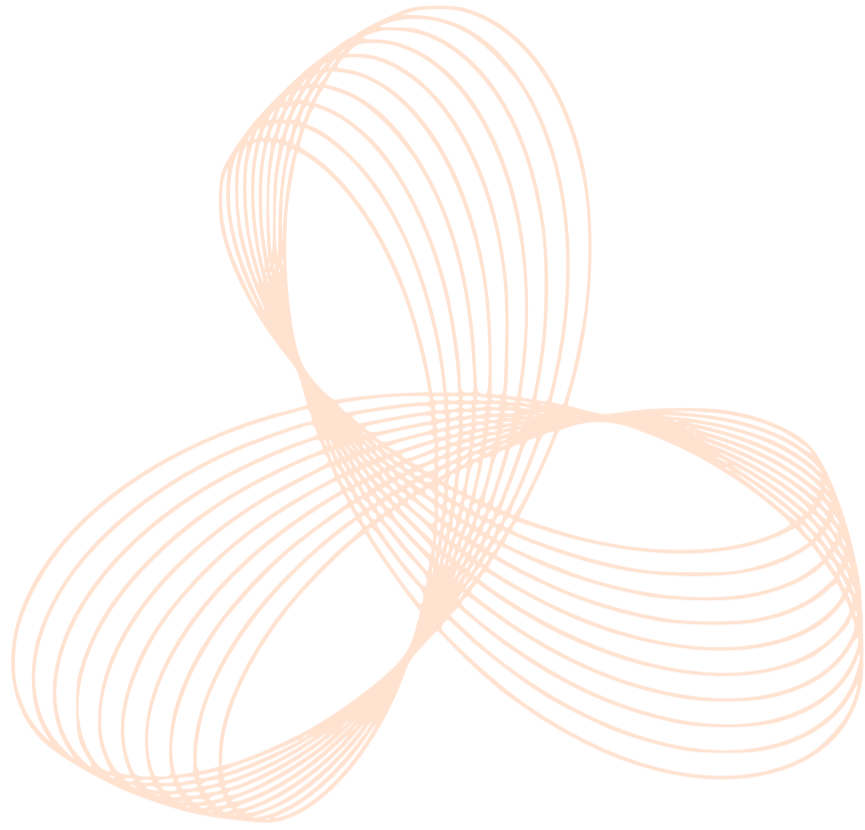


Gains amid Strategic Losses: Rethinking Foreign Policy in the Context of Somaliland



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KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Israel's recognition of Somaliland on 26 December 2025 marked the first formal re-recognition since independence in 1960, vindicating over six decades of pursuit for statehood and setting a historic diplomatic precedent.
- Israel's Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar's visit to Hargeisa on 6 January 2026 constituted the first official high-level diplomatic visit to Somaliland by a recognised state, lending it tangible international legitimacy.
- The current government reduced Somaliland's overseas diplomatic missions from eighteen to nine, cutting its global presence in half at the most critical moment in its recognition history, directly undermining the momentum generated by Israel's recognition.
- The closure of offices in South Africa, South Sudan, and Norway, and the defunding of missions in Germany and the Netherlands, eliminated Somaliland's presence in key regions where international opinion, parliamentary support, and recognition policy are actively shaped.
- Leaving the Addis Ababa mission, Somaliland's most strategically vital posting, without an ambassador or deputy, at a moment when the Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU remains unresolved, signals a catastrophic failure of diplomatic prioritisation.
- Somaliland failed to capitalise on Israel's recognition by launching a coordinated, proactive campaign to bring additional countries on board, leaving a historic diplomatic breakthrough without a strategic follow-through.
- The recurring postponement of elections, most recently the indefinite delay of the May 2026 parliamentary and local council elections, has eroded Somaliland's democratic credibility, which has historically been its most persuasive argument to the international community for recognition.
- The new government's "open foreign policy", engaging regional rivals such as Turkey and Qatar without transparency or public accountability, created strategic confusion, domestic distrust, and ultimately failed to produce any tangible diplomatic gains while alienating existing allies.

