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Buy One Get One Free: Recognition, State-Building, and the Dual Peace Dividend in the Horn of Africa

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Abstract

Somalia and Somaliland are usually presented as competitors in a zero-sum sovereignty dispute. This article develops a different proposition: internationally recognized Somaliland statehood could also advance Somalia's stabilization and state-building. The "buy one get one free" formulation describes a potential dual peace dividend rather than an automatic result. The study combines qualitative, theory-guided historical and policy analysis with in-depth expert interviews and focus group discussions. Five theoretical mechanisms are proposed. Recognition could clarify the territorial scope of Somalia's federal project, reduce political investment in forceful reunification and redirect resources toward reconciliation and public authority. It could also support security and economic cooperation with Hargeisa and reduce regional threat perceptions that complicate external support for Mogadishu. Interview participants linked the unresolved status dispute to constitutional ambiguity, nationalist mobilization, diplomatic tensions, and diverted state-building attention. The article therefore recommends a negotiated settlement covering borders, citizenship, public assets and debts, security cooperation, freedom of movement, and minority protections. If Somalia is unwilling or unable to accept separation, the international community should step in to mediate the deadlock . With these arrangements, recognition could strengthen Somaliland's statehood and help Somalia develop a more coherent, legitimate, and governable federal state.

Keywords: Somalia; Somaliland; Recognition; State-Building; Conflict Transformation; Federalism; Peacebuilding; Regional Security

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BACKGROUND

The debate on Somaliland's status in regional and international forums is usually framed in terms of two competing narratives: Somaliland's claim to independence and Somalia's claim to territorial integrity. This framing assumes that an advantage for one side must be a loss for the other. This has encouraged external actors to support Somalia's reconstruction within the borders of the Somali Republic--- created in 1960 after the merger of Somaliland and Somalia--- while maintaining extensive informal relations with Somaliland. This creates a long-standing constitutional and political contradiction: Somaliland has built and maintained its own governing institutions since declaring independence in 1991, while Article 7(2) of Somalia's 2012 Provisional Constitution declares the territory of the Federal Republic of Somalia including Somaliland "inviolable and indivisible" (African Union Commission, 2005; Federal Republic of Somalia, 2012).

This article argues that recognition of Somaliland could benefit both sides of the status dispute. It could consolidate a functioning political order in Somaliland and at the same time enable Somalia to define a more realistic territorial project, to harness scarce political resources, to complete its federal bargain and to improve cooperation with Hargeisa. The phrase "buy one get one free" is a metaphor for this potential dual peace dividend, and is not a promise of peace. It means that a policy which is focused only on Somaliland can provide a second return by improving the incentives and institutional setting for Somalia's stabilization.

The case is important, because after 30 years of liberal state-building project financed by the West, Somalia is far from a fully consolidated state. The unresolved Somaliland question is not the sole or principal cause of Somalia's difficulties. But it consumes diplomatic attention, maintains zero-sum nationalism, complicates constitutional closure and makes cooperation with Hargeisa into a recurring sovereignty crisis. State-building scholarship warns that externally recognized institutions remain fragile when they lack an accepted political settlement and workable relations with local centers of authority (Call & Cousens, 2008; Menkhaus, 2007; Paris, 2004).

The article asks: through what mechanisms could Somaliland's recognition contribute to Somalia's stabilization and state-building, and under what conditions could those benefits outweigh the risks? It answers with a qualitative theory-driven analysis of historical scholarship, constitutions, intergovernmental documents, policy reports, in-depth expert interviews and focus group discussions. Five pathways are identified: territorial clarification, redirection of political resources, constitutional consolidation, formalized cross-border cooperation, and reduced regional threat perception. These are theoretical propositions -- plausible causal sequences grounded in existing scholarship and expert interpretation -- rather than confirmed empirical findings. Systematic testing through comparative case analysis, survey research, and longitudinal tracking of institutional indicators is required before stronger causal inference can be drawn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on de facto states provides a theoretical basis for understanding Somaliland's ambiguous legal status. Caspersen (2012) points out three essential features of de facto states: effective internal governance, declared independence that is not widely recognized, and a sustained claim to sovereign status. Somaliland meets all

three of these criteria, and Somalia exemplifies a contrasting category of recognized-but-weak statehood where juridical status exceeds administrative capacity. Pegg (1998) and Tansey (2011) argue that de facto state persistence depends less on international legitimacy than on the quality of governance institutions. The literature implies that recognition debates require analysis of the distributional effects of recognition on the wider territorial order.

