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Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy under Mnangagwa

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Abstract

Under the Presidency of Emmerson Mnangagwa, Zimbabwe's foreign policy has been characterised by the desire to 're-engage' with the west with a view to securing the removal of sanctions and encouraging an inflow of investment. In this it has recieved the strong backing of the AU and SADC states and a renewal of traditional ties of solidarity. However, Western reaction to the violence meted out by the regime to its opponents following the July 2018 election has reinforced the reluctance of the US and EU to remove sanctions until Zimbabwe displays progress towards democracy and has even begun to test the patience of its neighbours. Correspondingly, the Zimbabwean government has placed renewed faith in the 'Look East Policy', only to find that China is seeking to match its growing investments with tighter control.

Keywords

Zimbabwe, SADC, Mugabeism, Mnangagwa, Moyo, ZANU-PF, Second Republic, re-engagement, sanctions, Commonwealth

Introduction

> Through the engagement and re-engagement policy, we are opening a new chapter in our relations with the world, underpinned by mutual respect, shared principles and common values. We look forward to playing a positive and constructive role as a free, democratic, transparent and responsible member of the family of nations. (Mnangagwa, 2018a, 8-9)
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> My government, cognisant that the world is not one basket and encouraged by the goodwill and support we have received to date, will continue to accelerate the international engagement and re-engagement policy, underpinned by mutual respect, peaceful development, shared principles and common values. (Mnangagwa, 2018b, 5)
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> Zimbabwe looks forward to playing a positive and constructive role as a free, democratic, transparent, prosperous and responsible member of the family of nations. We are committed to strengthen dialogue, cooperation and partnerships, underpinned by mutual respect, common values and shared principles. (Mnangagwa, 2018c, 9)

Mnangagwa's likely foreign policy as potential head of state was examined way back in mid-2016, a moment when he was regarded as Mugabe's closest confidante and anticipated successor (Tinhu, 2016). The analysis ended with the prognosis that his strategic pro-Western

orientation might end in a fundamental clash with Mugabe's anti-imperialism. His guiding policy directions were categorised as following the motto "zero problems with the West". They would be motivated by seeking to find arrangements with Brussels, London and Washington which would allow a return to some degree of normalisation, the supposed maxim being "generous with promises of good business" to soften the West's hostile stance and create renewed interest in economic gains. But at the same time, the article also argued that this ambition would be counteracted by the fact that his "presidency (would) be predicated on authoritarianism given his unpopularity", and that his rule would accordingly probably set him on a collision course with these Western capitals. It was therefore predicted that Zimbabwe under a Mnangagwa government would need to continue its heavy reliance on the big power with which it had maintained good relations, namely the Chinese government in Beijing. "Appeasing the communist state, while courting the West", it was diagnosed, "(would) require delicate diplomatic skills that he might not possess" (Tinhu, 2016).

Mnangagwa's road to the highest office was not as straight forward as anticipated at that time. Nonetheless, it ultimately reached it final destination. However, on the way, it had required significant detours which had made the Chinese connection and backing even more important than had been anticipated. Nonetheless, this did not damage the cautious hope (bordering at times on expectation) in the West that the end of Mugabe's rule would open windows of opportunity not only for improved human and political rights domestically, but also for Western interests, notably in the country's natural resources. After all, part of Mnangagwa's new mantra was the slogan "Zimbabwe is open for business" (Ndimande and Moyo, 2018). The linkage between international relations and renewed efforts to overcome the economic isolation and dependence was also reflected in the buzzword of a "new dispensation". This was to include the promotion of the foreign policy portfolio into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, thereby creating an explicit link between foreign and economic policy.

But to what extent did a modified rhetoric signify a principled shift in policy away from what has been dubbed "Mugabeism" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015)? Commenting on Mnangagwa's 2018 speech at the United Nations General Assembly, Zulu (2018) suggested, "Zimbabwe's foreign policy has not changed". While observers seem to agree that his tone is markedly more measured and less prone to theatricality than that of his predecessor, the substance suggests few if any basic changes. Despite "an appeal for acceptance by world leaders and attracting investments", as diagnosed by one of the commentators, the impression has remained that "there is no political will to change the governance culture, it's just a smokescreen speech" (Zulu, 2018).

After three years in office, it is already possible to suggest that Zulu's predictions are correct, and that Mnangagwa's attempts to balance Zimbabwe's relations with the international friends of the Mugabe regime against those of the 'hostile' west are already in disarray. A deepening economic crisis combined with a brutal crackdown on the government's domestic opponents have resulted in manifestly disappointed hopes, to the increasing embarrassment and despair of Zimbabwe's neighbours and the renewed determination of the US, United Kingdom (UK) and European Union (EU) to maintain pressures upon Harare for both political and economic reforms. We pursue this argument

here by examining Zimbabwe's relations with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the West, including the Commonwealth, before exploring the changing nature of ties with China.

