

Original Paper

Return of the Prodigal Son? Transformations in Zimbabwe's Relations with China Since 1963

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Abstract

The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) introduced Zimbabwe into the realm of China during the liberation struggle as it sourced military support. In line with the Chinese dominance in ZANU, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) guerrilla warfare followed the Maoist doctrine. However, at independence, Zimbabwe joined the British Commonwealth and became a part of the western orbit. Although the country continued to have some form of political and economic linkages with China, the relations were cosmetic. It was at the fall of the cordial relations with the West at the end of the 1990s that Zimbabwe refocused on China. Zimbabwe hinged its survival on Chinese support as it turned full circle to the East. This paper analyses the long historical relations between Zimbabwe and China. It argues that political transformations returned back Zimbabwe to China's hegemony. The paper is based on qualitative research methods and information was gathered primarily through the use of archival data.

Keywords

look east policy, ZANU, liberation struggle, China, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Mutsvangwa, quoted in Tendi (2020, p. 39) stated that, "Mujuru [Nhongo] came to China (in 2005) to seal a mining deal. After he saw Shanghai, he said to me in some amazement that the Chinese have come a very long way. I asked him what he meant. He said the last time he had been to China was in 1976 to get weapons. I was surprised. I asked myself, 'the Chinese gave him the weapons that made him the great commander that he was and after independence he never went back to China again?'. I was shocked this was his first trip to China since 1976."

The relationship that can be derived from the above quote in a way captures how Zimbabwe related

with China from the time it was fighting for independence until the post 2000 era when its relations with the West got sour. Tendi (2020) goes on to note that while the China of Mao was appealing to the guerrillas during the liberation struggle, economically they perceived the West as being the best model, hence the amusement in the post Mao period which captured the Zimbabwean government leaders post the year 2000 when China had been transformed.

The Zimbabwe-China relations were created in the liberation struggle when China supported the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), which went on to win the first majority elections and formed a majority government in 1980 under Prime Minister Robert Mugabe. China came to the support of ZANU in one of its greatest time of need. When ZANU was formed as a break-away faction from the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU), it was hard for the movement to attract regional and international recognition and support apart from the personal ties that the new party leadership had with Tanzanian and Ghanaian political leadership (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2011). When ZANU gained Chinese attention, it got a cocktail of support which opened the avenues for international and regional recognition and support. The support which ZANU from China transformed it from being “another” movement to being an ideologically grounded and militarily strategic liberation movement which gained mass support under its chosen Chinese version of Leninism-Marxism.

Be it as it may, in the post-independence era, Zimbabwe’s ties with China were a hollow publicized close political relationship which was punctuated by Zimbabwean political leadership visits to China to show gratitude for the liberation support. However, beyond that, there were no meaningful ties. The new country viewed China as being as equally poor as it was and hence Zimbabwe fell back into the British and Western orbit for perceived socio-economic gain (Note 1). Even during the independence negotiations at Lancaster House, after a successful armed struggle, ZANU did not call for the Chinese input, or call on the Chinese for advice or support. Britain, the Commonwealth, the United States of America (USA) and the Frontline States had influence of varying degrees, while China waiting for the end of the negotiations to be given political recognition only.

The ignoring of China by Zimbabwe was not because China had no capacity but Zimbabwe believed promises of catalysed development by the West as exemplified by the fact that the USA was the largest donor to post-independence Zimbabwe (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2011). Zimbabwe could have aligned with the Chinese given that at the time of its independence, China was already an aspiring major power. China had not only sponsored a number of liberation movements to show that it could challenge other major powers, but was also using other dominating tools like investment and aid to Africa to challenge for global influence and dominance (Yu, 1977). Among these big investments was the Tanzania-Zambia railway line (Yu, 1977). The fallacy of the promises only came to light many years later that the west only sought to protect white minority interests in the post liberation era. When the Zimbabwean government moved to address colonial imbalances like the land question, the West started to consider Zimbabwe a pariah state and worked for its socio-economic destruction. It was at this time, in the post 2000 era, that Zimbabwe reverted seriously to the Chinese for socio-economic and global

diplomatic support. The only major difference in this instance is that the policy was now more blended with the development or deepening of diplomatic and socio-economic ties with other Asian states like Russia, and Iran, with China having the lion's share.