Scholars of Somaliland's political economy have complicated optimistic accounts of unrecognized statehood. Phillips (2016) argues that Somaliland's isolation from the world had institutional autarchy that insulated political bargains from international conditions and that in the future, formal integration into the international system could disrupt local institutions. Pijovic (2014) finds that informal bilateral arrangements substitute for diplomatic channels but impose structural costs on economic integration and security cooperation. Together these studies frame recognition as a transformation with winners and losers, not a simple institutional gain.

Historical scholarship on the 1960 union of Somaliland and Somalia remains unexplored in recognition debates. Ingiriis (2021) points out contradictions in the British Somaliland Protectorate relationship with the Italian Somalia Trust Territory and argues that elite bargains institutionalized northern (Somaliland) marginalization in ways that made the 1991 breakup a predictable outcome. This view suggests that recognition would address a flaw in the 1960 constitutional order that has distorted Somali state-building ever since.

Recent quantitative and comparative work has examined self-determination settlements and conflict recurrence. Ahmad et al. (2022) find that negotiated separation lowers the likelihood of post-settlement armed conflict compared to secession and indefinite limbo, at least in communities where pre-settlement violence has been low-intensity and border commissions are established. Ylonen's (2022) comparative study shows the cases when long-standing non-recognition accumulated grievances that erupted in renewed violence, while external facilitation of agreed territorial changes generally yielded more stable outcomes. The benefits depend on the quality of the settlement, the inclusiveness of the process, and the handling of contested communities.

Comparative studies explain the conditions that ensure peaceful separation. Tir (2005) finds that conflicts may not return when there are clearly demarcated borders, agreements to protect populations are signed, and international monitors are put in place. The peaceful split of Czechoslovakia is a positive example. The Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict after separation shows failure to settle borders while Sudan-South Sudan case show how unresolved borders, wealth and citizenship can reignite conflict. The comparative record supports the proposition that recognized borders can reduce some sources of interstate conflict while demonstrating that the mode and quality of separation are decisive for outcomes.

This article addresses a specific gap in the existing literature. Most recognition scholarship focuses on the benefits or costs for the entity seeking recognition, treating effects on neighboring states as secondary. The dual dividend proposition inverts this optic and asks whether recognition of Somaliland could improve Somalia's own state-building trajectory. No published study has systematically examined this question. The article sets out five theoretically grounded mechanisms through which recognition could break this constraint and identifies the scope and countervailing risks that qualify each pathway. This framing shifts the policy debate from a zero-sum sovereignty battle to a comparative analysis of transitional costs and governance benefits.

Historical Context

The 1960 Union and the Collapse of the Somali Republic

The State of Somaliland attained independence from Britain on 26 June 1960. The Italian-administered Trust Territory of Somalia achieved independence on July 1, 1960 and merged with Somaliland on the same day to form the Somali Republic. The union reflected the political appeal of pan-Somali nationalism, which sought the unification of Somali-inhabited territories in the Horn of Africa. It was formed under great time pressure, and legal scholars later identified contradictions between Somaliland and Somalia instruments of union (Contini, 1969; Lewis, 2002).

The Somali Republic subsequently experienced military rule, the Ogaden War in 1977-1978, authoritarian repression, and civil war. The state collapsed in 1991 following the overthrow of Mohamed Siad Barre. Somaliland's leaders declared the restoration of the sovereignty held briefly in June 1960 and limited their territorial claim to the former British protectorate. Schraeder (2006) regards this withdrawal as a major rupture in pan-Somali nationalism that weakens not only the nation-building process of the 1960 Republic but also the irredentist project.

Divergent State Building Since 1991

Somaliland and Somalia went in very different political directions after 1991. Somaliland's political order emerged through bottom-up local conferences, clan negotiations, demobilization, and hybrid institutions that merged customary authority with republican government. The 1991 Burao conference restored independence, and the 1993 Borama conference established a national charter and competitive elections. Somaliland's 2001 Constitution codified Somaliland's claim to restore sovereignty (Bradbury, 2008; Phillips, 2020; Renders, 2012).