Zimbabwe's Relations with SADC: Straining solidarity?

Feted for their liberationist credentials, Mugabe and ZANU-PF received a warm welcome from neighbouring states within the southern African region. Following independence in 1980, the new government played an integral part of the formation the Southern African Development Cooperation Conference (SADCC) and its subsequent transformation into the SADC, then oriented to the final liberation of the continent by the defeat of apartheid. But once that had been achieved in 1994, relations within SADC were to be strained by Mugabe's rivalry with Nelson Mandela, whose status overshadowed that of all other "struggle heroes". The by-product was that of forged intimate bonds of friendship, based upon a shared resentment of the South African leader's prominence, with President Sam Nujoma and Namibia under the former liberation movement SWAPO (Melber, 2015).

Zimbabwe's "fast track" land reform and the emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) as an opposition which threatened ZANU-PF's dominance from the turn of the century coincided with Mandela's retirement. Subsequently, under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki, South Africa was to pursue a policy of 'quiet diplomacy' whereby principled critique of Zimbabwe's increasingly authoritarian governance under Mugabe was subordinated to pragmatism (Lipton, 2009). Despite differences in their individual historical trajectories, the similarities and close alliances between former liberation movements throughout the region were to shape SADC's regional approach to Zimbabwe (Southall, 2013). The Mugabe regime could rely on SADC solidarity (Botswana excepted) and the regional body's willingness to close eyes, ears and mouths regarding its march into autocratic rule based on state terror. It was also founded upon the continued lionizing of Mugabe as a "struggle icon" throughout much of the continent. This was reinforced by Pan-African enthusiasm for the expulsion of white farmers from African land from the early 2000s which conveniently ignored the spiral into authoritarianism and economic decline with which it was closely associated. Nonetheless, the more Zimbabwe began to become a parody of a failed state, the more the ageing Mugabe became a continental embarrassment, and the more Zimbabwe became an economic and reputational drag upon Southern Africa as a whole, the more the region began to look forward to his inevitable departure. Hence it was that when it came to the crunch in the de facto coup of November 2017 that a warm if wary welcome was extended to Mnangagwa as his replacement, even though the African Union (AU) and SADC together took pains to gloss over the military's intervention as merely assisting a constitutional change of government. Mugabe was to discover to his cost that regional solidarity with ZANU-PF as a former fellow liberation movement far outranked sympathy with a President who had long outstayed his time in office. In any case, Mnangagwa was a known quantity, and seemingly held out some welcome prospect of change.

Mnangagwa was anything but a newcomer to the sub-regional power circles and could rely on immediate acceptance and support. SADC, as he stressed in his inauguration speech, "is our home … There can never be any doubt to our intentions to SADC, itself the fount of our foreign policy." (*Chronicle,* 2017) Several other presidents and former presidents of SADC

Member States were in attendance of the ceremony, visibly endorsing the transfer of power. Mnangagwa followed thorough with a series of visits to neighbouring countries in 2018: Angola, Namibia and Mozambique in January, followed by Botswana in February, and the DRC in March. Most notably, he received a red-carpet welcome in Gaborone by Ian Khama, who had made no secret of his aversion to Mugabe's regime. Botswana extended Mnangagwa an olive branch which was firmly seized and the country's new Head of State Mokgweetsi Masisi made a visit to Zimbabwe in early April for talks with his counterpart. On 17 March, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa, himself newly installed in office, had visited Harare for a consultative meeting "intended to strengthen economic, political and social relations". (Kamete, 2019, 527).

The open displays of friendship and solidarity underlined that both the AU and SADC were likely to remain tolerant of Zimbabwe's domestic politics. Both organisations had been happy to gloss over the military's de facto displacement of Mugabe as a constitutional change of government, despite the fact that it manifestly brought their principles regarding such matters into question. Likewise, they were to display no hesitation in endorsing the legitimacy of the elections in Zimbabwe at the end of July 2018, which returned ZANU-PF to power (despite the regime's customary manipulation of rules of fair play), and thereafter refused to critically engage with the violence which erupted in its wake. South Africa, for instance, merely 'noted' the protest action in Zimbabwe before going on to express confidence that the measures being taken by the Zimbabwean government "would resolve the situation" (*TimesLive*, 2019).

Their governments' limp reaction was to earn the strong condemnation of the SADC Council of NGOs, which on 24 January 2019, publicly deplored the "failure by the leadership of the country to put in practice the values, principles and ethos espoused by the constitution and regional SADC protocols and continental instruments that promote good governance and respect for fundamental human rights" (*forus*, 2019). To the frustration of regional society, this was simply ignored by SADC's governments. As an editorial in *The Namibian* (2019) opined at the end of January 2019:

> Zimbabwe is dragging SADC down. No wonder SADC has failed to show any progress of economic and social integration, despite that being its reason for existence.
> *The Namibian* wanted to hear what the position of the SADC chairman [our very own president Hage Geingob] is on the crisis there. Zilch, Nada, Zero. We were referred to the secretariat in Botswana.
> If our president cannot even issue a statement as chair of that regional body, then who is to provide direction that is so badly needed to revive the failed state called Zimbabwe?
> Step up, SADC. Step up, chairman Geingob. We cannot afford having you all as leaders twiddling while parts of the region burn down.

