GEOPOLITICS

INDIA AND SOMALIA HOLD THEIR FIRST FOREIGN OFFICE TALKS. WHY IT MATTERS AT SEA

By **Kamlesh Bhagatkar**, *Politician, Author & Geopolitical Analyst · 16 November 2026*

India and Somalia held their first round of Foreign Office Consultations in Mogadishu on Sunday, 15 November. Joint Secretary Suresh Kumar M, who heads the West Asia and North Africa division of the Ministry of External Affairs, led our side. Somalia's delegation was led by Hamza Adan Haadoow, Permanent Secretary in its Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, according to the MEA statement carried by ANI and IANS.

The talks followed a Memorandum of Understanding on consultations between the two foreign ministries, signed in Mogadishu a day earlier. On that Saturday, Sripriya Ranganathan, MEA Secretary for Consular, Passport and Visa and Overseas Indian Affairs, called on President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and conveyed greetings from President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The MEA said the President recalled his association with India and his visit in 2015.

The agenda covered trade and investment, health and pharmaceuticals, small businesses, development cooperation, defence, security and consular matters. The line that caught my eye was on the sea. The two sides discussed "increased hijacking and piracy in the region and the need to effectively counter these", the MEA said. They were also "unequivocal in their condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations." The next round will be held in India.

A long gap, now formalised

India and Somalia established diplomatic relations in 1960. Our embassy in Mogadishu closed in 1991, when the Somali state collapsed into civil war, and since then the High Commission in Nairobi has handled Somalia through concurrent accreditation. The MEA still describes India as one of Somalia's top three trading partners and as a preferred destination for Somalis seeking medical treatment and higher education.

So the relationship has run for decades on trade, scholarships and hospitals, without a regular political channel. An MoU on consultations and a fixed round of talks give it one. I read this as housekeeping with a purpose: once a dialogue is institutionalised, it survives changes of officials and moods, and it

gives both sides a desk to call when a ship is taken.

There is history here too. According to our High Commission in Nairobi, 4,600 Indian peacekeepers served in Somalia in the UN mission UNOSOM II in 1993 and 1994, and twelve of them lost their lives.

Why the sea comes first

Somali piracy has come back this year. The International Maritime Bureau's figures for January to September 2026, as reported by Shipping Telegraph, show global piracy at its lowest nine-month level since 1992, with 51 incidents. Yet Somali pirates carried out eight hijackings in that period and accounted for 94 per cent of all crew taken hostage worldwide. Puntland authorities said five crew members were killed before a Palau-flagged tanker hijacked on 21 April was released. "The recent uptick in Somali piracy activity is a reminder that the threat remains," said Michael Howlett, the IMB's director.

The Indian Navy has been in the thick of it. On 2 November, it freed the Iranian fishing vessel Azini and rescued 20 crew members after a two-day operation off Somalia's northeast coast, according to Onmanorama and StratNews Global. Armed pirates had seized the boat on 29 October between Bandar Bayla and Hafun. A warship, identified by StratNews Global as INS Kolkata, worked with a maritime reconnaissance aircraft, and an Indian Air Force C-17 delivered equipment for the Navy's marine commandos. No casualties were reported. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh credited the Navy's readiness and the Air Force's support.

The Navy has run anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden since 2008. I think the reason it keeps doing so is simple arithmetic. Our trade and our seafarers move through these waters every day, and with traffic around the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea already strained this year (I wrote about the Hormuz crisis and our oil supply here), the Somali coast is one more chokepoint we cannot leave to chance.

A navy can rescue a crew. It cannot arrest the financiers on land, share local intelligence or prosecute suspects. That work belongs to Somali authorities, including those in Puntland, where Bandar Bayla lies and where, StratNews Global reports, regional officials have responded with arrests and closer surveillance. A standing diplomatic channel with Mogadishu is how we build the trust that such cooperation needs.

What Bharat should watch

The Horn of Africa has become a crowded neighbourhood for outside powers, and India came late to Mogadishu. Yesterday I wrote about the Qatar and Türkiye defence pact, and the same rule applies here: if we are absent, others fill the space. In my view, three things will show whether this dialogue has substance.

First, whether India reopens a resident mission in Mogadishu. Without one, the relationship keeps running through Nairobi.

Second, whether the "defence and security" and "maritime security" items turn into something concrete, such as training for Somali coast guard personnel or information sharing on pirate groups. The MEA statement lists them as areas of cooperation but gives no details yet.

Third, the date of the second round in India. The MEA says it will be fixed at "a mutually convenient date." If it comes within a year, I will take that as a sign that both capitals mean it.

Sources

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