The reconstruction in Somalia was based more on top-down, elite bargaining, externally sponsored conferences, transitional charters, and donor-backed federal institutions. These efforts re-established internationally recognized government, but authority was still divided among the federal government, federal member states, clans, and armed forces. Menkhaus (2007) called this governance without government.

The difference shouldn't be romanticized: Somaliland has witnessed many electoral delays, coercive security mechanisms, and competing authority in parts of Sool and Sanaag in the past, including fighting around Las Anod in 2023 that resulted in civilian deaths and displacement (Amnesty International, 2023; Hoehne, 2013). Somalia has strengthened its federal institutions and restored some of its diplomatic influence.

The Arusha Precedent and Regional Irredentism

A regional precedent illustrates how territorial accommodation can change incentives. The 1967 Arusha Memorandum between Kenya and the Somali Republic ended official Somali support for the insurgency in Kenya's former Northern Frontier District and restored bilateral relations, moving the conflict away from interstate confrontation to domestic integration of Kenyan Somalis (Whittaker, 2015). No such accommodation was made with Ethiopia; the irredentist rivalry culminated in the Ogaden War of 1977-1978 (Lewis, 2002; Tareke, 2000). This comparison has reinforced the narrower proposition that acceptable borders can reduce one source of regional insecurity.

Analytical Framework

Conflict Transformation and Territorial Settlement

Conflict-transformation theory views durable peace as a change in relationships, institutions and narratives, not temporary suppression of violence. Lederach (1997) stresses locally legitimate relations and ongoing reconciliation. Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative and positive peace focuses on the institutions and inequalities that perpetuate conflict after fighting has subsided. This framework, applied to the Somaliland-Somalia dispute, asks if indefinite ambiguity manages the disagreement or preserves the structures that allow it to recur. A territorial settlement can alter political incentives by defining two international legal persons and establishing a basis for treaties on security, movement, trade, and public assets (Crawford, 2006; Fabry, 2010).

Recognition and State Building

Recognition scholarship distinguishes empirical state capacity from international legal status. De facto states can control territory and offer public authority while being excluded from normal diplomatic and financial institutions. On the other hand, recognized states may possess juridical sovereignty but weak internal authority. Somaliland and Somalia illustrate the two opposite sides of this gap (Caspersen, 2012; Jackson, 1990; Pegg, 1998). The central proposition of this article is that the two gaps are connected. International policy has tried to strengthen Somalia's empirical statehood while also denying juridical statehood to Somaliland, on the assumption that preserving the legal possibility of reunification assists Somalia reconstruction. A conflict-transformation perspective permits the opposite hypothesis: closing the reunification question may allow Somalia to concentrate legitimacy, resources and bargaining within a territory its institutions can realistically govern.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative single-case design combining historical interpretation, policy analysis, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Documentary sources include foundational scholarship on Somali nationalism, research on state-building trajectories, the constitutions of both polities, intergovernmental records and policy reports. The information was processed according to the analytical categories of territorial settlement, state capacity, political incentives, conflict transformation and regional security (George & Bennett, 2005).

Informed consent and ethical approval were obtained prior to data collection. The interviews are used to identify proposed mechanisms and compare them to documentary evidence; they are not treated as evidence that recognition will lead to stabilization. The analysis is based on process tracing logic of George and Bennett (2005), assessing whether theorized causal mechanisms are observable in the historical and policy record. They evaluate each mechanism based on three parameters: theoretical coherence, consistency with historical and institutional evidence and corroboration or disconfirmation of the theories by expert interpretation. The analysis does not necessarily establish probabilistic regularities but it provides plausible pathways and limits their scope.

The documentary record was used to check participant claims against independent sources. Future research should include participants in Mogadishu's federal institutions, civil society groups skeptical to separation, and Sool and Sanaag communities.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Two concepts need to be defined before the mechanisms are described. Stabilization, for example, is seen in terms of reducing armed violence, establishing minimal public order and establishing conditions that allow political institutions to function (Paris, 2004). It is a precondition for, but distinct from, state-building, which involves the construction of the administrative, legal, and fiscal institutions that sustain governance over the long term (Call & Cousens, 2008). For the purposes of this analysis, the question is whether Somaliland's recognition could alter the political incentives and institutional conditions relevant to both processes in Somalia.