In direct contrast to such concerns, SADC in early February 2019 unconditionally supported the government. Indeed, after being briefed by Mnangagwa at a SADC Consultative Meeting on 9 February 2019, SADC chairman Geingob issued a statement in which the blame for the post-election violence was placed foursquare upon the shoulders of those opposing the government:

> some internal groups, in particular NGOs, supported by external forces, have continued with efforts to destabilise the country. … violent demonstrators rode on the back of increases in fuel prices, to

> implement their intention to destabilise the country. The demonstrations resulted in the destruction of property and loss of life. (…)
> The SADC Heads of State and Government further noted that the Government's efforts to transform the economy and bring about prosperity to the people of Zimbabwe are negatively affected by the illegal sanctions that were imposed on the country since the early 2000. SADC expresses its solidarity with the Government and the people of the Republic of Zimbabwe and calls upon the international community to unconditionally lift all sanctions imposed on the country. (SADC, 2019a)

Throughout the year, the call for an end to sanctions was taken up by the regional body. The official communique of the annual ordinary SADC Summit in Dar es Salaam stated:

> 12. Summit noted the adverse impact on the economy of Zimbabwe and the region at large, of prolonged economic sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe, and expressed solidarity with Zimbabwe, and called for the immediate lifting of the sanctions to facilitate socio-economic recovery in the country.
>
> 13. Summit declared the 25th October as the date on which SADC Member States can collectively voice their disapproval of the sanctions through various activities and platforms until the sanctions are lifted. (SADC, 2019b)

As a critical observer commented:

> By openly and unreservedly siding with an increasingly authoritarian government masquerading as a reformed and progressive "Second Republic", SADC is making light of a pressing and ever-expansive need to enact serious political, media and security reforms in Zimbabwe out of "brotherly" love.
> (…)
> A distorted brand of pan-Africanism, the voluntary, self-gratifying need to maintain old, wartime relationships trumps people-centred necessities and expressions, will obviously fail and simply cause further widespread social, economic and political instability in southern Africa. (Mhaka, 2019)

Following the Summit decision, 25 October was marked as "SADC Day of Solidarity with the Republic of Zimbabwe". However, what was notable was how this failed to resonate amongst citizens throughout the region. Most notably, the "anti-sanctions march" held in Harare on what was declared a public holiday, was poorly attended, despite pressure and mobilisation from the government, and was branded "an embarrassing flop" (Chikohomero, 2019a). The leader of the Freezim Congress, one of the vocal opposition parties, was to disdainfully dismiss the march as "meaningless" and the SADC initiative as "solidarity by a group of clueless people" (Mhetu, 2019).

Despite all these indications of regime solidarity with Zimbabwe, there remains much concern about the extent of the country's collapse and its impact upon the region. Ramaphosa was to be vocal at the World Economic Forum in Davos in calling for an end to sanctions, arguing that these were damaging to Zimbabwe's prospects of recovery (Southall, 2019). His position manifestly reflected his government's view that it could not afford the total collapse of the Zimbabwean economy. Following years of Zimbabwe's crisis, South Africa remained host to anything up to 2 million Zimbabweans - although the estimates vary significantly and the truer figure may be less than 700,000 (Africa Check, 2020). While many of these Zimbabweans make a significant contribution to the South African economy, they also contribute to the burgeoning numbers of South Africa's unemployed, and stoke tensions within poorer communities where foreigners are too often as competition for jobs and blamed for consuming scarce resources. In addition, there are still many South African companies operating in Zimbabwe. While mining firms (especially in platinum) are reportedly still making

handsome profits, others – such as Nampak (packaging), PPC (cement), Barlowworld (equipment distribution), Pick n' Pay and Pepkor (both retail) - are struggling from Zimbabwe's hyperinflation, foreign exchange shortages, power outages and lack of consumer demand, and are confronting rapidly falling profits or serious losses. Pepkor announced its withdrawal from the country in November 2019 (Brown, 2019). As a result of these connections, South Africa appears eager to extend what help it can to Zimbabwe without simultaneously losing what financial leverage it possesses to pressure its counterpart's policies.

