

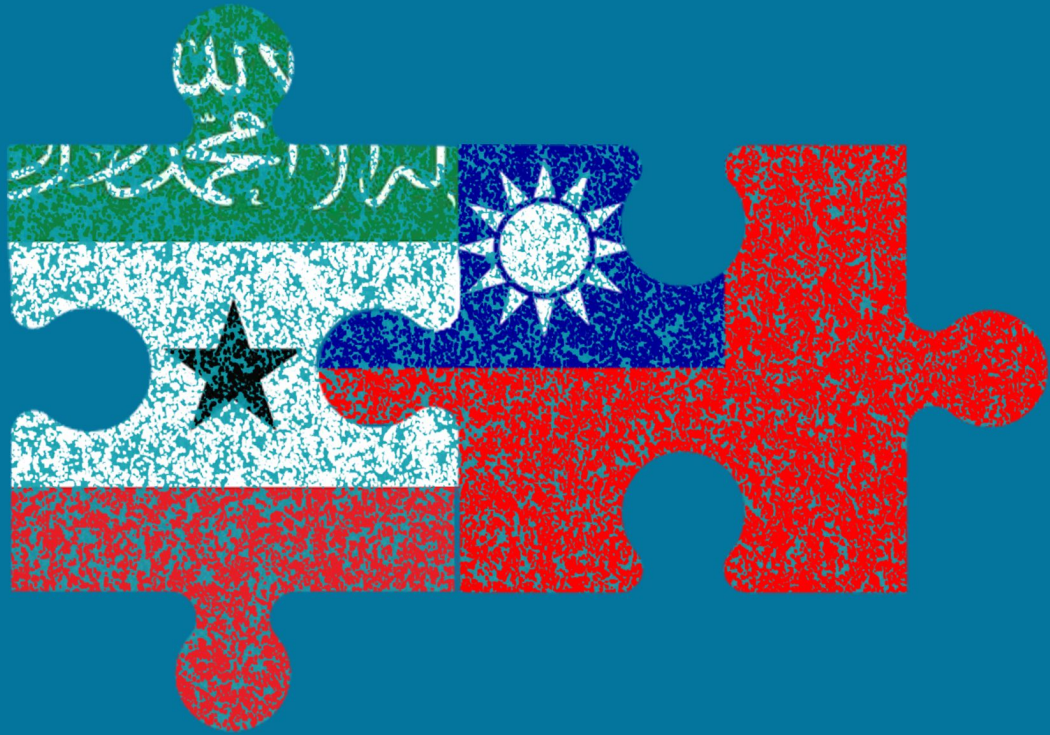


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An In Depth Analysis of the Somaliland-Taiwan Diplomatic Ties

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1. Abstract

In the wake of the Cold War in 1991, the Horn of Africa region suffered acute misalignment of developmental strategy from the rest of the world, leading to gross underdevelopment. Global interest in the region has been renewed with the competing interests of superpowers such as the United States of America, China, and Russia. Currently, there appears to be an ongoing tug-of-war between the United States on one side and China and Russia on the other. The rivalry involves new emerging powers seeking to establish their presence and gain allies in the Horn of Africa. So far, Somaliland has shown an interest in actively participating in the power politics while ignoring the risks involved. For instance, Somaliland established diplomatic relations with Taiwan, a move that might antagonize China. China is a superpower which is influential in the Horn of Africa and a member of the United Nations Security Council. This study analyzed Somaliland's foreign policy shifts from the neutrality it pursued for so long to the current practice of taking sides, and the possible policy implications of this shift. The study particularly focused on the new diplomatic ties between Somaliland and Taiwan and its immediate or potential influences on Somaliland's state building and domestic stability, as well as its effects on Somaliland's strategic interests in the region and beyond. The study was conducted using qualitative methods, and the data collection methods included key informant interviews, literature review, and observational methods. The data was analyzed thematically, and the findings were presented in the form of discussions. The study found that Somaliland's reasons for establishing ties with Taiwan were not made clear either to the Somaliland parliament or to the public. It also established that the pursuit of diplomatic ties with Taiwan could lead to retaliatory action from China, which is one of the five veto powers at the UN. This action could, among others, stymie Somaliland's recognition efforts. The study recommended that Somaliland should review its approach to foreign policy, as well as hold consultations with a wide range of stakeholders before making foreign policy shifts. It also recommended that Taiwan should make transparent its goals in establishing diplomatic ties with Somaliland.