Clarifying Somalia's Territorial Project

All participants identified the unresolved status of Somaliland as a problem of political scope. Somalia's recognized constitutional framework refers to the territory of the 1960 Republic, but since 1991 the federal government has not administered Somaliland. This created a persistent distance between juridical claims and governing capacity. This gap allows constitutional language to promise a territorial outcome that public institutions cannot implement and requires every external agreement with Somaliland to be contested as a question of sovereignty (Federal Republic of Somalia, 2012).

Recognition could narrow this gap by defining Somalia's state-building process around the territory in which its federal bargain is negotiated. Such clarification would not solve disputes among the federal government and member states, nor would it determine the status of all contested communities. But it would remove an external territorial claim from the constitutional agenda and allow Somalia leaders to define representation, fiscal federalism, resource sharing and security responsibilities without reserving an absent Somaliland party in the settlement.

Interviewees also linked the unresolved pan-Somali political project with extremist recruitment narratives. A territorial nationality regime could prevent shared Somali ethnicity from operating as an automatic claim to Somalia's citizenship and public institutions.

Research commissioned by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada found that Somalia authorities gave contradictory answers on whether ethnic Somalis from Ethiopia's Ogaden region could obtain Somalia citizenship: the Ministry of Interior and Federal Affairs confirmed eligibility for persons of Somali ethnicity willing to renounce Ethiopian citizenship, while the Embassy in Brussels denied it outright—illustrating the administrative ambiguity surrounding the 1962 law's broad ethnocultural definition (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2018). Somaliland recognition as an independent state could therefore support prospective reforms defining citizenship around Somalia's settled territory, descent from its citizens, and lawful naturalization.

The historical record of Somalia shows the weaknesses of the identity system. A World Bank diagnostic reported fraud, unreliable foundational documents, and international concern about authenticating passport holders (World Bank, 2016). The research by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada further revealed that a lawyer in Mogadishu determined that 'there is no procedure or administrative body in place to obtain citizenship in Somalia', a finding corroborated by the United States Department of

State's assessment that 'there continues to be no recognized competent civil authority to issue civil documents' (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2018). For persons from the Ogaden, the Somalia Ministry of Interior specified that the required procedure is to 'find elders that attest and verify' Somali clan descent—a verification method directly paralleling the community attestation described for Somaliland (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2018). The evidence supports the narrower conclusion that weak identity proofing can create security risks.

Somaliland's approach grounds nationality in the territories in the former British protectorate (Somaliland Citizenship Law, 2002). Recognition would also lead to the alignment of document systems with bounded territorial jurisdiction and security gains based on reliable records, audits, accessible appeals and non-discriminatory administration.

A territorialized citizenship system could also undermine Islamist recruitment appeals that combine jihadist mobilization with Greater Somalia Irredentism and a political community that includes all ethnic Somalis across the Horn. Al-Shabaab draws on religious ideology, governance failures, foreign intervention, and local grievances, and has spread violence to Kenya (Anderson & McKnight, 2015). Recognition would only remove one narrative of mobilization; effective prevention still requires genuine government, accountable security institutions and regional counterterrorism cooperation.

Redirecting Political Resources

A second finding concerns opportunity cost. Interview participants argued that the Somalia government, parliamentarians, diaspora organizations, and diplomatic missions devote political attention to opposing Somaliland's recognition. The financial cost is hard to measure but the political cost is reflected in the persistent diplomatic campaigns and conflicts over foreign relations with Somaliland— activities that compete with reconciliation, revenue mobilization, service delivery, and security-sector reform.

Schraeder's (2006) analysis can explain why this allocation continues. The constructed conception of Somali unity survived the decline of military irredentism and continued to shape projects aimed at restoring the unified state. Recognition would not eradicate cultural pan-Somalism, which can exist peacefully across borders. However, it could reduce the institutional reward for political actors who present reunification as a prerequisite for Greater Somali irredentism project.