Introduction

One year after the unratified unification between the two governments of Somaliland – a British Protectorate – and Somalia – a Italian colony that has been under UN Trusteeship Administration in 1960, the people of Somaliland took their first step toward reclaiming independence from the ‘Somali Republic’ through a failed coup orchestrated by junior Somaliland Military officers in 1961. The search for full recognition lasted over 64 years, until 26 December 2025 when the State of Israel officially recognized the Republic of Somaliland as a sovereign State.¹

During these decades of pursuing re-recognition, Somaliland managed to achieve a homegrown and locally-driven peacebuilding process, state-building and ultimately a multi-party democratic system. Its government has functioning judicial, legislative and executive branches, chosen through democratic elections. Drawing on cultural foundations, the country has elected presidents, parliamentarians and local councillors through one-person-one-vote elections. Both international and local electoral observers have assessed these elections as free and fair. Since 1991, Somaliland has had six democratically elected presidents four of whom were came through one-person-one-vote and peacefully transferred power. The government provides services, albeit at the most basic level. It is home to a thriving business community and is beginning to attract significant foreign investment and development aid.²

Despite these political and security successes, there are also challenges and failures. The most pressing challenges to Somaliland democracy are the recurring postponements of elections. The failure to hold timely elections has occurred under almost every president, from Dahir Rayale Kahin, the third elected president, to incumbent president Abdirahman Mohamed Abdillahi. Most recently, this month, April, the joint parliamentary and local councillors’ elections scheduled for May 2026 were delayed after the House of Elders extended the terms of the sitting houses by two years and three months. Some critics argue that the government has failed to adopt clear and principled leadership in resolving prolonged disagreements over the most critical technical issue facing the elections, the establishment of credible and agreed-upon voter registration system. The failure to resolve this matter in a timely and transparent manner has directly contributed to the current impasse. This raises questions about the ruling party’s intentions, and tests popular trust in the democratic process.³

1 Eran Sthoeger, “The Legality of Recognizing Somaliland,” *European Journal of International Law*, (2026): 1, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/the-legality-of-recognizing-somaliland/>

2 Barkhad M. Kaariye, “Democracy and State Formation Nexus: Experiences in Somaliland,” *Democracy and Security* 17, no 2. (2021): 4-11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2021.1871601>

3 SomalilandChronicle, “Is Somaliland a Democracy? The Guurti’s Answer Is Yet Another Election Delay,” *SomalilandChronicle*, 29 April, 2026, <https://somalilandchronicle.com/2026/04/29/is-somaliland-a-democracy-the-guurtis-answer-is-yet-another-election-delay/>

These processes have a direct bearing on Somaliland's foreign policy. Israel's recognition of Somaliland has fulfilled the lifelong goal of Somaliland people. This diplomatic move makes the State of Israel the first country to re-recognize Somaliland after the independence on 26 June 1960 when 35 countries, including Israel had originally recognized.⁴ Notwithstanding these achievements, Somaliland has also suffered strategic losses because of an unguided foreign Policy.

More talks, few results

The London Somalia Conference was a diplomatic conference hosted by the Government of the United Kingdom, which concluded that Somaliland and Somalia should begin talks on their future. As a result, Somaliland and Somalia held nearly eight rounds of talks, all agreements reached in these talks ended without effective implementation.

London talks: The first Somaliland-Somalia technical committee meeting was held in London on 20-21 June, 2012, hosted by the UK and co-hosted by the European Union.

Dubai talks: Delegations from both sides, led by President Ahmed Silanyo of Somaliland and President Sharif Sheik Ahmed of Somalia, met in Dubai on 28th June, 2012, hosted by the UAE government. Both presidents agreed to continue the talks.

Ankara talks: The third round was held on 13 April 2013 in Ankara, as continuation of the previous discussions.

Istanbul-1 talks: The two sides met in Istanbul on 7-9 July 2013 and agreed, among other points, not to politicize the social issues and airspace issues.

Istanbul-2 talks: The second round in Turkiye and the fifth overall was held in Istanbul on 16-19 January 2024.

Djibouti talks: This round was a presidential-level meeting on 21 December, 2014 in Djibouti.

Istanbul-3 talks: This round was planned for Istanbul on 26-27 February 2015 but collapsed after Somalia breached prior agreements by including individuals from Somaliland who supported Somalia's position. Talks have been suspended since then, and Somalia has remained in political turmoil. President Bihi engaged unplanned meeting with President Farmajo in Addis Ababa, hosted by Prime Minister Abiy which yielded no results and instead generated political tensions.