2. Background

In 1960, Southern Somalia and Somaliland attained independence, and the two entities agreed to come together and form the Somali Republic. However, in 1991, Somaliland declared unilateral independence from the rest of Somalia, although it has not yet attained international recognition. It however enjoys relative political stability owing to the introduction of a negotiated democracy, as well as employing active peace building initiatives in its governance. During the first two decades of self-independence, Somaliland engaged in a semi-non-alignment policy which made it impartial and minimized its involvement in regional proxies, thus making it less prone to any regional or international animosity. Its proclamation of self-determination from the rest of Somalia called for neutrality and cautious navigation of the conflicting geopolitical interests of influential states. While Somaliland didn't receive international acceptance, it has enjoyed acknowledgment and has faced no apparent threats from any other country. To speed up the state building process, Somaliland shifted to direct elections with the objective of building a sustainable political system based on rotation of power. The neutral approach to foreign policy helped Somaliland avoid unexpected backlashes from other countries and build warm relations with countries in the region.

In recent years, Somaliland's trajectory of democracy and state-building seems to be slowing down. Since 2020, the country has been in a deadlock over the continuity of the elections and the peaceful transition of power, and since the beginning of 2023, there have been ongoing armed conflicts in its eastern regions.

Somaliland's impartial approach to foreign relations may have been informed by the lessons learnt from Somalia's involvement in the Cold War, and its frequent shifts between the Eastern and Western camps, while at the same time engaging in constant border conflicts with some frontline states. To avoid a repeat of the same, Somaliland formulated its foreign policy objectives based on neutrality and peaceful coexistence of all countries. The Somaliland constitution declares that Somaliland shall "respect the territorial integrity of other countries".¹

¹Somaliland Constitution 2000, Article 10(4)

In addition to the current domestic state building challenges, Somaliland has also been employing aggressive foreign policies within the last decade. In 2014, Somaliland took sides during the Yemen conflict by allowing the UAE to use the Berbera Airport as a military base.² This posed the risk of attracting retaliatory action against Somaliland and its waterways from the Houthi's Movement, endangering overall maritime security in the red sea.

Secondly, in March 2018, Somaliland affiliated itself with the Saudi led camp in the gulf crises when the Somaliland President Muse Bihi openly accused Qatar of being the “enemy”³ during an official visit to the UAE. These foreign relations moves have depleted the gains made by the country in its bid to be recognized as an independent state. In the latest ill-advised foreign-relations move, Somaliland “accused the government of Ethiopia of fueling the conflict in Lasanod”⁴ ; an accusation that the Somali State in Ethiopia denied.

In 2020, Somaliland provoked China by establishing diplomatic ties with Taiwan, which China considers part of its territory. China, a veto state, and emerging superpower condemned these diplomatic moves and warned that they would retaliate immediately. However, Somaliland seems to take the warning lightly, as it has continued renting out military bases to foreign entities. Given the huge amounts of revenue that they generate, this equates to selling the strategic position that sets it apart from the countries of the region.

3. Objectives

The issue of Somaliland's recognition as an independent state primarily lies in the unresolved politico-legal relations between Somalia and Somaliland. It also involves the United Nations Security Council procedures for new state membership, including no objection from any of the five permanent members.

¹Somaliland Constitution 2000, Article 10(4)

²BBC, Somaliland agrees to UAE military base in Berbera, 2017

³Horn Diplomat, Qatar is Against the Agreement of DP World in Berbera, 2018

⁴Ethiopia Insight, Somaliland and Ethiopia faceoff over Las Anod jeopardizes regional cooperation, 2023.