2. Research Method

This paper is based on a review of related literature. Various literature has been written on the roles played by various outside states competing for influence in post-colonial Africa. The major states were the United States of America (USA), Britain, France and other European states, from the West and Russia and China from the East. The role of China is mostly given to explain how its conflict with the then Soviet Union (USSR) drove China to seek to counter Russian influence by sponsoring rival liberation movement in African colonies in which Russia was already sponsoring liberation movements. Various arguments and propositions in the fragmented literature are brought together to put forward the arguments in this paper.

Initial methodology also intended to have interviews with members who had extensive knowledge on the liberation struggle, independence negotiations and post-independence alignment policy of the government of Zimbabwe. However, this was rendered impossible by the Corona Virus (Covid-19) pandemic which gripped Zimbabwe in particular and the rest of the world in 2020. The researcher, therefore only managed to have a single interview with one ex-combatant of the second liberation struggle who is coded as Interviewee A. Be it as it may, review of the available literature gave enough information for the completion of the paper.

3. Discussion

3.1 *The Liberation Struggle and the Development of China—ZANU Relations*

Historical romanticism, especially among politicians, locate the cordial relations between Zimbabwe and China to the pre-colonial times, prior to the arrival of Western Colonialist to Southern Africa. However, the cementing of the relations between Zimbabwe and China was born during Zimbabwe's struggle for independence. The relationship between Zimbabwe and China during the liberation struggle was born from the relationship between the ZANU and China. The relationship was surrogated by the animosity between Russia and China in exporting socialism and communism to Africa.

It was hard for ZANU to gain international recognition after its birth in August 1963. International recognition was important to assert the relevance of a liberation movement in Southern Africa and also to secure important material resources for the survival of liberation movement and supplies for military struggles (Reed, 1993). Liberation movements in Zimbabwe had started in the early 1950s and Joshua Nkomo became a dominant figure from the formative stages. ZAPU, from where ZANU splinted from, had been an established movement which had already created relations with regional and global state and non-state players. Reed and Ndlovu-Gatsheni note that ZANU managed to acquire continental ties and support from Ghana and Tanzania based on personal ties of Robert Mugabe and Herbert Chitepo,

respectively (Reed, 1993). ZANU undertook various military operations inside colonial Zimbabwe to show various state and non-state actors that the movement was deserving of regional and international attention like the Chinhoyi Battle of April 1966 and some other acts of sabotage (Reed, 1993). However, these acts which are viewed differently depending on one's standpoint were not enough to turn international recognition and support full circle from ZAPU or at least to place the two liberation movements on equal footing. The long life of ZAPU as the liberation movement in Zimbabwe had given it alliance and recognition from other liberation movements in Africa and globally, which also translated into it gaining the international recognition of being the liberation movement in the then Rhodesia (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2011).

Transformations in international relations in the East where the Sino-Soviet alliance break-up gave ZANU an opportunity that reshaped internal politics in Zimbabwe's liberation movement and transformed ZANU into a formidable liberation movement with an ideology and strategy. At the break-up, China sought to challenge the Soviet Union in gaining ideological and diplomatic influence in Africa and isolate the Soviet Union at the global stage (Yu, 1977). China also sought the support of African states against Taiwan's claims of being the bona fide China, at the United Nations as well as in claiming the Security Council permanent seat (Yu, 1988). In order to achieve its objectives, China took serious diplomatic offensives which included creating diplomatic ties with the already independent African states and also to counter support liberation movements that were rival to Soviet Union supported liberation movements. On this front, China supported the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) against the Soviet Union sponsored, People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), in Angola (Legum, 1976). In Zimbabwe, China began supporting ZANU against the Soviet Union ally, ZAPU (Legum, 1976).