South Africa declined a request from Zimbabwe for a bail-out of Rand 1.2 billion made on December 26, 2018. Nonetheless, the two governments entered discussions how to work together to settle Zimbabwe's debt to the IMF, World Bank and the Paris Club. According to the Zimbabwean Finance Minister Mthuli Ncube, Zimbabwe had a total national debt of US$ 16.9 billion, of which its external debt was 7.4 billion, with 5.6 billion in arrears. 1.3 billion was owed to the World Bank, 680 million to the African Development Bank, 308 million to the European Investment Bank and 2.8 billion to the Paris Club (composed of individual countries). South African Finance Minister Tito Mboweni indicated that South Africa might extend an existing credit facility of nearly Rand 100 million and would assist Zimbabwe's bid to have its international debt written off, noting that Mnangagwa had visited Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan looking for further financial assistance. However, Mboweni ruled out Zimbabwe's adopting the Rand as it did not have adequate resources to do so but supported the establishment of a new currency as an aid to the country's resolving its problems (Fabricius, 2019).

Mutual collaboration was similarly the theme when Ramaphosa visited Harare for the annual meeting of the South African-Zimbabwe Bi-National Commission in March 2019, welcoming the decision of the EU to lift sanctions on members of the ZANU-PF administration the previous month (South African Government, 2019). Relations were also kept on track by payment to Eskom of a US$ 10 million debt by the Zimbabwean state electricity (Zesa) in July 2019 (Newsday, 2019). However, Zesa continued to owe power producers in South Africa and Mozambique an outstanding US$ 70 million, and by early 2020 was negotiating to borrow the money from the African Export-Import Bank in an urgent bid to keep the country's lights on (Bloomberg, 2020). By now, Zesa was able to supply Zimbabweans with electricity for up to only six hours a day, not least because the extended chronic drought had massively reduced the region's capacity to generate hydro-power. However, as Eskom in South Africa is in the throes of its own financial crisis, the pressure on Zesa to pay its bills will remain.

For all that the South African government was eager for relations to remain on an even keel, it was to be compelled by events to despatch envoys to Harare in August 2020 in order to press restraint upon the Mnangagwa government, which was confronting its latest crisis by a brutal crackdown on opponents, journalists and the freedoms of speech, association and protest. An already devastated economy had been plunged into even further distress by Covid-19, with up to 800,000 of Zimbabwe's still resident population said to be on the verge of starvation. A bankrupt government was increasingly unable to pay its employees, with doctors and nurses taking to the streets to demand payment in US dollars (rather than the re-introduced Zimbabwe dollar) in a context of rapidly rising inflation. Mounting popular protest was leading to calls for the establishment of a National Transitional Authority, this calling into

question not merely the legitimacy but the sustainability of a regime for which even military support was said to be fraying. Faced by mounting international concern, more Zimbabweans fleeing south, and an upsurge of illegal smuggling and trafficking of goods across the border, South Africa was constrained to act. And it did so in time honoured fashion, by sending envoys to Harare to plead with the Zimbabwean government to behave. However, when Sydney Mufamadi, a former government minister and Baleka Mbete, former speaker of the National Assembly (accompanied by Advocate Ngoako Ramatlhodi and diplomat Ndumiso Ntshinge) met with Mnangagwa on 9 August 2020, they were – by all accounts – subjected to a presidential harangue and were refused permission to meet with the opposition (Southall 2020).

Mnangagwa's contemptuous dismissal of South Africa's latest diplomatic foray will have done little to calm growing dismay in Pretoria about what the worsening crisis north of the Limpopo will bring in its wake. Naledi Pandor, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, is reported to have hinted at a possible 'significant pivot' in South Africa's relations with Zimbabwe. The 'political dynamics' which were inextricably linked to the economy would need to be confronted 'simultaneously' along with the possibility of initiating 'an inclusive political dialogue'. However, the latest mission to Harare demonstrated amply that, while South African patience might be wearing thin, the Ramaphosa government as yet lacked the appetite and resolve to back diplomacy with muscle.

It may be in part that South Africa, and perhaps SADC more generally, is aware of developing dissonance between factions allied to Mnangagwa and Vice-President Constantino Chiwenga respectively and is reluctant to engage in any activity which could be interpreted as assisting 'regime change'. Nonetheless, the ZANU-PF government must now be aware that liberation movement solidarity may be beginning to wear increasingly thin (Fabricius 2020). The virtual SADC Heads of State Summit on 17 August 2020, however, showed not yet any inclination to measure and judge the Mnangagwa regime against its normative frameworks, despite a #ZimbabweanLivesMatter campaign and demands by the regional civil society and human rights agencies urging the Summit to address the deteriorating situation. Rather, it preferred to ignore the crisis and the affront against the South African emissaries a few days earlier by remaining silent. Instead, the Summit Statement praised Mnangagwa as outgoing chairperson of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation for his role in promoting regional peace during his term (New Zimbabwe, 2020).

The West and sanctions

Sanctions were imposed upon Zimbabwe by the US and EU from the early 2000s in response to the regime's callous disregard of human rights and its abuses of democracy. Both the US and EU were eager, however, to always stress that these were not sanctions imposed upon the country as such, but rather upon specific individuals within the ZANU-PF and their associated companies. Inadvertently, however, in applying these sanctions, the West provided the regime with excuse to blame the country's economic woes upon others, and to claim that their real objective was 'regime change'. This cry was to be taken up by Mnangagwa.