This study focused on key policy issues surrounding the Somaliland-Taiwan relations and their possible implications on Somaliland's security. It also examines how these ties could impede Somaliland's efforts towards international recognition of independence. The research specifically seeks to meet the following objectives:

- ✓ To assess Somaliland's foreign policy, policy shifts, and the consciousness of its policy actions.
- ✓ To review the nature of Somaliland-Taiwan relations and provide independent analyses on the pros and cons of this relations on Somaliland and its immediate as well as strategic interests.
- ✓ To raise awareness of policy makers in Somaliland regarding the foreign policy shifts, by providing perspectives that can inform discussions on Somaliland's next decision making.
- ✓ To create knowledge and to enable citizens to appreciate the Somaliland-Taiwan relations and the surrounding realities.

4. Methodology

The study used qualitative research methods. The data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with key informants and holding focus group discussions with relevant respondents. This data was supplemented by in-depth interviews with subject experts and a review of available literature.

The data was collected in September 2022 and further validated in June 2023. Written tools were developed to guide the interviews and FGDs, and the interviews were conducted via email and phone calls. The interviews and FGDs were recorded, transcribed, and translated where applicable. In addition, the observation method was used to track Somaliland's foreign policy developments and its shifts over the past years. The trends formed part of the data.

5. The Taiwan-Somaliland Relations - Inception

Taiwan's (formally known as the Republic of China) diplomatic outreach started to shrink from 2015 when several states ceased recognizing it as a state and established relations with the People's Republic of China. Currently, Taiwan has formal relations with only one state, Eswatini, a small landlocked country in Southern Africa. China has, in recent years, intensified its efforts to contain Taiwan and has been successful in Africa, as evidenced by most African states' stance to cut off ties with Taiwan. In response to this increasing isolation, the United States committed to sponsor a 'Promoting and Protecting Diplomatic Alliance Building' campaign for Taiwan by passing the 'Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI)' Act in 2019.⁵ Interestingly, the US itself does not recognize Taiwan nor does it have formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. According to the US - Taiwan Relations Act,⁶ the US only has friendly, commercial, and cultural ties with Taiwan.

According to the TAIPEI Act, the United States committed to "support Taiwan in strengthening its official diplomatic relations as well as other partnerships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region and around the world," and to "consider, in certain cases as appropriate and in alignment with United States interests, increasing its economic, security, and diplomatic engagement with nations that have demonstrably strengthened, enhanced, or upgraded relations with Taiwan".⁷

Taiwan has had informal interactive ties with Somaliland since 2009. During the period, Taiwan was weighing the feasibility of establishing a formal relationship with the latter, and it offered scholarships to Somaliland students without publicly announcing it. For Somaliland, those contacts were sporadic and had not been backed by an intention of foreign policy change.⁸

⁵ Statute at Large 134 Stat. 755 - Public Law No. 116-135 (03/26/2020) of 116th Congress

⁶ Public Law 96-8 of 1979

⁷ SUS Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019, Article 5 (1,2)

⁸ Key informant interview participant, June 2023

Perhaps motivated by the TAIPEI Act, Somaliland started to formalize relations with Taiwan. A year after the passage of the Act, the Somaliland-Taiwan relations were made public. The two sides established representative offices in each other's country in August 2020. While it is unclear when the relations started, American lobby groups, including former US diplomatic officials, started to visit and speak about the Somaliland-Taiwan ties. The role of Taiwan in facilitating the lobbyists is not apparent.

On its side, China attempted to preempt the possibility of Somaliland's relations with Taiwan. In August 2020, the Chinese Ambassador to Mogadishu met with Somaliland president, Muse Bihi, where they failed to reach any understanding. In a follow up statement, China indirectly accused Somaliland of undermining its 'One-China' principle and threatened that Somaliland would "get burned and swallow the bitter fruit".⁹ It also increased its engagements with Mogadishu in several areas, including holding joint naval exercises.

6. Inside the Relations

Taiwan seems calculative and self-interest oriented and has been employing pre-established strategies. The formulators of the TAIPEI policy are vividly debating why and how Somaliland is important in their strategies in the Horn of Africa and Africa at large.¹⁰ From its representative in Hargeisa to their senior officials in Taipei, Taiwan is clear and specific about the objectives of their mission in Somaliland, and they are clear with their cause, but Somaliland diplomats and foreign ministry officials are obviously less clear about any specific objectives of making diplomatic ties with Taiwan. In fact, in the presence of global media, some of them have expressed provocative statements; for instance, while speaking to the media, Somaliland's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Issa Kayd said: "We will run our business the way we want. China cannot dictate, no other country can dictate".¹¹

