

**The Eight Years of Interaction: Lessons from Zimbabwe's Look East Policy
and the Future of African Countries and Asia-Pacific Region**

By

Percyslage Chigora and Taderera Hebert Chisi

ABSTRACT

The Eastern Asia and Oceanic states have proven to be a hub of technological sophistication that have driven economic growth and subsequently intensified production of goods and service provision. As such, most African countries have forged closer ties with countries in this region and, as a result, there has been reluctance in approaching the West. Zimbabwe, in particular, after receiving unfavorable treatment by the West, developed a new policy of associating with the East. The year 2008 marks eight years of interaction between Zimbabwe and the East, dubbed the Look East Foreign Policy. The policy is intended to discover new acquaintances in the East to enable her development processes. The extent to which it has been successful has been doubted in some circles. Therefore, the paper seeks to review the eight years of Zimbabwe's interaction with the East, elucidating on the achievements, challenges, and the future of the relations. The paper also seeks to unearth the controversies surrounding the success of both North-South and South-South cooperations. In the final analysis, the paper provides guidance on factors contributing to foreign policy success in developing countries, particularly those in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Africa and the East has increased in the contemporary world because of the forces of globalization that have driven the increased interaction of actors across boundaries. But one important factor has been the perceived continued decline by some African countries of favorable treatment by the western countries that have prompted these countries to seek acquaintance with the East. For Zimbabwe, there has been the emergence of hostility between herself and most of the western countries. This loss of friendly actors in the West has had negative effects on the Zimbabwean society, particularly in respect of shortage of foreign exchange and declining investment. Zimbabwe, under the Robert Gabriel Mugabe government, had no option but to redesign its foreign policy and seek assistance and partnership with the East. The relationship has had benefits and costs to both sides vis-à-vis the realization of developmental goals in the 21st century international system. The paper, therefore, espouses these issues, in essence, beginning with conceptual and historical issues to policy issues moving to dimensions and modes of interaction between African and the Asia-Pacific region using Zimbabwe as a particular case in point. The paper will conclude by speculating on the future of this interaction in enabling development not only of developing countries but also developed and the emerging fast growing economies.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO AFRICA AND THE EAST

The relationship between Africa and the East is discernible in two phases, i.e. the Cold War and the post-Cold War era. The Cold War period is associated with the emergence of newly independent states in Africa. During the Cold War, China and Soviet Union invested heavily in newly-independent African countries, building up infrastructure and providing aid in the hopes of counterbalancing Western influence on the continent. There was a close relationship because of shared experiences with colonialism and Western imperialism. In essence, the Chinese regarded themselves as an older brother to the Third World (<http://worldnews.about.com/od/chinainafrika/i/chinainafrika.htm>).

In the 1960's and 1970's, China's interest was centered on building ideological solidarity with other underdeveloped nations to advance Chinese-style Communism and on repelling Western "imperialism"

(Brookes and Shin, needs date). China made her first successful breakthrough in East Africa with generous aid for the construction of the Tanzanian railway line between the newly independent states of Tanzania and Zambia (Cas De Villiers, 1976:28-29) China continued with the project on infrastructural development in a number of countries. In West Africa a number of stadiums have been constructed through Chinese donations. It is easier to read that by early 1970's, the position of the West and Soviet Union in Africa had suffered drastically as a result of Red China's onslaught (Cas De Villiers, 1976: 28).

Until the mid-1970's cooperation meant building solidarity between two continents that belonged to the same under-developed world. The Chinese presence in Africa was typified by technicians sent to boost nations newly liberated from colonial tutelage; some 15,000 doctors and more than 10,000 agricultural engineers went to areas of the Third World that had become arenas for the Cold War. (Servant, needs date). Cooperation grew in almost all spheres of life. In the military sphere between 1955 and 1977 China sold \$142m worth of military equipment to Africa. It also threw open the doors of its universities: 15,000 African students have studied in China since their countries became independent. In 1977 trade between China and Africa reached a record \$817million (Ibid).