The UN General Assembly statements between 2010 and 2024 all indicate Somalia's formal objection to Somaliland's separate diplomatic engagement. The 2024 Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding is a good example of this dynamic and also of its limits. The scale of the political cost was acknowledged directly by Somalia's own Prime Minister, Hamza Ali Barre, in a video statement in July 2025:

"*You know what happened in the country. All of a sudden, we saw some part of the country taken by Ethiopia after it signed MOU with Somaliland. For a complete one year we haven't done anything else other than to wage diplomatic war to defend our sovereignty. That resulted in the terror group Al-Shabaab to retake the land that was previously liberated from them, because our attention was consumed by the fight with the MOU. There may be other MOUs that we may not know*." (Barre, 2025)

This statement is significant not only because it comes from a head of government, but because it illustrates precisely the mechanism identified by interview participants: sustained diplomatic opposition to Somaliland's external arrangements diverted institutional focus from counter-insurgency and governance, enabling Al-Shabaab's resurgence in previously secured territories. The Prime Minister's admission that additional undisclosed arrangements may exist further underscores the compounding unpredictability of the status quo.

Constitutional and Federal Consolidation

A third mechanism is constitutional closure. Somalia's 2012 Constitution is provisional and leaves important questions of federal design, power, resources and territorial organization to future negotiations. The claimed inclusion of Somaliland adds another unresolved layer because it is treated formally as part of the Republic but does not participate in the federal institutions that revise the constitutional order. Recognition would clear up this contradiction, and constitutional talks could be focused on the parties who exercise and compete for power in Somalia (Federal Republic of Somalia, 2012).

Somalia's constitutional disputes stem from domestic squabbles over executive power, electoral rules, federal member states, clan representation and revenue. Recognition would not solve these problems but would simplify the territorial arena and eliminate the idea that a future Somaliland delegation should be accommodated in a new union. The benefit is simplification of the bargaining environment, not constitutional completion.

Security and Economic Cooperation

The fourth pathway is stronger cooperation. Somalia and Somaliland face shared threats, including al-Shabaab, arms trafficking, maritime insecurity, climate shocks, displacement, and illicit finance. Weak communication and intelligence-sharing allow criminals and suspected terrorists to move between the territories and evade authorities. Informal contacts can help resolve individual incidents, but cooperation remains vulnerable without recognized relations. A security agreement may be portrayed in Somalia as conceding sovereignty and in Somaliland as weakening independence. Recognition could enable the parties to establish regular channels and negotiate arrangements on law enforcement, intelligence-sharing, extradition, customs, aviation, and maritime security without reopening the status question each time (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Menkhaus, 2007).

Economic relations might also get more predictable. Pastoral mobility, trade, transport and remittances link communities across political lines. A negotiated settlement could allow lawful movement, clarify customs and taxes, and reduce uncertainty for businesses. It could also prevent routine trade disputes from escalating into sovereignty-related confrontation. Interstate cooperation would offer a more durable framework to address shared concerns than continued indefinite legal ambiguity.

Depending on the terms of the recognition and mechanism of transition, Somaliland financial institutions could establish relations with international banks, facilitate trade through letters of credit, lower remittance costs and have access to development banks.

Engagement Without Recognition

Engagement without recognition---the existence of functional relationships with unrecognized entities but no formal diplomatic recognition--- characterizes Somaliland's current international position (Ker-Lindsay, 2015). The European Union has developed differentiated engagement instruments enabling technical cooperation and trade facilitation without triggering the sovereignty-recognition threshold (Bouris & Kyris, 2017). Shevchuk (2022) notes such arrangements carry risks when they become vehicles for competitive great-power positioning. A transition to a structured recognition process, negotiated between the principal parties with appropriate guarantees, would generate qualitatively different incentive effects from those available within the current engagement without-recognition framework alone.

Regional Support and Threat Reduction

A fifth mechanism concerns Somalia's neighbors. Ethiopia and Kenya have historically viewed Somali nationalism through the experience of territorial claims, insurgency and interstate violence. Somalia does not formally claim Ethiopian and Kenyan territory but historical threat perceptions remain embedded in regional security relations. Historically, Kenya and Ethiopia saw Somali irredentism as a threat to their borders. This shaped their policies toward Somalia, including their 1964 defense pact and Ethiopia’s efforts to weaken Somalia after the Ogaden War (Whittaker, 2015; Yihun, 2014; Chonka & Healy, 2021).