⁹ Thomas J. Shattuck, *China-Taiwan Competition over Somaliland and Implications for Small Countries*, 2020

¹⁰ Scott Pegg, *The Somaliland-Taiwan Partnership: A New Frontier in De Facto State Diplomacy?* August 2020

¹¹ Yimou Lee, Reuters, February 2022

Even the Taiwanese representative was noted to be cautious of Somaliland representatives' emotional outbursts. The representative said, "Somaliland calls Taiwan its big brother, but I prefer to see our relations as a sharing and cooperative one".¹²

During the initial phases of the two countries' diplomatic ties, Somaliland's minister of foreign affairs classified Somaliland's ties with Taiwan as a "special and historical relationship",¹³ which was indicative of his satisfaction with this relationship.

In his remarks, the minister used vivid and strong diplomatic words, but failed to explain the actual meanings of "special" and "historical". Taiwan is aware and partially prepared for the long-term threat it faces from China, considering that China is economically, technologically, and militarily superior. Taiwan has the United States and its allies as its sponsors, but Somaliland has no clear strategic sponsors against security and development threats arising from the ties with Taiwan. This, coupled with the fact that it is a small, poor, and unrecognized country located in a volatile region, questions arise as to why it would antagonize China, a powerful state with leverage in Africa and Somaliland's neighboring countries including Ethiopia and Djibouti.

Somaliland didn't only forge a relations with Taiwan, but also continued provoking China publicly. In February 2022, foreign affairs officials on a trip to Taiwan negatively referenced China in their remarks, and in April 2023, in a statement to address the Chinese military drills around Taiwan, Somaliland further implied its recognition of "national borders" between China and Taiwan.¹⁴ In a parliamentary debate session in Somaliland's upper house of parliament, an MP argued that the increased instability in Somaliland may be associated with China as it may have sponsored proxy conflict in Lasanod, to retaliate against Somaliland for its diplomatic relations with Taiwan. He added that, "Somaliland is in a fight against China".¹⁵

¹² BBC News, Somaliland and Taiwan: Two territories with few friends but each other, April 2021 (BBC News, 2021)

¹³ DW, Somaliland, Taiwan expands ties amid isolation, 2022

¹⁴ Somaliland Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement on Twitter, 12 April 2023

¹⁵ Saab TV, Guurti Debate on Foreign Affairs, 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IY1EZOTwcC8&t=309s>

6.1 The Current Status of the Relations

Somaliland and Taiwan signed a bilateral accord back in February 2020 to exchange representative offices, and Taiwan is now one of the few entities with diplomatic presence in Hargeisa. However, unlike its engagements with other countries, Taiwan, formally known as the Republic of China, maintains the “Taiwan Representative Office” as its official office name in Hargeisa. In most cases, Taiwanese presence in other countries is precleared by China for commercial purposes, but the Hargeisa office is the only of its kind Taiwan has all over the world, making it diplomatically unique and possibly attractive to particular attention. Usually, Taiwan uses the “Republic of China” or Taipei in other countries.¹⁶

Naming of the Taiwan overseas missions is particularly overseen by China. In 2021, China protested the Lithuania mission due to the latter hosting it with the same name as the mission in Somaliland. It remains unclear whether Somaliland officials are aware of the naming procedures and the implications thereof, and whether they knowingly consented to the naming of the Taiwan Mission in Somaliland. Taiwan has so far refrained from declaring independence from the People’s Republic of China. Upon the arrival of the Taiwanese representatives in 2020, it was reported that Somaliland President Muse Bihi was looking for possibilities of “mutual recognition between Taiwan and Somaliland”.¹⁷ Since then, it is not clear whether Somaliland and Taiwan recognized each other as independent states, or whether Somaliland particularly recognized Taiwan.

Somaliland’s goal of gaining international recognition is different from Taiwan’s goal which is to maintain its current status quo; keep it separate from China. While the two have challenges with respect to sovereignty, each one has its own cause and circumstances. In the case of Taiwan, its top ally, the US, is the world’s first economic powerhouse today, while its top enemy, China, is the second global economic powerhouse.