The Chinese support to ZANU included both moral and material support. Alao (2014, p. 6) summarizes the assistance which Zimbabwe got into four categories, and states that,

"The first was the provision of military assistance, which saw China sending military hardware to guerrillas in the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA, the military wing of ZANU). The second form of support was the extensive military training that was given to ZANLA guerrillas. A significant number of ZANLA soldiers received military training in China that would advance the ZANLA insurgency. The third was the financial assistance given to the cause of Zimbabwean liberation through ZANU, while the final was the nature and extent of the ideological solidarity that resulted from the above."

Of importance was the ideological and military training that ZANU guerrillas obtained from China. Notable on the military training was the training that was given to the Josiah MagamaTongogara, ZANU Chief of Defence (1973-1979), Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, Personal Assistant to Robert Mugabe from 1977 until 1980 (Bhebe, 1999; Voice of America (VOA) News, 2017) when he became the minister of State security. In total, three groups were trained in China with Mnangagwa leading the first group of five in 1963, another group of four which had received basic training in

Ghana in 1964 went to China in 1965 (Bhebe, 1999), while the third group of eleven led by Josiah Tongogarawent for training in 1966 (The Herald, 2015; Nkala, 2021). In addition to the combatants who were trained in China, China sent teams of military instructors to train the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) (the military wing of ZANU) combatants in Tanzania (South African History Archive (SAHA), 2021; Nkala, 2021). Eight instructors were stationed at Itumbi Training Camp and twenty at Mgagao (The Herald, 2015). There were also other instructors who trained ZANLA recruits in Ghana (Bhebe, 1999). According to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Zimbabwe, China trained "about 15,000 freedom fighters and 240 military officers" of ZANU (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Zimbabwe, 2016), some great feat which impacted on the direction of the Zimbabwe struggle especially on the impact the ideology of the respective liberation movements. Records of arms, financial and other social support are not easy to establish. However, records from prominent nationalists like Tekere (2006), shows that the Chinese did not only extend material support but also logistical support for materials acquired from other supportive Eastern countries.

The military assistance was vital because it tipped the internal ground in favour of ZANU which increased its recruits and in turn increased the numbers of its military incursions in the country. The internal dominance of ZANU brought with it the acknowledgment of the regional and other international players who had once frowned on ZANU as a breakaway faction. Chung (2006, p. 75) noted that in the early 1970s, ZANLA forces posted victories against the Rhodesian military machinery which made her "realise that it would be ZANU rather than ZAPU that would one day rule a free Zimbabwe." This realization can be seen as proof of the transformative role played by external support to ZANU, but which support could only be acquired after the movement had been incubated by China. Whilst the role of China was central in giving ZANU an ideological and military footing which translated into becoming a force in the contestation of dominance between ZAPU and ZANU, its actions from the independence negotiations at the Lancaster House conference until Zimbabwe's fall-out with the West showed action of no meaningful gratitude to a diplomatic relation that could be characterized as "all weather". The Lancaster House talks became a field dominated by Britain, the Commonwealth, the United States of America (USA) and in some cases the Frontline States flexing their influence. There are no records that the ZANU component in the Patriotic Front sought political backing or advice from China to counter-leverage the talks. In the post-independence period, Zimbabwe joined the Commonwealth group of nations which was dominated by Britain and practically adopted capitalism. It only paid lip-service to Socialist-Marxist doctrines which it had used as mobilizing ideologies during the struggle, some form of dumping the Chinese doctrine as unworkable. These are the issues that are contrasted in the following sections to show that Zimbabwe gave its back to a diplomatic relation which natured it in the first instance.

3.2 Independence and Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy

The road to the independence of Zimbabwe was marked by milestone international meetings under which the British government sought to limit the role of the military solution in Zimbabwe's independence. Prior to the 1979 Lancaster House Talks, liberation movements in Zimbabwe, the Smith Regime and external players (Britain, USA, South Africa, Zambia and the Front Line States) held various talks which were mostly instigated by the British government, the USA and South Africa on the need to have a controlled political solution against a military solution to the 'Rhodesian question'. The discussions which were instigated by Britain, USA and South Africa with Ian Smith and the Patriotic Front, were driven by the fear of increased influence of socialism from the East, whilst the talks might have also been used to assure the Rhodesians that the transition would be managed in a manner that would keep the new state under the ambit of the British (western) club with robust control of the elections outcome to preserve white privileges under the new government (Smith, 1997).

