

The New Government of Zimbabwe: A Distant Relationship with China?

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Abstract: Given the sanctions imposed by Western countries, the government of Robert Mugabe characterized Zimbabwe's foreign policy as an explicit rejection of the political conditions of the West and searched to establish economic and political relationships with other countries, such as China. However, by contrast with Mugabe's government, the presidency of Emmerson Mnangagwa has been promoting an active foreign policy intending to reengage with the West, particularly with the European Union and the United States. Is it because the economic relationship with China has failed to provide benefits to the Zimbabwean society? Does the change of administration represent a shift in Zimbabwe's foreign policy and its relationship with China? Or does the current presidency of Zimbabwe see the Western and China as two complementary and strategic partners? This article argues that even if the current government will try to reengage with the West as part of its national strategy of economic development, that does not mean that Zimbabwe intends to distance itself from the People's Republic of China because it has proved to be a strategic political and economic partner for more than fifty years now.

Keywords: China, Zimbabwe, United States, foreign policy, sanctions, foreign direct investment.

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Introduction

The initial approach between the PRC and Zimbabwe occurred in the colonial era when the PRC provided arms, military strategies, and training for freedom fighters of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, while also providing ruling elites with revolutionary ideas and scholarships throughout the 1960s and the 1970s. As soon as Zimbabwe became an independent country on April 18, 1980, Robert Mugabe visited Beijing, intending to express his gratitude and interest to continue strengthening the bilateral relationship.¹

Even though during the 1980s, the newly formed Zimbabwean government continued to receive Chinese financial loans, it also received development and military aid from Western countries, which were eager to support the government of Robert Mugabe as he promised to avoid the influence of the Soviet Union and Cuba.² With the end of the Cold

1 Victor Ojajorotu and Rumbidzai Kamidza, "Look East Policy: The Case of Zimbabwe–China Political and Economic Relations Since 2000," *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 1 (2018): 17-41.

2 Timothy Scarnecchia, "Intransigent Diplomat: Robert Mugabe and His Western Diplomacy, 1963–

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War, the Western governments and global financial institutions, such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), became the primary mechanism to support social and economic development in developing countries, including Zimbabwe.³

Nevertheless, since 2001, the Western countries, namely the United States (U.S.), the European Union (EU), and Australia, imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe since they considered that the country needed to reinforce its democratic mechanisms and institutions.⁴ The U.S. passed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Recovery Act⁵, opposing voting in favor of new grants, extensions of loans, or any debt cancellations from multilateral organizations, such as the WB and the IMF.⁶ In the same tenor, the EU introduced restrictive sanctions to specific individuals and companies from traveling and having business with Europe, freezing funds, and imposing an embargo on arms and other related materials.⁷ Furthermore, in 2003 Zimbabwe stopped being part of the Commonwealth.

It is widely believed that given these restrictions, Mugabe's government decided to intensify its economic and political relations with Asian countries, especially with China, through the 'Look East' policy⁸, announced in 2003. Since then, the exports from Zimbabwe to China have increased at an annual average rate of 17 percent, while the imports from Zimbabwe to China have been increased by an annual average of 32 percent.⁹ This trend has resulted in the PRC becoming the third largest exporter partner of Zimbabwe, right after South Africa and Singapore.¹⁰

At the same time, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China has become relevant to the economy of this African country. While the United Kingdom and the United States were the countries with the most FDI flows in Zimbabwe's economy during the period from 2001 to 2006, this was reversed when China took first place since 2007, and it has been the largest foreign investor since then.¹¹ Moreover, the financial aid for development

1983" in *Mugabeism? African Histories and Modernities*, ed. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Sabelo J. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 77-91.

3 Ojakorotu and "Kamidza, "East Policy," 17-41.

4 For thorough analysis about the nature and perceptions of the sanctions imposed, refer to the article of Heather Chingono, "Zimbabwe sanctions: An analysis of the "Lingo" guiding the perceptions of the sanctioners and the sanctionees," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 4, no. 2 (2010): 66-074.

5 U.S. Congress, *Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act of 2001*, 2001, Washington D.C., <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ99/PLAW-107publ99.pdf> (accessed December 18, 2019).

6 U.S. Embassy in Zimbabwe, *U.S. Sanctions Policy: Facts and Myths*, 2019, Harare, <https://zw.usembassy.gov/u-s-sanctions-policy-facts-myths/> (accessed December 21, 2019).

7 European Union Commission, Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, *European Union Restrictive measures (sanctions) in force (Regulations based on Article 215 TFEU and Decisions adopted in the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy*, July 7, 2016, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/cfsp/sanctions/docs/measures_en.pdf (accessed December 18, 2019).

