



Horn Institute for Peace and Development

Somalia's Foreign Policy Needs Clear Vision and Firm Foundations

Policy Brief



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Introduction

Foreign policy includes all matters related to the state's external relations, such as the exchanges and transactions existing between a particular country and other sovereign states globally and international or regional organizations. These relations and ties aim to promote understanding and cohesion among nations through international cooperation at all levels.

In this article, we aim to highlight the ways in which the foreign policy of Somalia deals with the old and modern political interactions and deadlocks that the world has witnessed at all levels in the political, strategic, economic, social, and cultural arena.

For decades, it has been apparent that Somalia's diplomacy has failed to adapt to international developments. The deeper you study Somalia's foreign policy, the more you notice the ambiguity in its important decisions, the lack of established rules and principles, and even the lack of firm foundations for the country's external relations with other states.

Many analysts believe that Somali diplomacy has always needed a visionary and politically mature leadership that understands the challenges ahead and can

distance the country from the political infighting between the world powers in international forums. Such imbalanced and unplanned Somali foreign policy caused the Somali dictatorship regime to lose its most powerful global alliances, including the Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the former Soviet Union. This reckless diplomacy has also led the post-dictatorship governments of Somalia, post-1991, to engage in conflicts and political disagreements between other countries and on issues that have little or no meaning for Somalia.

The following sections present, in brief, some of the vital issues and turning points that the floundering foreign policy of Somalia has witnessed since the military junta, ousted in 1991, took over the power.

Worsened Somalia–Soviet

Relations

Somalia and the former Soviet Union enjoyed remarkably warm relations between 1960 and 1976. However, the Somali dictator launched a military offensive in 1977 against the Marxist regime in Ethiopia led by Mengistu Hailemariam.

Somalia's goal was to regain the Somali territories in Ethiopia after the deadlock and failure of diplomatic activities.

Ethiopian forces strongly resisted the Somali attacks but, after a fierce fight, the Somali National Army completely took over the Somali State in Ethiopia. The Somalis, however, continued fighting against the Ethiopians until they were on the point of seizing Addis-Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. This was the turning point at which the Soviet Union allied with Marxist regime in Ethiopia and reinforced the collapsed military whole-heartedly. As a result, diplomatic relations between Somalia and Soviet Union worsened.

Not only did Somalia cut the ties with Soviet Union, but its attempts to join the Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were unsuccessful. Unfortunately, Somali diplomacy, despite much hard work, failed to reach that goal.

Analysts reason that Somalia's unplanned foreign policy, before taking the decision to go to war, caused the lack of military aid from any powerful alliances, resulting in the unsuccessful end of the war. In addition, analysts believe that such reckless foreign-policy practices were a contributing factor in the collapse of the regime in Somalia. It was after this war that Somali armed movements, funded by other countries such as Ethiopia, started attacking the Somali National Forces.

After successive attacks on Somali National Army bases in the regions near the Somali–Ethiopian border, these armed forces succeeded in overthrowing the military regime, which had ruled the country for two decades with an iron fist. Unfortunately, the country then experienced a bitter civil war that displaced many Somalis to neighboring countries, which showed obvious hostility towards them.

Somalia Stands by Saudi Arabia amid Swedish Row

Under the leadership of the former President Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud, the Somali government's foreign policy also did not demonstrate sufficient care or consistency, as shown by the government's decision on the dispute between Sweden and Saudi Arabia, in which it took the side of Saudi Arabia, negatively affecting Somalia's special relationship with Sweden.

It is well known that Somalia did not consider that this dispute between the two countries was not in fact an important conflict affecting fundamental Islamic beliefs and forcing Islamic countries to protect their sacred places. Somalia also did not consider the possibility that this political row between the two countries could be ended with the use of shuttle diplomacy

between the officials of the two countries to narrow the gap between them without long-term harm for the countries entangled in the dispute. The disputing countries did not want to permanently sacrifice their historical relations for this simple issue.

Somalia, however, severed diplomatic relations with Iran at this time in solidarity with Saudi Arabia, whose embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad was attacked by Iranian protestors. Somalia considered the attack on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran a clear violation of all international conventions, covenants, and treaties. It subsequently gave Iranian diplomats in Mogadishu 72 hours to leave the country and accused them of inciting religious strife among Somali society.