At his inauguration as President on 24 November 2017, Mnangagwa declared his intention to open a new chapter in the country's history.

> … some bigger nations have attempted to make us bend to their dictates, working feverishly to confine us to the pariah status. We have successfully maintained good relations with the preponderant majority of the family of nations. In truth, we never deserved to be maligned and/or economically and politically mistreated. I stand here today, to say that our country is already (sic) for a sturdy re-engagement programme with all the nations of the world.
> As we bear no malice to any other nation, we ask those who have punished us in the past to consider their economic and political sanctions against us. Whatever misunderstandings may have subsided in the past, let these make way to new beginning which sees us relating to one another in multi-layered, mutually beneficial ways as equal and reciprocally dependent partners. In this global world, no nation is, can or need be an island, one unto itself. Isolation has never been splendid or viable; solidarity and partnership are and will always be the way. We are ready to embrace each and all, on principles of mutual respect and common humanity. We will take definite steps to re-engage those Nations who have had issues with us in the past. (Chronicle*,* 2017)

However, the US was unimpressed by the rhetoric, and the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Amendment Act (ZIDERA) was signed into law in August 2018 by President Trump. Renewing the 2001 ZIDERA, it "effectively extended US restrictive measures against targeted individuals and companies" (Kamete, 2019, 529). Furthermore, in March 2019, US sanctions were renewed under the National Emergencies Act. These apply to 141 individuals, as well as some 56 companies (some state-owned) and some other enterprises (including farms), with which US citizens and businesses are prohibited to do business.

In contrast, the EU demonstrated more willingness to re-engage, and in February 2019, the EU foreign ministers agreed that there would be no sanctions imposed on members of the current government. Contrary to what was frequently maintained, they declared, there were no economic sanctions by the EU: "The individual measures still in place concern a very limited number of persons linked to the previous regime and consist of an arms export ban, assets freeze and travel restrictions", a spokesperson explained. "These restrictions have no impact on the economy of the country", the spokesperson added. "Anything suggesting the opposite is wrong" (BBC, 2019). Furthermore, in October 2019 the EU announced another considerable aid package, bringing financial support during the year to 67.5 million Euro, totalling 287 million Euro since 2014. As its Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development declared, this made the EU Zimbabwe's biggest donor and "is another testimony of EU's unwavering support to the people of Zimbabwe". As he stated further: "In a difficult socio-economic time, we will strengthen our support to critical sectors such as primary health care as well as resilience building" (European Commission, 2019).

If this was welcome news in Harare, the renewal of targeted sanctions by the US meant that the changes in EU strategy were downplayed. Accordingly, when Mnangagwa addressed the United Nations General Assembly in New York on 26 September 2019, he lashed out at:

> the continued albatross of illegal economic sanctions. These sanctions constitute a denial of the human rights of the people of Zimbabwe to develop and improve their quality of life. Furthermore, the sanctions are slowing down our progress, inhibiting our economic recovery and punishing the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.
> (…)

> My country applauds the Southern African community, the African Union and all who stand with us in demanding the immediate and unconditional removal of these illegal sanctions.
> Those that imposed the illegal sanctions must heed this call and lift them, now. Cooperation is a win-win game. Sanctions are a lose-lose game. Zimbabwe deserves a restart (Mnangagwa 2019)

Subsequently, at the culmination of the anti-sanctions' day rally in March 2020, he denounced sanctions as a cancer and proclaimed: "Enough is Enough, remove them. Remove these sanctions now!"

Given its recent concessions, the EU was not impressed. Following the anti-sanctions' rally, the EU ambassador in Harare declared:

> Lifting of the (remaining) sanctions is not decided on street marches or social media campaigns; this will not divert attention on the situation on the ground. Frankly speaking, there are a lot of other issues challenging Zimbabweans that would warrant attention than the EU restrictive measures.
> We are not moved by the march at all. A stadium event would not be in any way decisive. … Zimbabwe is not where it is because of the so-called sanctions, but years of mismanagement of the economy and corruption. (Mushava, 2019)

This was followed up by the EU launching a hashtag #DidYouKnow on its Twitter page (@euinzim) which explained that its sanctions are not in the way of trade flows but target a few leading party cadres and companies linked to human rights violations.

