

The UAE's Ambitions: Controlling Somalia's Strategic Seaports

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Abstract: *This article searches the United Arab Emirates' strategic ambitions in Somalia, focusing on its efforts to control main seaports along the Horn of Africa in the interest of Regional influences and global Trade routes shift. Moreover, the UAE seeks to increase its maritime influence and secure vital trade routes. The article studies the covers the geopolitical implications of UAE investments in Somali port infrastructure, examining how these developments affect regional stability and Somalia's economic landscape. Additionally, the article discusses the broader context of UAE's foreign policy, its partnerships with local stakeholders, and the potential challenges created by competing international interests in the region. it is believed that this perspective frames the UAE's actions as a part of a broader story about economic strategy and power projection in a vibrant maritime corridor.*

Keywords: UAE, Somalia, Strategic seaports, Maritime trade, Geopolitics, Infrastructure investment

1. Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has increasingly focused on expanding its influence in the Horn of Africa, particularly through strategic investments in Somalia's seaports to these ports are fundamental for regional trade and security, making them attractive targets for foreign investment and control, moreover, the UAE's ambitions are driven by a desire to improve its geopolitical standing, secure trade routes, and counterbalance the influence of competing nations. Additionally, this expanding policy has significant implications for Somalia's sovereignty, economic development, and political landscape, raising questions about the long - term impact of foreign control over lively maritime assets. As the UAE seeks to harden its role as a key player in the region, understanding these changing aspects becomes essential for assessing both local and international relations in Somalia. for this The interplay between foreign ambitions and domestic challenges will shape the future of Somalia's ports and influence regional stability at the end, the outcome of these investments could redefine Somalia's position in global maritime trade.

1.1 Background

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), a federation established in 1971, has emerged as a significant player in global trade and geopolitics, particularly in the Horn of Africa. Its strategic location along key maritime routes has facilitated its rise as a regional hub for commerce and logistics. Somalia's geographic position near the Bab el - Mandeb Strait, a crucial chokepoint for global shipping, makes it a focal point for the UAE's ambitions (Rodrigue, 2020). The UAE recognizes that controlling Somali ports can enhance its maritime logistics capabilities and secure vital trade routes. To this end, it has actively invested in Somalia's port infrastructure, notably in Berbera and Mogadishu, as part of a broader strategy to develop logistical hubs that facilitate trade and extend the UAE's economic influence in East Africa (Friedman, 2021). Additionally, the geopolitical dynamics of the region, with the presence of global powers like China and the United States, further motivate the UAE to assert its role as a regional leader.

Security considerations also play a crucial role in the UAE's involvement; by establishing a presence in strategic ports, the UAE aims to bolster maritime security and protect its shipping interests in a region faced with piracy and political instability. Overall, the UAE's ambitions in controlling Somalia's strategic seaports reflect a combination of economic interests, geopolitical strategy, and a commitment to regional stability.

2. Literature Review

The literature on the UAE's ambitions in Somalia highlights the country's strategic interests in controlling key maritime assets, particularly its seaports. Scholars emphasize the importance of Somalia's geographic location near the Bab el - Mandeb Strait, a critical chokepoint for international shipping (Rodrigue, 2020). This strategic positioning makes Somalia a focal point for the UAE's efforts to expand its influence in East Africa and enhance its maritime logistics capabilities. Moreover, research also discusses the economic motivations behind the UAE's investments in Somali ports, such as Berbera and Mogadishu. These investments are framed within a broader context of the UAE's desire to establish itself as a regional trade hub and secure vital trade routes (Friedman, 2021). The literature indicates that these economic initiatives are not only about infrastructure development but are also intertwined with the UAE's geopolitical strategy to assert dominance in a region increasingly contested by global powers. Furthermore, security considerations play a significant role in the UAE's ambitions. The literature outlines how the UAE seeks to mitigate threats such as piracy and terrorism by enhancing maritime security through its presence in Somali ports. This dual focus on economic and security aspects reflects a comprehensive approach to foreign policy that underscores the UAE's commitment to regional stability while pursuing its national interests. Overall, the literature underscores the complexity of the UAE's ambitions in Somalia, weaving together economic, geopolitical, and security dimensions.

2.1 The United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), a federation of seven emirates established in 1971, has emerged as a significant global player due to its strategic location, vast oil wealth, and economic diversification efforts. Located on the Arabian Peninsula, the UAE has positioned itself as a hub for trade, tourism, logistics, and geopolitics. Over the past decades, the UAE has expanded its influence across the Middle East, Africa, and beyond, leveraging both economic investments and strategic partnerships to enhance its regional and global standing (Telci, 2020).

