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POLICY BRIEF

SOMALIA-SOMALILAND DISPUTE:

A Structured Pathway for Coexistence and a More Stable Horn

A strategic framework for managing disagreement, reducing conflict, and preserving the possibility of a just and mutually acceptable settlement.

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Peaceful coexistence is not the final destination, but it is the necessary pathway.



PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

Reduce tensions and prevent conflict escalation.



STRUCTURED DIALOGUE

Maintain communication and manage political differences.



PRACTICAL COOPERATION

Promote collaboration in trade, security, and public services.



CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Build mechanisms to mitigate risks and protect communities.



FUTURE SETTLEMENT

Preserve space for a just and mutually acceptable solution.



AUGUST 2026



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*Different
Realities.
A Shared
Future.*



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A stable Horn of Africa requires practical cooperation today and a political solution tomorrow.

KEY MESSAGES

SOMALIA–SOMALILAND DISPUTE

A STRUCTURED PATHWAY FOR COEXISTENCE AND A MORE STABLE HORN

PEOPLE
STABILITY
OPPORTUNITIES

1



A POLITICAL IMPASSE, NOT A MILITARY CONFLICT

The Somalia–Somaliland dispute is a long-standing political disagreement over sovereignty and self-determination. Neither side has the military capacity to impose its position, making a negotiated and structured approach the only realistic path.

2



BOTH SIDES HAVE LEGITIMATE CONCERNS

Somalia prioritizes territorial integrity and constitutional order. Somaliland prioritizes self-determination and international recognition. Sustainable solutions must address the concerns of both sides.

3



THE STATUS QUO CARRIES GROWING RISKS

Continued deadlock increases social polarization, contested territorial tensions, disinformation, and external geopolitical competition, threatening regional stability.

4



PRACTICAL COOPERATION IS POSSIBLE AND NECESSARY

Both sides have interdependence in trade, security, migration, environment, and public services. Cooperation can reduce tensions, build trust, and deliver tangible benefits to people on both sides.

5



A STRUCTURED INTERIM FRAMEWORK CAN REDUCE RISKS

A framework based on dialogue, crisis management, and practical cooperation can prevent escalation, protect civilians, and create space for future political negotiation without prejudging the final status.

6



A STABLE AND PROSPEROUS HORN IS A SHARED INTEREST

Managing the dispute responsibly benefits not only Somali and Somaliland communities but also the wider Horn of Africa. Peaceful coexistence creates opportunities for people, stability for the region, and a more secure future.



THE BOTTOM LINE

Managing disagreement today, without prejudging the outcome, can reduce conflict, protect communities, and keep the door open to a just and mutually acceptable settlement tomorrow.



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1. Somalia-Somaliland Relations Enter A New Era Of Competition

For over thirty years, the relationship between Somalia and Somaliland has been characterized by a consistent strategic dynamic. Internationally, Somalia has maintained recognition of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Somaliland has independently governed since declaring itself an independent nation in 1991, and established separate political institutions. However, neither party has achieved their desired end-state. Somalia cannot assert control over Somaliland and Somaliland has not secured broad international recognition for its declared independence. This equilibrium is increasingly unstable. Three factors are critical to this shift in stability: the changes in the diplomatic arena created by the Israeli government's December 2025 declaration of formal recognition of Somaliland, the increased strategic value of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. And the growth in the commercial/geopolitical value of Berbera port. These factors have changed the nature of the conflict. It can no longer be considered simply a bi-lateral issue regarding sovereignty, rather, it has evolved into a larger struggle involving regional security, freedom of access to the sea/sea lanes, trade and development and foreign partnerships.

1.1 Changes In The Diplomatic Arena

December 26, 2025 marked a major change in the diplomatic environment. On that date, the Government of Israel formally recognized Somaliland as an independent state, making Israel the first UN member state to do so. Somalia rejected the decision as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial

integrity. The recognition did not produce a broader wave of international recognition for Somaliland. The African Union subsequently reaffirmed that it does not recognize Somaliland as an independent state and reiterated its support for Somalia's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity. Therefore, the implications of Israel's official recognition of Somaliland lie not in transforming Somaliland's current international standing immediately but in what it signifies in terms of changes to the overall diplomatic environment. For Somaliland, recognition by a UN member state establishes a new standard for how other nations may engage internationally. For Somalia, it adds another factor to pressure it to protect its claims to territory via the African Union, Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), United Nations, or bilaterally. IGAD reaffirmed on June 18, 2026 that Somalia's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity were to remain unchallenged.

Since the official recognition of Somaliland by Israel there has been greater competition diplomatically as opposed to movement toward a resolution. Somaliland continues to seek out external partners while Somalia seeks to limit such partnerships' development as they relate to its own territorial claims. In September 2026, Somaliland President Irro met with members of Congress and U.S. Department of Defense officials to promote increased strategic and economic cooperation between Somaliland and the United States and highlight Berbera's potential as a hub for security and trade in the region. Additionally, Somaliland indicated it was willing to provide greater economic and possibly security access to external actors if they provided increased engagement internationally.

As a consequence of the above noted increase in diplomatic competition between Somalia and Somaliland, external engagement related to final status questions has become more directly linked than ever previously experienced. While recognition remains contentious, the Somalia\ Somaliland dispute no longer operates under the same diplomatic paradigm as existed prior to December 25, 2025.

