

Will the port of Berbera and Critical Minerals put Somaliland on Washington's map?

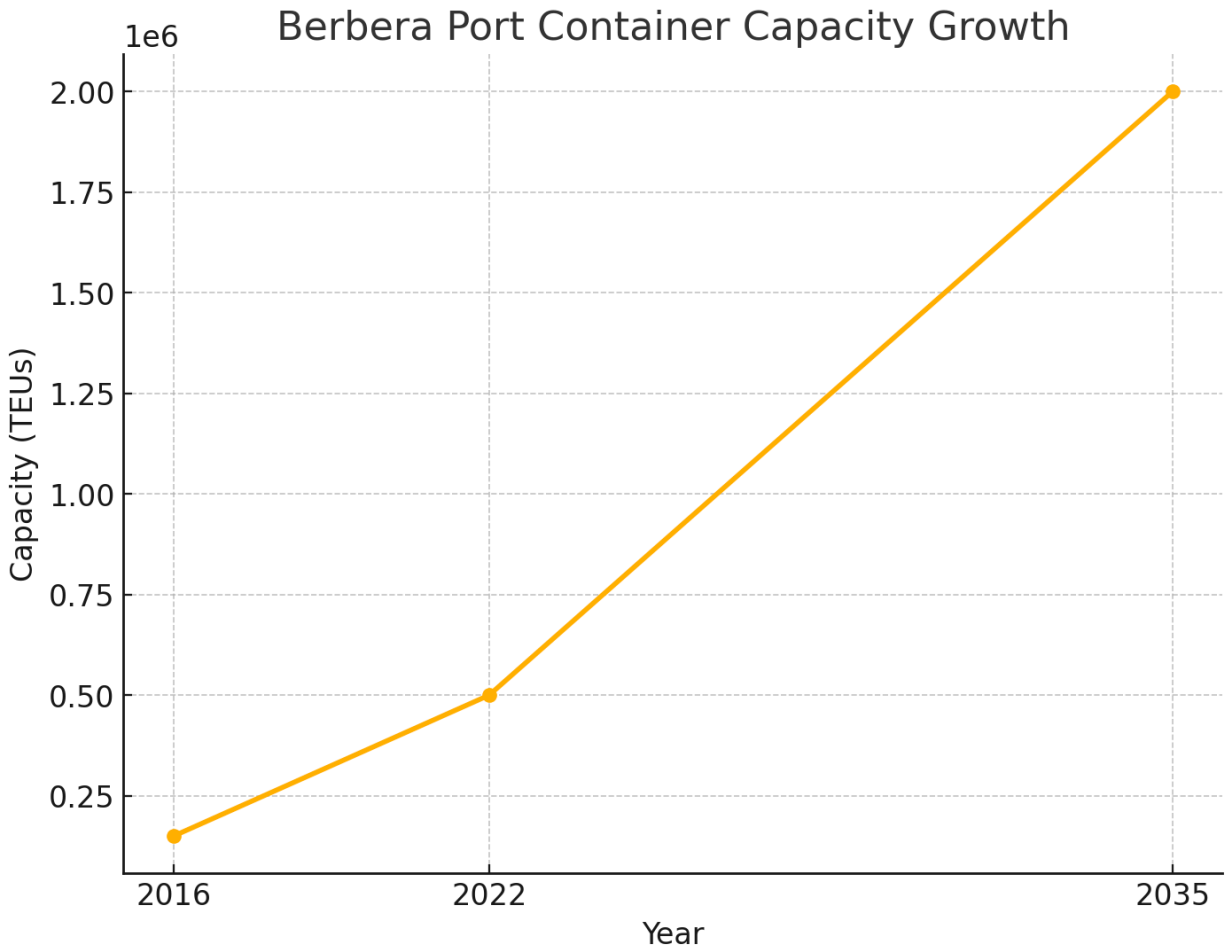
Somaliland's geography is destiny: Berbera's proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait positions the territory at the heart of global trade and security debates.