8 Although there is no official document on this regard, it appears constantly on the statements and declarations of the Government of Zimbabwe.

9 For details, see United Nations, *UN Comtrade Database, 1992-2018*, 2020, <https://comtrade.un.org/data/> (accessed December 18, 2019).

10 World Bank, World Integrated Trade Solution. *Zimbabwe Trade*, 2019, <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/ZWE> (accessed December 19, 2019).

11 United Nations, Conference on Trade and Development, *Bilateral FDI Statistics*, 2014, <https://unctad>.

received from China has been an essential income for the Zimbabwean economy. It is estimated that during the period 2000-2019, the total amount of aid received has been USD 2,188,632,701.00,¹² whereas the concessional loans represent 84.5 percent of the total Chinese aid.

On the political side, it is remarkable that in 2008, the United Nations' Security Council decided to adopt an initiative to intensify the sanctions on President Mugabe's government. However, China and the Russian Federation voted against it.¹³ In that way, the PRC proved not only to be a strong economic partner but also a strategic political one for the government of Mugabe.

However, in contrast with the government of Robert Mugabe, the presidency of Emmerson Mnangagwa, which was established in November 2017, has been promoting an active foreign policy intending to reengage with the West, in particular with the European Union and the United States. For instance, in Mnangagwa's inaugural speech, he asked for the consideration of "those who have punished us in the past to consider their economic and political sanctions against us. [...] We will take definite steps to reengage those nations who have had issues with us in the past."¹⁴ In June 2018, the EU resumed talks with Zimbabwe's government, as it committed political and economic reforms to the country. Nevertheless, the U.S. and the EU have insisted on the reforms that need to be immediately applied in order to revoke the restrictions and sanctions from this African country.

Reflecting on the exposed above, why does Zimbabwe's current government orient its foreign policy to reengage with the West despite the previous sanctions and having a longstanding political and economic relationship with China? Is it because the economic relationship with China has failed to provide benefits to the Zimbabwean society? Does the change of administration represent a shift in Zimbabwe's foreign policy and its relationship with China? Or does the current presidency of Zimbabwe see the Western and China as two complementary and strategic partners?

Literature Review

Terrence Musanga was one of the first authors to write about the Zimbabwean people's

org/en/Pages/DIAE/FDI%20Statistics/FDI-Statistics-Bilateral.aspx (accessed December 18, 2019).

- 12 Since there is no an integral official document about the Chinese aid given to Zimbabwe, this amount has been calculated using different sources, such as the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Zimbabwe, the Secretariat of the Chinese Follow-up Committee of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the International Monetary Fund, the OECD and some articles published in newspapers of China and Zimbabwe, respectively.
- 13 United Nations, Security Council, *Security Council Fails to Adopt Sanctions against Zimbabwe Leadership as Two Permanent Members Cast Negative Votes*, 2008, SC/9396, New York, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2008/sc9396.doc.htm> (accessed December 18, 2019).
- 14 Emmerson Mnangagwa, "President Mnangagwa's inauguration speech in full," *Chronicle*, November 25, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/president-mnangagwas-inauguration-speech-in-full/> (accessed December 18, 2019).

vision to the engagement with China. He states that the ordinary people consider that the 'Look East' policy has been an imposition, as they perceive the Chinese products are of poor quality and the benefits to the national economy have been scattered.¹⁵ However, this argument does not explain that a rapprochement to the European Union and the United States would be the logical solution to disengage away from China since Musanga contends that Zimbabwean people also perceive the presence of Western capitalism as the reflection of "discontinuities and continuities of colonialism in post-colonial Zimbabwe."¹⁶

According to Lucky E. Asuelime, the relationship with China has been unfruitful to improve the country's economic and social conditions. Moreover, the current government is aware of the danger of having undiversified partners since it could harm the economy as it did in the financial crisis of 2008.¹⁷ In the year 2009, the exports from China were reduced, which did not impact the overall trade with Zimbabwe because the decrease in imports was only 5.04 percent compared to the previous year.¹⁸ However, the factor that could have brought more harm to Zimbabwe's economy could have been FDI, which in 2008 suffered a decrease of 92.3 percent compared to 2007. Contrarily to expectations, in 2009, FDI volume once again boomed insofar as one thousand percent, almost reaching similar investment levels as in years preceding the financial crisis.¹⁹ Therefore, the financial crisis did not severely impact the long-term economic relationship between Zimbabwe and China.