1.2 Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Geopolitics

Changes in the international political environment are taking place within a larger transformation of the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden area's strategic import. The sea lane connecting the Gulf of Aden, Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea has increasing global strategic importance due to interruptions to international shipping through the area. ongoing conflict in Yemen. and the escalating rivalry of multiple nations for control of maritime security in the region. Somaliland's geographical position puts it on the border of this strategically critical sea lane. According to Reuters, Somaliland's proximity to this sea lane and Berbera's connection to the Red Sea are key factors why Somaliland is becoming an increasingly significant player in the international arena from a geostrategic perspective. This positioning of Somaliland presents new opportunities for Somaliland. In addition to supporting commercial activities, international cooperation regarding maritime security, logistics and investments, Somaliland's positioning can be used by other countries to gain access to the wider Horn of Africa/Red Sea region. At the same time, an increase in the number of external actors interested in Somaliland increases the political risk associated with such actions. These actors will be working to achieve their

own security, commercial or geopolitical objectives related to their interests in the region rather than achieving a resolution of the Mogadishu and Hargeisa dispute. Therefore, even if an actor becomes engaged with Somaliland and enhances its strategic value, there is no guarantee that this engagement will lead to a reduction in the existing political differences between the two sides.

The evolving relationship between Israel and Somaliland is reflective of this emerging pattern. Following Israel's recognition of Somaliland, the two sides have expanded their diplomatic and security cooperation. On June 2026, Somaliland's Defence Minister reported that Israel was providing training to Somaliland security forces, however he denied reports that negotiations had commenced for the establishment of an Israeli military base in Berbera. From a broader perspective, it is evident that the Mogadishu and Hargeisa dispute is being increasingly influenced by events related to the rapidly developing Red Sea security environment, over which neither party has full control.

1.3 Increasing Strategic Value of Berbera

Berbera is situated at the center of this transforming strategic environment. Both commercially and geopolitically, Berbera holds considerable strategic value. DP World currently operates and plans to expand the Port of Berbera. Currently, the terminal includes a 400-meter extension and a 17-meter draft. DP World states that further expansion is possible and describes the port and surrounding Berbera Economic Zone as such, a central dilemma exists for the Mogadishu and Hargeisa dispute regarding Berbera.

For Somalia, growth in external relationships (political/commercial/security) centered on Berbera create concern that expansion of engagement may gradually shift the regional balance-of-power concerning territory still recognized by Mogadishu as part of Somalia.

It should be noted that foreign investment or strategic cooperation does not automatically determine Somaliland's status as an internationally recognized state. What it does indicate is that the longer Somalia-Somaliland delay resolving their competing claims of sovereignty over this disputed territory, the higher likelihood that external actors will develop interests/relationships that complicate management of this dispute.

2. The Core Problem: Two Political Systems

The dispute between the two sides has continued because two political realities have developed without either fully replacing the other. Internationally, Somalia retains recognized sovereignty over the territory claimed by Somaliland. At the same time, Somaliland has maintained separate governmental institutions and exercised de facto self-government since 1991

As such, the African Union asserts Somalia's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity and does not acknowledge Somaliland as an independent nation-state. Simultaneously Somaliland's governmental structures have evolved considerably in the past 30 plus years of self-governance

2.1 Somalia's International Sovereignty & Territorial Integrity

Somalia's standing internationally relies largely on being the recognized state of

Somalia and the principles of territorial integrity. As the Federal Republic of Somalia represents Somalia internationally in all organizations, engages in diplomatic relations with every other state and receives regional and international assistance toward preserving the unity of Somalia's territories. After Israel recognized Somaliland in December 2025, the African Union reaffirmed their stance that Somalia's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity should be upheld and that they reject all unilateral recognition of Somaliland. Thus far this position constitutes an important element of diplomatic support for the Federal Republic of Somalia and its territorial integrity..

Somalia's standing internationally affords it considerable advantage in terms of both diplomacy and law. It allows the Federal Republic of Somalia to act as Somalia's representative internationally and to resist any attempts to modify the internationally recognized borders of Somalia. Additionally, this standing grants Mogadishu access to regional and international bodies from which they may object to external actions perceived to contravene the sovereignty of Somalia.

However, international recognition will not automatically confer practical political authority. For more than three decades (since 1991), the Federal Republic of Somalia has not operated within Somaliland in a manner consistent with normal administrative practices. Instead Somaliland has established its own legislative branch, executive branch, national security apparatuses, and governmental systems. In this context, Somalia's international sovereignty exceeds its practical political authority in Somaliland.

2.2 Somaliland's De Facto Self-Government and Political Institutions

Somaliland's political legitimacy is based on a different kind of political legitimacy. After declaring its independence in 1991, Somaliland had formed separate political and security systems and has established separate governing institutions. After more than three decades, these institutions have become part of everyday political life in the areas governed by Somaliland. The establishment of all kinds of political and security institutions (executive, legislative, judiciary, administration, security) have given Somaliland the possibility to execute a considerable amount of real power in the absence of an international recognition of Somaliland as a sovereign state.

It is not possible to ignore this political reality with the simple fact that Somaliland is not broadly recognized as a sovereign state by the rest of the world. The capability to administer a region, to establish and run institutions and to organize the political life of a population for an extended period of time generates interests, expectations and forms of political organization that are impossible to remove with mere diplomatic declarations. Entire generations grew up under the institutionally separated government of Somaliland from the government of the Federal Republic of Somalia and thus have developed political experiences and expectations that differ from those of other parts of Somalia.