Djibouti-2 talks: The last official meeting between the two sides was held in Djibouti in the last week of December 2023, days before the MoU between Somaliland and Ethiopia, in presence of the President of Djibouti Ismail Omer, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and representatives from other regional organizations.⁵

The ‘Keep Somaliland Static’ Policy

Under president Muse Bihi Abdi, Somaliland’s government engaged with international partners to build the case for full recognition, including Taiwan. One such engagement was an invitation to the United States to establish a presence in Berbera – a coastal city on the Gulf of Aden, in 2023. In response, senior officials from the U.S. Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) visited the port of Berbera in January 2023 on a site survey mission. A US-led international military exercise was subsequently scheduled for the following month, February 2023. Berbera was not the only planned for the exercise, it was also set to take place in Botswana, Djibouti, Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda with participation from 20 partner nations. The U.S. military routinely surveys potential operating locations to prepare for contingencies, test readiness and adjust force posture as directed.⁶

To prevent these engagements, the Somalia government with assistance from foreign powers, fomented armed conflict in the eastern regions of Somaliland, particularly in the Sool region. Using local grievances as pretext, Somalia collaborated with external actors to destabilise the region. This led an armed confrontation between Somaliland’s army and Somalia-backed local armed groups including foreign-trained Somalia troops. In the early morning of 6 February 2023, heavy gunfire erupted in the city. The Somaliland government stated in a press release that its military bases had been attacked. Following the fighting, Somaliland Security forces withdrew from the region and the local militias occupied it, including the regional capital of Lasanod. Somalia subsequently assisted in establishing a new administrative entity, Sool, Sanaag, Cayn-Khatumo State (SSC- K) in February 2023 which it formally recognised as Federal member State in October 2023.⁷

As part of its recognition efforts, Somaliland’s government under by President Muse Bihi Abdi signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Ethiopia on 1st January 2024 in Addis Ababa. The MoU contained several significant provisions, but its most controversial pillars were granting Ethiopia access to the sea in exchange for Ethiopia’s recognition of Somaliland. As expected, the MoU was challenged by a number of countries, including the Arab League, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and several regional and international partners. Although opposition to the MoU was politically and interest-driven, these countries invoked ‘Regional Security Concerns’ as their stated justification.⁸

⁶ US Embassy, “United States combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa visit to Berbera,” US Embassy, JANUARY 13, 2023, <https://so.usembassy.gov/united-states-combined-joint-task-force-horn-of-africa-visit-to-berbera/>

⁷ Bile Serar, “Who is fighting against whom?” Peace For All Institute, no. 1 (2023): 1-9.

⁸ Maxwell Webb, “Nine months later: The regional implications of the Ethiopia-Somaliland MOU”, Atlantic Council, October 2, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/nine-months-later-the-regional-implications-of-the-ethiopia-somaliland-mou/>



Somaliland and Somalia delegations met in Ankara for talks on April 13, 2013. The signing ceremony of Ankara Communique. Photo: Turkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The diplomatic and political reactions from these countries intensified. Somalia went so far as to mobilize local hardliners, concerned communities and foreign actors. It is notable that the Somalia government, including President Hassan Sheikh, his cabinet ministers and leaders of the terrorist organization Al-Shabaab, publicly shared the same position and called for 'Collective reaction' against the MoU. Analysts and diplomatic sources described how the Mogadishu government mobilized extremists to challenge the agreement. Hassan Sheikh called 'All ethnic Somalis' to take up arms against Ethiopia. He also threatened to expel Ethiopian armed forces, who are part of the AU Peacekeeping Mission in Somalia, from its soil, a statement that further inflamed Alshabaab and Somalia people across the region.⁹

Egypt's reported provision of military support to Somalia reflects a broader regional realignment in the Horn of Africa. While framed as Security cooperation, this development has intensified regional concerns about its potential implications for Somalia's internal stability and wider geopolitical competition in the region.¹⁰

To implement what can be described as a 'Keep Somaliland Static' policy, Somalia's close allies including Gulf Cooperation Council members, began promoting the resumption of mediated Somalia-Somaliland talks, with the objective of halting any recognition. At the point, Somaliland's government and people had no intention of resuming talks with Somalia, given that almost ten previous rounds had produced no results, as Somalia had consistently failed to implement agreed points.