According to Jean-Christophe Servant (needs date),

Throughout the 1980s, when the big Cold War powers were pulling out of Africa and western development aid halved, China kept up its contacts. But it had packed away its revolution to concentrate on fostering external trade and foreign investment. By the time that post-cold war geopolitics and developments in the Middle East had drawn the traditional players back into Africa, China had turned itself into the workshop of the world and had its eyes on Africa's raw materials.

One other major development in the last decade of the 20th century, which resulted in the strengthening of the East-African relations was the demise of the god father of Socialism/Communism; the Soviet Union. The unipolar world emerged under the leadership of the USA and neo-liberalism flourished as the ideology to guide development. The East saw the emergence of stronger powers in the name of the East Asian Tigers but of great significance was the growth of China to claim her position among the world's great powers. As the East gathered momentum of economic growth, not only did the East-

Africa relationship come to be dominated by China alone but by other countries that were also experiencing an economic boom.

The increased interaction between Africa and the East, and Zimbabwe in particular, has been a result of the way African countries view their relations with the West, which presents aspects of colonialism and double standards in the preservation of their own interest, not so much in the development of countries in the developing world. According to Femi Akonolafe (2007:8-9),

'the long list of African leaders who have been used, abused and dumped by western governments and their institutions over the years is too long to be recounted ---- the rulers and the scholars of the west have sold themselves the lie that all what they are doing is helping' ... 'the principal interest of Europe is to get these African raw materials as cheaply as possible, in order to feed its industries cheaply and thus, continue to maximize its profits and increase its wealth'.

Given that background, the East (which does not impose a bandwagon of conditionality) is to African countries a better devil to dine with. Prospects for a longtime relationship are even better, especially given that Asia now controls close to 70% of the world's foreign reserves and has advanced in terms of technology (Ibid:9).

The increased interdependence between Africa and the East has seen the birth of a multilateral institution in the form of the Asia-Africa cooperation, which has seen the hosting of the Africa-Asia Summit. This has been instrumental in providing a forum for cooperation on a number of issues that are critical in shaping the development of countries in Africa and the East. China, as the biggest power in the East, has launched its forum of interaction with Africa, as has been witnessed by the hosting annually of the China-Africa Summits.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THE ZIMBABWEAN CASE

Zimbabwe, at the turn of the new millennium, received widespread condemnation from the western countries and was subsequently put under sanctions by most of these countries. In order to curtail the effects of the sanctions, Zimbabwe came up with the Look East Policy. The policy saw the

development of cordial relations between Zimbabwe, Southeast Asia, and Far East countries, such as the People's Republic of China, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, India, and Pakistan. This also gave birth to several successful joint agreements between the Mugabe government and these countries.

According to Ibbo Mandaza (2005),

Zimbabwe's current conception of the "East" is quite distinct from that of the Cold War era, wherein the "Eastern bloc" described broadly the Socialist counterpoise to the capitalist western bloc and its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Thus defined, the "Eastern bloc" included the People's Republic of China in the Far East and Cuba in the Western Hemisphere... Zimbabwe's "Look East" policy is not an ideological assertion, the pursuit of an alternative ideology nor rejection of the capitalist road. It is based essentially on the need to survive when the West has apparently turned its back on the former British colony, a country which, if the entire story were told, has been so historically and economically tied and compromised into an intricate web of dependence on the northern hemisphere.

In relation to China, Mumbengegwi has noted that Sino-Zimbabwe relations have been long friendly and China rendered huge support to the people of Zimbabwe during their struggle for national liberation. After the country's attainment of independence in 1980, the Chinese government and people continued to offer considerable assistance to Zimbabwe for its national development, which the people of Zimbabwe will remember forever. Zimbabwe is firmly committed to constantly enhancing its traditional friendship and cooperative relations with China.