Somaliland also uses the argument about its historical past regarding the collapse of the Somali State after the formation of the Somali Republic in 1960 as a basis for its political claims. According to Somaliland, it is trying to restore an independent state that existed before the formation of the Somali

Republic in 1960. Regardless how one evaluates the correctness of this argument historically, it is currently an essential element of Somaliland's political identity and of its diplomatic communication.

However, institutional performance alone does not oblige other countries or international organizations to recognize Somaliland as a sovereign state. The recognition depends on the political, legal, regional and strategic calculations made by each country and international organization.

2.3 The Strategic Deadlock

The interrelation between both sides' political realities leads to the primary strategic problem underlying the conflict between the two sides. On the one hand, Somalia enjoys international sovereignty but has not yet regained control over Somaliland politically. On the other hand, Somaliland has achieved substantial de facto authority in executing political decisions but has not secured broad international recognition as a sovereign state. Therefore, neither side has succeeded in transforming its main advantage into a successful solution to the conflict.

For Somalia, international recognition guarantees its right to the territory claimed but does not necessarily provide the basis for reuniting Somaliland with Somalia. Likewise, for Somaliland, developing its institutions and engaging in external cooperation strengthens its capacity to administer itself politically, but does not ensure greater recognition. Thus, both sides can protect their current positions better than they can achieve their desired final outcomes.

Institutionally separate forms of governance can gradually solidify themselves even further. Political identities can become

increasingly differentiated. Contested areas can give birth to new political actors. External parties can develop increasing ties to the conflict due to their growing interest in it. Moreover, costs associated with negotiating a compromise can increase over time as nationalistic narratives and domestic expectations constrain leaders ever more strongly.

Given these circumstances, a distinction between their ultimate status and their day-to-day relations becomes ever more relevant. Whether the two sides shall ultimately merge again into a single state, exist separately as two independent sovereign states or assume some intermediate form of political relationships among them cannot be determined solely by their continued adherence to their respective positions. Similarly, matters such as security, trade relations, civil welfare and disputes involving conflicting groups residing within disputed territories cannot be held indefinitely hostage to negotiations relating to ultimate status.

Consequently, the chief policy dilemma lies in finding ways in which both parties may deal with day-to-day disagreements without being forced to relinquish their basic views on sovereignty. An arrangement along such lines would solve nothing vis-à-vis ultimate status questions. But it might diminish some risks emanating from the present impasse, and help to keep open possibilities for eventual settlements.

3. The Laascaanood Conflict Legacy

The dispute between the two sides is often presented primarily as a dispute between Mogadishu and Hargeisa. However, events occurring in Sool, Sanaag and Cayn show that the territorial dimension is even more

complex. The territorial issue is not limited to the dispute between Somaliland and Puntland. Both have repeatedly faced challenges to their political legitimacy from local communities, which have developed into a further political entity in territories claimed by Somaliland - SSC-Khaatumo (which has since evolved into the North-East Somalia Administration). Consequently, the territorial dispute is no longer simply a bilateral dispute about sovereignty. It has become a dispute about representation, legitimate local political authority, security and whether local communities have the right to decide what institutions will govern them.

3.1 The Laascaanood Conflict Legacy

Laascaanood was the site of a major turning point in the territorial dispute. Demonstrations that had begun in late 2022 escalated into a violent confrontation between Somaliland's armed forces and SSC-Khaatumo armed forces in February 2023. The violence displaced large numbers of civilians and caused significant casualties and turned what was previously a long-standing, but dormant, dispute regarding the status of Sool into an active security confrontation. In August 2023, SSC-Khaatumo forces took full control of Laascaanood when Somaliland's forces retreated.

The Laascaanood conflict represented much more than a mere victory for one side. The conflict showed that Somaliland's claim to the territory it considers to be within its jurisdiction does not necessarily lead to acceptance of Somaliland's political authority by all communities within that territory. Moreover, the conflict shows that the federal government's view on territorial

administration may converge with local mobilization, thereby changing the dynamics of power relations between the federal capital of Mogadishu, the de facto capital of Hargeisa and other regional players.

In addition, the conflict resulted in a new territorial dynamic. As of March 2026, EUAA reports indicate that Laascaanood and adjacent areas are controlled by a coalition aligned with the federal government, whereas Somaliland retains some presence further west, notably around Oog and Qorilugud. Various regions continue to be subject to dual or disputed control. Therefore, the territorial situation cannot be defined as a simple separation of two administrations.

3.2 SSC-Khaatumo and Development of North-Eastern Somalia

SSC-Khaatumo also changed the framework of the dispute through its evolution into a separate political unit. Initially emerging as an armed and political mobilisation at the local level, SSC-Khaatumo eventually developed into a distinct political administration and was subsequently recognized by the federal government in 2025 as the State of North Eastern Somalia. SSC-Khaatumo formally includes Sool, Sanaag and Buhodle and adjacent districts of Cayn, though its functional reach varies widely.

The fact that SSC-Khaatumo now exists as a political entity is important because it introduces a player who cannot be reduced solely to a position held by either Mogadishu or Hargeisa. SSC-Khaatumo emerged out of local mobilization efforts and has pursued formal recognition as a political entity within Somalia's federal structure. However, SSC-Khaatumo's declared territory corresponds to areas that Somaliland considers to fall within

its own territory, while Puntland still maintains political and security interests especially in parts of the Warsangeli community located in Sanaag.