¹⁶ Thomas J. Shattuck, China-Taiwan Competition over Somaliland and Implications for Small Countries, 2020

¹⁷ Lin Chia-nan, Somaliland office to open soon, Taipei Times, 2020

That is different from the Somaliland case, whose competitor, Somalia, has no apparent power, and worse still, Somaliland is provoking one of those two power houses without being sponsored by any other superpower, making it more vulnerable.

6.2 Returns from Taiwan Relations

Other than the bilateral accord, which is just protocol, there is no known partnership agreement between the two sides that has ever been presented to the Somaliland parliament or released publicly. Therefore, the benefits that Somaliland expected to reap from this relations are unknown. However, the nature of the relations can be assessed from their practices and cooperation approach. Somaliland and Taiwan have neither established trade relations nor recorded meaningful trade volume data between the two. In fact, the Somaliland business community has a stronger business presence in China than in Taiwan.¹⁸

Initially, Somaliland and Taiwan had the goal of cooperating in the fields of medicine, agriculture, energy, education, and maritime security. The details of the cooperation could not be accessed due to lack of transparency and documentation. So far, Taiwan has been engaged in basic aid diplomacy by providing some basic donations including food distribution and trauma kits in Somaliland. Close sources revealed that Taiwan has provided a number of scholarship opportunities, but after about four years in Somaliland, no major results in any of the areas of potential cooperation could be substantiated. Consequently, nothing of public value could be delivered.

On the bilateral cooperations announced several times in the past, there wasn't enough information made available to the parliament or transparently made accessible to the public, yet the government announced that Taiwan was considering oil explorations or drilling.

¹⁸ Key informant interview participant, 2023

The government officials kept referring to Taiwan's cooperation in major national issues as an investor, with the objective of attracting popular support, yet nothing materialized.

Understandably, Taiwan may be purposely postponing engaging in any significant partnership with Somaliland for two reasons. Firstly, Taiwan has had encounters with similar opportunistic countries who later discarded it after it had made significant investments in those countries, and secondly, Taiwan may be assessing whether the authorities in Somaliland or the Somaliland public will tire of the pressure and renounce the relations with Taiwan. Since 2016, Taiwan has had broken diplomatic ties every year, and may be facing a trust deficit with smaller countries. Honduras was the last to break ties with Taiwan in March 2023.¹⁹

Notably, some of the smaller countries who forged ties with Taiwan are grossly underdeveloped and governed by leaders who hope to selfishly benefit from the competition between China and Taiwan. Some therefore shift their allegiance in case China presents better financial offers, so Taiwan may be skeptical about Somaliland behaving in the same way. However, the wait-and-see approach may be placing Somaliland at potential risk without equitable benefit, as discussed in the next section.

6.3 Potential Risks to Somaliland, Arising from the Taiwan Relations

Public view is varied with respect to Somaliland making ties with Taiwan. Some of the views expressed echoed the Somaliland's Foreign Affairs minister, who said that "China cannot dictate"²⁰, during a visit to Taipei. Other people expressed skepticism over the move, some going as far as terming it as 'madness' from Somaliland.²¹ A third group of people do not necessarily object to the relations with Taiwan but are concerned about the provocation of China and the lack of strategy by the Somaliland side.

¹⁹ AP news, Honduras establishes ties with China after Taiwan break, 2023

²⁰ Africa news, Somaliland's top diplomat reaffirms the country's sovereignty, 2022.

²¹ BBC News, Somaliland and Taiwan: Two territories with few friends but each other, 2021

They opined that Somaliland rushed into the relations without considerations and unnecessarily antagonized China.