(<http://www.chinaconsulatesf.org/eng/xw/t205157.htm>) A number of joint activities have been carried out between Zimbabwe and China. China has rendered assistance to Zimbabwe in the construction of the National Sports Stadium in Harare, hospitals, dams, school dormitories, wells, and clothing factories. With the support of the buyer's credit by the Export-Import Bank of China, the China Capital Iron and Steel Corporation took part in the reconstruction of No. 4 blast furnace of the Zimbabwean Iron and Steel Corporation. The project was completed in June 1999 (Chigora, needs date).

DIMENSIONS OF INTERACTION

Economically, with its huge population, abundant natural resources, and impressive economic growth, Asia is fast becoming a new global economic hub, as well as a strategic centre of gravity in international politics

(<http://www.glob.co.zw/home%20page/Zim%20Look%20East%20bears%20fruit.html>). In general terms, China's principal interest in the continent is access to natural resources. China's trade with Africa has risen sharply, from \$10 billion in 2003 to \$20 billion in 2004, and Chinese goods are flooding African markets (Princeton Layman: <http://www.cfr.org/publication/8436/>). The primary focus is on textiles, where the growth of Chinese exports constitutes a 'double whammy' for Africa. Exports of Chinese textiles to Africa are undermining local African industry, while the growth of Chinese exports to the United States is shutting down the promising growth of African exports in this field (Princeton Lyman, opicit). Southern Africa provides a good example of both effects. Chinese exports of textiles to South Africa grew from 40 percent of clothing imports to 80 percent by the end of 2004. Out of 100 T-shirts imported into South Africa, 80 are from China (Princeton Layman, opicit).

Additionally, because of its rapid growth, more resources are required; Africa has these important resources which the east wants to tap. For example, China's sharply accelerating domestic energy demand, combined with declining domestic petroleum production and insufficient coal output, has spurred Beijing to pursue stable overseas sources of hydrocarbon fuels. In essence, by 2004 China had become the world's second largest oil consumer, behind the United States (Brookes and Shin, needs date).

According to Brookes and Shin,

Chinese oil consumption is expected to increase by 10 percent per year, while her oil and gas imports are forecast to increase from the present 33 percent of China's total oil and gas demand to 60 percent by 2020. Asian oil and natural gas production is not growing fast enough to meet Chinese demand, and a large portion of Middle Eastern oil and gas production is normally allotted to U.S. and European markets (Brookes and Shin, needs date).

For the east, Africa becomes the only source of oil. Other resources are also critical and for Zimbabwe that does not have oil the Chinese are flocking in numbers indicating growth in business. This has been aptly captured by one writer noting,

To our dismay, around 70 percent of the passengers on our plane were not Zimbabweans but rather Chinese mostly young professionals and entrepreneurs. What were these Chinese going to do in Zimbabwe, a country facing severe economic challenges due to a prolonged drought, food shortages, hyperinflation, foreign currency and fuel shortages? These young people are, in fact, the torchbearers of the fastest growing Chinese Business Empire in Africa
(<http://www.glob.co.zw/home%20page/Zim%20Look%20East%20bears%20fruit.html>).

In Zimbabwe China has invested heavily in mining, telecommunications, power generation, and housing projects. Cheap Chinese goods, ranging from toys to real aircraft, are flooding into Zimbabwe. According to Chigora,

The trade volume between China and Zimbabwe in 2002 was 191 million US dollars. China's exports to Zimbabwe totalled 32 million US dollars and imports totalled 159 million US dollars (Chigora, needs date).

For other eastern countries, bilateral trade between Indonesia and Zimbabwe increased to US\$34, 7 million in 2004, from a mere US\$5, 26 million in 2003

(<http://www.glob.co.zw/home%20page/Zim%20Look%20East%20bears%20fruit.html>).

In other spheres, agreements between China and Zimbabwe include a grant worth US\$6 million to import maize, finance the expansion of the Hwange thermal power station and some commercial projects, and extend a loan to the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) that has been failing to meet the country's power demands because of lack of adequate foreign currency to pay outside suppliers. China and Zimbabwe signed a cultural agreement and a protocol on higher education cooperation, which have led to 11 Zimbabwean students studying in China, and a few Chinese teachers and medical personnel working in Zimbabwe (Ibid).