The position of the Patriotic Front, and in particular the ZANU component is the subject of note by this paper. ZANU (and the Patriotic Front team) knew, or at least suspected that the British government favoured a political settlement that would not bring much to the realization of the ambitions that influenced the struggle (Rwodzi & Mubonderi, 2015; Tekere, 2006; Nkomo, 1984; Mugabe, 1982). In many instances, records show that during the Lancaster House talks, the main talks which culminated in the end of the struggle and ushered in majority rule, the Patriotic Front delegation was infuriated by the partiality of the British delegation in trying to frustrate them (Nkomo, 1984; Southern Rhodesia Constitutional Conference Report, 1979). However, with all this knowledge and suspicion, in the post-independence period, the new government allied more with the British and the West than it did with China and the East. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2011, p. 10) states that in the post-independence period, "ZANU-PF endeared itself to the US, which emerged as Zimbabwe's largest single donor in the 1980s. This was despite ZANU-PF's continued use of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric." This section takes account of some milestone issues which prove this assertion:

Lancaster House talks was a complex discussion in which the British took charge of the transformation of Zimbabwe to keep the new state under its ambit. A major take-off from the talks was the establishment of a Westminster model of governance, with entrenched white privileges. As noted earlier, the Patriotic Front negotiating team had known the British stance from the onset of the talks. There had been considerable Eastern ideological influence among the liberation movements. ZAPU and its military wing (ZIPRA) were more inclined to the Russian model of socialism, while ZANU and its military wing (ZANLA) were more inclined to the Chinese model of Marxist-Leninism. Robert Mugabe, the leader of ZANU was feared and loathed by the West for being a Marxist-Leninist. However, with all this knowledge, the Patriotic Front bequeathed to Britain the role of the umpire in the negotiations they had so much considerable interests. They also sought advice and direction from the Commonwealth, the Frontline States and the intervention of the USA (Rwodzi & Mubonderi, 2015). There is no information which showed that at least the ZANU component consulted and sought counsel

from the Chinese.

From the major role it played during the Lancaster House talks, Britain became a central figure in Zimbabwean governance from the time of transition deep into the 1990s. The merging of the security forces in the post-independence period and the training of the forces came under direct British influence through the British Military Advisory and Training Team (BMATT). The British Ministry of Defence (MOD) began preparations for training and integrating belligerent forces in Zimbabwe in 1976 (Whitaker, 2014). The training and equipping of the military force were to be controlled by the British government in order to control the military equipment which Zimbabwe would use, so that it would not offset the balance of power against apartheid South Africa and also to make Zimbabwe a market for its military and defence products (Whitaker, 2014). Whilst informing the British that as a sovereign state, Zimbabwe could seek military assistance from any country it chose, Mugabe requested to the British Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff for Operations, Major General Kenneth Perkins, that the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) be trained in line with British standards (Whitaker, 2014). Mugabe had also noted on a need to have the military adopt a pseudo-Maoist Chinese model but it was not taken along and BMATT adopted a British model (Jackson, 2011). The proposal by Mugabe might also have not been sincere. Mugabe knew that the British needed to avoid Zimbabwe being a socialist outpost and played well his cards to use the fear for his benefit.