Critics suggest that, apart from the potential external risks posed by the Taiwan ties, its engagement with the ruling government has, to some extent, raised suspicion within the opposition. In October 2020, the Taiwanese diplomatic mission leader, Allen Chenhwa Lou, was spotted attending an assembly of the ruling party.²² However, he did not attend the assembly of the major opposition party held the following year, November 2021, which led the presidential candidate of the opposition party to question the “value of Somaliland’s bilateral ties to the quest for international recognition”. The candidate called for improved ties with the People’s Republic of China instead.²³ Currently, Somaliland is going through a prolonged electoral dispute between the political parties, and Taiwan never justified their attendance of such a domestic political assembly of the ruling party, and not the opposition congress. Foreign diplomatic missions have a “duty not to interfere in the internal affairs of that [host] State”.²⁴

A retaliatory risk factor could be “that senior government officials could be easily targeted by the Chinese government”²⁵ using Chinese technology which is popular in Somaliland. This could possibly explain why Taiwan, faced with that dilemma, cooperated with the Ministry of Telecommunications on ICT, in 2021, although details of the cooperation have not yet been made public. However, Somaliland may not be adequately prepared to cope in case of cyber-attacks. Case in point, the Ministry of Telecommunication lost, and could not regain control of its verified Facebook page.

²² <https://fb.watch/IZNA7f9dhu/?mibextid=UVffzb>

²³ Somaliland Chronicle, Chairman of Waddani Opposition Party Questions Somaliland – Taiwan bilateral Ties and Called for Improved Ties with China, 2021

²⁴ Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations 1961, Article 41(1)

²⁵ Ahmed N. Amin, Op-Ed: How safe Chinese devices are in Somaliland? Horn Diplomat, 2020

On the conflict escalating in Somaliland’s eastern regions that resulted in large-scale displacement, death and loss of property, the United Nations has called for “investigation into the deaths”²⁶, and the “United States has expressed concern at the democratic backsliding” in Somaliland, but “Taiwan has stood by Somaliland”²⁸.

In his remarks at the UN Security Council Briefing on Somalia, the Chinese ambassador to the United Nations, Ambassador Zhang Jun, repeatedly stressed China’s opposition to “any actions that undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Somalia and lead to separation in the country”²⁹. This may be understood as China’s response to Somaliland’s relations with Taiwan, by placing stumbling blocks on Somaliland’s recognition efforts.

A proposed amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 for the US military activities in the Horn of Africa, suggested the countering of the presence of China in the region, including China’s role in fomenting unrest in the Sool region.³⁰ If approved, the proposal may contribute to an increased rivalry over the region.

Contrary to the tradition that international diplomats who visit Somaliland are welcome to meet both state and non-state actors, in early 2022, Somaliland turned down the request of the Chinese ambassador to Somalia who wanted to travel to Hargeisa to pay tribute to the Waaheen Market fire victims and later meet with parliamentarians and social groups.³¹ While reacting to the consequence of what he classified as Somaliland leaders “fanning the flames”, the ambassador replied that they are “harming others without benefiting themselves”.

²⁶ Anthony Kao, ‘Shared status’ fuels closer Taiwan and Somaliland partnership, Aljazeera, 2023

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Permanent Mission of China to the UN, Remarks by Ambassador Zhang Jun at the UN Security Council, 2023

³⁰ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 (amendment proposal), 2023

³¹ Michael M. Phillips, China Fumes Over Somaliland’s Warm Ties with Taiwan, Wall Street Journal, 2022

China has a presence in the Horn of Africa region. Both Ethiopia and Djibouti enjoy multimillion dollar investment partnerships with China. Those two neighboring countries have visible influence on Somaliland as the latter feel more dependent on training of its security forces and undertaking diplomatic maneuvering in Addis Ababa, the host of the African Union. On its side, Djibouti is well versed with Somali political dynamics and in the past, it proved its capability to leverage its relations with Somalia and Somaliland's political and business elites.³²

In other countries, China and Taiwan are alleged to have engaged in paying local politicians to secure ties with Taiwan or to sever them in the case of China. MPs from Solomon Island claimed that both China and Taiwan have offered huge amounts on the status of the "Issue of Taiwan"³³. In 2021, a news outlet in China³⁴ reported bribery allegations involving the Somaliland and Taiwan relations, but Taiwan³⁵ denied such allegations.

The tension around Taiwan has been rising since August 2022 when the US speaker visited the Island, followed by another visit in September 2022 by a senior European Union official. It has further escalated in April 2023 when the Taiwan president visited the United States, to which China responded by holding military drills around that Island. This occurred in the wake of the continued war in Ukraine launched by Russia that indirectly involved the West. The new US strategy in Africa is understood to have encountered geopolitical rivalry arising from Russia and China's influence. For this purpose, the US mentioned collaborating with the Horn of African country in its National Defense Authorization Act, including maintaining military presence in Berbera.

