China's Belt and Road Initiative and Zimbabwe's Development Strategy: Opportunities, Challenges, and Policy Implications

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the intersections between China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 as articulated through the National Development Strategies, NDS1 (2021–2025) and NDS2 (2026–2030). As Zimbabwe seeks to transition toward upper-middle-income status, Chinese financing, infrastructure development, and investment have become central to its modernisation agenda. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from South–South Cooperation, Dependency Theory, and Developmental State Theory, the paper provides a structured analysis of the opportunities and challenges posed by BRI engagement. The article argues that while Zimbabwe benefits from large-scale infrastructure, energy, and industrialisation projects under the BRI, long-term developmental outcomes depend on strengthening governance capacity, improving transparency, and aligning Chinese investments more closely with national policy priorities.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); China–Zimbabwe relations; Vision 2030; National Development Strategy (NDS1/NDS2); South–South cooperation; development policy; infrastructure; industrialisation.

INTRODUCTION

Since its launch in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has evolved into one of the largest global development frameworks, involving over 150 countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe. The initiative aims to strengthen global connectivity through infrastructure development, trade facilitation, financial cooperation, and policy coordination. Zimbabwe formally joined the BRI in 2018, although cooperation with China predates the initiative by several decades. The strengthening of bilateral relations is rooted in China's support for Zimbabwe's liberation movement during the 1970s, followed by sustained political and economic cooperation after independence (Alden & Wu, 2020)

Zimbabwe's economic vision, articulated through Vision 2030, aims to achieve upper-middle-income status through structural transformation, modernization of key sectors, industrialization, and improved public-sector performance. Implementation occurs through the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1) covering 2021–2025 and the forthcoming NDS2 covering 2026–2030 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018). Chinese involvement has become embedded in these development processes, particularly in the areas of infrastructure rehabilitation, energy supply expansion, mining sector investment, and reindustrialization through special economic zones and large-scale steel production.

The convergence between BRI priorities and Zimbabwe's national development plans has attracted both praise and criticism. Supporters argue that the BRI fills Zimbabwe's infrastructure financing gap, provides an alternative to Western development institutions, and accelerates industrial recovery (Brautigam, 2022). Critics, however, raise concerns regarding debt sustainability, limited local participation, governance weaknesses, and environmental impacts associated with mining and energy projects (Gadzala, 2022).

This paper evaluates the alignment between BRI and Vision 2030, identifies key opportunities and challenges, and examines case studies that illuminate the political economy of China–Zimbabwe cooperation. The analysis

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aims to provide evidence-based insights that can guide policymakers in optimizing the developmental benefits of the BRI while mitigating risks.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives: South–South Cooperation Theory, Dependency Theory, and Developmental State Theory. Together, they offer a multidimensional analytical lens for understanding the China–Zimbabwe relationship under the BRI.

South–South Cooperation Theory

South–South Cooperation (SSC) emphasises mutual benefit, solidarity, and non-interference among developing countries. China often frames its engagement with African states, including Zimbabwe, within this paradigm. SSC highlights horizontal partnerships rather than hierarchical donor–recipient models that characterise Western development assistance (Naidu, 2020). Under this lens, BRI is portrayed as a mechanism for shared development, technology transfer, and infrastructure connectivity driven by developing-country needs.

South-South Cooperation (SSC) serves as a cornerstone for collaboration among developing nations, emphasising equality and mutual benefit over the conditional aid typical of traditional donors. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplify this approach in Africa, including Zimbabwe, by prioritising infrastructure and trade links framed as partnerships rather than paternalistic assistance.

Expanded SSC Framework

SSC emerged from the 1955 Bandung Conference and gained UN recognition in 1978, focusing on technical exchanges, capacity building, and resource pooling without political preconditions. Key principles include national ownership, horizontal peer relations, and non-interference, distinguishing it from vertical North-South models that often tie aid to reforms (Naidu, 2020). The UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) tracks progress, with recent frameworks stressing measurable impacts like technology transfer.