The US reaction was even more robust. After the US Embassy (@usembassyharare) presented short video clips on "facts about the targeted sanctions", the Ambassador dismissed any responsibility for the "catastrophic mismanagement by those in power and the government's abuse of its own citizens" (Gerald, 2019). In addition, however, in an obvious snub to the march, State Security minister Owen Ncube was added to the sanctions list for leading State-sanctioned human rights abuses under the new dispensation. Thereafter, too, US Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair Jim Risch accused Mnangagwa of trying to deflect blame for the country's economic crisis by blaming Western sanctions. Rather, he advised: "The ruling party should focus on the needs of the Zimbabwean people instead of their bad governance, corruption and State capture." And addressing SADC's solidarity he suggested: "Regional institutions should also focus their energies on supporting democracy, not kleptocratic regimes." (Mushava, 2019)

Enraged by the Ambassador's remarks, Foreign Minister Moyo called him an "opposition citadel" and threatened to cut diplomatic ties, declaring:

> We genuinely seek dialogue with all well-meaning countries as part of our re-engagement efforts but our openness and the innate generosity of spirit of all Zimbabweans should not be taken for granted and should certainly not be abused. We have the means to bring all this to an end, should we deem it necessary or should we pushed too far.
> The unfortunate statement made by the US ambassador on the occasion of the SADC anti-sanction day on October 25 exhibited a clear contravention of acceptable diplomatic etiquette, was grossly partisan in nature, and reflected not only a worrying lack of respect for the host government but was also abusive of the hospitality of the people of Zimbabwe as a whole. (Samaita, 2019)

In sum, after nearly three years in office, it seems that Mnangagwa's militant approach to the sanctions issue has failed to bring any substantial reward. Indeed, rather than trying to

build on the EU's concessions and perhaps to drive a wedge between the EU and the US, it appears to have reinforced rather than closed polarities. As suggested by Chikohomero (2019b):

> Negotiations and not grandstanding would be a better solution to the sanctions issue. SADC should act as a guarantor for a re-engagement process. This should include a clear sanctions removal roadmap with milestones and thresholds where the US and EU can begin incrementally lifting the sanctions.
> To ask for the complete removal of sanctions in the face of a continued clampdown of civil liberties would be more like rewarding and incentivising impunity.

Return to the Commonwealth?

Zimbabwe was suspended from the Commonwealth for human rights violations related to the presidential elections and the "fast track" land reform in 2002. In December 2003, Mugabe withdrew Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth before the suspension could be extended. On his arrival in power, Mnangagwa expressed his wish that Zimbabwe would re-join the Commonwealth at the earliest opportunity. On the basis of interviews conducted in Harare in mid-January 2018, Sue Onslow viewed this as motivated by the hope that Commonwealth reengagement would accelerate the removal of US sanctions and the few remaining EU measures, which were still deemed to taint the Zimbabwean business environment. Furthermore, she argued, if successful, it might detoxify Western pressure for change and suggest the opening of a new chapter in Zimbabwe's international relations. Commonwealth membership was perceived as a "low hanging fruit" offering quick diplomatic success as "a kite mark of respectability in the international community" (Onslow, 2018).

The UK does not have the unilateral power to determine membership of the Commonwealth. Nonetheless, it's views and concerns remain highly influential. It was therefore significant that when the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) took place in April 2018, the British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson met his Zimbabwean counterpart Sibusiso Moyo at a side event. The Foreign Office declared in a statement: "The UK would strongly support Zimbabwe's re-entry and a new Zimbabwe that is committed to political and economic reform that works for all its people". However, Johnson also expressed the expectation that the government will deliver "the free and fair elections the people of Zimbabwe deserve and which it has promised" (James, 2018).

Despite these early and hopeful indicators, the prospects of Zimbabwe re-joining the Commonwealth were soon to be dashed by the regime's violent reaction to the protests which followed the elections in July 2018. In early February 2019 the UK's Africa Minister Harriet Baldwin stated before the International Development Committee of the House of Commons that the government would not be in support of Zimbabwe's bid for readmission. This triggered an angry response from Mnangagwa. While attending the AU Summit in Addis Ababa, he pointed out that the application was submitted to the Commonwealth Secretariat and not to the UK, which was "just a member" of the bloc (Ndlovu, 2019).

The British government's position prompted efforts by Zimbabwe to seek assistance elsewhere, Mnangagwa meeting with Patricia Scotland, the Commonwealth Secretary General, on 24 September 2019 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York. As an official Zimbabwean statement claimed the next day, "the process of readmitting

Harare into the Club was being 'accelerated'" (Zimbabwe Government Portal, 2019). Meanwhile, Zimbabwe's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Sibusiso Moyo, was seeking out another ally. In a blog article published in the Indian *Economic Times* he suggested common interests between the Modi government and Zimbabwe. After all, Modi like Mnangagwa, showed renewed interest in the group: "Just as with India, it is the Zimbabwean view today that the Commonwealth offers a ready-made network of countries as a platform for international cooperation in trade, investment, knowledge and mutual assistance." Moyo (2019) ended with the appeal:

> Zimbabwe and India have common cause in the benefits – and new potential – of the Commonwealth. We believe the time has come for us to re-join. And we ask India's help to fast-track this journey.

China as the ally in the East

The origins of Zimbabwe's Look East Policy (LEP) reach back to the years of the liberation war but was to take shape under Mugabe as his regime became increasingly distanced from the West and associated international organisations such as the IMF and World Bank.