The opinions on this matter were widely divergent at the time, but most condemned Somalia's foreign policy, accusing it of giving in to external pressure and not being independent in its political decisions regarding other countries.

Somalia's Neutral Position in the Gulf Crisis

In the early days of the diplomatic crisis between the Gulf States, Somalia issued a press statement urging them to resolve this dispute through dialogue and understanding in the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

In this statement, Somalia showed that it was very upset by the diplomatic crisis between the Gulf States and stated its willingness to contribute to ongoing efforts to find a solution to the problem between the GCC States. Somalia also pointed out that it was neutral and respected all parties equally due to the close and Islamic relations linking Somalia to the blockade countries as well as Qatar.

Although this neutral decision may be regarded as positive, some analysts accuse the Somali government of not standing by Qatar, which was making great efforts at the time to encourage Somalia to stand up to the increasing pressure from the blockade countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which carried much weight in Somali politics.

The Impact of Gulf Crisis on Somali–United Arab Emirates (UAE) Relations

The Gulf Crisis significantly impacted Somalia's relationship with the UAE, with the latter succeeding in a short time to elicit the points of view of the heads of states in Somalia.

The five state leaders condemned the neutral position of the federal government in the Gulf Crisis and accused it of failing to manage foreign policy. The majority of the heads of state strongly expressed their opinion that the decision of the Somali government did not reflect their beliefs and that they were united with the allied countries imposing embargoes on Qatar.

The crisis further escalated when the global port operator, DP World, signed an agreement regarding the port of Berbera with Somaliland, which had announced unilateral separation from the southern part of Somalia. As a result, the Somali Federal Parliament held a session in which it canceled the DP World's agreement with Somaliland. The parliament also declared that the UAE had violated the sanctity and sovereignty of Somalia.

Some analysts consider that the Somali Federal Parliament had adopted the wrong position in relation to the UAE, given the position of executive body, which was supposed to manage foreign policy. Other analysts, however, believe that the parliament was right in its decision to stand up to the arbitrary practices of the UAE.

Somalia's Solidarity with Saudi Arabia against Canada

Somalia once again sided with Saudi Arabia, this time against Canada, because the Canadian Foreign Ministry had expressed its deep concern for the continuing plight of human rights activists in Saudi Arabia. Everyone was confused as to the motives behind Somalia's solidarity with Saudi Arabia in an issue that was related to the human rights. Everyone wondered whether Somalia would subsequently suppress and silence its own activists and violate their rights.

Somalia Once Again Stands with Saudi Arabia

In October 2018, the Somali Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation issued a press statement stating that Somalia reiterated its firm position in support of the stability of the Arab countries.

At the same time, Somalia declared its whole-hearted solidarity with Saudi Arabia against all those who attempt to harm it or to harm the kingdom's economy.

Although the ambiguous statement issued by the Ministry did not bring the charges against any particular country, it did coincide with the killing of the Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, by Saudi Intelligence personnel in the Saudi Arabian Consulate in Istanbul. This was another sign of tension in Turkish–Saudi relations.

The statement also raises further doubts and questions and the extent to which Somalia advocates the killing of innocents abroad who have committed no crime other than peacefully opposing a regime and its practices.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, the concept of foreign policy is an open plan or strategy that governs the state's work in relation to the outside world that should be in perfect harmony with the country's sovereignty as well as its economic and military capabilities. The foreign policy of Somalia needs a clear vision and firm rules that regulate the diplomatic arena of the state to avoid

harming its relations with other countries and international organizations.

Somalia's foreign policy must also meet these general objectives:

- safeguard national security;
- Preserve the state's sovereignty and existence;
- Boost economic growth; and
- Strengthen the state's status in the international community.

We suggest that the Somali government should not get involved in political crises that occur between the major powers. We also call for a careful consideration of the pros and cons of any decision or policy before it is made. We must balance between protecting state interests and supporting injustice in other countries. Further, national interests should be considered over and above any personal interests.