The British influence on the army only contended with the guerrilla tradition which had been achieved during the war of independence era and was more engrained in the senior officers. However, some of these senior officers were also to be trained in British tradition with Solomon Mujuru, the first black Commander of the Zimbabwe National Army being trained in Pakistan and the second Air Marshal, Perrance Shiri, being trained at the Royal College of Defence Studies at Sandhurst in London. Zimbabwe was also to get military training for the Fifth Brigade from the North Koreans. The North Korean training was in line with agreement signed between Zimbabwe and North Korea after then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's visit to the country in 1980. The training might have been driven by the need to have a branch of the army that could be fully trusted by the ruling ZANU party, against an army trained by the British where ZANU did not render then complete trust (Evans, 1991). The request by Mugabe for the Zimbabwe army to be trained in British military standards might be seen as a betrayal of the ethos that had resulted in the successful execution of the struggle. The ZANLA forces which Mugabe had commanded were trained in line with the Maoist doctrine, and the popular liberation song, which the army returned to eulogizing after the fall out with Britain, *Nzira Dzemasoja* (Soldiers' Guide) was a transcription of the Maoist military doctrine morphed with some African and Christian morality (Chung, 2006, p. 80).

Economically, Zimbabwe had already been initiated into the British sphere of influence by colonialism. Despite the reduction in volumes of trade due to the UN sanctions from 1966 the effect might have only been nominal given that the Rhodesian regime still exported and imported goods using South Africa as a sanctions busting partner (McKinnell, 1969; Hawkins, 1967). Having acquired

independence with British influence and joining the commonwealth, Zimbabwe's economy was clutched in the Western economic orbit. Saungweme (2013) notes that in the 1990s Zimbabwe's trading partners were dominated by the Western countries and Japan with around sixty percent of the trade. Trade with Britain and the European Union (EU) transformed from the early 2000 impacted by the Fast – Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) which saw the institution of various trade sanctions and measures impacting on trade. There were no major efforts to disentangle from the Western orbit given that the West was seen as developed and rich.

Zimbabwe, however, since independence, managed to maintain nominal business relations with China. The Chinese were contracted to build the National Sports Stadium which was completed in March of 1987, in Harare. The Zimbabwean government would also purchase some military equipment from China (Jeuck, 2011). However, as earlier noted, the relations did not make China realise its intentions of challenging Western world order in Africa. The rhetoric of socialism was dying with each year after the independence of Zimbabwe. In the post-independence period, Zimbabwe became Western and discarded the Chinese model and principles. There could be a number of explanations which can be given as to why Zimbabwe became metaphorically 'British' when it could have learnt from the Chinese models to chart its path into development. Internally, the Lancaster House agreements favoured the maintenance of the pre-independence status-quo on major economic activities and political system. It was a premeditated status-quo by the British, the USA and the internal white community which had thrown its support behind a settlement that would preserve the pre-independence status-quo and promote the growth of neo-liberalism in the new state (Sadomba, 2008).

3.3 Post 2000 and the Relook to China

Zimbabwe's political decision to relook at its relations with China, in particular and the Eastern bloc, in general, was a push from the fall with the West, in general, and Britain, in particular. From the end of the 1990s, Zimbabwe moved on a collision path with the British government after the rise of the Tony Blair led New Labour Party. The New Labour Party did not recognize the colonial baggage of the British government as had been the norm and international legal practice, at least on the Zimbabwean case (Short, 1997). The agreement on the disbursement of funds for the second phase of the land reform programme which had been agreed to by the outgoing government of John Major (Mbeki, 2016; Chan, 2003) was discarded and the Labour Party proposed disbursing fund under a donors driven land reform programme as a component of poverty eradication (Short, 1997). The proposal was tantamount to unilaterally multilateralise a historically bilateral case and a renege from a colonial responsibility, a move which ZANU-PF rejected. The ZANU-PF government had been reeling under socio-economic pressure in the aftermath of payments of unbudgeted for, gratuities to the veterans of the second liberation struggle, the military intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the manifestations of the effects of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) (Asuelime & Simura, 2014). The government had pinned its hopes of gained public confidence through implementing a land reform programme and retain political power in the 2000 and 2002 parliamentary

and presidential elections, respectively.