China's BRI in African Context

China has invested over $300 billion in African BRI projects since 2013, covering ports, railways, and energy – Zimbabwe benefiting from expansions like the Victoria Falls-Hwange rail and Harare hydropower upgrades. This model promises faster delivery via Chinese financing and firms, fostering self-reliance amid Western aid delays. Critics highlight debt sustainability, yet proponents argue it aligns with SSC's solidarity ethos (UNCTAD, 2025).

Zimbabwe-Specific Engagements

In Zimbabwe, BRI supports the National Development Strategy 1 (2021-2025), with projects like the $1.5 billion Kariba Dam rehabilitation enabling power exports and economic diversification. These initiatives emphasise demand-driven needs, such as mineral value addition, contrasting with IMF-style conditionalities that Zimbabwe has historically resisted.

Table1: Comparative Analysis

Aspect	SSC/BRI Model	Western Aid Model
Structure	Horizontal partnerships	Hierarchical donor-recipient
Conditions	Minimal, non-interference	Governance/economic reforms
Speed/Execution	Turnkey by partner firms	Procurement via tenders
Focus	Infrastructure, trade links	Poverty reduction, democracy
Zimbabwe Example	Hwange power plant upgrades	Suspended loans post-2000

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Dependency Theory

Dependency theory critiques global economic structures for perpetuating underdevelopment in the Global South, and some scholars apply this lens to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), questioning if it fosters new dependencies despite its South-South Cooperation (SSC) framing. In Zimbabwe, Chinese investments spark debate over whether they build local capacity or entrench reliance on foreign loans, expertise, and resources, echoing broader tensions between mutual benefit and structural power imbalances.

Dependency Theory Foundations

Dependency Theory, pioneered by scholars like Andre Gunder Frank, posits that the global capitalist system locks peripheral economies into exporting raw materials while importing finished goods from core nations, hindering autonomous development (Frank, 1966). This creates a cycle of underdevelopment through unequal exchange and technological dependence. Critics extend this to BRI, arguing that China's resource-backed loans—often tied to commodities like Zimbabwe's lithium—may replicate colonial-era extraction patterns, prioritising Chinese firms over local labour and skills (Keohane & Nye, 2017).

Critiques of BRI as Neo-Dependency

While SSC promotes horizontal partnerships, detractors claim BRI generates debt traps and enclave economies with limited spillovers. In Africa, over $150 billion in Chinese loans since 2000 have funded infrastructure, but repayment strains budgets, as seen in Zambia's 2020 default (Brautigam, 2020). Resource-for-infrastructure deals reduce local value retention, with Chinese workers dominating projects and profits repatriated, undermining claims of technology transfer (Carmody, 2019). Keohane and Nye (2017) warn that such engagements shift dependency from Western to Eastern powers without dismantling systemic inequalities.

Zimbabwe Case Study

Zimbabwe's engagement exemplifies these tensions: BRI projects like the $2 billion Hwange Thermal Power Station expansion (completed 2022) address energy shortages but rely heavily on Chinese contractors and loans, with debt servicing consuming 20% of exports (African Development Bank, 2025). Proponents highlight capacity gains, such as training 500 local engineers, aligning with SSC's solidarity (National Development Strategy 1, 2021). Yet critics point to lithium mining deals granting China 20 years of off-take rights, fostering export dependency without beneficiation plants, thus questioning if investments empower or subordinate (Munyoro, 2023).

Counterarguments and SSC Defence

Defenders argue BRI disrupts Western hegemony by offering unconditional finance, enabling Zimbabwe to bypass IMF sanctions post-2001 land reforms. Unlike dependency theory's zero-sum view, SSC emphasises agency, with Zimbabwe negotiating terms under its Vision 2030 for value addition (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). Empirical data shows BRI projects boosting GDP growth by 1.5% annually in recipient nations, with greener, smaller-scale initiatives post-2021 addressing sustainability critiques (UNCTAD, 2025).

