

Thirty-Five Years Apart: Why the Somaliland–Somalia Debate Needs a New Conversation

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Editorial View — This article reflects the editorial position of Gateway Strategic Insights.

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAY

Thirty-five years after Somaliland restored its sovereignty, the central challenge is no longer explaining why the 1960 union failed — history has already provided its own answers. The more pressing question is whether political leaders on both sides are willing to recognise that the debate itself has fundamentally changed. A new generation has emerged, shaped by thirty-five years of separate political realities rather than by the aspirations of 1960. Lasting peace will not come from attempting to recreate the past, but from building a future grounded in mutual respect, realism, and practical cooperation.

THE VISION OF 1960

When the State of Somaliland and the Trust Territory of Somalia voluntarily united on 1 July 1960, they embarked on one of Africa's most ambitious post-colonial political experiments. The objective was never simply to merge two newly independent territories. Rather, the union was conceived as the foundation of a broader pan-Somali vision — one that sought eventually to unite all Somali-inhabited territories across the Horn of Africa, including present-day Djibouti, Ethiopia's Somali Region, and Kenya's Northern Frontier District.

For the generation that led independence, the union represented hope, sacrifice, and extraordinary political ambition. It reflected a belief that shared identity could transcend colonial borders and create a stronger future for all Somalis.

Yet within a remarkably short period, that vision encountered its first major tests.

THREE SHOCKS THAT DEFINED THE UNION

The first shock emerged from the distribution of political power within the newly established republic. Although the union had been entered voluntarily by two sovereign entities, many in Somaliland perceived that the principal centres of executive authority quickly became concentrated in Mogadishu. The Presidency, the Prime Ministership, and the most influential institutions of government were occupied by leaders from the former Italian Somaliland. While these developments reflected demographic and administrative realities, they also created an enduring perception that the union was evolving into political incorporation rather than an equal partnership.

This dissatisfaction surfaced as early as 1961, when a group of Somaliland military officers attempted to challenge the direction of the union. Although unsuccessful, the episode demonstrated that constitutional and political grievances were present almost from the republic's inception. The debate over the nature of the union did not begin in 1991. It began in its first year.

The second shock affected the broader vision of Somaliweyn. The architects of 1960 imagined that the Somali Republic would become the nucleus of a larger Somali state. Instead, history moved in another direction. Djibouti chose independent statehood in 1977 rather than joining the republic. Ethiopia retained sovereignty over its Somali Region following the Ogaden War, while Kenya maintained authority over the Northern Frontier District. Gradually, the dream of uniting five Somali territories gave way to the challenge of preserving the union of only two.

The third and most profound shock was the collapse of the union itself. Civil conflict, authoritarian rule, political exclusion, and widespread violence fundamentally transformed public perceptions of the relationship. In 1991, Somaliland declared that it had withdrawn from the voluntary union and restored the sovereignty it had held briefly in June 1960.

A GENERATION OF SEPARATION

Today, an often-overlooked reality deserves greater attention. Somaliland and Somalia have now existed separately for thirty-five years — a period that exceeds the lifespan of the union itself. The generation that negotiated the union has largely passed from public life. Those who experienced both the union and its collapse are now few. Meanwhile, the politically active generation has inherited a completely different reality.

For many Somalilanders, political identity has been shaped not by memories of the union but by thirty-five years of separate institutions, elections, governance, and

state-building. Their expectations are understandably different from those of the generation that pursued pan-Somali unity in 1960.

Somalia faces a different challenge. While successive federal governments have consistently reaffirmed the constitutional position that Somaliland remains part of Somalia, a broader national conversation about how to address thirty-five years of political divergence has yet to fully emerge. The discussion has often remained focused on constitutional continuity, while giving comparatively less attention to demographic change, political transformation, and the practical realities that now define relations between the two sides.

WHY THE DEBATE REQUIRES RENEWAL

Neither side benefits from remaining imprisoned by inherited narratives. Political legitimacy cannot be sustained indefinitely through historical memory alone, nor can enduring peace be built through pressure, confrontation, or attempts to recreate political arrangements that no longer reflect the realities experienced by millions of people today.

The responsibility therefore rests with today's leaders, in both Somaliland and Somalia. Their task is not to reinvent the wheel of hostility, deepen political polarisation, or rely on coercive narratives that have yielded little progress over the past three decades. Leadership should instead focus on creating the political space for honest dialogue, confidence-building, and pragmatic cooperation.

This does not require either side to abandon its constitutional or political position. It requires recognising that coexistence is not the same as capitulation, and dialogue is not the same as concession. Cooperation in trade, regional security, aviation, infrastructure, migration, environmental management, and economic development can proceed even where constitutional disagreements remain unresolved.

THE PATH FORWARD

The architects of the 1960 union sought to build a better future for all Somalis. That aspiration deserves respect. Equally, however, the generations that have grown up during thirty-five years of separation deserve the opportunity to define their own future. Statesmanship is not measured by the ability to preserve inherited disputes, but by the courage to imagine new relationships.

Perhaps the question facing Somaliland and Somalia today is no longer whether history can be reversed. The more important question is whether both societies are prepared to move beyond debating the past and begin designing a future in which dignity, mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and practical cooperation become the

foundations of a new relationship — whatever constitutional form that relationship may ultimately take.

A THINK-DO TANK FOR THE HORN OF AFRICA

ABOUT GATEWAY STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

Gateway Strategic Insights (GSI) is an independent strategic analysis, investment advisory, and foresight firm headquartered in Somaliland and focused on the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea region, and East Africa. GSI operates at the intersection of research, policy, investment, and strategic engagement — generating rigorous analysis while supporting implementation on the ground. Rooted in Somaliland, GSI draws on deep local knowledge, regional networks, and international expertise to serve governments, development finance institutions, private investors, and multilateral organisations.

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