³² ISIR Think Tank, Djibouti Summit on Somaliland-Somalia Relations: A Search for A Broad-Based Roadmap, 2020

³³ Edward Cavanough, China and Taiwan offered us huge bribes, say Solomon Islands MPs, The Guardian, 2019

³⁴ Fan Lingzhi, DPP bribes Somaliland politicians for a long time in exchange for political support, Global Times, 2021

³⁵ Lin Chia-nan, Ministry slams Chinese Somaliland report, Taipei Times, 2021

7. An Analyses of the Relations; Costs and Benefits

International relations are fused and multidimensional. Every diplomatic move has an impact on a country's national interests, including its security. This emerged as a main theme across most of the interviews and the participants in the focus group discussions. Some of the participants of the research reported that Somaliland-Taiwan relations could have a negative impact on the Somaliland side. The findings showed that the impacts of this issue on Somaliland's stability were more significant for some participants than others. As the findings of this study highlight, the impact could be catalyzed by China's role in the UN Security Council, its capability to frustrate Somaliland's junior diplomacy in the region, or emboldening Somaliland's opponents such as Villa Somalia, SSC-Khatumo, and Puntland. The Hargeisa-Taipei Relations from the study respondents' perspectives could also result in Somaliland's isolation from some of the African states, since China has a huge impact on the continent both in terms of economic and infrastructural investments.

For some other respondents, their views were that Somaliland and Taiwan do not and cannot recognize each other, because of their current international status of de facto status. It became apparent that in most cases, it was only a matter of the type, magnitude, and finally the time, for Somaliland to face retaliatory action from China. All the respondents agreed that having recognition is essential in order to maintain the states' international position, stability and development. In contrast, the attributes which Somaliland and Taiwan fulfilled provide for the functions of statehood. The study found that there is a lot that Somaliland could learn from Taiwan. Somaliland may cultivate Taiwanese relations to promote Somaliland's relations with the West, particularly with the United States. While Somaliland could gain some advantages like technology, agriculture, commerce, exposure, and international engagement, some participants believed that there had been no meaningful equivalent benefit from Taiwan since the relations were established.

On the other hand, most of the participants agreed that there was still no concrete, reliable, and consistent Somaliland foreign policy.

Another factor emerging from the study findings was that some participants were concerned about Somaliland's future due to the risk of involving superpower rivalry. Some expressed resentment over the future consequences of Somaliland' interventions of other states' local affairs, such as the China-Taiwan issue.

A consistent theme throughout the interviews relates to the reciprocity principle; China would not leave these relations to foster stronger. Others argue that while China can pressure Somaliland in many ways or channels, it may not see any value in taking retaliatory action at this time.

The risks associated with pursuing diplomatic relations with Taiwan may come in two forms. It may come in the form of domestic challenges Somaliland may face. Secondly, it may come in the form of strategic challenges.

Since February 2023, Somaliland has been engaged in internal armed conflict within its eastern region. While the issue is obviously domestic and has its political connotations, this makes Somaliland even more vulnerable to external security threats. It is unclear whether either China or Taiwan, or both, had any influence in sparking the conflicts at the beginning, or even at later stages. In any case, Somaliland has enough inhouse challenges that may be leveraged against it. These include the electoral crisis. On the strategic dimension, Somaliland may face backlashes from other countries in the Horn Region influenced by China, and additionally, it may not succeed in its bid to join the United Nations. As to whether Somaliland will continue its relations with Taiwan, this will largely depend on two issues; first, whether Somaliland understands the relevance of the UN Security Council procedures for new state membership, and secondly whether it is aware of the consequences of disregarding the procedures. The United Nations has a new membership application procedure and various Security Council vetting procedures, and some members of the council may object to Somaliland's membership.

Generally, state formation or recognition is a weighty and highly political process, and thus depends on other factors including agreements between the parent state and the seceding state. There are lawful procedures or practices vested in international law. According to the UN Charter, “the admission of any such state to membership in the United Nations will be affected by a decision of the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council”³⁶. The candidate state submits an application to the United Nations, and the Security Council examines the request before it’s voted on by the General Assembly.