A recognized Somaliland committed to inherited borders could make the reconstitution of a single irredentist Somali center less likely and could reduce incentives for neighboring states to manage Somalia primarily through defensive intervention (Schraeder, 2006; Tareke, 2000; Whittaker, 2015).

Interview participants argued that reduced threat perception could encourage Ethiopia and Kenya to support a stronger Somalia within settled borders. This claim is plausible but conditional. Both countries have many interests and their policy will not be settled solely by Somaliland. But a formal territorial settlement will remove one historical source of distrust and allow regionally-based cooperation on the issue of al-Shabaab, trade corridors, refugees, climate resilience and border administration. This mechanism is the most speculative of the five and rests on the thinnest documentary evidence base. No peer-reviewed study has isolated the recognition variable from co-occurring governance and security factors. The mechanism is therefore retained as a hypothesis for future research rather than a claim supported by the existing documentary record.

The Dual Peace Dividend

Taken together, the five mechanisms explain the central proposition of the title. The first dividend is the consolidation of Somaliland's statehood through the legal recognition of an authority that has governed separately for more than three decades. The second is a more bounded and potentially more coherent state-building project in Somalia. The two outcomes are connected because a settled relationship can replace a struggle over the existence of the parties with negotiation over their conduct toward one another.

The interviewees linked recognition to less irredentist mobilization, greater security for neighboring states and greater space for Somalia to pursue reconciliation. These views should be treated cautiously because the sample consisted mainly of Somaliland-based elites. Still, the agreement among participants from diplomatic, security, legal, academic, and parliamentary actors identify a policy hypothesis that deserves systematic testing.

These five mechanisms are analytical constructs, not assured outcomes. Each is grounded in established theory and supported by historical and interview evidence, but none has been empirically tested in a context directly analogous to the Somaliland-Somalia case. Future research should treat each mechanism as a falsifiable hypothesis and assess it through comparative analysis, public-opinion research, and longitudinal tracking of institutional outcomes.

Risks And Conditions

Nationalist Backlash

Recognition could initially increase instability in Somalia. Political leaders and armed forces might portray it as the breakup of the country, stir public anger, and accuse outside powers of violating Somalia's sovereignty. Recognition is more likely to support peace if it follows public consultation, clear explanations, and a negotiated agreement rather than a sudden decision (International Crisis Group, 2006; Ker-Lindsay, 2015).

Competition for External Support

Interview participants warned that failing to resolve the Somaliland–Somalia dispute could lead both sides to seek support from rival external powers. Realist theory explains that alliances one side sees as defensive may appear threatening to the other, encouraging further competition (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Jervis, 1978). An internationally mediated agreement with security guarantees could reduce this competition and make cooperation easier.

The participants described an asset-for-protection risk that each side could trade ports, military bases and resources for external support. After Somaliland and Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding concerning recognition and sea access, Somalia signed a maritime security agreement and cooperation on hydrocarbons exploration with Türkiye (Associated Press, 2024a, 2024b; Reuters, 2024a, 2024b). Somalia and Somaliland have also reportedly offered strategic access to the United States and other powers (Al Jazeera, 2026; Israel Hayom, 2026; Reuters, 2025, 2026). A settlement should require authorization, disclosure, competitive licensing, and periodic review of any such arrangements.

Contested Territories and Precedent

Somaliland's claim follows the former protectorate boundary, consistent with the African principle of respecting borders existing at independence (Ratner, 1996). Yet authority and political allegiance remain contested in parts of the east. Recognition arrangements that disregard the preferences, security, and political participation of affected communities may undermine legitimacy and weaken the durability of a settlement (Cuhadar & Druckman, 2024; Nilsson, 2012). Sustainable agreements in

disputed territories should be negotiated with meaningful community participation and include effective protections for civilians and minorities (Cuhadar & Druckman, 2024; International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2014). They should also avoid territorial changes imposed through coercion or force, consistent with the UN Charter and the International Court of Justice's reaffirmation of the prohibition on acquiring territory by force (United Nations, 1945, arts. 2(3)–(4), 33; International Court of Justice [ICJ], 2024).