⁹ Horn Observer, "Al-Shabaab and Somalia unite against Ethiopia and Somaliland", Horn Observer, 04 January 2024, <https://hornobserver.com/articles/2585/Al-Shabaab-and-Somalia-unite-against-Ethiopia-and-Somaliland>

Horn Observer, "Somali president labels Ethiopia 'enemy', urges Somalis to be prepared for war", Horn observer, 13 January 2024, <https://hornobserver.com/articles/2608/Somali-president-labels-Ethiopia-enemy-urges-Somalis-to-be-prepared-for-war>

¹⁰ News Agencies, "Egypt delivers more weapons to Somalia amid rising tensions with Ethiopia", Aljazeera English, 23 Sep 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/23/egypt-delivers-second-stockpile-of-weapons-to-somalia-amid-ethiopia-tension>



Minister of Defense Gen. Abdel Maged Saqr & Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh witnessed the formation of Egyptian troops - Egypt Today

Israel's recognition: A friend in need, is a friend indeed

On 26 December 2025, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that the State of Israel had officially re-recognized the Republic of Somaliland as a sovereign nation – a move few countries had been willing to make. In turn, Somaliland's president officially declared that Somaliland has reciprocally recognised the State of Israel. The move triggered regional and international opposition, as expected, while all Somaliland people, including the opposition parties and other political stakeholders warmly welcomed it. The streets of Somaliland filled with celebrations and the flags of both nations were flown across the country.

Both nations nominated ambassadors to each other, though neither has yet been deployed to the respective capitals. The first senior Israeli diplomat to visit was Foreign Affairs Minister Gideon Sa'ar, who travelled to Hargeisa on 6 January 2026 in the first official visit to the Republic. Amid further condemnations from several countries, he declared that "Only Israel will determine for itself who it recognises". On the Somaliland side, twenty-five technical delegation from the Ministry of Water travelled to Israel for training. Other Somaliland citizens, including Journalists, also travelled to Israel for meetings and exposure visits, while Israeli journalists covered the celebrations in Hargeisa.¹¹



President Abdirahman received Israel's FM in Hargeisa. Photo: Somaliland's Presidency



President Abdirahman Mohamed on the videocall with the Israeli PM Netanyahu on the day of recognition. Photo: Somaliland's Presidency

From Diplomatic pressure to Active War: Reactions from the Recognition

Israel's recognition of Somaliland was received as a significant development in the region. Some foreign actors, rather accepting it, began taking every possible step to prevent Israel or any other country from following suit. Security meetings between Somalia and foreign powers have reportedly discussed aggressive actions against Somaliland and its allies. In these engagements, foreign powers have proposed to Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud plans to destabilize Somaliland as a part of new regional restructuring of the Horn of Africa. This plan, whose implementation is ongoing, envisions dividing Somaliland into three separate entities through financial, psychological and military means. The Sool region has already been acted upon, the plan also seeks to fuel armed clash between two clans in the western regions of Somaliland, Awdal and Selel, bordering with Ethiopia and Djibouti. With the support of these foreign nations, Somalia's government reportedly established a 'National Committee' for 'Destabilizing and dismantling Somaliland' even before the recognition was made public. The committee brought together senior security advisors, the head of Somalia's Intelligence agency and top military commanders. The committee's stated priority is to ignite conflict in Somaliland and oversee the implementation of this agenda. Foreign actors are also assigned roles in the plan, including financial, intelligence and arms support.¹²

On 17 April 2026, Somalia's Ambassador to Ethiopia Abdullahi Warfa posted on his X account what appeared to be a message circulating in Somalia's diplomatic channels;

"Any Country interfering in Somalia's internal affairs and compromising its territorial integrity and sovereignty will face repercussions, including potential restrictions on access to the Bab-El-Mandab strait"¹³

Notwithstanding Somalia's fragile security situation which depends heavily on foreign troops to protect key government sites, many analysts questioned how Somalia could credibly threaten to restrict access to the Bab-El-Mandab strait. Following this statement, Somalia's piracy resumed operations in Somalia's coastline with at least four vessels hijacked. Whether there is any connection between Somalia's statement and the resumption of Piracy remains unclear, but the development risks further aggravating the already fragile state of maritime security in the region.¹⁴

¹² Confidential diplomatic Cable, Official, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Somalia, July 2025.

