of international engagement in which strategic maritime depth, infrastructure, and logistical reliability can assume substantial importance alongside formal *de jure* recognition. This does not imply that sovereignty or recognition have become irrelevant. Rather, it demonstrates that their practical significance may vary according to strategic context. Both scholars and policymakers must therefore grapple with a changing geopolitical environment in which strategic necessity increasingly reshapes the boundaries of international engagement. Understanding this transformation requires moving beyond rigid legal distinctions toward a more nuanced analysis of how sovereignty, recognition, security, geography, and material capability interact in strategically contested spaces.

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