

Somalia Needs a Cogent Foreign Policy Agenda

Introduction

After decades of being a backwater failed nation largely defined by civil wars, famine, piracy and terrorism, Somalia is suddenly finding itself at the center of arguably the most convulsing geopolitical conflict in a generation. But being in the limelight has proved costly. Bitter rifts among oil-rich Gulf monarchies and historic rapprochement between erstwhile rivals in the Horn of Africa region could throw this fragile nation off balance, potentially reversing significant gains made since 2000 when Somalia's first peace and state building agenda was launched.

Since the election of President Mohamed Abdullahi (Farmaajo) in February 2017, the two most important regions for Somalia in terms of stability and trade—the Horn of Africa and the Middle East—have been going through unprecedented and often unpredictable changes. Historically, Mogadishu has sought to collaborate with its Horn of African neighbors on security and stability and its Middle Eastern friends on economic recovery. Both prospects are at a grave risk as President Farmaajo's administration struggles to optimally calibrate to the dizzying machinations. What started out as rookie gaffes by the administration have now morphed into regular foreign policy mistakes that could cost Somalia some of its most important diplomatic relationships. That is particularly true in an increasingly unstable world where a rules-based international order is giving way to organized chaos.

However, despite its limited leverage, Farmaajo's administration still has an opportunity to craft and implement a cogent foreign policy agenda that advances Somalia's interests while maintaining vital relationships.

Foreign Policy Missteps

In many ways, foreign policy missteps have always been Somalia's Achilles heel. Since independence in 1960, the country has been pulled from all sides of geopolitical contests. Civilian administrations from 1960 to 1969 managed to walk a fine line in navigating intricate intra-state relations. But there were cases where they poorly managed relations with some of the superpowers, for example severing relations with United Kingdom or entering the Soviet orbit assuming it would help the country to rout Ethiopia.

The generals who took power in a coup in 1969 also fell into the trap of geopolitical intricacies. At the height of the Cold War in the 1970s, Somalia's military regime aimlessly swung between the Soviet Union and NATO. At its most crucial moment, when the country was preparing for the war of 1977 to reclaim Somali territories from Ethiopia, the Somali government was considered neither a Soviet ally nor friend of the West. Some scholars attribute Somalia's ultimate humiliation in that war to its failure to aptly align itself with either of the two superpowers.

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Indeed, Somalia ultimately paid a high price for conducting a hapless foreign policy. Both the Soviet Union and the US were widely thought to have formed an unlikely alliance to back Ethiopia rather than Somalia in 1977. More painfully, even Somalia's traditional allies in the Arab world, such as Saudi Arabia, Libya and South Yemen, all supported Ethiopia according to documents released by WikiLeaks (all for entirely different reasons). Ethiopia, meanwhile, masterfully took advantage of Somalia's foreign policy misdiagnosis by cobbling together a formidable alliance of both the Soviets and the Americans against Somalia.

That defeat in 1977 is widely thought to have stopped Somalia's meteoric rise as a powerful and confident (perhaps overconfident) nation in Africa. The military dictatorship of Mohamed Siyad Barre never recovered from the Ethiopia fiasco, which precipitated the emergence of armed and tribal rebel groups that were mostly based out of Ethiopia.

Exactly 40 years later, history appears to be repeating itself in a familiar but deeply worrying pattern. Once again, Somalia is being pulled by powerful nations in opposing directions. And once again, the government's handling of these complicated relationships risks plunging the country into a familiar trap. Fortunately, Somalia has state institutions that can diversify thinking and apply corrective interventions if necessary. The democratic culture of the nation also allows alternative views to be heard. However, the government must be aware of the gravity of diplomatic mishaps and the importance of inclusive consultations in the post-conflict federal dispensation.

Impact of Gulf Crises

In addition to the longstanding conflict between the Gulf countries and Iran (Somalia sided with Saudi Arabia in 2015), the ongoing bitter rift among Gulf monarchies has had a deleterious impact on Somalia. Pitting Qatar against an alliance of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain, the conflict has swept through Somalia in a way no one expected. The country is caught between Saudi Arabia, which is used to getting its foreign policy diktats regurgitated by Somali leaders without filtering, and an increasingly assertive Qatar, which is widely believed to have deeply rooted links with the Farmaajo administration.

At the outset of the crises in June 2017, the UAE–Saudi alliance exerted an enormous pressure on virtually all Arab and African nations to sever diplomatic ties with Doha.