¹³ Amb. Abdullahi Warfa (@Warfak1), "Any country interfering in Somalia's internal..." X (Formerly Twitter, April 17, 2026, <https://x.com/i/status/2045064781954945330>)

¹⁴ Shola Lawal, "Why is piracy rising off Somalia again — and is the Iran war responsible?" Aljazeera English, May 1, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/5/1/why-is-piracy-rising-off-somalia-again-and-is-the-iran-war>



An armed Somali pirate sits along the coastline while the Greek cargo ship, MV Filitsa. - AFP/Getty Images

“The foreign actors appear to believe that the most effective way to pursue their interest in Somaliland is to support and architect Somalia’s aggressive policies including the deliberate promotion of instability.”

Somaliland’s strategic location has given it relevance to the global discussion. However, the threats from opposing countries have already imposed economic cost on the region, particularly Somaliland. On 20 April 2026, Maersk – one of the largest logistics companies, announced the temporary suspension of new bookings to and from the Port of Berbera, Somaliland.¹⁵ This disruption will affect not only Somaliland’s import supply chain, but also Ethiopia and other countries in Africa that rely on the Berbera Port.

Despite the fact that Somaliland and Somalia have different allies, those backing Somalia share a common interest in weakening and destabilising Somaliland. Some seek to expand their influence and presence along the strategically vital Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, others aim to access Somaliland’s vast untapped natural resources, including minerals and oil. These actors appear to believe that the most effective way to pursue their interest in Somaliland is to support and architect Somalia’s aggressive policies including the deliberate promotion of instability.¹⁶

¹⁵ Maersk, “Temporary cessation of acceptance of booking to/from Port of Berbera, Somaliland, Somalia,” Maersk.com, April 20, 2026, <https://www.maersk.com/news/articles/2026/04/20/berbera-booking-suspension-update>

¹⁶ Hiiraan Online, “Somaliland accuses foreign actors of arming unrest in Awdal and Salal regions”HOL, April 27, 2026, <https://shorturl.at/LjeKE>

Ambiguous Foreign Policy: A Failure of Strategic direction

Under previous governments of Somaliland, foreign policy was guided by consistent and clear objective; achieving recognition and strengthening relations with neighbouring countries. Other goals, including aid and financial assistance were pursued with caution and attempts were made to prevent external interference in Somaliland's internal affairs. That approach has fundamentally changed the new government.¹⁷

In his early months in office, President Abdirahman's government has tried to shift the status quo by adopting 'Open foreign Policy' that engages regional rivals. Despite making trips to East African and Arab countries and receiving Turkish delegates in Hargeisa before travelling to Qatar – the first such visit in 34 years, most of the discussions were not disclosed to the public, and the media was given no opportunity to be briefed. The political and security risks of these engagements, and the invitations extended to rival regional powers, generated unease among the Somaliland public, who began openly debating the potential consequences.¹⁸

Following Israel's recognition, several of these countries openly aligned themselves with Somalia, altering the course of ongoing diplomatic engagement with Somaliland. Djibouti summoned its representative in Hargeisa, and Somaliland responded in kind. Djibouti Airline also suspended its regular flights between Hargeisa and Djibouti.¹⁹ The alignment of these foreign actors with Somalia has also fuelled public anger in Somaliland with citizens calling on the government to expel those maintaining a diplomatic presence in Hargeisa, including Turkiye. However, rather than campaigning to bring more countries into support of the recognition, particularly in the regional countries, Somaliland's government has exhibited a strategic failure in its foreign policy.²⁰

Regarding relations with Ethiopia, one of the President Abdirahman's major pre-election campaign pledges was to "Reconsider the MoU and any agreement that might follow". This position has added further ambiguity to an already turbulent relationship between the new Somaliland government and Ethiopia. Although some discussions on the MoU resumed following President Abdirahman's first and only trip to Addis Ababa 14 October 2025, nothing concrete has yet been agreed upon the two governments.

