From Aid to Geoeconomic Partnership: Türkiye–Somalia and the Developmental State Challenge

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Author Biography

MOHAMED SHUEIB MUSE is Executive Director at the Somali Policy Institute and a researcher specializing in governance, geoeconomics, peacebuilding, state-building, and political economy in the Horn of Africa. His work focuses on Somalia's federalism, strategic diplomacy, economic governance, and international partnerships, particularly Türkiye–Somalia relations and regional development dynamics.

Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of Türkiye–Somalia relations from humanitarian assistance into a broader geoeconomic partnership encompassing infrastructure, security cooperation, trade, and resource governance. The study investigates whether this evolving relationship can contribute to Somalia's transition toward a developmental state model or whether it risks reinforcing external dependency patterns. Since President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's landmark 2011 visit to Mogadishu, Türkiye has emerged as one of Somalia's most influential strategic partners through investments in ports, roads, hospitals, military training, education, and maritime security. This engagement represents a significant shift from emergency aid toward long-term strategic and economic involvement in the Horn of Africa.

Using a qualitative political economy approach, the paper draws on comparative case analysis, policy reports, trade data, and secondary literature to evaluate the developmental implications of Türkiye's involvement in Somalia. The analysis applies developmental state theory, dependency theory, and geoeconomic frameworks to assess whether foreign-led infrastructure and security partnerships can facilitate domestic industrial transformation in fragile states. Comparative lessons from China–Ethiopia, UAE–Djibouti, and Qatar–Rwanda are used to contextualize Somalia's trajectory.

The findings suggest that Türkiye has contributed significantly to Somalia's state reconstruction and economic stabilization through port modernization, security cooperation, transport infrastructure, and institutional support. However, Somalia continues to face structural weaknesses including import dependency, weak industrial capacity, limited state revenue, and inadequate regulatory institutions. Without coherent industrial policy, local capacity-building, and stronger governance mechanisms, Turkish investments risk reproducing dependency dynamics rather than enabling sustainable development. The paper argues that Somalia must strategically leverage Turkish support to build domestic productive sectors, improve infrastructure governance, enhance vocational training, and develop long-term economic planning institutions.

The study concludes that Türkiye–Somalia relations represent both a major opportunity and a strategic test for South–South cooperation in Africa. The success of this partnership will ultimately depend on Somalia's ability to convert external investment into local industrialization, employment generation, and institutional transformation. The paper contributes to broader debates on geoeconomics, state-building, and development partnerships in fragile and post-conflict states.

Keywords

Somalia; Türkiye; Developmental State; Geoeconomics; Infrastructure Diplomacy; South–South Cooperation

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative political economy methodology using comparative case analysis and secondary data drawn from policy reports, institutional publications, trade statistics, and academic literature.

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Türkiye's engagement in Somalia has grown from emergency aid (especially after the 2011 famine) into a broad geoeconomic partnership spanning infrastructure, trade, security and governance. Turkish actors – from the government and military to TİKA (development agency) and Turkish firms – have rebuilt airports and roads, opened hospitals and schools, and now run the Port of Mogadishu under a long-term concession. Yet Somalia remains one of the world's poorest countries, heavily import-dependent (imports ≈$9B vs exports ~$1.1B and reliant on diaspora remittances. The core question is whether the Türkiye partnership can help Somalia evolve toward a developmental state model – with coherent industrial strategy, institutional capacity and competitive economy – or whether it will simply perpetuate a dependency on foreign aid and investment.

Türkiye's Geoeconomic Footprint. Since Erdoğan's 2011 visit to famine-stricken Somalia, Ankara's role has expanded dramatically. Turkey has delivered over $1 billion in aid (2011–22) to Somalia, and Turkish NGOs (e.g. TİKA, Diyanet) and companies have undertaken dozens of reconstruction projects. These include rebuilding the Mogadishu airport and key roads, digging wells (serving ~126,000 people), and opening vocational schools (agriculture and fisheries) and hospitals. Turkish Airlines now flies direct to Mogadishu, symbolizing renewed connectivity. The crown jewel is the Port of Mogadishu, modernized and operated by Turkish firm Albayrak under a 5-year (now-renewed) deal. Under this arrangement, 55% of port revenues go to Somalia's government and 45% to Albayrak, with the aim of doubling port income via $80M of upgrades. (In its first month under Albayrak in 2014 the port generated $2.7M in revenue.)

