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China's Gamble:
Infrastructure
&
Influence in Somalia

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China's Gamble: Infrastructure and Influence in Somalia

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Abstract

China's increasing influence in Somalia results from geopolitical alignment and strategic infrastructural investment. With 65 years of diplomatic relations, China has strengthened its position through soft power diplomacy, development efforts and strategic engagement of Somalia's alignment with the 'One-China Policy'. China portrays itself as a development partner, but its expanding influence in Somalia's precarious security situation begs the question of its long-term objectives. Somalia is a crucial test case for how China strikes a balance between investments, diplomatic efforts and non-interference in conflict areas as Beijing looks to expand its footprint across East Africa through the Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords: One-China Policy, Strategic Partnership, Al-Shabaab, East Africa, Somalia

Introduction

On 16 March 2025, Somalia and China marked 65 years of diplomatic relations—celebrating a partnership that has endured regional and global shifts. The occasion was highlighted by a meeting between H.E. Wang Yu, Chinese Ambassador to Somalia, and H.E. Ahmed Moallim Fiqi, Somalia's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Mogadishu (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Federal Republic of Somalia, 2025). As the first East African country to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, Somalia's long-standing engagement with Beijing continues to evolve, with both sides reaffirming their commitment to expanding cooperation in key sectors.

China's involvement in Somalia dates back decades. In 1984, the Hargeisa-Berbera Highway project, spanning 1,500 km, was awarded to the Chinese company SIETCO, following an agreement signed with the Somali government on 10 May 1983. This infrastructure project was pivotal in facilitating trade and enhancing national integration—highlighting China's early influence and long-standing investment in Somalia's development.

This milestone follows a series of high-level engagements in recent months, signalling Beijing's growing interest in Somalia. On 26 February, Wang Yu and Ahmed Moallim Fiqi met

once again to sign an Agreement for China's support in constructing Somalia's National Diaspora Centre, thus underscoring China's role in Somalia's domestic development agenda (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Federal Republic of Somalia, 2025).

Just weeks earlier, on 10 February, the two diplomats had also discussed advancing economic and strategic cooperation thus emphasising a shared vision for deeper engagement since the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Federal Republic of Somalia, 2025). At a broader level, China-Somalia ties have been gaining momentum on the global stage. In February 2025, Fiqi and Wang Yi met in New York (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025), where both leaders reaffirmed mutual support for sovereignty and territorial integrity—a stance that reflects Beijing's strategic interests in Africa and Mogadishu's growing reliance on Chinese partnerships.

This follows a landmark decision in September 2024, when President Xi Jinping and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud elevated bilateral relations to a “strategic partnership” at the FOCAC Summit in Beijing (CGTN, 2025). As part of this deepening cooperation, China announced a 200-million yuan (USD 28 million) grant to support Somalia's immediate priorities (Mohamed Dhaysane, 2024). During the summit, President Xi reiterated China's commitment to supporting Somalia's peace and development efforts, vowing to back Mogadishu in safeguarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity. He also drew parallels between China and Somalia's shared struggle for national reunification, subtly linking Somalia's internal territorial disputes with China's longstanding One-China Policy.

This diplomatic alignment underscores Somalia's continued commitment to Beijing's core foreign policy priorities—bringing us to a critical aspect of their partnership.

Somalia's Commitment to the One-China Policy

Somalia has upheld the One-China policy since the 1960s, recognising Beijing as the sole legitimate government of China while rejecting any official ties with Taiwan. However, its reaffirmation in 2025 is pivotal, as Somalia faces territorial disputes, particularly with Somaliland, which declared itself independent in 1991 but remains internationally unrecognised.

This renewed stance aligns Somalia with China's sovereignty narrative as Taiwan deepens its engagement with Somaliland. Taiwan's Deputy Foreign Minister François Wu's

attendance at Somaliland's presidential inauguration in 2024 signals warming ties, echoing China's own concerns over Taiwan's international standing (Focus Taiwan, 2024). Meanwhile, Somaliland and Taiwan have continued to strengthen their relations despite strong opposition from Somalia and China. Taiwan pledged USD 22 million to construct a medical centre in Hargeisa. It has also offered scholarships to military officers in an effort to modernise Somaliland's defence capabilities. Both countries signed the Energy and Mineral Resources Cooperation Agreement in 2022, granting Taiwan access to explore energy and mineral resources (Geeska, 2025).

China has responded to Taiwan's growing engagement with Somaliland by adopting a more assertive stance toward Hargeisa. In this context, Somalia's reaffirmation of the One-China policy serves as both—a diplomatic signal and a strategic move. By aligning itself more closely with Beijing, Mogadishu not only reinforces its opposition to Somaliland's independence but also strengthens its diplomatic standing within the African Union and the United Nations.