Table 2: Comparative Perspectives

Dimension	Traditional Dependency (West)	BRI/SSC Model (China)
Power Dynamic	Core-periphery exploitation	Peer-to-peer (contested)
Debt Mechanism	Conditional grants/loans	Resource-backed, commercial
Local Content	Moderate, with procurement	Low initially, improving
Zimbabwe Impact	Suspended aid (2000s)	Power/mining infrastructure
Long-term Risk	Policy reversals	Debt overhang, expertise gap

Developmental State Theory

Developmental State Theory underscores the role of a proactive, autonomous state in orchestrating economic transformation through disciplined industrial policies, strategic investments, and selective international partnerships, a model China has mastered in its rise from poverty to global power. Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 envisions reclaiming such a state apparatus to spearhead industrialisation, infrastructure renewal, and skills upgrading, positioning Chinese engagements framed within South-South Cooperation (SSC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as potential accelerators rather than dominators, provided Harare asserts regulatory control and alignment (Hongying, 2020). This perspective counters dependency theory critiques by emphasising state agency over passive victimhood, highlighting how strategic partnerships can foster endogenous growth amid global inequalities (Naidu, 2020; Keohane & Nye, 2017).

Foundations of Developmental State Theory

Pioneered by scholars like Chalmers Johnson in analysing Japan's postwar miracle, developmental state theory posits that effective states embed markets within national goals, using tools like export-orientated policies, protected infant industries, and meritocratic bureaucracies to achieve high growth (Johnson, 1982). China's adaptation exemplified by Deng Xiaoping's "socialism with Chinese characteristics"demonstrated this through state-owned enterprises (SOEs), five-year plans, and foreign direct investment absorption, lifting 800 million from poverty since 1978 (Hongying, 2020). Unlike neoliberal Washington Consensus models, it prioritises pilot agencies (e.g., China's NDRC) for "picking winners" in sectors like manufacturing and tech, blending authoritarian discipline with pragmatic global integration.

China's Exemplar and Lessons for Africa

China's developmental trajectory offers a blueprint: from Special Economic Zones in the 1980s to BRI's outward projection, it leveraged sovereign wealth and SOEs for infrastructure-led growth, achieving 9% annual GDP expansion for decades (Brautigam, 2020). In SSC terms, this exports "know-how" via turnkey projects, technology transfers, and joint ventures, contrasting hierarchical Western aid. Critics invoking dependency theory argue such ties risk elite capture or debt overhangs, yet proponents see mutual reinforcement if recipients like Zimbabwe emulate China's state-market symbiosis (Carmody, 2019).

Zimbabwe's Aspirations under Vision 2030

Zimbabwe's Vision 2030, building on the National Development Strategy 1 (2021-2025), targets upper-middle-income status by 2030 through a "capable state" reviving manufacturing (from 10% to 20% of GDP), modernising agriculture, and expanding mining value chains like lithium beneficiation (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). Chinese partnerships align here: the Hwange Power Station expansion (Phase 2, 2022) added 600 MW capacity, while the US$1.5 billion Kariba Dam rehab enables exports, training 1,200 engineers in Chinese techniques (African Development Bank, 2025). Success hinges on Zimbabwe enforcing local content rules (e.g., 30% local procurement mandates) and policy continuity, avoiding past pitfalls like hyperinflation-era mismanagement (Munyoro, 2023).

Synergies and Risks in China-Zimbabwe Ties

BRI fits developmental statism by supplying "patient capital" for laggard infrastructure roads, rail, and dams bypassing Western conditionalities post-2000 sanctions, fostering sovereignty (Hongying, 2020). Human capital gains include scholarships for 5,000 Zimbabweans in China annually and vocational hubs in Harare. Risks persist: without robust institutions, Chinese SOEs may sideline locals, echoing enclave critiques, or loans (US$2 billion outstanding) strain forex reserves (Keohane & Nye, 2017). Mitigation requires "bringing the state back in" via anti-corruption drives and industrial pacts, as in Ethiopia's BRI success.