African governments may also fear that recognition of Somaliland would encourage secession elsewhere. The strongest response is to define the case narrowly: two previously independent colonial territories entered a voluntary union in 1960, the shared state collapsed, and one former unit rebuilt sustained institutions within its inherited boundary. This reasoning does not create an automatic rule for every separatist movement but requires the African Union to articulate why Somaliland is historically specific.

Comparative Cases and Selective Precedent

Three comparative cases inform the scope conditions under which separation processes generate stabilizing effects. The Czech-Slovak dissolution identifies the negotiated character, the absence of significant minority populations at the new border, and robust institutional frameworks as key factors in its stabilizing outcome (Tir, 2005). The Ethiopia-Eritrea case sheds light on the consequences of the failure to resolve border dispute because after initial 1993 cooperation there was a catastrophic border war in 1998-2000. Sudan-South Sudan's 2011 independence showed that stabilizing effects depend heavily on post-independence institutional quality and sustained third-party engagement. The comparative data from these cases are overwhelmingly in favor of examining negotiation quality, boundary clarity and institutional guarantees.

Recognition is not the Substitute for Reform

The dual-dividend argument should not be used to blame Somalia's problems on Somaliland. Somalia's insecurity is the product of armed insurgency, fragmented authority, elite competition, limited revenue and external rivalry. Recognition would eliminate one structural ambiguity but would not eradicate al-Shabaab or settle domestic power-sharing disputes. Stabilization still depends on Somali political agreements and accountable public authority. Recognition should not also be viewed as an unconditional reward for Somaliland: its legitimacy is based on a credible government, civilian security and negotiated governance in contested areas (Call & Cousens, 2008; Menkhaus, 2007; Pegg & Kolsto, 2015).

Equity and Rights Dimensions

The contested territories of Sanaag and Sool, including the city of Las Anod, represent a significant equity and rights dimension. The 2023 conflict in Las Anod, which resulted in Somaliland forces withdrawing following armed resistance by local communities, illustrates that Somaliland's territorial claims are themselves disputed. The recognition framework should include conditions of as such: free and fair elections, meaningful participation rights for Sool and Sanag regions and other

minority clan communities, and independent monitoring of the human rights conditions of contested territories (Amnesty International, 2023).

Women's political participation should be included in rights conditions, in line with international standards. Somaliland's 2021 elections were peaceful, but women remained poorly represented. The proposed framework makes women's participation a requirement for structured dialogue, not just a goal after recognition.

Risks of Recognition Transition

The transition from de facto to recognized statehood comes with its own risks. If recognition is granted prematurely or without adequate conditionality, ruling elites who built support through the narrative of external exclusion may face legitimacy challenges once that narrative is replaced by international normalization, and economic windfalls could be captured by patronage networks.

Policy Implications

The limits of bilateral dialogue were apparent in Somaliland President Irro's fireside conversation with Hudson Institute Senior Fellow Joshua Meservey in September 2026. Asked whether Somalia would ever accept Somaliland's separation, Irro explained that previous talks had stalled because Somaliland entered them seeking separation while Somalia sought to preserve the union, leaving no common ground between their objectives. He argued that clear international recognition of Somaliland as a democratic and functioning state could change Mogadishu's position (Hudson Institute, 2026). This supports a two-part approach: first, pursue negotiations to resolve practical issues; second if Mogadishu continues to reject a two-state settlement, international actors may need to help ensure a peaceful separation.

This openness to dialogue finds a notable echo within Somalia's own political landscape. In a video statement, Abdirahman Abdishakur — chairman of the Wadajir Party and a prominent opposition leader and presidential candidate in Somalia — responded to a question about what he would do with Somaliland if elected president by stating that whether Somalia and Somaliland remain united or separate must be resolved through discussion and dialogue, not imposition. He affirmed that he does not believe in forced reunification, though he personally prefers unity. Crucially, he framed any outcome as conditional on mutual consent: unity depends on Somaliland's willingness, and separation depends on Somalia's acceptance (Abdishakur, 2026). While Abdishakur does not represent current Somalia government policy, his position demonstrates that dialogue-based and consent-driven approaches carry meaningful traction within Somalia's political arena, and that the all-or-nothing posture of Mogadishu's formal stance is not universally shared among Somalia leaders. This creates a potential opening for future negotiations grounded in the principle that neither forced unity nor unilateral separation is legitimate.