Somalia's position also raises questions about the economic and diplomatic incentives it receives from China. Beijing's soft power diplomacy was evident when Charge d'Affaires Chen Wendi announced the establishment of China-Somalia Friendship Student Award Program for the 2024 National Examination. The Chinese Embassy in Mogadishu will financially reward top-performing students, with prizes ranging from USD 400 to USD 1,000 each (FTL Somalia, 2024). Additionally, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi extended his regards to Somalia on its assumption of a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), further reinforcing China's diplomatic engagement with Mogadishu.

Infrastructural Investments: Strategic or Economic?

Somalia and China have announced a USD 1.2 billion investment partnership to be implemented during 2025-26 (FTL, 2024). This Partnership focuses on enhancing Somalia's infrastructure, energy, and agriculture sectors to boost economic growth, create job opportunities, and strengthen bilateral ties between the two nations. While details on specific projects and timelines are still forthcoming, the collaboration aligns with China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) goals in Africa. Notably, this marks the first time in 40 years that Somalia has entered such a substantial financial or investment agreement with an international partner.

China has played a key role in Somalia's infrastructure development, having constructed over 80 projects, including hospitals, stadiums, and roads. Since 1991, China has also dispatched more than 400 medical personnel in 13 batches to support Somalia's healthcare sector. On 7 September 2024, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and his delegation visited Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd. in Beijing, meeting with company executives to explore investment opportunities in Somalia. *"Today, we are starting a new journey, a journey that will lead our country to prosperity and progress. The Millennium Vision 2060 shows our commitment to overcome the current challenges, creating a solid foundation for the generations to come,"* President Mohamud stated (Ministry of Communications and Technology, 2024).

Somalia faces challenges in expanding its fibre optic network due to high costs and logistical difficulties. However, partial deployment could benefit high-traffic areas such as businesses and web servers. Meanwhile, 5G technology presents a more feasible alternative for nationwide internet access, with Huawei and China potentially playing a critical role in its deployment.

Reports suggest that China offers a financing model where 5G equipment and infrastructure are provided upfront, allowing repayment based on actual usage rather than through traditional interest-based loans. This arrangement is Sharia-compliant (halal), as Islamic finance prohibits interest (Riba), enabling Somalia to adopt 5G technology efficiently while managing costs (Facebook, 2025).

Al-Shabaab's Resurgence: Risk to Chinese Presence

On 18 March 2025, Somali President survived an assassination attempt by Al-Shabaab in a roadside bombing near the El Gaabta checkpoint while en route to Aden Adde International Airport in Mogadishu. The attack, carried out using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), resulted in multiple casualties. *"This cowardly act, which led to the death and injury of innocent civilians, is a testament to the group's growing desperation as they suffer continuous defeats at the hands of the Somali National Army,"* read an official statement from the Information Ministry (Mohamed Dhaysane, 2025).

The Ministry did not immediately provide a death toll, but reports indicate at least 10 fatalities, including seven presidential guards. Several others were injured, and the explosion caused significant damage to a nearby building and one of the convoy's bulletproof vehicles (Somali Guardian, 2025). Just days earlier, on 15 March 2025, Al-Shabaab carried out a large-

scale assault, resulting in over 150 casualties among government and armed personnel (Shahada News Agency, 2025). The details of the incidents are as follows:

- Awdheegle district, Lower Shabelle region: 31 killed, 36 injured.
- Lafoole district, Lower Shabelle region: 3 killed, 4 injured, and a military pick-up truck destroyed.
- Sumdhali (بيالانموسد) area, Adale district, Middle Shabelle region: 22 killed.
- Haji Ali, Adale district, Middle Shabelle region: 43 injured.
- Lajjars (سررجبل) area, Adale district, Middle Shabelle region: 7 US personnel killed, 4 injured. Reports indicate they were receiving air support from US aircraft at the time. A military pick-up truck and a Dushka heavy machine gun were also seized.

China's traditional foreign policy emphasises non-interference in domestic affairs, yet Somalia's unstable security situation challenges this position. Unlike Western nations that offer direct military support, China has favoured economic engagement and limited security assistance through arms sales and police training. With Al-Shabaab's resurgence, China faces several dilemmas viz. Will it expand its role to include security cooperation, potentially undermining its non-interventionist policy, or will it remain strictly an economic partner, thereby jeopardising the safety of its investments?

A shift towards its security presence in Somalia—even through private military contractors or intelligence cooperation—would represent a significant departure from China's traditional approach to African engagements.

Conclusion: Development Partner or Strategic Power Play?

China's engagement in Somalia presents both opportunities and risks. At first glance, its investments promise economic growth, infrastructure development, and enhanced bilateral ties. However, beneath this economic partnership lies a complex geopolitical chess game where Beijing is testing the limits of its influence in a fragile state.

For Somalia, the primary challenge is to ensure that Chinese support does not come at the expense of economic sovereignty or political autonomy. Navigating between great powers while safeguarding national interests will shape Somalia's future trajectory. Whether China becomes a reliable development partner, or a strategic power-seeking influence will depend on how both nations manage their evolving relationship.

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