A few complied, but most quietly maintained relations with Qatar. Somalia was one of the few nations that, for some reason, felt the need to declare its neutrality in the conflict among squabbling Gulf states—a decision that received mixed reaction in Somalia. For the Saudi alliance, Somalia's neutrality was a confirmation of the widespread rumors that Farmaajo's government is beholden to Qatar.

Relations continued to sour between the Saudi alliance and Somalia in 2017. Visits by Farmaajo and Prime Minister Hassan Khaire to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi did not mend the broken ties between the countries. Meanwhile, the administration's relations with Qatar became demonstrably warmer, culminating in a state visit by Farmaajo to Doha, which resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars in projects and aid for Somalia.

What perplexed the Saudi alliance the most was the shift in the Somali government's traditional alliance with the Kingdom. They were shocked that a poor country that depends on the Gulf for almost all of its trade would take a seemingly independent foreign policy position. After all, the UAE is Somalia's largest trading partner, and Saudi Arabia imports almost all of the country's livestock exports. Egypt has trained Somali students and security forces in its educational institutions for a generation. On the other side, Somalia has neither significant trade nor any historical relationship with Qatar. So the question in the minds of the Saudi alliance (and some foreign policy pragmatists) remains: why is Mogadishu willing to risk losing its coveted relations with the Saudi alliance over Qatar? The administration has maintained that it is about principle not resources. That could be part of the story, but is definitely not all of it.

The worsening relationship between Somalia and the UAE–Saudi alliance peaked in April 2018 when Somali authorities seized nearly 10 million USD from a UAE plane that landed at Mogadishu airport. Abu Dhabi insisted that the funds were destined for the Somali security services. The government said it suspected that the money was going to influence a political standoff going on in the federal parliament, which ended in the removal of the former speaker of the Lower House.

The UAE has demanded an apology, suspended its longstanding security assistance to Somalia and even closed a hospital.

While UAE-Somalia relations reached their lowest point ever, Saudi Arabia appeared to have maintained an open channel with Mogadishu. However, no one was under the illusion that Riyadh was going to be neutral about the rift. Many believed that it was only a matter of time before the Saudi Arabia's displeasure became more pronounced.

That happened in August when the Kingdom turned away 27,000 goats from Somalia, just days before the lucrative Hajj pilgrimage. Citing Rift Valley disease, Saudi officials said the animals posed a public health threat, despite the fact they had been cleared by independent vets.

The decision to reject the livestock came only two days after Somalia sided with Saudi Arabia in the Kingdom's diplomatic row with Canada—a decision widely derided as the perfect illustration of the administration's haphazard and incoherent foreign policy agenda. The government's claim of a neutral foreign policy has given way to opportunistic interventions. More ominously for Somalia, Saudi Arabia's rejection of the prized Somali livestock highlighted the unequal relationship between Mogadishu and Riyadh, where the latter wields almost all of the power.

Rapid Changes in the Horn of Africa

The turbulence in the Middle East, particularly among the Gulf countries, is spilling over to the Horn of Africa. In many ways, the region is becoming a battleground for the warring nations. The UAE has been the most aggressive, securing military bases in the Gulf of Aden (Yemen, Eritrea and Somalia).

Abu Dhabi also maintains strong ties with Somaliland (a break away region of Somalia that has sought independence since the early 1990s) and with most of Somalia's federal member states. Together with Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi played a behind the scenes role in the historic rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In doing so, the Saudi alliance appeared to be expanding its membership while isolating countries that they view as unreliable.

Notable among those are Somalia and Djibouti. The latter had its own spat with Abu Dhabi over the Doraleh Port, when earlier this year it terminated the contract of Dubai-based DP World to manage the port. The ports management giant has been striking partnerships with the authorities managing ports in Berbera and Bossaso. This week, the UAE announced that it was building an oil pipeline connecting Eritrea's main port in Assab with the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa.

Much of the fast paced changes in the Horn of Africa are being led by Ethiopia's new prime minister Abiy Ahmed. In June, he visited Mogadishu and announced that Ethiopia would co-finance and use four Somali ports. Although the details of that agreement remain unknown, the declaration sent jitters across Somalia, yet again raising questions about the administration's capacity to calibrate foreign policy and trade carefully. Concerns about the agreement centered around which ports were included; whether Ethiopia had the financial and professional capacity to run ports; and whether it was actually negotiating on behalf of the Saudi alliance.