Figure: Aerial view of Mogadishu Port (1992) – Somalia's main maritime gateway. The port's modernization has made it Somalia's sole large-scale commercial port (others are small coastal jetties) and roughly 70% of goods entering Somalia pass through Mogadishu[9]. Albayrak reports that about 70% of imports handled at Mogadishu Port are Turkish-made, and bilateral trade is near $500 million. (By comparison, Ethiopia—already 97% dependent on Djibouti's Doraleh port supplies only ~18% of Somali imports, while Turkey is ~4%.) In short, Turkey is now one of Somalia's top trading partners and leads the redevelopment of its gateway infrastructure.

Beyond Aid: Security and Natural Resources. Turkey also provides critical security support. In 2017 Ankara opened Camp TURKSOM (its first African base) in Mogadishu, at which Turkish forces train thousands of Somali National Army (SNA) troops. Turkey's counterterrorism assistance – including training the elite Gorgor commandos and deploying Bayraktar drones – has been central to Somali operations against al-Shabaab. Militarily, a 2024 MOU makes Turkey a partner in Somalia's naval security (Turks train and equip the Somali Navy) in exchange for 30% of Somalia's future Exclusive Economic Zone revenues. Separately, a March 2024 deal grants Turkey rights to Somali offshore oil & gas exploration and a share of proceeds. Both agreements illustrate Turkey's move from humanitarianism toward a geoeconomic strategy: Turkey hopes stability at sea will protect billions in fisheries and hydrocarbons, and expand its influence in the resource-rich Horn.

Somalia's State Capacity and Dependencies. For Somalia to leverage this partnership into a developmental state trajectory, Somali institutions must capture and direct investments strategically. A developmental state (as seen in East Asia) typically means a strong bureaucracy guiding industrial policy, coordinating investment in key sectors, and fostering domestic production through planning and incentives. But Somalia today lacks many of these features. The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) has very limited budgetary resources (2022 revenue ~$1B, largely from customs and aid) and only minimal regulatory capacity[18]. Much of the economy is informal or diaspora-driven (remittances are roughly 20–50% of GDP). Agriculture and livestock still employ ~60% of the workforce, while industry (factories) accounts for <8%. There are virtually no large domestic manufacturers – "Everything in Somalia comes from outside – there are no factories, no investment, no tourism," laments a Turkish business leader. With $9B of imports vs $1.1B exports, Somalia runs a massive trade deficit, sustained only by foreign aid and remittances.

In sum, Somalia remains dependent: it buys foreign goods, relies on imported services, and its state finances are bolstered by international donors (Turkey and others) more than domestic taxes. Without new domestic productive capacity, Turkey's investments risk perpetuating a pattern where external partners dictate economic activity. Dependence theory warns that without fostering local industry, peripheral states simply supply raw materials or consumption markets for core economies. Erdoğan's focus on brand-building and infrastructure creates goodwill, but a developmental state requires channeling such projects into Somali-owned enterprises and long-term planning.

Ports, Infrastructure and Logistics

Port Modernization: As noted, Mogadishu Port is now run by Albayrak (Turkey) and upgraded to international standards. This has significantly increased throughput: since 2014 the port has been handling nearly all Somalia's inbound cargo. Albayrak reports that goods passing through are essential for reconstruction (cement, food, iron) and basic needs. The FGS sees the port as vital to revenue: under the 2014 concession, the Somali share (55%) was expected to double the government's port income. Indeed, efficient port operations have helped Somalia move from ad-hoc logistic improvisation toward more predictable trade flows. However, the port is already nearing capacity; government planners acknowledge Mogadishu Port will hit a ceiling in 3–5 years, and plans are underway to build a new larger port through international tender. Careful attention to revenue-sharing and competition in the new port's contract will be needed to avoid corruption and ensure Somalia truly gains value.