The Look East Policy, adopted by the Government, has managed to unlock investment opportunities in the key sectors of the economy. The business partnerships, which emerged from the policy, include the

joint venture between the Government-controlled Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) and the Midex Overseas Limited of India. IDC and Midex are currently constructing a multi-seed oil processor plant in Chitungwiza. The plant has a capacity to process over 20,000 tons of cotton seed and Soya beans per year. The project is expected to create more than four hundred jobs for Chitungwiza residents and those of surrounding areas. China and India have played a pivotal role in supplying the country with essential equipment for rural electrification programme. By 2005, 4,229 projects had been completed while 1,157 projects were at various stages of completion. The growth in numbers of tourists from Asia bears testimony that the Look East Policy is beginning to bear fruit. In 2005, the country witnessed an increase in visitors from Asia, notably China, which granted Zimbabwe an Approved Destination Status (Chigora, needs date).

In the transport sector, Air Zimbabwe acquired two MA60 aircraft from China, bringing the number of its fleet to eight. This has enabled the national airline to expand its domestic, regional, and international routes. Public transport operator, ZUPCO (Zimbabwe United Passenger Company) also managed to acquire 135 conventional buses and 41 mini-buses from China. Chinese business people have established retail shops in the capital, Harare, and other major towns, mostly selling cheap electrical appliances, clothes, blankets, toys, and beauty products. Retailers are enjoying thriving business, and the shops are popular with people who cannot afford to shop at the up-market departmental stores. Many items, especially clothing, are sold only for a quarter of their price. While a modest television set is sold at around Z\$8m (US \$450) at the established shops, the Chinese televisions cost as little as Z\$1m (US \$56) (Ibid).

In the power and mining sectors trade, China's state-owned companies, such as China Aero-Technology Import and Export Corporation, have entered into investment deals with ZESA Holdings, for the refurbishment of power plants. The corporation pledged in 2005 that it would invest US\$400 million in mining (Bayano, 2008). The refurbishment will go a long way in improving power supply that has affected business, as well as agricultural production as a boost to the fast track land reform.

Other countries within the framework of the Look East Policy have sold equipment to the mechanization programme in Zimbabwe that is meant to boost the agricultural sector. Brazil and a

number of Asian countries, China in particular, which extended a loan facility that has gone a long way in making this vision a reality, have chipped in in this regard (Mabasa Sasa, 2008).

The state of the Look East Policy in 2008 indicates that there has been continued interaction between Zimbabwe and the East. Specifically, China and Zimbabwe signed a US\$42 million loan facility for local agro-business concern Farmers' World to implement the second phase of the farm mechanisation program (Herald Reporters, 2008). Chinese investors visited Zimbabwe with the aim of investing within Zimbabwe's gold and platinum sectors. Kaande noted a Chinese investor keen on recycling sawdust has who made available close to US\$100 million for the construction of a paper manufacturing plant in Manicaland. This factory will be set up to recycle the mountains of sawdust that have accumulated on the Chimanimani to Nyanga route over 50 years of saw milling (Kaande, 2008). Trade relations between the two countries continue to grow, recording US\$340m worth of business between the two countries, while exports to Zimbabwe were at US\$140m. Chinese companies have invested a further US\$1.6 billion in engineering and related contracts (Chronicle Reporter, 2008).

One case of success, recorded in 2008, has witnessed the,

Commissioning of 97 trucks procured from China by Road Motor Services...The vehicles, comprising 68 North Benz tractor trucks (30-tonne capacity), 16 North Benz delivery trucks (30-tonne capacity), eight triaxle tipper trailers (45- tonne capacity) and five fuel tankers (42 000 litres capacity), were procured from a Chinese manufacturer, Camco .The vehicles were procured through an Eximbank of China concessionary loan to replace the old unserviceable RMS fleet and to complement seven trucks received from Camco International in February last year Cases that come to mind include, among others, manufacturers for transportation of their raw materials and end products, the farming community for its agricultural inputs and produce, the mining sector for its mineral products and thermal power stations and tobacco farmers for their coal supplies" (Herald Reporter, 2008).