Meanwhile in Abu Dhabi, Ethiopia's prime minister Ahmed and President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea received UAE's highest medal from Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Zayed for "their courage to end hostilities and open a new chapter of peace and prosperity." A few days later, Afwerki, whose government was sanctioned by the UN for supporting extremist groups in Somalia and occupying Djibouti territories, invited Farmaajo for a state visit.

Without coordinating with Djibouti—Somalia's closest ally – Farmaajo flew to Asmara, the first ever visit by a Somali president. From there, he called for the lifting of the UN embargo on Eritrea. This enraged Djibouti, which called the move "shocking and irresponsible" and lamented about the ungratefulness of Somali leaders for kowtowing to a hostile nation, which had attacked Djibouti for hosting a peace conference for Somalia in 2008. In unusually frank language, Djibouti said Farmaajo was playing into the strategic objectives of other states whose agenda was isolating Djibouti economically and politically.

Calibrating Cogent Foreign Policy

As a deeply fragile nation still recovering from decades of conflict, Somalia cannot afford to engage in impetuous foreign policy. The country doesn't need enemies, but it must not lose friends either, particularly special ones such as Djibouti. That is an exceptionally tricky balance in a world where the zero sum game is the modus operandi.

To achieve that goal, Farmaajo's administration must carefully craft a cogent foreign policy agenda anchored around the following set of principles:

1) **Do no harm:** Somalia is not in a position to alienate anyone. The country needs to sustain existing relations and nurture new ones. Somalia is an extraordinarily fragile nation state recovering from decades of civil conflict. New friends like Eritrea are not as valuable as old allies such as Djibouti.

2) **Independence:** Charting an independent foreign policy is never easy for a country like Somalia. However, nations are ultimately selfish and look after their interests above all. Diplomacy is the art of balancing friends and enemies, promoting interests while avoiding conflicts. That is intricate and requires careful calculations calibrated by effective state institutions, not by enterprising politicians or amateur functionaries.

3) **Trade diplomacy:** As a poor nation blessed with plenty of natural resources, a strategic location and, above all, a vibrant society that has a knack for business, trade diplomacy should be the ethos for the Somali government. Somalis know how to sell goods and services and have hundreds of millions of people in their neighborhood with an increasing purchasing power. The government has a responsibility to enable that. That's why conflict with the countries' largest trading partners, UAE and Saudi Arabia, is harmful in the long run. That relationship needs to be repaired and not at the expense of any other country.

4) **Consensus building:** Despite the fact that foreign policy is constitutionally under the domain of the federal government, Mogadishu would benefit from broadening consultations on key decisions that impact the nation. This is in part an implicit recognition of the spirit of the federal system. It is also the pragmatic realization that the federal government barely controls the country outside of Mogadishu, and that federal member states routinely engage in foreign policy, with or without the consent of Mogadishu.

To operationalize these principles, the Farmaajo administration will have to do things differently, especially in the following areas:

First and foremost, it needs to reduce the speed at which it makes decisions. Nations cannot have blind spots in an increasingly crowded foreign policy highway with no rules. This is particularly true when driving in a vehicle like Somalia that has neither side nor rear view mirrors. As the elected leader of the country, the president has a legal and moral responsibility to protect Somalia's interests, which are many and at times contradictory. This requires temperate assessments and lucid analysis, something that seem to be missing in this government's decision-making processes.

Secondly, the federal government, though it will not be able to run a friction-free foreign policy, should hold its ground against other states, gain their respect and advance the country's strategic interests. This can only happen if the government's actions are based on the best interests of the state rather than the government and if it institutionalizes its decision making, operating within the realm and confines of the rule of law. This would allow the Somali state (however weak) to solidify its local credibility and its international standing, helping it to withstand external pressures and manipulations.

Thirdly, Farmaajo must recognize that almost all strategic decisions in Somalia need to be inclusive and consultative and therefore widen the consultative process when he makes consequential decisions. Those framing the constitution imbued "co-governance" at the heart of the document. This was a recognition of the deep polarization and mistrust within Somali society.

The post conflict nature of the country dictates that the government must secure the buy-in and blessing of member states and other national stakeholders including Parliament and the Council of Ministers. This empowers them, but does not take away the president's constitutional powers. Given the fact that the federal government's writ barely extends beyond Mogadishu, one lesson we can learn from recent history is that unilateral decisions will be resisted and ultimately undermined.



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