Roads and Connectivity: Turkey has rebuilt key urban roads in Mogadishu (e.g. airport highway) and other highways in southern Somalia. These projects facilitate trade flow from the port into the hinterland. However, road networks across Somalia are still underdeveloped: most connections between cities are rough tracks. A robust development strategy would extend these investments: for instance, linking Mogadishu to (semi-)autonomous regions could integrate markets, and establishing transit corridors to Ethiopia could make Somalia an export hub. (Ethiopia's heavy reliance on Djibouti's port is partly due to weak alternatives; Somali planners hope Mogadishu could serve as a secondary outlet to the sea, but this requires both port and highway expansion.)

Energy and Utilities: Turkish firms (and related partners) have invested in generator-based power plants, telecom infrastructure and small renewable projects. For example, Turkish-backed companies are involved in feasibility for oil and gas (see Petroleum MOU) and may finance grid expansion. Yet Somalia still suffers chronic power shortages. A developmental approach would harness Turkish financing and expertise in ways that build local capacity: e.g., joint-venture power plants that train Somali technicians, or tariffs structured to fund future grid growth. So far Turkish help has mainly been grants or turnkey projects (hospitals, generators), not building Somali state utilities.

Logistics Corridors and Trade Hubs: Somalia's geographic position on the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean could make it a regional transit hub – if port and transport links are fully utilized. For example, Mogadishu is closer to some global sea lanes than East African Rift ports, and Somaliland's Berbera port (under UAE-DP World) is developing into an Ethiopian gateway. Turkish planners could work with Somalia to leverage its coastline (over 3,300 km) into fisheries development and maritime services. They might also help develop free-trade zones or industrial estates near Mogadishu Port, attracting light manufacturing to import inputs and export goods (perhaps textiles or fish processing), somewhat replicating the SEZ strategies Ethiopia pursued. So far no Somali Special Economic Zone has materialized, though Turkey's interest in hydrocarbons suggests a natural-resources corridor might emerge along the Jubba and Shabelle river basins.

Trade Dependency: Even after Turkish investment, Somalia's trade remains lopsided. Imports (manufactures, fuel, food, construction materials) are roughly eight times exports. Turkey is now a leading import supplier (among EU/India/China), but the majority of imports come from neighboring countries (as of 2017: Ethiopia 17%, Sudan 17%). Turkish goods have fluctuated recently (global supply issues). A developmental-state strategy would use improved trade infrastructure to boost exports: for Somalia, this means scaling up livestock, fisheries, and possibly light manufacturing for export. Turkey might assist by investing in abattoirs or packaging plants near the port, creating value-added exports rather than simply importing packaged Turkish foods. Otherwise, Somalia risks specializing as a market for Turkish (and Chinese, Indian, Arab) products, without building indigenous industry.

Security and Employment

Türkiye's security cooperation has clearly helped Somalia's stability. By training ~16,000 Somali soldiers (including elite Gorgor units), building Camp TURKSOM and providing equipment, Turkey has contributed to reclaiming territory from al-Shabaab and securing the capital. Security fosters economic confidence, encouraging private investment (even Turkish construction companies have returned as al-Shabaab pressure waxes). However, there is an economic side to this: so far, the main job creation has been in the military itself. Few Turkish projects have robustly focused on civilian employment beyond the construction phase. For example, Albayrak's port operation likely employs hundreds of Somalis (trucking, stevedoring, administration), but figures aren't public. Turkish-built hospitals and schools are staffed by Somalis, yet are often administered by Turkish institutions. If Türkiye–Somalia cooperation shifts toward development, it should prioritize job-intensive sectors: vocational training (beyond military) in trades like mechanics, electricians, construction trades; agricultural extension services; and SME credit programs. Institutional linkages (e.g. Somalia-Turkey Business Council) can encourage joint ventures, but the government must also implement policies (like low taxes or financing) to encourage Turkish and other firms to hire locally and transfer skills.

Somalia's urban reconstruction – much of it Turkish-funded in Mogadishu – has created some employment. Turkish contractors have rebuilt parts of the Presidential Palace and embassy. But relative to the Somali labor force these are small projects. A developmental state requires scaling this up: e.g., involving Somali firms as subcontractors on Turkish projects, or insisting on local labor content. Turkey's focus on visible projects (mosques, stadiums, plazas) wins public affection but does little directly for productivity. A shift toward building factories, agro-processing plants or expanded utilities would yield longer-lasting jobs. This would parallel East Asian models, where infrastructure was linked to industrial zones. Somalia's civilian employment remains dominated by informal trade and agriculture – a structural transformation to industry and services requires deliberate policy.