The deterioration of Zimbabwe's relations with the West had quickened pace as a direct result of the increase in violence and human rights violations following the fast track land reforms and the rise of the MDC as a political opposition challenging the ZANU-PF rule. It coincided with a growing Chinese economic interest in the resources the continent had to offer for its own rapidly expanding industries, as a potential opportunity for exporting know how and labour for public works and as a potential market for its manufactured goods. Zimbabwe's growing isolation from the West offered a convenient entry point and China soon emerged as a reliable new partner country, proclaiming the bilateral relations as a win-win situation. However, while the strengthened connection was welcome to a regime under siege, China's greater involvement was not spurred by philanthropy but rather by its self-interest. China had become Zimbabwe's top export market in 2015 and accounted for the largest share (74%) of foreign direct investment, and in the same year, it had promised a US$ 4 billion aid and investment package. In addition, it had developed particularly close ties with the Zimbabwe army, from which Mnangagwa's 'Lacoste faction' within ZANU-PF drew its strength. It had sold weapons ranging from small arms to jet fighters in addition to funding the new National Defence College (Bannerjee and Rich, 2017). In short, if China was ready to become a patron, then Zimbabwe had become more than happy to sign up as a client to the emerging global power.

It had been apparent for some time that Beijing was becoming increasingly impatient with Mugabe's senility and his clinging to power. In particular, China had become increasingly concerned about the Mugabe regime's indigenization policy, which required 51 per cent ownership of foreign businesses. Although two Chinese companies, Anjin and Jinan, which were active in the Marange diamond fields, had started operations in 2012 with 51 per cent of their shares owned by Zimbabweans, they had been integrated into the state-owned Zimbabwe Consolidated Diamond Mine in 2015. This had aroused a vehement response from China, which had correspondingly refused to back Mugabe in his crackdown on opposition in 2016. However, the threat to Chinese investments in the diamond mines had also offended the Zimbabwean military which, under the leadership of General Constantino Chiwenga, had

reportedly owned a 30 per cent stake in Anjin. Hence although China was subsequently to deny any involvement in the military intervention which had preceded the transfer of power (although Chiwenga had made an official visit to Beijing from November 8 to 10, 2017), it was widely recognised that it had backed 'Team Lacoste' (as the faction under Mnangagwa was popularly dubbed) to succeed him (Bannerjee and Rich, 2017).

Mnangagwa himself had been exposed to Chinese friendship in his earlier career and upon entering office was full of praise for the ally and recognised the strong bonds by a state visit from 2 to 6 April 2018. As he stated in an interview shortly thereafter:

> Of old friends who stood by Zimbabwe during the hard times, China is one. I'm a graduate of their military academy. Since my inauguration, I paid visits to my peers in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and then on the African continent. But the first visit outside Africa is to China – that is significant. (Smith and Norbrook, 2018)

Mnangagwa's elevation to the presidency may have received China's blessing as the best of all the available options. Nonetheless, strains were soon to appear when it became increasingly apparent that Zimbabwe was unable to service its debts. Rumours that China intended to seize Zimbabwean institutional assets as collateral were quickly dismissed. Nonetheless, China was less than amused by Zimbabwe's liquidity problems and its arrears. As Chan (2018) has pointed out, Chinese loans are increasingly provided by banks rather than the state, and these only stay in business by realising their returns. So what particularly rankled in Beijing was that Zimbabwe's incapacity to pay its dues was deemed to be an outcome of the government's misappropriation of Chinese funds, or simply their being used to balance the books of a mismanaged household. Accordingly, there was need to tighten controls, and this was to culminate in the signing of a currency swap deal in January 2020 following a visit to Harare by Chinese foreign affairs minister Wang Yi.

A currency swap involves the exchange of money in one currency for the same in another, and companies doing business in another country often use it to obtain more favourable loan rates. Yet given Zimbabwe's acute shortage of foreign currency, the agreement simultaneously implied China's greater capacity to control the use of its funds, and to turn the tap of liquidity on or off at short notice. As Finance Minister Ncube was to acknowledge, the currency swap would strengthen (or perhaps require?) its capacity to honour its liabilities to China. And, increasingly, these were many, for unable currently to obtain funding from the West because of its debts, Zimbabwe had become increasingly reliant upon China for the funding of its infrastructural projects (which, funded by concessional loans, are executed by Chinese companies). These are worth more than US$ 2 billion, and include expansion projects for the Victoria Falls and the Harare airports, the Kariba South and the Hwange hydro-power stations, and the building of a new parliament building for a planned new city on the outskirts of Harare (Samaita, 2020). Additionally, it was announced in April 2020 that Zimbabwe's Rio Energy Ltd, a unit of RioZim Ltd, will build a 2,100 megawatt thermal power plant with the China Gezhoubal Group Corporation in northern Zimbabwe at a cost of $3 billion (Marawinyika and Latham, 2020).