The matter was worsened by the fact that in September 1999 a new, labour and civil society driven, opposition political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) had been born and the British government and the white commercial farmers in Zimbabwe had openly shown support for the party (Asuelime & Simura, 2014). The aggregate of these events saw the government arguing that Britain had created the party in order to topple it from power (Tendi, 2014), hence the actions of the Blair government on land was seen as a sabotage on a policy that could assist ZANU—PF to retain power. The Zimbabwean government, therefore, in the post 2000 defeat of its sponsored draft constitution, threw its support to land occupations which it had discouraged between 1997 and 1998 when Chief Svosve in Mashonaland and East Province and some Veterans of the Second Liberation Struggle led peasants to occupy then white owned farms on the pretext that they were ancestral lands or that they had been enlisted by the government for compulsory acquisition (Simura, 2009; Moyo, 2001). The land occupations were chaotic, violent and at first showed no signs of central control and command. It was only later, in 2001, that the government instituted the FTLRP and brought sanity to the occupations.

Britain and the West tried to reign in Mugabe and ZANU—PF without success. The land occupations and the subsequent FTLRP was not only an issue of property rights but also seen as setting a wrong precedence against neo-liberal domination in the former settler economies. This led the West to impose various sanctions on the government of Zimbabwe, some selected individuals in government, business and ZANU—PF and some business entities which had links to the government, ZANU—PF, and the security sector (Moretti, 2017; Chingono, 2010). Of importance on the various sanctions were the conditionalities given for the repeal of the USA sanctions law on Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZIDERA) of 2001. The Western bloc also attempted to have United Nations comprehensive sanctions on Zimbabwe in July 2008 when the USA sponsored a draft sanctions resolution. Having already returned to the Eastern bloc, China and Russia blocked the resolution with a double veto (United Nations, 2008; Worsnip, 2008). Zimbabwe turned to China, primarily, and other eastern countries like Russia for trade and investments to offset the deficit caused by the pull-out of the west. Zimbabwe rekindled the title of ‘All weather friend’ for China. It also began retooling its defence and security apparatus with mostly Chinese produced equipment and technology (Vines, 2017; Edinger & Burke, 2008). This also included some training programmes (Mukaro & Mugari, 2005).

The re-turn to the east particularly to China yielded the best results for the country. The various sanctions regimes which had been imposed on the country by the West were meant to see the economy crush and the country to be ungovernable. This in extension was meant to set an example that any former settler colony that challenges colonial privileges would suffer. Deepened relations with China therefore kept Zimbabwe afloat and brought some notable investments like the “expansion projects of Victoria Falls Airport, Kariba South Hydro Power Station and Hwange Thermal Power Station” (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Zimbabwe, 2016), the construction of the new parliament building and opening up of some manufacturing plants. Zimbabwe also managed to

get access to Chinese funding of some projects when the Western creditors had slammed the door on the Southern African country. During the Covid-19 pandemic, China donated and also sold Covid-19 vaccines to Zimbabwe at a time when there were lamentations over “vaccine nationalism” especially in the West. Zimbabwe was among the first African countries to administer the vaccine. China, therefore, can be seen as a benevolent “father” who supported Zimbabwe in most of its darkest moments against the West.

4. Conclusion

The government of Zimbabwe’s return to China was not simply by operation of pull factors. Zimbabwe, at the attainment of independence did not grab the pull factors, namely the relation which had been created during the war of liberation and China’s desire to secure strategic allies Africa at the time. Zimbabwe was baited by the dangled aid and industrial development from the West that it thought that its newly found foreign policy was being driven by pragmatism. It was also yoked by the manner in which it acceded to independence negotiations wherein the Patriotic Front in general and ZANU in particular, did not also turn to China as a strategic ally to leverage on the talks. Hence, the Patriotic Front accepted the hamstringing clauses due to the pressure that was mounted on them by the British, the Commonwealth and the Frontline States, as well as promises of increased Western aid and funding that would turn Zimbabwe into a fast developing state (Sadomba, 2008).

The return, as discussed in the paper was driven more by push factors. The fallout with Britain and the West was the major push factor which drove Zimbabwe to relook at its global relations leading to it turning back to the East. The return has paid dividends as shown by how China assisted Zimbabwe in its time of dire need. However, it has seen Zimbabwe with little bargaining power on various concessions, which has made the country to be seen as a vassal, with little diplomatic leverage due to its Western pariah status.

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