Politically, Zimbabwe has come under attack from western countries, particularly former colonial master, Britain, and its ally the United States of America. As result of this onslaught, Zimbabwe has sought political acquaintance from the east. Specifically, mutual respect and cooperation has come to exist between Zimbabwe and the Indonesia, where the two countries continue to support each other at

international fora and share similar views within the context of south-south cooperation (<http://www.newsnet.co.zw/index.php?nID=10715>).

The Langkawi International Dialogues have provided the framework of support and cooperation, thereby strengthening Zimbabwe's standing in the international community of States. In essence,

The Langkawi International Dialogues had served as excellent platforms for sharing experiences and lessons learnt in governmental, economic and socio-political areas. Such dialogue had also succeeded in promoting trade between Malaysia and several African countries as well as in establishing networking between Malaysian businesses and their overseas counterparts. (The Herald Report, 2007).

With regards to the rate at which Chinese influence is spreading in Africa, one question needs to be answered. It looks like China exploits her knowledge and understanding of third world countries' politicians' fears and concerns in global politics to advance her influence. The Chinese seem to understand that there is great anti-western feeling in most African countries and that there exists a leadership vacuum among them to lead a powerful crusade against the western influence. China, which by all standards is no longer an underdeveloped country, deliberately maintains the 'third world' tag, a tag, which portrays her as leader of 'downtrodden' third world countries. Her history as a former colony of the European powers allows her to promote herself as sensitive to the dignity of Third world countries and this has won her many friends in Africa, who feel that they share a common colonial past with her (Tompson, needs date). She also was not involved in the colonization of Africa in the 19th century, so she is not tainted with the evils of colonialism.

In the military and security sphere, the east has come to the aid of African countries, thereby boasting their security. China has a history of selling weapons and arms production lines to regimes in Africa. In the late 1990's China made more than \$1bn out of the war in Eritrea. It has also been suspected of using Sudan as an outlet for military technology. It is still militarily involved in Zimbabwe, another country cold-shouldered by the West. (Servant, need date). Chinese military attachés have been concentrated in member states of the Southern African Development Community (Ibid).

In 2004, despite the U.S. and EU arms embargo against Zimbabwe, China sold Zimbabwe fighter aircraft and military vehicles for \$200 million (www.heritage.com). In addition, China provided a military-strength radio-jamming device, which the Harare government used to block broadcasts of anti-government reports from independent media outlets during the 2005 parliamentary election campaign (Ibid). In 2008, Zimbabwe's air force bought \$200 million in Chinese-made Karakorum 8 trainer jets. To boost internal-security apparatus, water cannons to subdue protesters and bugging equipment to monitor cell phone networks have been acquired.

Diplomatically, China offers African countries diplomatic support in multilateral institutions, especially the UN, where she is a member of the Security Council. All African countries that have fallen out of favour with western powers seek protection of China; for example, Sudan and Zimbabwe. Furthermore, China's professed respect of sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states is appealing to many African leaders who view the West's interference as tantamount to interference in internal affairs. China has earned significant political capital among African countries through aid and debt forgiveness. This makes her a God and saviour for the downtrodden.

As China's power and influence grows, Beijing is becoming more willing to challenge the United States, EU nations, and others in international arenas to protect its interests in Africa. Over time, differences between China and democracies over human rights and basic political and civil rights will sharpen. For example, in September 2004, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1564, which condemned the mass killing of civilians in the Darfur region, but stopped short of imposing oil sanctions if Khartoum did not act to stop the killing. China abstained from the vote and threatened to veto any further move to impose sanctions (Ibid).

For Zimbabwe, given onslaught by western countries has benefited politically from associating with China. Politically, China wields power in the United National Security Council and any attempt by other powerful countries to arm twist some nations have been blocked by China's veto powers. Several attempts were made on Zimbabwe but China was ready to use its veto.