Therefore, there is a multilevel territorial dispute. Based on historical borders identified with the former British Somaliland Protectorate, Somaliland maintains its claims to Sool and Sanaag. Historically, Puntland's claims have been linked to clans affiliated with Puntland and/or to ties with Puntland-based politicians. SSC-Khaatumo/North East Somalia's administration emerges from a distinct political process centered on local communities' relationship with Somalia's federal structure. The overlap of these competing claims makes resolution of the territorial issue significantly more difficult than would be if it were merely a matter of transferring authority from Mogadishu to Hargeisa.

4. The Cost of the Status Quo

It is not just the lack of a formal agreement that defines the cost of the the Somali federal government and Somaliland dispute. Rather, the longer this dispute continues. the more entrenched it will be in all political institutions, territorial competition, social identification and in the strategic interest of other nations. The key concern however is not merely the fact that the dispute will remain stagnant. The issue lies in whether or not the conditions under which this dispute exists are going to continue to evolve at the same rate that the political structure exists to deal with such developments. Therefore, the main challenge presented by this situation is the idea of cumulative entrenchment. Politicians become more

entrenched in their views, disputed territory develops its own forms of administration, social narratives become more polarized on issues related to both sides of the dispute and international actors develop interests that do not necessarily coincide with either party's long term goals. Therefore, maintaining the status quo could potentially become more difficult regardless of any future conflicts that occur.

4.1. Strategic Maximalism and Political Deadlock

While both sides have well-defined positions, each has a vested interest in preserving its core claim and protecting what it sees as its national objective. Therefore, negotiations between the two parties run the risk of being nothing more than an opportunity for each side to defend their position rather than work towards creating some form of movement. This results in a strategic impasse between the two parties in which neither side achieves their desired outcome, yet both have created political and institutional interests in maintaining their current positions. The longer this impasse continues, the larger the chance that the dispute will become more difficult to resolve due to increasing political costs of compromising over time. While Israel's recognition did not settle Somaliland's international standing, it did demonstrate that the international context regarding this dispute can change even if the basic disagreements surrounding this dispute remain unchanged.

4.2 Growing Social And Political Polarization

Political narrative surrounding sovereignty, territorial control and past grievances can create an atmosphere in which communities

feel compelled to align with competing versions of group membership. Thus, once a political dispute transitions into the realm of social identity, it is often much easier for communities to conflate competing versions of group membership with competing visions of sovereignty. This is especially true in areas in which clan identity, political affiliations and territorial claims intersect. In the case of Laascaanood, it was clear how quickly a disagreement about politics could escalate into a level of violence among members of a community. Subsequent events that led to SSC-Khaatumo and North-Eastern Somalia demonstrated that members of a population residing in disputed areas cannot automatically assume that their preference for political governance corresponds to either Mogadishu or Hargeisa.

Social polarization also impacts upon the amount of political space available for negotiations. If sovereignty comes to be seen as linked to a shared sense of self-identity, then compromises can be viewed as betrayals rather than negotiated settlements. This limits opportunities for politicians to soften their stances vis-a-vis their constituents who come to view negotiated settlements as treasonous. The danger posed by this phenomenon is heightened when political disputes are communicated through social networks. What begins as a dispute between institutions can rapidly translate into a dispute between communities, what begins as a dispute between communities can easily take on a national or regional character. Once this dynamic becomes established, it is far easier for societies to reverse this process than it would be had no such process existed previously.

4.3 Digital Politics: Dispute and Misinformation

In addition to traditional forms of political activity, digital politics (including social media) is now an essential component of the political environment created by the dispute over the two sides. Rapidly circulating politically-oriented content on social media allows all manner of political actors -- political parties, activist groups, diaspora organizations and individual citizens -- to communicate quickly and widely regarding matters like territorial claims, alleged violations of state and non-state security forces, and historical injustices. Political reaction occurs based upon un-confirmed reports of military activities, civilian deaths, territorial changes, and/or foreign intervention prior to the establishment of independent fact-based reporting. Moreover, content intended to provoke outrage and reinforce identity-based group affiliations can spread much faster than careful and corrective information.

As a consequence of this dynamic, the political tensions associated with a dispute create a feedback loop where emotionally charged digital stories of threats promote further perceptions of threats. increase the level of public pressure against compromises in negotiations. and reduce the likelihood of political accommodations. While digital media does not create the underlying disputes over status, they do exacerbate the social and political implications of conflicts.

Since the conflict has developed a strong role for diaspora communities and has drawn-in a range of international geopolitical players, it is not possible to view digital media as secondary to other dimensions of the conflict. Digital communication has effectively extended the scope of the political arena from being strictly confined to a defined geographic area to encompassing the entire global community. Consequently, narratives

about Somaliland, Somalia and the disputed region(s) are able to flow across borders and exert influences on political mobilizations well removed from the site of the dispute.

