



Staff

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A Friend's Warning, a State's Opportunity: Rethinking Somaliland's Washington Strategy

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Michael Rubin's recent article, "*Somaliland's Delegation is Sending the Wrong Message to Washington*," deserves serious consideration. Not because every conclusion he reaches must be accepted, but because countries seeking stronger international partnerships should listen carefully when longstanding friends raise uncomfortable questions.

His central concern is that Somaliland has built considerable political goodwill in Washington through its relative stability, democratic competition, security cooperation, strategic geography, and broadly pro-Western orientation, but that an oversized or insufficiently focused presidential delegation could weaken that capital by projecting domestic political accommodation rather than strategic discipline.

There is merit in this warning. But the question is larger than whether Somaliland should send five officials or nineteen.

The Real Issue Is Strategic Coherence

Diplomacy is about *signaling*.

A delegation communicates before negotiations begin. Its composition signals priorities, authority, preparation, and purpose. Rubin is therefore right to caution against turning an important presidential

visit into a collection of disconnected ministerial agendas.

Yet delegation alone is a weak measure of diplomatic competence. Governments frequently travel with political, technical, security, and commercial teams. The real distinction is between a *strategically organized delegation and an uncoordinated one*.

Somaliland should therefore focus less on numerical limits and more on mission design. A small presidential negotiating team can handle the most sensitive political engagements, while other officials work through clearly defined tracks for the less critical but strategic engagements.

The President does not need every official beside him in every meeting. But additional officials are not automatically unnecessary either if each has a specific mandate. The essential question is therefore not *how many people are traveling*. It is: *What is each person traveling to achieve?*

Every member should be able to answer three questions: *Why am I going? Whom am I meeting? What measurable outcome am I responsible for?* If those questions cannot be answered, Rubin's criticism becomes difficult to dismiss.

The Pahlavi Comparison Has Limits

Rubin compares President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi "Irro" with Iranian opposition figure Reza Pahlavi. The comparison is rhetorically powerful, but analytically limited.

President Irro is not an aspirant seeking to prove his readiness to govern. He is the elected president of a political entity that has governed itself for more than three decades and maintains functioning institutions.

Somaliland's challenge is therefore different.

It must demonstrate that *Somaliland itself is a credible, reliable, and strategically valuable partner*. This distinction matters because Somaliland's case must become increasingly institutional rather than personality-driven.

Presidents change. Ministers change. Governments change. A serious Somaliland-U.S. relationship must survive all of them.

Indeed, one of Somaliland's strongest arguments is that political leadership has changed repeatedly while the institutions of the state have endured.

From Recognition Advocacy to Strategic Bargaining

For more than three decades, Somaliland's international case has been largely normative:

We restored our sovereignty in 1991. We built peace through locally driven processes. We established functioning institutions, conducted competitive elections, maintained relative stability, and occupied an important strategic location. Therefore, the international community should address Somaliland's case for recognition.

This argument has considerable historical and political weight.

But international politics does not operate on virtue alone. States act where *principles, interests, and strategic opportunities intersect*. Somaliland, therefore, needs to move from *recognition advocacy toward strategic bargaining*.

The question should increasingly become not only why the United States should recognize or engage Somaliland, but what concrete strategic interests the United States and Somaliland can pursue together.

This is particularly important in a changing Red Sea and Horn of Africa environment shaped by maritime insecurity, competition over ports and access, terrorism, Gulf engagement, Chinese influence, Ethiopia's search for diversified trade corridors, and wider geopolitical competition. *Somaliland should position itself within these debates*.

What Should Somaliland Take to Washington?

Somaliland should arrive with a small number of propositions rather than a long list of projects.

The first should be *Red Sea and Gulf of Aden security*. Berbera lies within one of the world's most strategically sensitive maritime environments. Instability around Yemen, Bab el-Mandeb, and the southern Red Sea increases the value of reliable partners along the African coast.

The second should be *counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation*. Somaliland's stability should not simply be presented as an achievement deserving international praise. It should be presented as a strategic asset that can contribute to regional security.

The third should be a *commercial and geoeconomic partnership*. Berbera Port, the Berbera Economic Zone, and the corridor toward Ethiopia give Somaliland potential importance in logistics, trade diversification, and regional connectivity.

The fourth should be *political reliability*. Somaliland's democratic competition, relationship with Taiwan, cooperation with the UAE, and willingness to work with Western partners distinguish it within an increasingly contested region.

Learning From Friends

There is also a broader lesson in Rubin's intervention.

Somaliland should value international scholars, policymakers, diplomats, and analysts who have defended its achievements and supported stronger international engagement.

But friendship should never mean permanent agreement. A serious political community must distinguish between *hostility and constructive criticism*. Criticism from friends can be uncomfortable and sometimes wrong. But it can still expose weaknesses before competitors or opponents exploit them.

The appropriate response to Rubin is therefore neither a personal attack nor an automatic acceptance. *It is to ask: What part of this criticism can strengthen Somaliland's diplomacy?* That is how politically mature states engage their friends.

A Somaliland That Knows Its Value

Somaliland's greatest diplomatic risk is not whether nineteen officials board an aircraft.

The greater risk is arriving in Washington without a unified understanding of what Somaliland wants from the United States, what the United States may realistically want from Somaliland, and where those interests intersect.

Geography alone does not create influence.

The real challenge is whether Somaliland can convert *geography into geopolitical value, geopolitical value into diplomatic leverage, and diplomatic leverage into durable institutional relationships. That is the political economy of recognition.*

Michael Rubin is right that appearances matter, preparation matters, and amateurism would be costly at such an important moment.

But Somaliland should take the argument further. The objective is not merely to send a smaller delegation. *The objective is to build a more strategic state.*

A successful Washington visit should demonstrate a Somaliland that understands its national interests, coordinates its institutions, listens confidently to constructive criticism, negotiates from its strengths, and approaches the United States not primarily as a petitioner, but as a partner capable of contributing to shared strategic interests.

That would be the strongest response to Michael Rubin's concern, and a more convincing demonstration of the political maturity Somaliland wants the wider international community to recognize.



About the Author

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