Wang was to castigate critics of China's relations with Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular, claiming that Chinese policy was premised upon non-interference in internal affairs and "listening to the voices of Africa". It was an 'all-weather' relationship. Yet had he

been listening more closely, there were more than a few Zimbabwean voices of discontent to be heard. Typical was the public complaint made by an independent MP in mid-2019 about a Chinese company's violation of labour laws in his constituency. He articulated popular resentments virulent among many Zimbabweans when maintaining: "They are causing environmental degradation, they are violating human rights, and are involved in corruption" (Mambondiyani, 2019). The response by the Chinese embassy, issued in a lengthy statement, was notable not only for its disdain of the particular MP, who was accused of slander, but also for its thinly veiled criticism of government policy:

> It is not only logically absurd but also morally untenable to simply blame that Zimbabwe's economic difficulty can be attributed to that China's investment is not good for Zimbabwe. It is universally recognized that whether a country can get rid of poverty and achieve sustainable development mainly relies on its own efforts. (…)
> We sincerely hope that the Zimbabwean side will continue to create a more favourable environment for all foreign direct investment, including Chinese enterprises. (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Zimbabwe, 2019).

Critics of China's growing involvement in Zimbabwe liken it to a new colonialism and criticise the Look East Policy as merely furthering the interests of the political elite (Ojakorotu and Kamidza, 2018, 37). In response, the Chinese government continues to express solidarity with Zimbabwe's rulers by its voting behaviour in the United Nations as well as by open support of the demands to end the Western sanctions (members of the Chinese embassy made great play of attending the anti-sanctions march). However, given the recent strains in the relations with China, there is additional incentive for a re-assessment of relations with the West.

Conclusion: old wine in new bottles?

Under the Mnangagwa government, foreign and economic policy combined around the search for new investments and the ending (or at least the easing) of sanctions by the US and EU. While close ties continued with the allies of the Mugabe regime (in particular China) and both SADC and AU member countries initially remained in loyal support to the new government, Mnangagwa was eager to promote a strategy of "re-engagement" with the West. This suggested a significant shift away from the anti-Western stance and rhetoric of his predecessor. As he declared in an interview in May 2018:

> [With] those countries that stood with us during the hard 18 years, we are consolidating our relationships. But we inform them that we need new friends. Zimbabwe, as small as we are, cannot belong to the West nor belong to the East. (Smith and Norbrook, 2018)

As of writing (September 2020) it is becoming increasingly apparent that Mnangagwa's hopes of re-orienting Zimbabwe's foreign policy have been confounded by his government's own actions. Its brutally repressive response to the mounting economic and political crisis it is confronting at home has increased rather than diminished its chances of overcoming its isolation. It has long been guaranteed support from South Africa and SADC, but there are now signs of growing impatience with Harare in regional capitals. Although Zimbabwe may be 'open for business', there are few indications of interest from investors, however many Memoranda of Understanding about promoting investments and trade were signed in the first flush of international enthusiasm for the ousting of Mugabe. Nor is there

likely to be any substantive change in a post-Covid 19 global economy, when whatever enthusiasm there was for restoring relations with Zimbabwe will have been doused by Western governments' absorption with grappling with their own crises. Indeed, the more that the Mnangagwa government fails to engage democratically with its own citizens, the more it will negate any prospect of re-engagement with the West.

It is indicative that one of the latest acts initiated by Mnangagwa borders to desperation: at the end of July 2020 he signed an agreement with the Commercial Farmers Union of Zimbabwe. The organisation represents the just over 200 remaining white farmers, who numbered 4,500 before being expropriated since the turn of the century in the "fast track" land reform. The agreement commits the government to a voluntary compensation for the improvements and infrastructure on their former property amounting in total to US$ 3.5 billion, half of which is payable within 12 months and the rest within five years (Mavhunga, 2020). But there is no idea how the government wants to raise the money, especially when due to the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic spending priorities should be entirely different (The Economist, 2020). While widely conceived as an effort to ease relations with the West and encourage foreign investments, the immediate responses were at best lukewarm reluctant, while within weeks confusion spread due to conflicting statements by cabinet members as regards to who at the end is really entitled to apply for such compensation (Al Jazeera, 2020). While qualified as "an interesting signal", the Zimbabwean scholar Alex Magaisa cautioned (as quoted in Ehl, 2020):

> At the end of the day, without attending the big issues – the human rights issues, the economic mismanagement, the electoral malpractices, political rights violations and so forth – I don't think Zimbabwe will be able to restore the relations that it wants with the Western community, … We have already seen in the same week of this agreement very vile rhetoric from the Zanu-PF party, calling the American ambassador a thug and threatening to expel him from the country. So it doesn't provide any confidence at all.

Zimbabwean foreign policy remains locked in the parameters of recent times past: looking to regional solidarity, estranged from the West, and increasingly dependent upon China, its most powerful friend. Yet China is a country with its own very clearly defined interests, and history may well prove that these do not align with those of the government and people of Zimbabwe.

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