Comparative Perspectives

Comparing other "Southern partnerships" highlights what Somalia might emulate or avoid:

China–Ethiopia: Ethiopia actively pursued a developmental state strategy in the 2000s, building industrial parks (e.g. for textiles), new cities and a modern railway, largely financed by Chinese loans and expertise. China-Ethiopia ties included targeted technology transfer and training. However, researchers note Ethiopia still suffered few backward linkages: factories imported Chinese machinery and inputs, labor turnover remained high, and dependency on Chinese capital grew. Crucially, Ethiopia had a strong centralized state (Tigrayan-dominated until recently) able to set and enforce industrial policy. Somalia lacks this: without a stable, centralized planning authority, it would be hard to replicate Ethiopia's disciplined model. Still, the China-Ethiopia case shows the potential (and pitfalls) of using foreign partners for industrialization.

UAE–Djibouti: Djibouti's partnership with the UAE (via DP World) transformed Djibouti into a major transshipment hub. The Doraleh Container Terminal (90% built by DP World) carries ~1 million TEUs annually[28], serving ~97% of Ethiopia's imports. But Djibouti's economy remains undiversified; most citizens see employment only in the port, logistics or military bases. Djibouti's government eventually nationalized Doraleh (2018) when terms with DP World became politically fraught[29]. For Somalia, the lesson is double-edged: letting a foreign operator run the port can bring in investment and efficiency, but Somalia must guard its sovereignty – ensuring revenue sharing (55/45 split) and competitive tendering for future projects. So far, Mogadishu's deal seems more favorable (higher government share) than Djibouti's, but future governments will need to negotiate carefully to avoid exploitative contracts.

Qatar–Rwanda: Qatar's engagement with Rwanda has been largely through diaspora and media investment (e.g. Qatari businessmen, RwandAir hub). It is smaller-scale and more consensual, without heavy infrastructure projects. Rwanda benefits from investment in finance and aviation, but again the economy is still tightly directed by the Rwandan state. Somalia could attract Gulf capital (as it has from UAE in fisheries, etc.) but without a coherent state strategy such funds may not build domestic capacity. Rwanda's success lies in government-led planning (Vision 2020) – a template far beyond Somalia's current capability.

Türkiye–Libya: Pre-2011, Turkey built roads, hospitals and even proposed oil-for-infrastructure deals in Libya. This partnership collapsed in the civil war. Lessons for Somalia include the risks of over-reliance on political ties (the 2024 oil deal with Türkiye grants up to 90% of output to Turkey and has been criticized locally). If Somalia's government falls or shifts, such concessions could be voided or renegotiated. A development plan should avoid overbidding its resources in urgent need of cash – Libya essentially saw little local economic benefit when turmoil came.

In sum, these cases suggest that abundant foreign investment does not automatically create a developmental state. What matters is how Somali authorities use the partnership. Turkey offers grants and contracts, but Somalia must translate them into skills, institutions and industries. Otherwise, it risks following the “dependency” pattern: trading one patron (Western donors) for another (Türkiye, China, Gulf states) without internal capacity-building.

Discussion: **Opportunities and Risks**

Türkiye’s approach has elements of South–South cooperation: it emphasizes Muslim solidarity and has often skipped multilateral channels, opting for direct bilaterals. Turkey prides itself on being a model of a Muslim-majority country that developed (post-2000s) and now “gives back” by helping others build capacity. This is appealing to Somalis and distinguishes Turkey from Western donors. But to become a true development partner, the Somali state needs to assert its own development agenda. This means drafting an industrial strategy (as some Somali documents hint, e.g. National Industrial Policy), investing in human capital, and possibly creating a Somali Development Bank (the SDRB was revived in 2024) to finance local entrepreneurs.