In Africa, the UAE's growing footprint is particularly evident in its focus on maritime and port infrastructure development. This strategy aligns with its broader geostrategic goals of controlling critical sea lanes, facilitating regional trade, and projecting military power. The UAE has adopted a dual-track approach: pursuing economic ventures such as port modernization while simultaneously engaging in security and humanitarian initiatives. By combining these efforts, the UAE seeks to strengthen its role as a pivotal actor in global maritime and geopolitical dynamics (Perez, 2022). Additionally, Somalia, with its extensive coastline and strategic location at the crossroads of major global trade routes, has become a focal point of the UAE's ambitions. Investments in key Somali ports, such as the DP World - managed Berbera Port and the upgraded Bossaso Port, underscore the UAE's interest in leveraging Somalia's potential as a logistics hub. These developments, coupled with security assistance and humanitarian aid, reflect a comprehensive approach aimed at consolidating the UAE's influence in Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa. However, its strategy of engaging directly with regional governments like Somaliland and Puntland has created friction with Somalia's Federal Government, complicating its efforts to achieve long-term mutual benefits (Gökalp, 2020; Arabia, 2020).

2.2 Somalia, Strategic seaports

Somalia's strategic location along the Horn of Africa, bordering the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, makes it a key player in global maritime trade. With a coastline stretching over 3,300 kilometers, Somalia sits at the nexus of major shipping routes connecting the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea, offering significant potential for economic growth and geopolitical influence through its seaports. Furthermore, the country's major seaports include Mogadishu, Berbera, Bossaso, and Kismayo, which play crucial roles in trade, logistics, and regional connectivity. Mogadishu, the largest and most historically significant port, is managed by the Turkish company Al-Bayrak. Berbera, strategically located in Somaliland, is managed by UAE-based DP World and has seen over \$400 million in investments to enhance its logistics capacity, particularly as a trade hub for landlocked Ethiopia. Bossaso and Kismayo, while smaller, are also vital for regional trade and economic activities, with efforts underway to modernize and expand their infrastructure (Ali, 2020; Miller & Verhoeven, 2020). In addition to the major ports, smaller facilities such as Hobyo and Garacad have attracted interest for potential investment in fisheries, cold storage, and logistics. These ports represent untapped opportunities for

Somalia to diversify its economy, improve infrastructure, and capitalize on its extensive marine resources. However, much of Somalia's port infrastructure remains underdeveloped, requiring substantial investment in berths, cargo handling, and management services to meet modern trade demands. Equally important, Somalia's seaports also carry immense geopolitical importance and are strategically positioned to influence the flow of goods through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a critical chokepoint for global trade and energy shipments. This has drawn interest from regional and global powers, including the UAE and Turkey, which have sought to strengthen their foothold in the region through port development and security collaborations. However, the engagement of external actors, coupled with political complexities within Somalia, has raised concerns about sovereignty and equitable economic benefits for the country. The author argues that modernizing Somalia's seaports and integrating them into regional and international trade networks could unlock significant economic potential. However, realizing this vision will necessitate resolving political issues, encouraging collaboration between regional administrations and the federal government, and making sure that port infrastructure investments result in stability and inclusive growth.

2.3 Maritime trade

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is actively tracking ambitions to control Somalia's strategic seaports, which play a crucial role in maritime trade. Maritime trade refers to the exchange of goods and services via shipping on oceans and seas, and it significantly contributes to the global economy (UNCTAD, 2021). Moreover, the UAE, a federation of seven emirates known for its rapid economic development and modern infrastructure, seeks to enhance its influence in the Horn of Africa through investments in port infrastructure. Important shipping routes connect continents, and strategic chokepoints, such as the Red Sea, are vital for facilitating international trade (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, in investing in Somalia's ports, the UAE aims to improve its logistics capabilities and establish itself as a leading maritime hub in the region. This aligns with its broader foreign policy goals of increasing regional influence through economic partnerships and security alliances (Khalil, 2022). Furthermore, the UAE's focus on port development reflects the importance of well-developed infrastructure for efficient cargo movement, which is essential for economic growth and trade (OECD, 2019). Control over these maritime routes can significantly impact geopolitical dynamics, as nations compete for strategic advantages in global trade (Hoffmann, 2021). The UAE's actions in Somalia, **according to the author, demonstrate** its strategic approach to marine trade and regional influence, highlighting the interdependence of geopolitical and economic objectives.