4.4 The Danger of Normalizing Perpetual Social Conflict

While the continued presence of a long-standing dispute does not automatically lead to a persistent condition of armed conflict. one potential long-term outcome is a normalization of perpetual hostilities. Communities often begin to regard their counterparts in a dispute not merely as opponents in ongoing negotiations, but as adversaries who will forever be opposed to them. This is especially concerning since, once a degree of violence diminishes in intensity, the basis for continuing conflict may persist. Educational systems, media narratives, institutions, diaspora networks and campaign rhetoric can all serve to maintain competing historical narratives and reinforce social divisions. For example, a generation raised within a context where dispute resolution was framed as an identity-based issue may have less motivation to revise the narratives previously used to describe their differences.

Therefore, while the primary strategic concern remains the possibility of renewed large-scale fighting, an equally valid concern is the increasing institutionalization of distrust. Once distrust is embedded in both social and political institutions, relatively minor incidents can take-on disproportionate levels of symbolic value relative to their actual context.

4.5 Geopolitics and Externalization

It is not necessarily foreign engagement per se that poses dangers. Foreign investments,

trade agreements, maritime cooperation and diplomatic relations can provide both positive impacts on security and economic development. However, when external actors become directly engaged in competing with each other for influence over various actors in a domestic conflict, then it is likely that the internal dynamics of a dispute will become subsumed by larger regional/continental competitive interests. As a result, external powers may support some actors in a dispute without addressing the underlying issues of contention.

Over time, this process could result in the externalization of an otherwise internal dispute: the basic question of whether Somaliland should exist as an autonomous entity is gradually replaced by a series of larger strategic competitions involving access to ports/maritime security arrangements/military cooperation/regional alliances/etc.

5. Three Paths Forward

5.1 Reconstituting a Political Union

Reconstituting a political union would result in Somaliland returning to a shared Somali political structure while identifying the structural and political shortcomings that led to the failure of the 1960 union. Therefore, a reconstituted union would not be equivalent to merely reinstating the prior 1991 constitutional order. An effective union would necessitate discussions regarding the distribution of political power, guarantees in the constitution, representation, security arrangements, fiscal responsibility, and the preservation of Somaliland's institutions. From Somalia's vantage point, the attractiveness of this path forward is that it

preserves the existing international framework of Somali sovereignty and territorial integrity. The African Union continues to affirmatively support this stance and does not acknowledge Somaliland as an independent country. Despite this attractiveness, there is a fundamental political hurdle to forming a reconstituted union. Somaliland has had time (more than thirty years) to develop its own separate institutions and political aspirations. Additionally, Somaliland's leaders continue to advocate for Somaliland as a separate entity and the 2025 recognition by Israel demonstrates that Somaliland has pursued an external diplomatic agenda rather than prepare to return to the former union on the same terms. Therefore, a union can only become politically viable when it entails a significantly revised constitutional settlement, rather than simply restore the status quo ante.

5.2 Negotiating Separation

Negotiating a separation involves the two sides negotiating an agreement whereby Somaliland is recognized as a separate sovereign nation-state and all outstanding issues related to separation are resolved through negotiation. Potential issues that may arise during such negotiations include border issues, citizenship issues, asset/liability issues, security arrangements, trade issues, movement restrictions, diplomatic relations, and issues related to contested territories. This type of resolution represents a significant departure from the current position taken by the African Union and the Federal Government of Somalia. Specifically, in February 2026, the African Union issued a declaration reaffirming Somalia's

sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity while rejecting Israel's unilateral recognition of Somaliland.

Given that a negotiated separation would go beyond an agreement reached by Mogadishu and Hargeisa, it would also require significant international support and mechanisms for dealing with those communities/territories who do not identify with either party. For example, the establishment of North East Somalia in 2025 was recognized as a federal member state by the Federal Government while the territory claimed by North East Somalia includes areas currently considered part of Somaliland's territory.

While separating the two main political entities in the region would provide one element of closure in the dispute between Somalia and Somaliland —the relationship between the two primary political projects — it would not necessarily resolve every issue related to contested territories or communities.

5.3 Temporary Arrangements for Interim Coexistence

Temporary arrangements for interim coexistence would not aim to finalize the status of Somaliland at present. Rather, it would establish a mutually accepted mechanism for managing relations between Somalia and Somaliland while maintaining each side's position with respect to the ultimate constitutional question.

In practical terms, any interim arrangements between Somalia and Somaliland would be made "without prejudice," i.e., neither Somalia's participation in any agreements nor Somaliland's would constitute recognition by Somalia of Somaliland as an

independent state nor acceptance by Somaliland of Somalia's sovereignty. Thus, both sides could engage in cooperation regarding security incidents, trade movements, humanitarian access, and other practical matters without first resolving the ultimate status question.

Interim frameworks for managing the relationship between Somalia and Somaliland would also need to reflect the territorial realities created since Laascaanood. The emergence of North East Somalia means that contested communities cannot be viewed as mere subjects for negotiation between Mogadishu and Hargeisa. Therefore, any interim framework would need channels that allow affected local governments/community administrators to discuss matters relating to security, governance and territorial arrangements.

Ultimately, the objective would not be to freeze existing territorial claims indefinitely. Rather it would be to ensure that disputes regarding the unsettled status of sovereignty do not continuously produce additional security crises while allowing for a future comprehensive resolution.

5.4 Assessing the Three Alternatives

These alternatives are all about finding ways to handle the same unresolved problem in different ways. Re-union will create an opportunity for Somaliland to reunite politically, and at the same time find a way that allows Somalia to continue within its existing legal and international frameworks. Separating by negotiation would seek to settle the bilateral sovereignty question through the creation of two separate states, while requiring agreements on borders, contested territories, citizenship, security, and other outstanding issues. Coexisting on an

interim basis would put off the final status decision, while allowing some type of structure to be established which could help manage the day-to-day effects of continuing to disagree.