By: Agnes Gitau - Managing Partner GBS Africa and Executive Director at the Eastern Africa Association,

Somaliland;(self declared independent from Somalia since 1991) is mounting a high-stakes campaign to secure U.S. recognition by offering both military access on the Gulf of Aden and a gateway to critical mineral reserves. This initiative arrives as global attention is fixed on Red Sea security, supply chain resilience, and intensifying great-power competition with China. For Washington, the question is whether to recalibrate its long-standing "One Somalia" doctrine in the face of shifting geopolitical and economic imperatives.

Unlike Somalia's federal government, which remains plagued by fragility and an enduring Islamist insurgency, Somaliland has cultivated a reputation for relative stability. The territory runs its own elections, prints its own currency, and maintains security institutions that function beyond Mogadishu's reach. The African Development Bank has ranked Somaliland among the Horn's more administratively capable territories in fiscal management and governance. Yet the narrative of orderliness is not unblemished. The conflict in Las Anod and the SSC–Khatumo uprising expose deep clan fractures and governance strains, raising doubts about whether recognition might amplify, rather than resolve, domestic vulnerabilities.

Somaliland's geoeconomic case hinges on its minerals. Preliminary surveys suggest deposits of lithium, tin, gypsum, and industrial gemstones, though large-scale extraction remains nascent. The U.S. Geological Survey estimates that the Horn of Africa holds untapped lithium and tin deposits capable of contributing up to 3–5 percent of global demand if properly developed. For Washington, the stakes are clear: diversifying away from Chinese-controlled supply chains is now a matter of national security, as codified in the Defense Production Act's 2022 critical minerals amendment.



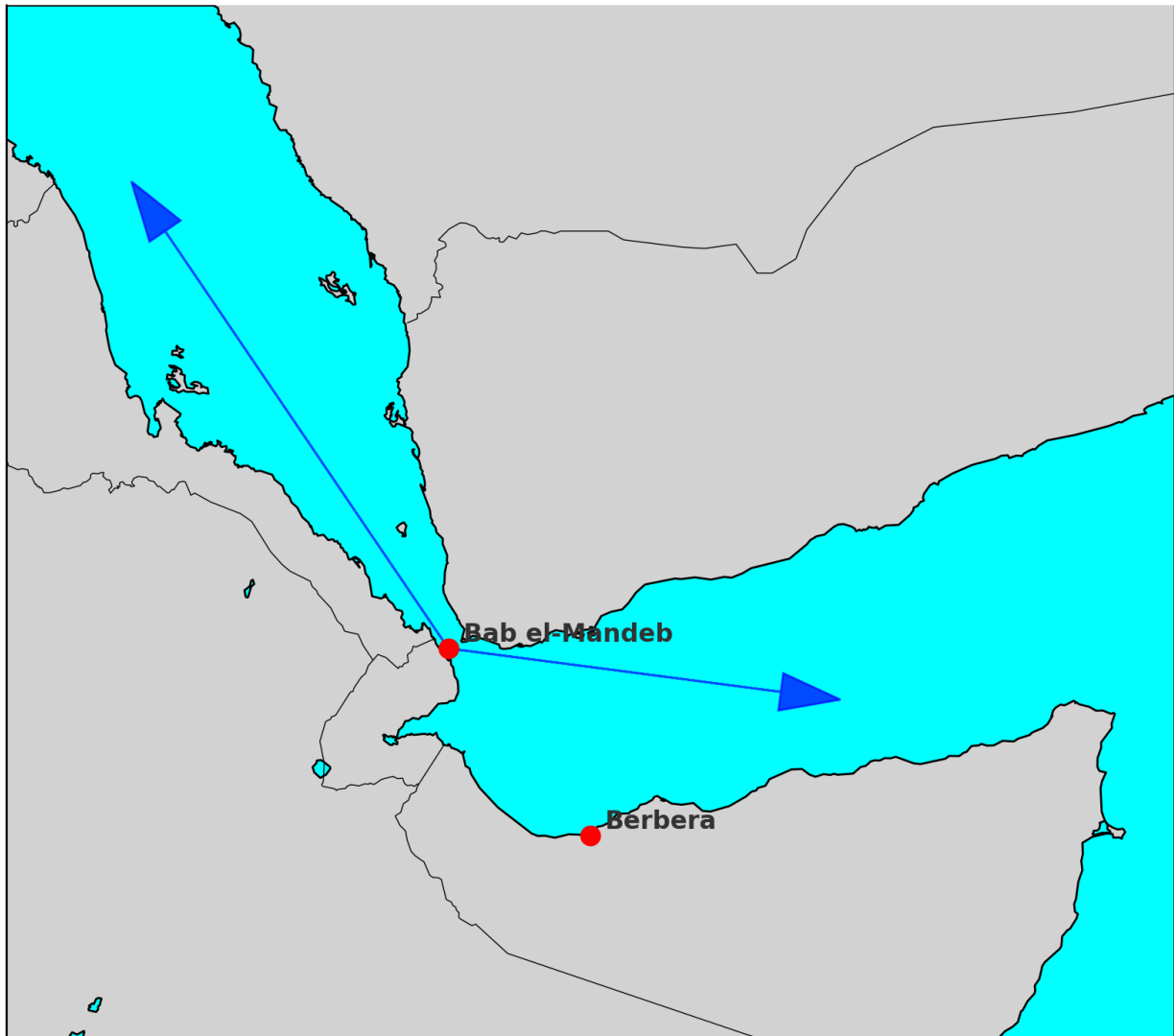
Berbera Port Container Capacity Growth (showing expansion from 2016 to projected 2035)