On the other hand, Victor Ojakorotu and Rumbidzai Kamidza consider that Zimbabwe's government has continuously signed opaque business and investment contracts with China that mainly benefit the ruling elites by rooting them in power.²⁰ However, the authors fail to enumerate and provide specific examples about the opaque investment contracts signed between the ruling elite with China, while there is ample evidence that most part of the PRC's aid has been destined to the sectors of health and education.

Furthermore, they argue that there is a widespread belief among Zimbabweans that the relationship with the PRC has caused many domestic industries to be affected by Chinese companies' entrance into the country.²¹ Nevertheless, according to the Afrobarometer organization survey in 2016, 48 percent of Zimbabweans consider that China has had a very positive influence on their domestic economy, whereas 31 percent believe it has been

15 Terrence Musanga, "Perspectives of Zimbabwe-China Relations in Wallace Chirumiko's 'Made in China' (2012) and No Violet Bulawayo's We Need New Names (2013)," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 29, no. 1 (2016): 81-95.

16 Musanga, "Perspectives of Zimbabwe," 81-95.

17 Lucky E. Asuelime, "Mnangagwa's Foreign Policy Direction : Old Wine in New Skin?" *Journal of African Foreign Affairs* 5, no. 2 (2018): 9-21.

18 United Nations, *UN Comtrade Database, 1992-2018*, 2020, <https://comtrade.un.org/data/> (accessed December 19, 2019).

19 United Nations, Conference on Trade and Development, *Bilateral FDI Statistics, 2020*, <https://unctad.org/en/Pages/DIAE/FDI%20Statistics/FDI-Statistics-Bilateral.aspx> (accessed December 18, 2019).

20 Ojakorotu and Kamidza, "Look East Policy," 17-41.

21 Ibid.

negative. Simultaneously, 46 percent of Zimbabweans consider that China's economic development assistance has been beneficial, while 30 percent think it has done an awful job.²²

Moreover, 41 percent of the population consider that the Chinese investment in infrastructure and business contributes the most to a positive image of China, 31 percent of them consider that the most influencing factor is the cost of products, while only 5 percent of Zimbabwean believe it has been the support in international affairs and 4 percent claimed it is the non-interference in internal affairs.²³ By contrast, only 9 percent of Zimbabweans consider that China is taking jobs or business from locals.²⁴ For these reasons, it seems improbable that the people of Zimbabwe are pushing the new government to get a rapprochement to the West as a strategy to disengage with China.

Since the explanations described above remain insufficient to explain the significance and the approach to China planned by the government of Emmerson Mnangagwa as it also looks for a re-engagement with the West, in the following section, I provide a different analysis with the aim of elucidating the importance of the cooperation with the PRC for the current administration of Zimbabwe.

The New Foreign Policy of Zimbabwe

In order to understand the foreign policy of the current Zimbabwean administration, it is essential to say that after internal disputes in the government of Robert Mugabe and his ex-vice-president Emmerson Mnangagwa, on November 14, 2017, a military takeover and mass demonstrations made Robert Mugabe resign to the presidency of Zimbabwe.

This paved the way for Mnangagwa to be sworn as state-in-waiting president of this African country on November 24 2017. Then, after the general elections were held in 2018, he was sworn as chief of state with 50.8 percent of the popular vote. These elections were remarkable because this is the first time in 16 years that the government allowed the EU, U.S. and the Commonwealth to monitor the election events in the country,²⁵ which could be interpreted as an initial sign of the new administration to reopen talks with the Western countries with regard to the restrictions imposed in the early 2000s.

In the inaugural speech of President Mnangagwa in 2017, he stressed that his administration's main driver would be the country's economic development. On the agenda of the foreign policy, he put emphasis on the attraction of Foreign Direct Investment, exports, the establishment of Special Economic Zones, the creation of a re-engagement

22 Mogopodi Lekorwe, et al., *China's growing presence in Africa wins largely positive popular reviews*, Report of Afrobarometer Round 6, Dispatch no. 122, October 24 (2016), 1-31, https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ab_r6_dispatchno122_perceptions_of_china_in_africa1.pdf.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 European Union Election Observation Mission, *Zimbabwe 2018*, October 11, 2018, Zimbabwe, https://eeas.europa.eu/election-observation-missions/eom-zimbabwe-2018_en.

program with all the nations of the world, commitment to honoring the debts, and active interest to settle new relationships.²⁶

This is important because, in the following months, President Mnangagwa would start a series of activities related to the expansion of the foreign relationships of Zimbabwe. Remarkably, the first trip he did outside of Africa as chief of state took place in April 2018, when he paid a state visit to Beijing, intending to meet with President Xi Jinping in order to express his gratitude for all the support given in the aftermath of the Western sanctions. Besides, he expressed his interest in reinforcing the economic ties and investment with China, including participating in the Belt Road Initiative.²⁷