A gradual, negotiated settlement is the preferred option. The first stage should begin structured talks based on agreed principles: non-aggression, respect for existing borders, civilian protection, cooperation against shared threats, and rejection of forced reunification or territorial control.

This approach is consistent with established principles of international law. Crawford's (2006) authoritative treatment of statehood criteria confirms that effective governance and popular consent are legally significant, even absent formal recognition — a standard Somaliland meets more robustly than many recognized states. The OAU's 1964 resolution AHG/Res. 16(I) established *uti possidetis juris* and made African nations bound to colonial-era borders. Somaliland's situation is legally distinctive: it is not trying to alter the colonial boundaries, but to restore the independence of a colonial-era territory that voluntarily united with Italian Somalia in 1960. This distinction could help the African Union, IGAD, and UN Security Council discuss recognition while addressing concerns about setting a precedent (Crawford, 2006; Fabry, 2010; OAU, 1964).

The second stage should address practical matters arising from separation, including citizenship, residency, movement, public assets and debts, airspace, maritime cooperation, trade, communications, and protection for cross-border communities. Agreements on these issues can show that separate statehood need not divide people or disrupt their ties.

The third stage should support Somalia's recovery. International partners should help advance reconciliation, constitutional talks, local government, sound public finances, justice, and civilian security. This would make clear that recognizing Somaliland does not mean abandoning or weakening Somalia; it should go hand in hand with renewed support for a capable and legitimate Somali state.

Alternative Policy Options

Four main policy options appear in the literature. The first is to keep the current situation, with Somaliland governing itself without recognition. This approach has growing costs because Somaliland needs access to international financial systems. The second is for one or more countries to recognize Somaliland unilaterally. This could build momentum but may increase regional tensions without wider support. The third is to bring Somaliland back into a restructured Somalia federation, an option Somaliland’s government and voters have consistently rejected. The fourth is to delay action, as the international community has largely done for three decades, despite diminishing results.

The proposed staged settlement is preferable because it links each step to conditions and offers both sides incentives to cooperate.

Somalia and Somaliland should also establish regular diplomatic missions and joint commissions. Recognition would create channels for managing disagreements; it would not resolve every dispute. Formal relations could support continued talks on contested areas, shared infrastructure, security, and citizens’ rights.

CONCLUSION

Somaliland's recognition is commonly evaluated as a benefit to Hargeisa and a loss to Mogadishu. This article has developed a theoretical account of why that assumption may be incomplete. The unresolved status quo preserves a mismatch between Somalia's constitutional territory and its governing reach, encourages recurring

diplomatic confrontation, and keeps reunification available as a nationalist project. Recognition could close this question and allow Somalia's political competition and international assistance to concentrate on the institutions and communities within its effective federal arena.

These benefits are not guaranteed. Recognition could trigger a backlash, worsen conflict in disputed areas, or be used to avoid necessary reforms. Any settlement should protect communities, manage practical relations, maintain cooperation against shared threats, and continue supporting Somalia's state-building. Under those conditions, the commercial metaphor in the title captures a serious peacebuilding proposition: recognizing Somaliland may secure one functioning state while helping another become more coherent and stable.

The objective is not to preserve Somalia weakness or to institutionalize hostility between related populations. It is to replace an entirely unworkable sovereignty fight with two credible political authorities and a managed relationship between them. Somaliland would have the international status it wants, and Somalia would have clearer borders for reconciliation, constitutional bargaining, and institution building. This is the potential dual peace dividend.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is based on purposive expert sample and cannot provide an indication of how Somalia or Somaliland publics respond to recognition. The causal mechanisms proposed have to be tested in more detailed interviews, focus groups, public opinion studies, and comparative studies with other negotiated separations. Future research should also assess the diplomatic and administrative resources spent on the status dispute and how different recognition paths impact federal politics, contested areas, and regional security.

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