Therefore, the main distinction among the three alternatives is based upon how quickly or when they want to answer the question of ultimate sovereignty. Both union and separation seek to resolve this immediately. In contrast, interim coexistence distinguishes the resolution of the immediate security and political issues, from the ultimate determination of who has sovereignty.

This distinction is especially important today because of the changing political climate. While there were previously only two players in the conflict (Mogadishu and Hargeisa) today the situation is much more complex due to the emergence of North-East Somalia, continued contention over control of Sool and Sanaag regions, as well as the increasing influence of external players.

While a final status agreement would ultimately need to take into account all of these emerging factors, those involved do not need to wait for a final status agreement to develop procedures for managing their relationship. Therefore, rather than being viewed as a fourth alternative for resolving the sovereignty dispute, an interim framework would serve as a means for establishing a set of procedures to govern the relationship between Somalia, Somaliland and other interested parties during the period prior to when a final status agreement is feasible.

6. A Structured Interim Coexistence Framework

In establishing an interim coexistence structure, the goal of structured interim coexistence is not to determine the ultimate constitutionally recognized status of Somaliland. Instead, its purpose is more narrow: to create a political and security structure that allows the parties to manage a disputed issue without creating further instability and allowing room for eventual resolution of the dispute.

Therefore, this creates an important distinction. As the political situation currently exists there are numerous overlapping political realities. Somalia has received international recognition and receives support from the African Union (AU) and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) regarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity. On the other hand, Somaliland maintains its own government institutions and seeks to receive international recognition. Additionally, North-East Somalia provides additional layers of political authority in regions that are claimed by Somaliland.

Therefore, an interim structure should be based on practical management needs versus an expectation that the final status dispute will be able to be resolved at once.

6.1 "Without Prejudice" Principle

An essential component of an interim coexistence structure is a defined "without prejudice" principle. This means that any cooperation established between Somalia and Somaliland would not imply recognition by Somalia of Somaliland as a sovereign state. Similarly, participation by Somaliland would

not indicate an acknowledgment of the sovereignty claims made by Somalia.

Thus, this principle would permit the parties to develop solutions to common problems without forcing either party to give up their core positions. Therefore, agreements related to security coordination, trade, travel, humanitarian access or communication would be viewed as operational arrangements and would not be considered as a solution to the final status of the parties.

This principle is especially important due to the ongoing disparity between Somaliland's stated political position and those of the African Union and IGAD. The AU reiterated in February 2026 that it does not recognize Somaliland as an independent country and continues to support Somalia's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity. IGAD similarly reiterated its position supporting Somalia's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity in June 2026.

Therefore, without some form of protection against controversy regarding even limited forms of technical cooperation could make cooperation difficult and/or impossible for one or both parties.

6.2 Ongoing Dialogue Between Somalia and Somaliland

The problem facing these two states is not merely that there are no talks occurring. Rather, the problem lies with developing sufficient durability to sustain dialogue in times of deteriorating relationships between them. Therefore, the structure proposed above would include ongoing dialogue mechanisms between Somalia and Somaliland, rather than intermittent meetings to occur only when a conflict occurs.

Dialogue would serve as a permanent conduit for resolving political disputes, handling security-related issues, facilitating discussions around economic issues and coordinating responses to humanitarian concerns. Furthermore, dialogue would create mechanisms that would enable misunderstanding to be resolved prior to being escalated into public confrontation(s), and/or military action.

As previously mentioned, the format of the dialogue may need to remain flexible. For example, it could consist of senior political officials who participate with technical working groups focused on various aspects of potential cooperation. The primary focus of the dialogue would not be to pressure the parties toward a final-status agreement at each meeting. However, the process would seek to maintain open lines of communication to avoid having all elements of the relationship dependent upon the prevailing political conditions at any particular time.

Similarly, previous experience in Somalia demonstrates the value of continuous political dialogue. Both the AU and IGAD encouraged continued inclusive political processes among Somali stakeholders in May 2026 following consultations that were unable to achieve consensus.

While the AU and IGAD referred to the broader Somali experience in their encouragement of continued inclusive political processes, the same principle can be applied specifically to the Mogadishu and Hargeisa dispute as follows: instead of continually converting disagreements into political or security crises, disagreements should be institutionalized within a formal dialogue mechanism.

6.3 Mechanisms for Managing Security Issues

Incidents involving security pose one of the most significant challenges to any type of interim agreement. Developments in contested areas often have national political implications. Thus, a viable interim framework would necessitate establishing channels for direct communication between relevant security agencies in order to mitigate the risk of incidents being misinterpreted as escalatory actions.

It is crucial to note that this mechanism does not aim to create a combined military structure nor imply political unification. It aims to decrease the likelihood that an incident develops into a larger-scale political crisis.

Sool and Sanaag are examples of such contested areas. Territorial control remains highly fractured in these areas. Reporting by EUAA indicates areas under the control of federal-aligned forces, Somaliland forces, other armed actors, as well as areas with mixed control. EUAA also reported ongoing security incidents in Sool/Sanaag throughout March 2026.