2.4 Geopolitics

Somalia's strategic position near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait highlights its importance in global geopolitics and trade. This chokepoint facilitates the transit of approximately 6.2 million barrels of oil daily, along with liquefied natural gas and other commodities, making it a vital artery for international commerce. Somalia's extensive coastline, bordering the Gulf

of Aden and the Indian Ocean, aligns with critical east - west shipping lanes used for transporting goods between Asia, Europe, and the Americas. However, this strategic location also exposes Somalia to security challenges, including piracy, smuggling, and illegal fishing, necessitating significant maritime governance and international collaboration. Additionally, Somalia's location has attracted the interest of global and regional powers. Middle Eastern nations like the UAE and Qatar have invested heavily in Somali ports to strengthen their control over maritime trade routes. Turkey has deepened its presence through infrastructure projects and port management in Mogadishu, while China's Belt and Road Initiative signals its intent to leverage Somalia's connectivity to strategic trade corridors. Western nations, including the U.S. and European Union, also recognize Somalia's importance in ensuring the security of global shipping lanes and countering regional threats. These overlapping interests make Somalia a focal point for economic opportunities and geopolitical competition.

2.5 Infrastructure investment

Infrastructure investment refers to the allocation of resources towards developing essential facilities and systems that support economic activities and enhance quality of life. This investment is vital for stimulating economic growth, as improved transportation networks facilitate trade and mobility while reliable energy sources attract foreign investment (World Bank, 2021). Public - private partnerships (PPPs) are increasingly utilized to finance these projects, allowing for greater efficiency, cost reduction, and risk - sharing (OECD, 2020). As urban populations grow, infrastructure investment becomes crucial to meet the rising demand for housing, transportation, and public services, necessitating sustainable urban planning to manage this growth effectively (UN - Habitat, 2020). Additionally, incorporating modern technology into infrastructure projects, such as smart grids and intelligent transportation systems, enhances service delivery and sustainability (IEE, 2019). Environmental considerations are also paramount, with a shift towards green building practices and renewable energy projects aimed at minimizing ecological impacts (IPCC, 2021). Ultimately, nations with well - developed infrastructure are more competitive in the global market, as efficient logistics and robust connectivity attract businesses and strengthen trade capabilities (World Economic Forum, 2019). Thus, infrastructure investment is a critical driver of economic development and social well - being, requiring careful planning and implementation to address the needs of growing populations and evolving economies.

3. Challenges

- 1) According to the author, regional competitions between Qatar and Turkey for influence in Somalia are the source of geopolitical concerns for the UAE, making it challenging for it to act independently and creating diplomatic problems.
- 2) Somalia's weak central authority and clan rivalries pose challenges to local governance, making it difficult for the UAE to maintain stability in its operations.

- 3) Piracy and terrorism creates significant security risks to port operations and infrastructure, with groups like Al - Shabaab makes significant threats.
- 4) Maintaining a military presence for security can strain resources and escalate tensions with local populations.
- 5) The UAE's port infrastructure investments face increased risks due to the uncertain political and security landscape. And the economic benefit of local communities can be a significant challenge, as dissatisfaction be able to lead to instability.
- 6) Poor infrastructure can hinder the development and operation of ports due to environmental and logistical challenges.
- 7) UAE must respect Somalia's sovereignty and international laws to control ports, balancing military or economic ambitions with humanitarian needs and rights.

4. Recommendation

- 1) Top priority is to prioritize diplomatic engagement with regional adversaries like Qatar and Turkey to promote collaboration, restraint tensions, and implement cooperative security initiatives or joint development projects.
- 2) Give emphasis to community engagement and consultation in development projects to ensure local communities benefit directly from investments, shape change priorities, foster ownership, and reduce resentment and instability.
- 3) Focus to prioritize investments in workable infrastructure projects that address long - term development needs, such as renewable energy, water management, and agricultural development. This will contribute to greater resilience and reduce dependence on external aid.
- 4) Operate with transparency in all dealings and establish clear mechanisms for accountability. This includes publicly disclosing investment details, project outcomes, and community engagement processes that possibly build trust and enhance the legitimacy of UAE efforts.
- 5) Promote Security Sector Reform to full security sector reform in Somalia, focusing on building the capacity and professionalism of Somali security forces including training in human rights, rule of law, and community

5. Future Aspects

According to the author, the following factors will determine the UAE's future success in Somalia:

- 1) Cooperation in collaborating with regional governments to reduce area competition and strengthen the legitimacy that leads to Putting money into a kind of infrastructure initiatives to lift the economy, improve community ties, and assisting Somali security forces and institutions to establish a stable investment climate.
- 2) To offer assistance in order to meet urgent needs and foster confidence. Giving workable development initiatives a priority in order to promote resilience in In order to establish a stable and secure atmosphere, coupling helps with capacity building.
- 3) To determine the strategy prioritizes economic growth, capacity building, and security while addressing political and security factors, focusing on community - focused

initiatives, cooperation, and flexibility for long - term stability.

- 4) Respecting Sovereignty and Ownership of the country ensuring all actions respect Somalia's sovereignty and prioritize Somali ownership of development and security initiatives. This includes empowering local communities and supporting locally - led solutions, fostering long - term sustainability and reducing dependence on external actors.

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