Berbera, Somaliland's principal port, is the territory's strongest strategic card. According to UNCTAD's *Review of Maritime Transport 2022*, more than 30 percent of the world's container trade and an estimated 12 percent of global trade by volume passes through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait annually, amounting to about 6.2 million barrels of oil per day in 2021.

Berbera sits just 260 kilometers east of this chokepoint, positioning Somaliland as a pivotal node in maritime security. Since 2016, the DP World-funded modernization project has expanded Berbera's container capacity to 500,000 TEUs annually, with a target of 2 million TEUs by 2035. Livestock exports through this port have historically generated over \$500 million annually, underscoring its economic importance for the Horn of Africa.

Shipping routes through Bab el-Mandeb connect East Asia and Europe, carrying oil, grain, and manufactured goods. Somaliland's pitch to Washington hinges on this geography offering military access and a secure logistics hub in a region increasingly contested by China.

Red Sea Shipping Routes: Strategic Position of Bab el-Mandeb and Berbera



The **proximity of Berbera** to this global maritime artery

By the numbers: Bab el-Mandeb & Berbera ports

- **6.2 million barrels/day** of oil and petroleum products transited Bab el-Mandeb in 2021 (*U.S. EIA*)
- **30% of global container trade** moves through the Red Sea–Suez corridor annually (*UNCTAD 2022*)
- **12% of world trade by volume** crosses the Bab el-Mandeb–Suez route (*ICS 2021*)
- **500,000 TEUs** current annual Berbera port capacity, with a target of 2 million by 2035 (*World Bank 2022*)
- **\$500 million** in annual livestock exports through Berbera pre-COVID (*AfDB 2020*)
- **260 km** — Berbera’s distance from the Bab el-Mandeb Strait

U.S. policymakers increasingly see Berbera as a complement to Djibouti, where congestion and Chinese military presence complicate operations. The *Naval War College Review* highlighted Berbera as one of the few viable alternatives for Western deployment in the Red Sea corridor. With Houthi attacks disrupting shipping lanes and al-Shabaab resilient across Somalia, a U.S. footprint in Berbera would offer both strategic redundancy and enhanced counterterrorism reach.