6.4 Functional Cooperation and Sovereignty

There has been an ongoing failure to distinguish between sovereignty disputes and functional cooperation. An interim framework based on structured coexistence would address the former first and the latter secondly. Practical issues related to daily political and economic relationships should be resolved based on practical needs and not conditioned on resolving sovereign issues. For example, trade, transportation, humanitarian assistance, public health communications, telecommunication,

aviation, animal disease monitoring, and security communications may require some degree of coordination regardless of how fundamentally each party disagrees about the sovereignty issues. In no way does this imply that either party must relinquish their stance. Rather, it implies that the parties recognize that unresolved constitutional questions (i.e., those regarding sovereignty) do not preclude the necessity for practical governance.

Furthermore, separating the two frameworks would protect the overall structure from being dependent on a single negotiation over sovereignty. Therefore, negotiations concerning final status could occur independently while practical arrangements facilitate reductions in tensions until such time as an overarching framework is negotiated.

6.5 Representation of Disputed Territories

An interim framework that is strictly bilateral risks perpetuating one of the principal shortcomings identified by the Laascaanood conflict: treating disputed territories as mere objects of discussion rather than as political entities. North East Somalia presents this problem in a manner that is difficult to avoid. EUAA reporting indicates that North-East Somalia was established in 2025 and subsequently recognized by the Federal Government of Somalia as a federal member state. However, there appears to be overlap between the territory claimed by North-East Somalia and the territory Somaliland considers part of its own territory. Control of these territories remains disputed.

6.6 African Union and IGAD Support

Therefore, representation should be included within discussions relating to

disputed territories. It is important to note that this does not imply granting each local actor a veto power over the larger Mogadishu and Hargeisa dispute. Rather, it suggests that decisions regarding security, administration, travel restrictions and local governance should be influenced by the communities whose lives will be impacted by those decisions. Similarly, including representation in discussions relating to disputed territories recognizes that political authority in those areas cannot be reduced solely to constitutional claims presented by Mogadishu and/or Hargeisa. Local legitimacy, security structures and political affiliations have emerged as critical components of the territorial realities in the area and cannot be simply erased via a bilateral agreement.

6.7 Preventing Social Conflict Through Digital Communication

An interim framework would be incomplete if it were limited only to addressing the political and security aspects of institutions. While the dispute currently exists primarily at the level of physical confrontation and military action, increasing use of social media, diaspora networks and digitally generated political narratives present significant challenges. Such platforms provide a vehicle whereby unverified claims of events can be rapidly disseminated throughout the world, thereby transforming localized conflicts into more widespread identity-based confrontations. Preventing social conflict therefore includes establishing mechanisms for rapid communication during periods of high sensitivity. The goal here is not to limit political expression but to minimize the amount of unverified claims which can lead

to immediate public reaction prior to the availability of verified information.

Mechanisms for achieving this might include establishing communication protocols among relevant authorities in times of crisis, clarifying disputed security-related information quickly after it occurs and cooperating with civil society organizations and media outlets in verifying information. Ultimately, the goal is not to establish a shared understanding of historical/political events. Both Somalia, Somaliland and local communities will likely continue to have differing views on history and who controls certain territories. The ultimate objective is much simpler: prevent disagreements over a country's political status from escalating into greater levels of violence due to intentionally false or misleading information spread through various forms of digital communication

African Union (AU) Support Role in Conflict Management – A Framework

The African Union could support the political process as a regional facilitator, however it is essential to define their role clearly. The AU's previous actions are evident. they have recognized Somalia's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity and rejected Somaliland's claim for independence.

Therefore, an AU supported framework will not necessitate neutrality from the AU on the organization's pre-existing position regarding Somalia's territorial integrity. Rather than taking a neutral stance, the AU can support and assist in establishing dialogue and conflict management structures while continuing to recognize Somalia's territorial integrity.

Supporting a structured approach will enhance the credibility of the process politically. The AU can facilitate dialogue among key stakeholders, promote confidence building activities, encourage

participation by Somali and local stakeholders involved in the conflict and support coordinating regional diplomatic efforts while avoiding the imposition of a predetermined final-status solution. In addition, IGAD can contribute to supporting the regional aspect of the conflict through providing security assistance, regional diplomacy, and support for cross border issues. IGAD currently provides such support under its existing mandates including peace building, stabilization, and regional security initiatives in Somalia. Additionally, IGAD continues to express a commitment to respecting Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity as stated in its 2026 declarations.

As a result, the proposed framework will consist of three different aspects. political dialogue between Somalia and Somaliland, community level participation and international/ regional involvement to sustain the ongoing process. None of these mechanisms will affect the ultimate status of Somaliland.

7 Political Risks Associated with an Interim Framework

Although an interim framework would mitigate many of the political risks associated with the present stalemate, it would also generate some new political risks. The principal political risk will be that an arrangement to manage the dispute might ultimately come to be seen as a de facto resolution of it. Alternatively, an interim mechanism could evolve into an ongoing substitute for a political resolution of the dispute, rather than serving as a bridge toward one. The presence of these risks does not preclude the possibility of interim coexistence. Rather, they indicate the

measures that would need to be taken in order to ensure that an interim framework remains politically viable and truly temporary.

7.1 Risk of De Facto Recognition

The immediate political risk posed by the prospect of practical cooperation is that this could lead to the view that Somaliland has been recognised as a sovereign state. Such a position would be particularly sensitive for both Somalia (which has always maintained a strong commitment to maintaining its territorial integrity) and regional organizations like IGAD and the African Union that currently recognize the territorial integrity of Somalia. As recently as February 2026, both the African Union and IGAD reaffirmed that they did not consider Somaliland to be an independent state.