However, despite the aforementioned benefits of looking east for African countries, the criticism has since emerged. Despite China's activities being well intentioned, it has been observed that the

relationship between China and Africa evolves in ways to suit more the Chinese economy than the African (Sunday Times Reporter, 2006). It is a well known fact that the Chinese economy is growing in leaps and bounds and that the country urgently needs the raw materials from Africa, i.e. iron ore, copper, platinum, timber, and cotton (Ibid). Just as the West does, China has not done much to help in development of manufacturing industry. She largely invests in energy exploration, extraction, and refining and transportation infrastructure overseas.

With regards to the aid coming from China, it is true that Africa needs it, but in reality this aid does not necessarily represent altruistic support of African states. It is now known that economic, social, and military assistance is a useful instrument for promoting national interest. The supply of aid is not divorced from comprehensive political planning as articulated in a country's foreign policy. So it is quite obvious that the Chinese wouldn't embark on a long march to Africa, leaving fellow Asian countries nearer, some with worse problems than Africa, just to be good Samaritans to the Africans.

Some have questioned the quality of the goods sold. Chitima, in relation to this criticism, has noted:

No one is forced to go and buy from the Chinese shops. Those that have money can go and buy things from expensive shops, but for some of us who earn poor salaries, we do not have a choice but to go to China Town (a complex housing Chinese traders)...It is true that their clothes or electrical goods do not last long, but those that buy them should treat them with extra care, so that they can use them for as long as possible (Chigora, date needed).

At the same time, it has to be noted that there is nothing new about Chinese products because Zimbabwean cross-border traders used to go to Botswana and Zambia to buy Chinese products and then re-sell them at the informal markets in Zimbabwe before the Chinese came to Zimbabwe (Chigora, needs date).

John Robertson has questioned the practicability of the Look East Policy and has recommended that the government needs to mend its relations with the IMF, World Bank, the USA, and European countries in order to revive the economy. In essence he noted:

China itself is looking to the West, and there is no way we can sustain our economy by limiting trade to China, or one or two other Asian countries, because that will give the country short-lived relief. Let's make sure that we talk to the IMF so that it can resume financial assistance, for that is how we could once again get steady forex inflows (Chigora, needs date).

Some analysts say the problem with the Look East Policy is that it is not a policy at all. They say it is more of a political slogan stemming from Mugabe's problems with the West. Former Information minister Jonathan Moyo, a political scientist and independent MP, has noted that:

The "Look East" mantra was not a policy by "any stretch of the imagination". There is no such a policy. It's a political slogan. It's typical of the ZANU PF leadership to parade slogans as policies. The 'Look East' slogan lacks substance and that's why it was so embarrassing to see the president and government officials wildly excited because of only two aircraft bought from China by Air Zimbabwe" (Chigora, needs date).

Such critics maintain that it is of no use trying to persist with a dreadful charade in the hope that the reality will vanish and be replaced by wishful thinking. But the reality is that Zimbabwe inherited a set of international economic and political relations that still is shaping and, in all probability, will continue to heavily influence the country's future (Chigora, needs date).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, cooperation between Zimbabwe and the East has contributed towards a common and mutually beneficial economic development, through foreign currency generation, technology transfer, and employment creation to uplift the standards of living of the Zimbabwean people. Zimbabwe has now gone eight years on its own path outside the Western interest. Zimbabwe, through the Look East Policy, has demonstrated that a development path without the West can be realized. For the West in this globalization era confrontation, sanctions, threats, and demonization will not work in favour of Western interests and have a potential of generating much more division, as more like-minded states may soon follow the Zimbabwean path leading to a shift in terms of global power getting into the hands of China.

The way forward is to allow African countries economic independence and the freedom to run their own political affairs in the context of the African interest. In essence Zimbabwe's Look East Policy is positively working out and gradually, Asian countries are proving themselves capable of serving as alternatives to the rich Western nations in countries.

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