Officially, Washington continues to affirm Somalia's territorial integrity. Yet momentum is building toward a more pragmatic stance. Former British Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson and U.S. Congressman John Moolenaar have pressed for engagement with Hargeisa, citing both democratic governance and the Berbera opportunity. Bipartisan hearings in the U.S. Congress have floated the idea of opening a liaison office in Hargeisa, a move that would stop short of recognition but signal serious engagement.

China's dominance in African infrastructure, particularly in Djibouti, sharpens Somaliland's appeal. Beijing's multi-billion-dollar Belt and Road investments have entrenched its presence, raising alarms in Washington. Somaliland counters with a pitch of "equitable partnership"—military access, mineral cooperation, and governance support without debt diplomacy. For the EU and multilateral lenders, deeper engagement could recalibrate investment frameworks, but African Union norms against secessionist recognition remain a powerful obstacle. Addis Ababa, Nairobi, and Cairo would likely resist any precedent that emboldens other separatist movements.

The risks of engagement are significant. The Las Anod conflict threatens to unravel Somaliland's stability narrative, while disengagement from Mogadishu risks weakening counterterrorism operations against al-Shabaab. A calibrated dual-track approach balancing engagement with both Hargeisa and Mogadishu may be the only sustainable option.

Policy options matrix

Policy Path	Advantages	Risks	Strategic Signal
Status Quo (One Somalia)	Maintains AU and UN norms; avoids alienating Mogadishu and AU partners.	Missed leverage in Red Sea security; Chinese dominance in Djibouti continues unchecked.	U.S. prioritises stability over opportunity.
Partial engagement	Establish liaison office in Hargeisa; partner in mining and maritime security without formal recognition.	Could strain relations with Mogadishu; AU may see this as de facto recognition.	Pragmatic balancing: hedging without commitment.

Full Recognition	Secures Berbera base; diversifies critical minerals; rewards Somaliland's democratic governance.	Diplomatic rupture with AU and Somalia; risks inspiring other separatist claims in Africa.	Bold U.S. pivot prioritising great-power competition over traditional diplomacy.
-------------------------	--	--	--

Somaliland's campaign for U.S. recognition is no longer a marginal issue in the Horn of Africa it is a live test case for how Washington balances principle with pragmatism in an era of great-power competition. Berbera's proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait gives Somaliland undeniable geostrategic weight, while its untapped critical minerals align neatly with U.S. ambitions to reduce dependence on Chinese-dominated supply chains. These assets ensure that Hargeisa will remain on the radar of U.S. policymakers even if formal recognition remains elusive.

Yet the risks are equally stark. Internal divisions, most visibly the Las Anod conflict, expose cracks in Somaliland's stability narrative. Any U.S. tilt toward Hargeisa must therefore be carefully staged to avoid undermining fragile counterterrorism operations in Somalia or alienating African Union partners wary of setting precedents for secession. China's entrenched presence in Djibouti and across African infrastructure means that hesitation could leave Washington at a disadvantage in securing one of the world's busiest maritime arteries.

The calculus for Washington is not whether Somaliland matters it clearly does but how to engage without tipping the Horn into greater instability. A phased approach, beginning with a liaison office and targeted economic and security cooperation, could deliver tangible benefits while preserving flexibility. Formal recognition remains the boldest and riskiest option, one that would signal a decisive U.S. pivot in the Red Sea but carry significant diplomatic costs.

For now, Somaliland's pitch to Washington underscores a broader truth: in the geopolitics of the Red Sea, geography and resources can give even unrecognised states a seat at the table. Whether that seat comes with a flag will depend on how Washington balances its immediate strategic needs against its long-standing commitments to African unity and stability.

Agnes Gitau is Managing Partner at GBS Africa and Executive Director of the Eastern Africa Association. A specialist in East African trade, investment, and governance, she advises both governments and international investors on navigating the region's political economies. Her commentary draws on extensive on-the-ground experience, linking African domestic politics with global strategic shifts in economics, security, and diplomacy. She writes regularly on how policy choices and geopolitical competition are reshaping development pathways across the Horn of Africa and the wider continent.