As such, the way to protect against this risk would be to clearly distinguish functional co-operation from legal recognition. Any interim agreement reached between Somalia and Somaliland should contain language that explicitly states that neither party's participation in any interim agreement changes either party's position regarding final status. Similarly, international partners that choose to participate in or support an interim framework should adhere to the same principle.

By separating functional cooperation from legal recognition, it will be possible to engage in practical cooperation without inadvertently establishing a legal or diplomatic precedent. Moreover, the fact that participation would require acceptance of fundamentally different positions on Somaliland's status makes it easier to justify for actors who take such different positions.

7.2 Risk of Indeterminate Arrangements

While there is no inherent reason why an interim arrangement cannot provide stability where none existed before, the real risk is that it could become permanent by default. If successful in reducing tensions immediately surrounding the crisis, participants in an interim agreement may see less incentive to pursue the far more difficult negotiations needed to reach a comprehensive settlement. Consequently, the result could be a long-term, stable but unsettled division of territory within which temporary mechanisms gradually develop into permanent institutions. This is an especially relevant risk given the evolving nature of the territorial context. For example, since 2025 Somaliland has had to contend with another institution in areas where it claims jurisdiction — namely, North East Somalia, which was declared a federal member state of Somalia. Reporting in 2026 by the European Union Agency for Asylum identified multiple areas where Somaliland, North East Somalia and Puntland all lay claim to territorial jurisdiction.

Therefore, the safeguard here should be institutionalized temporariness. That is, interim frameworks should have defined mandates. they should include regular reviews of progress made during the interim period by representatives of the parties involved. and the parties should agree upon regular assessments of whether conditions exist to facilitate movement towards a broader settlement. Institutionalized temporariness does not require setting a time limit for resolving questions related to sovereignty. however, it ensures that interim arrangements do not serve as a substitute for political negotiations.

7.3 Risk of Marginalizing Local Populations

To date, almost all attempts to resolve disputes over territorial jurisdictions have failed to incorporate local populations in any meaningful sense as part of the process. Thus, unless Somalia and Somaliland treat disputed territories primarily as matters of national interest rather than as issues requiring consideration of local interests, there is little doubt that a bilateral framework will replicate one of the major shortcomings of previous approaches. There are reasons to believe that this failure will repeat itself again. The local politics in Sool and Sanaag are demonstrably more complex than national governments recognize.

According to reports by EUAA in 2026, the area claimed by North East Somalia administration includes Sool, Sanaag and Buhodle districts. However, the administration actually controls these areas unevenly. In Sanaag district alone, various combinations of allegiance to Somaliland, Puntland, North East Somalia and other local actors continue to compete for influence and/or control over aspects of local governance.

Thus, the local dimension should be incorporated into an interim framework through structured participation of local communities or administrators whose lives are impacted by any decision affecting their governance. This does not imply that each local group must be granted a right of veto over the outcome of negotiations conducted at the national level. Instead, it implies that agreements reached among national governments without regard for input from local communities are unlikely to enjoy widespread legitimacy among those local communities and thus may perpetuate conflict at the local level.

7.4 Risk of Increasing Geo-Political Rivalry

In addition to the increasing presence of external players in the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden area, and their growing interest in maritime security, ports etc. the fact that there are now several competing regional alliances/strategic partnerships, adds to the complexity of this dispute. On the one hand, external engagement creates possibilities for both economic and security benefits. However, external involvement could also add additional strategic interests to a situation where the underlying political dispute has yet to be resolved.

8 Conclusions: Managing the Dispute without Prejudging Its Resolution

In recent years, the Somalia-Somaliland conflict has evolved to the point at which sustaining the status quo will become increasingly challenging. Somalia is internationally recognized and supported regionally by many countries with regard to its sovereign rights. Somaliland has established independent political structures, and has sought international recognition of those structures. In February 2026 the African Union stated that it supports Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, while IGAD did likewise in June and September 2026.

Therefore, the principal policy challenge is not simply finding a way to settle the dispute definitively, but rather finding ways to limit or eliminate the risk of additional conflict resulting from a lack of definitive resolution. Both reunified federalism and negotiated separation represent possible long term political options, however both would require substantial political agreement(s) among all relevant parties prior to implementation. Furthermore, attempting to impose either option on either party without sufficient

political agreement could exacerbate rather than resolve the underlying issues.

An alternative strategy is structured interim coexistence. Structured interim coexistence does not require Somalia to relinquish its claimed territorial position, nor does it require Somaliland to relinquish its claim to separate statehood. Rather, it separates the management of immediate political, security, and economic challenges from consideration of what will ultimately define the relationship between Somalia and Somaliland. A "without prejudice" clause would enable practical cooperation without prejudicing the ultimate determination of whether a unified Somalia exists or if Somaliland is recognized as a separate state.

Fundamentally, structuring an interim framework means distinguishing between the process of managing a dispute from resolving one. Structuring an interim framework neither provides for institutionalized separation by default nor presumes that political federation can be easily restored. Its intended purposes include reducing the cost associated with disagreement, preventing local disputes from expanding into larger-scale confrontations, and providing space for negotiating a future solution to the dispute.

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