17 Goth Mohamed, "President Bihi Talks Somaliland's Journey to Independence and Regional Stability", Somaliland Current, September 23, 2024, <https://www.somalilandcurrent.com/president-bihi-talks-somalilands-journey-to-independence-and-regional-stability/>

18 Somaliland, "President Abdirahman Irro Holds Strategic Meeting with Turkish Consul General to Reinforce Bilateral Relations", Somaliland.com, November 3, 2025. <https://www.somaliland.com/news/president-abdirahman-irro-holds-strategic-meeting-with-turkish-consul-general-to-reinforce-bilateral-relations/>

HornDiplomat, "Somaliland President Heads to Qatar for High-Level Talks", HornDiplomat, June 28, 2025, <https://www.horndiplomat.com/somaliland-president-heads-to-qatar-for-high-level-talks/>

19 Jackson Mutinda, "Why Somaliland recalled envoy to Djibouti", The EasternAfrican, December 31, 2025, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/why-somaliland-recalled-envoy-to-djibouti-5313016>

20 Urur Siyaasadeedka Shacabka, "A Call for the Closure of the Turkish Consulate in Hargeisa", Facebook, January 10, 2026, <https://shorturl.at/Lrd34>



Under previous government, nearly eighteen overseas missions were operational in various capacities, but now only nine remain, the rest have either been closed or downsized. Somaliland's diplomatic Mission in Addis Ababa has been operating without an ambassador or deputy. Ambassador Adam Gedi Qayad was nominated by President Abdirahman as Minister of Agriculture without a replacement being appointed, leaving the mission without both head and deputy head, with operations managed by the First Secretary. This has been widely regarded as strategic failure. Furthermore, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdirahman Adan recalled several representatives to Hargeisa and ordered the closure of offices abroad. In an official Noteverbal addressed to the representatives, the Minister has ordered the closure of Somaliland offices in South Africa, South Sudan and Norway. He also reduced or suspended funding to several other offices, including those Germany and Netherlands. Some of these offices had been operating legally in various capacities in their respective host countries and had been actively advancing Somaliland's cause. The decision to scale back Somaliland's diplomatic presence in these countries is a strategically ambiguous one. More critically, it signals that the effort to secure international recognition for Somaliland's statehood risks being narrowed to an increasingly small circle of friends, a development that poses a genuine threat to the nation.²¹

“Under previous government, nearly eighteen overseas missions were operational in various capacities, but now only nine remain, the rest have either been closed or downsized.”

Conclusion

The external threats are real and coordinated. Foreign powers operating through Somalia have moved beyond diplomatic obstruction in to active destabilisation. All these challenges, the resumed piracy, the Maersk suspension and the establishment of Somalia's committee against Somaliland are not isolated events. What makes this moment genuinely dangerous is not the strength of Somaliland's enemies, it's the failure of its own foreign service leadership to respond with the strategic clarity the moment demands.

A government that postpones elections, leaves most critical diplomatic mission in Addis Ababa without an ambassador, closes overseas offices in countries that matter, is not governing for recognition, it is governing against it. The ambiguous foreign policy validates precisely the argument that Somaliland's opponents have long deployed to deny its statehood. The consequences of this shrinking presence are neither abstract nor distant, they are already materialising. A Somaliland without representation in key African capitals cannot build the continental consensus it needs to advance its case in the continental and regional organizations. Reducing its footprints in Africa and Europe loses direct access to the governments, institutions and publics that shape international norms. A Somaliland that leaves its most strategically critical mission, Addis Ababa, without leadership at the very moment its relationship with Ethiopia hangs in the balance, signals diplomatic neglect. Diplomacy abhors a vacuum, where Somaliland retreats, its opponents advance.

Yet the problem runs deeper than mere physical presence. The quality, capacity and competence of the Diplomats Somaliland sends or fail to send, is a consequential as the offices it chooses to maintain. Diplomacy is not a passive act of representation, it is an active, skilled and often gruelling exercise in persuasion, relationship building and strategic communication. A competent diplomat does not simply occupy a desk in foreign capital, they cultivate trust with host governments over years, navigate complex bureaucratic and political landscape. These are not generic administrative skills. They require deep knowledge of international law, geopolitics, strategic communications and the specific political culture of the host country, combined with the personal credibility and institutional backing to be taken seriously at the highest levels.



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