South Sudan and Kosovo were the latest applicants to go through the formal application and vetting process; South Sudan was not hindered by the members of the security council, but unlike South Sudan, Kosovo, which submitted its membership application to the United Nations in 2008 (earlier than South Sudan), got rejected. It was vetoed by China because of its relations with Taiwan which recognizes Kosovo as a state, among other reasons.

In fact, Somaliland has higher chances for its bid for international recognition to succeed compared to Taiwan, as Taiwan has a sovereignty conflict with China, a superpower and a member of the United Nations Security Council. Even attempts to establish alliance with Taiwan against the wishes of China can provoke that superpower and thus reduce the chances for Somaliland to maintain its internal stability and to meet the final requirements for acceptance as a member of the United Nations.

8. Conclusion

The research concluded that the Somaliland-Taiwan diplomatic ties could antagonize China as it considers the ties to be direct interference in its internal affairs. The alliance could lead this superpower to retaliate, with far-reaching repercussions in Taipei and Hargeisa. In other words, agitating China may lead to a dead end in the struggle for recognition, because China is in the security council. For Somaliland, the move signals a serious deviation from the recognition efforts.

³⁶ The United Nations Charter, Article 4(2)

The nature and scale of the possible retaliatory actions are yet to be revealed, but Somaliland has demonstrated its fragility by having internal armed conflict, political crises, and most importantly, lack of sovereignty which makes it barely ready for minimum backlashes.

Somaliland's most prominent foreign policy agenda, joining the United Nations and receiving international recognition, is unattainable without the agreement or the consent of the members of the Security Council including the permanent members, and without agreement with Somalia on their politico-legal question.

So far, the justification presented by Somaliland officials for having relations with Taiwan is that Somaliland and Taiwan share "common values", but there are no other discernible unique or substantial interests which could primarily motivate the states to join forces. Sharing values, if any, would then be a secondary justification.

Taiwan is backed by the US, and Somaliland's relations with Taiwan may harness support from the West, including partnership on economic development and some levels of security cooperation.

Somaliland and Taiwan have maintained diplomatic relations for two years, in which time Somaliland has not clearly justified the controversial move. The move raises critical questions about why Somaliland would choose to build ties with Taiwan and antagonize a superpower. It therefore bears examining the disadvantages for Somaliland in maintaining Taiwan relations in-regards to its stability, securing itself from the risk of unstudied superpower rivalries, and maintaining unchallenged pathways for sustainable development by avoiding thoughtless foreign policies with possible backlashes. Second, China sees Taiwan as part of its territory, and engaging with Taiwan without China's consent may be considered an act of aggression against China's sovereignty. Finally, Somaliland should consider the fact that building relations with Taiwan is in fact squandering Somaliland's ambition for recognition by confronting a member of the United Nations Security Council and a veto power.

Above all, there are questions as to whether Somaliland's decision to engage with Taiwan was the result of an informed decision backed by strategic analysis.

9. Recommendations

Somaliland has to revisit its foreign policy approach, resume its neutral and peaceful approach for growth and development, and respect its constitutional principles, including respect for domestic affairs of other countries. Somaliland is not in a position to engage in coercive diplomacy.

The government has to reassess its relations with Taiwan and engage pragmatism in determining and balancing the costs and benefits of this relations and its potential consequences on its political stability or national security as well as strategic interests.

Foreign policy officials have to be aware of regional geopolitics; they have to be mindful in their statements and engage thoughtful analyses in navigating the conflicting geopolitical interests.

Above all, the government has to be transparent and accountable to the parliament and public in its policy shifts. Such policy shifts have to be backed by solid reasoning, and it has to be made for the interest of the nation. In the case of Taiwan, the government has to justify the relations with Taiwan as well as the partnership agreements reached, for the benefit of all; this includes the scholarships offered by Taiwan.

Taiwan must understand the dynamics around the clan politics in Somaliland and the controversy around its relationship, and therefore, it has to maintain transparency, neutrality, and uphold the credibility of its mission from involving itself in internal affairs. It has to partner with Somaliland, not with a group or party, and thus, it has to improve the integrity of its partnership with Somaliland.

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