Geoeconomically, Somalia sits at a crossroads of Middle Eastern competition (UAE, Saudi, Qatar, Turkey, Iran, etc.). Turkish investment must therefore navigate complex politics: for example, Turkey’s rivalry with the UAE (which backed federal rivalries and built-up Somaliland) adds instability. Somalia may benefit from playing these powers off each other, but only if its institutions remain above such pressures. For now, Somalia has granted Turkey 30% of fisheries and oil revenue rights – deals that generate immediate infrastructure help but lock in long-term revenue sharing. The FGS seems to accept this trade-off, but caution is warranted: without strong oversight, such concessions can impoverish future budgets.

Institutionally, Turkey’s model emphasizes humanized development (hospitals, schools) and religious-cultural affinity. Conferences like “Preparing Somalia’s Future: Goal 2015” (Istanbul 2012) produced broad roadmaps for state reconstruction. Turkey’s style sidestepped political conditionalities (unlike EU aid) by linking to shared faith and history. This has strengthened Somali elites’ perception of Turkey as a partner. To deepen developmental impact, both sides might embed planning components: for example, integrate Somali ministries into project design (so they learn logistics), or require local joint ventures in infrastructure contracts. The recent hydrocarbon MOU notably ties Turkey into Somalia’s legal concession framework, which is a positive sign of institutional process rather than ad-hoc deals.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Türkiye–Somalia relations have indeed moved "from aid to geoeconomic partnership". Turkey has built key infrastructures, enhanced security, and is poised to exploit Somali maritime resources. However, this is not yet a developmental state transformation. Somalia's state capacity remains fragile, and its economy is still stuck in a low-base, import-dependent trap. To use the Türkiye partnership as a lever, Somalia needs a clear industrial policy. This would involve:

Strategic Planning: Somalia could formulate multi-year plans (like Ethiopia's Five-Year Plans) targeting sectors where Turkey's help could catalyze growth – e.g. fisheries, livestock exports, and agro-industrial parks. Donors (including Turkey) can fund these plans but Somali authorities must own them.

Public Revenue and Sovereignty: Manage port and resource revenues transparently. For instance, if Turkey takes 30% of oil rents, set aside that share into a national petroleum fund (per best practices) rather than immediate spending, so revenues benefit long-term development. Similarly, ensure port concession revenues (55%) go to state budget and are tracked.

Domestic Industry Support: Use port and road improvements to lower logistics costs for Somali entrepreneurs. Encourage joint ventures (e.g. Turkish-Somali factories) through incentives. Possibly establish an Export Promotion Agency to attract Turkish manufacturers (textiles, pharmaceuticals) to use Somalia as a regional base, akin to Chinese firms in Ethiopia's SEZs[17].

Capacity Building: Invest part of aid into Somali institutions: civil service training, accounting systems, customs modernization (some already underway [24]). An empowered Somali Planning Ministry could coordinate Turkish and other projects so that they fill gaps (e.g. electricity policy, vocational training needs).

Employment and Education: Turkish technical schools and scholarships (several hundred Somalis study in Türkiye each year) should be aligned with Somali industry needs (engineering, agronomy, logistics). Similarly, vocational centers in Somalia could be expanded with Turkish support to train mechanics for renewable energy installations or ICT technicians for the telecom sector.

In the final analysis, Türkiye's experience (as an emerging middle power) could help Somalia, but only if it empowers Somalia's agency. The risk of dependency is real – Somalis may become accustomed to Turkish aid and security (and Turkish flattery) as a substitute for building their own state. But the opportunity is there: Turkey's comprehensive involvement (military, education, economics, humanitarian) means it has the levers to encourage a coherent strategy, if the Somali government demands it. Policymakers in Mogadishu could use the prestige and negotiating power of the Turkey partnership to attract other investors under a national development plan (just as Ethiopia used China's example).

Given the Horn of Africa's growing geoeconomic competition, Somalia's choice matters beyond its own borders. A Somali developmental state – however nascent – could stabilize the region, create jobs for millions of youths, and reduce the appeal of extremist groups by providing livelihoods. For conference audiences, the Somali–Türkiye case illustrates both the promise and complexity of South–South strategic investments: it tests theories of dependency (will Somalia simply consume Turkish imports?) against developmental state ideals (can Somalia leverage these ties into self-sustaining growth?). The answer likely lies in the details of policy: strong Somali leadership that frames Turkish aid as a partnership, not a charity, with clear benchmarks for local capacity-building and diversified economic planning.

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