Under the framework of this trip, the Chinese and the Zimbabwean governments agreed upon the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership cooperation between their countries in areas of trade, investment, technology, telecommunication, infrastructure, and people-to-people exchanges. Likewise, President Xi Jinping called on “Western countries and organizations to improve relations with Zimbabwe at an early date.”²⁸

Therefore, under the current government, the relationship between the PRC and Zimbabwe shows signs of being promoted and strengthened even more than the previous years despite Harare’s interest in reengaging with the West. Moreover, it is worth saying that the Chinese administration seems not to consider the re-engagement policy as an actual competition with the United States or the European Union.

During Mnangagwa’s inaugural speech as elected chief of state in August 2018,²⁹ he mentioned that the strategic sectors to improve the national economy are agriculture, mining, manufacturing, infrastructure, and tourism. Concomitantly, health, education, water and sanitation infrastructure are priorities in the social services sector.

Thus, despite the shift of government in Zimbabwe, China remains a strategic partner to Harare since many of the direct investments, loans, and financial aid have been largely destined to the most relevant sectors established by the current administration. For instance, most of the grants aim to develop infrastructure for energy generation and supply, while water supply and sanitation have received the most considerable amount of concessional loans.

Concerning Chinese commercial loans, the most considerable amount of money, which is estimated at USD 341,300,000.00, has been provided to social infrastructures, such

26 Emmerson Mnangagwa, “President Mnangagwa’s inauguration speech in full,” *Chronicle*, November 25, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/president-mnangagwas-inauguration-speech-in-full/>.

27 Yuliang Zhang and Gretinah Machingura, “Interview: Zimbabwe seeks deeper economic ties with China to boost economy, says President Mnangagwa,” *Xinhua Net*, April 01, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/01/c_137080600.htm.

28 Mengjie, “China, Zimbabwe agree to establish comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation,” *Xinhua Net*, April 02, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/03/c_137086164.htm.

29 Emmerson Mnangagwa, *Inauguration Speech by the Incoming President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Comrade Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa*, August 26, 2018, Harare, <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/ff7b7050/files/uploaded/HE%20INAUGURATION%20SPEECH.pdf>.

as the rehabilitation of Zimbabwe's aging water treatment and distribution, the upgrade and expansion of the Victoria Falls airport and the expansion of the state-owned mobile network NetOne. Agriculture and Health are the second and third sectors to receive the most considerable amount of loans, respectively.³⁰

Moreover, the principal sectors with the presence of Chinese foreign direct investment are energy generation and supply, which mainly refers to the construction of hydropower infrastructure, mining, industry, and agriculture.³¹ This makes it likely that the current administration of Zimbabwe will continue to seek deeper collaborations with the government of the PRC, since the infrastructure projects are directly related to the development of its national economy.

In fact, during the period 2017-2019, there have been new Chinese aid grants, loans, and investments in Zimbabwe that account for strengthening this bilateral relationship. For example, in terms of grants, China contributed USD 47,058,000.00 to the sectors of health, agriculture, government, and emergency response, and it provided concessional loans for transport with a total amount of USD 153 million.³²

Regarding FDI, there is a large Chinese manufacturing company that, since 2018 was established in Zimbabwe to produce ceramic. It intends to employ 1,600 to 1,700 local workers, including supervisors and general workers and the total estimated amount of investment is USD 120 million.³³

Furthermore, in 2019 there have been new and large direct investments in the construction of hydropower plants that intend to expand the sewage treatment plants, to upgrade and rehabilitate distribution networks, especially in eleven high-density suburbs, and to construct new water pumping in reservoirs, as well as the implementation of water and wastewater projects.³⁴

Therefore, this evidence is consistent with the official speeches of both Chinese and Zimbabwean governments about the interest of both countries to continue with the bilateral economic engagement in areas of shared benefits and it also means that the relationship between the PRC and the administration of Robert Mugabe was not focused on the benefit of the Zimbabwean ruling elite, but in the needs and priority sectors of national development.

30 Since there is not an integral official document about the Chinese loans given to Zimbabwe, this amount has been calculated using different sources, such as the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Zimbabwe, the Secretariat of the Chinese Follow-up Committee of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the International Monetary Fund, the OECD and some articles published in newspapers of China and Zimbabwe, respectively.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Tonderayi Mukeredzi, "Chinese investors establish ceramic tile manufacturing company in Zimbabwe," *China Daily*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201910/15/WS5da52c23a310cf3e3557086a.html>.

34 Tonderayi Mukeredzi, "Chinese enterprises to help end Zimbabwe's chronic water problems," *China Daily*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201910/15/WS5da52c23a310cf3e3557086a.html>.

On these matters, it is essential to say that they have consistently provided large amounts of aid to Zimbabwe in the past years despite the European Union and the American governments' sanctions. According to the National Budget Statements published by the Zimbabwean's government in 2018³⁵ and 2019,³⁶ the most extensive aid funding for development came from the United States. Although there have been recent debates about China's exact amount, it is considered that nowadays is the second-largest funder of aid for development of Zimbabwe.³⁷

In the case of the aid provided by the U.S., it is mainly focused on the health sector, management of programs (operation costs) and democracy, human rights, and governance. Other grants are devoted to humanitarian assistance, economic development, education, peace and security, and the environment. However, there are no grants directly related to infrastructure.³⁸ This is worth noting because that means that the aid provided by the Chinese government is different from the one that comes from the U.S., which reinforces the idea that despite the current intentions of re-engagement to the West, the aid provided by China remains strategic for the development of this African country.

Final Remarks

The bilateral relationship between China and Zimbabwe is of great relevance to the national economy of the latter because the financial aid provided by the PRC is targeted to strategic sectors that the current government wants to develop in order to reach its national economic goals, such as infrastructure, agriculture, mining, manufacturing, health, education, water, and sanitation.

Moreover, since China remains the prominent foreign direct investor in Zimbabwe, the administration of President Emmerson Mnangagwa will likely continue to pursue a stronger relationship with the PRC in order to attract more Chinese direct investment into the country. Therefore, even if the current government tries to reengage with the West as part of its national strategy of economic development, that does not mean that Harare would intend to distance itself from the PRC, which has proved to be a strategic political

35 Ministry of Finance and Economic Development of Zimbabwe, *The 2019 National Budget Statement 'Austerity for Prosperity' Presented to the Parliament of Zimbabwe*, November 22, 2018, Harare, http://www.zimtreasury.gov.zw/index.php?option=com_phocadownload&view=category&id=54&Itemid=787.

36 Ministry of Finance and Economic Development of Zimbabwe, *The 2020 National Budget Statement 'Gearing for Higher Productivity, Growth and Job Creation' Presented to the Parliament of Zimbabwe*, November 14, 2019, Harare, http://www.zimtreasury.gov.zw/index.php?option=com_phocadownload&view=category&id=54&Itemid=787 (accessed December 21, 2019)

37 The debates emerged because the Zimbabwean government published in the 2020 National Budget Statement that the aid funding received from China in 2019 accounted for USD 3,881,500.00. Nevertheless, the Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe argued that the actual amount provided were USD 136.8 million. In the end, the Zimbabwean government acknowledged the mistake, which makes China the second largest aid donor in 2019.

38 U.S. Foreign Assistance, *Zimbabwe: Foreign Assistance*, 2019, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/explore/country/Zimbabwe>.

and economic partner for more than fifty years now.

There are signs that the relationship between the PRC and Zimbabwe is being promoted and strengthened even more than the previous years under the administration of Robert Mugabe. At the same time, the evidence shows that the Chinese government does not consider Zimbabwe's re-engagement policy as an actual competition with the United States or the European Union because China and the West's economic presence in Harare have been focused on different fields.

For instance, the U.S.'s aid has been mainly focused on the health sector, management of programs (operation costs) and democracy, human rights and governance, and other grants provided to humanitarian assistance, economic development, education, peace and security and the environment. By contrast, the Chinese grants are allocated to develop infrastructure for energy generation and supply, while water supply and sanitation have received an extremely substantial amount of concessional loans. Further, Chinese FDI is invested in energy generation and supply, mainly referring to the construction of hydropower infrastructure, mining, industry and agriculture.

Besides, it is essential to note that despite the sanctions imposed by the European Union and the American government, they have consistently provided large amounts of aid to Zimbabwe in the past years, where the most extensive aid funding for development comes from the United States. Moreover, although there have been recent debates about China's exact amount, it is considered that nowadays is the second-largest funder of aid for the development of Zimbabwe.

However, the current administration of Zimbabwe nowadays faces the challenge of providing attractiveness and certainty to foreign investors in order to increase its exports, as well as the presence of Chinese companies and from other countries in its territory. The end of the government of Robert Mugabe may be appealing for investors -particularly from those that come from Western countries- but Mnangagwa will have to take decisive actions in order to implement a proactive foreign policy that promotes a renewed image of Zimbabwe to the world.

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