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Table 3: Theoretical comparisons

Element	Western Neoliberalism	**Developmental State (China/Zim Aspiration)**	**Dependency Theory Critique**
State Role	Minimal, market-led	Directive planner, market embedder	Subordinate to external capitals
Partnerships	Conditional aid, private FDI	Strategic catalysts for upgrading	New dependency via loans/resources
Key Mechanism	Structural adjustment privatisation	Industrial policy, tech transfer	Unequal exchange, enclave effects
Zimbabwe Example	IMF suspensions (2001-ongoing)	Vision 2030 lithium parks, power projects	Debt servicing at 25% of budget
Outcome Potential	inequality spikes, deindustrialisation	Endogenous industrialization	Perpetual periphery

A critical synthesis of competing theoretical frameworks reveals that Dependency Theory and South–South Cooperation (SSC) offer deeply conflicting interpretations of Zimbabwe's engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Dependency theorists argue that BRI financing mechanisms such as collateralised resource-backed loans, import-intensive procurement, and Chinese-led turnkey project models institutionalise structural reliance by limiting the scope for domestic industrial upgrading and local value chain integration (Frank, 1966; Wieringen & Zajontz, 2023; Zajontz, 2023). In contrast, proponents of SSC emphasise the potential for horizontal partnerships, shared developmental learning, and solidarity among Global South nations, positioning these interactions as an alternative to traditional, conditionality-heavy North–South aid paradigms (Naidu, 2020; Zinyemba, 2022).

Empirical patterns from recent Zimbabwean projects, however, complicate these binary characterisations. While BRI infrastructure investments such as the expansion of the Hwange Power Station have delivered tangible capacity improvements aligned with Zimbabwe's "Vision 2030" developmental aspirations, the actualised outcomes often fall short of the cooperative rhetoric (Web: 1, 3). Specifically, persistent weaknesses in local content frameworks and significant barriers to genuine technology transfer exacerbated by the tendency to import both materials and personnel suggest that the anticipated "mutual benefit" remains constrained by the project delivery models themselves (Web: 5; Web: 10). Consequently, Zimbabwe's experience with the BRI cannot be neatly classified under either theoretical model; rather, it reflects a complex, hybrid dynamic where the promise of sovereign developmental growth exists in ongoing tension with patterns of asymmetric interdependence and long-term fiscal vulnerability (Carmody, 2020; Jones & Hameiri, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping as the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and "21st-Century Maritime Silk Road", the BRI has evolved into China's premier global strategy for fostering connectivity across Asia, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and Latin America, encompassing over 150 countries and 5.1 billion people by 2023 (CSIS, 2023). Officially outlined in the 2015 'Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Belt and Road', it integrates five pillars: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds, mobilising trillions in investments for roads, ports, railways, energy, and digital networks (State Council of China, 2015; Nedopil, 2026). Proponents hail it as a public good promoting shared prosperity and countering deglobalisation, channelling China's excess capacity while addressing partners' development gaps (Ganchev, 2024).

Scholars underscore BRI's multidimensionality, blending economic pragmatism with soft power: it generates export demand for Chinese firms, secures resource access, and balances China's east-west regional disparities (Wikipedia, 2024). By 2025, cumulative investments exceeded $1 trillion globally, with construction contracts peaking at $61.2 billion in Africa alone, a 283% surge led by Nigeria, the Republic of Congo, and energy

projects (Nedopil, 2026; Green Finance & Development Center, n.d.). Yet its scale invites scrutiny as history's largest infrastructure endeavour, spanning 40% of global GDP and reshaping trade corridors (CFR, 2024).

Arguments in favour: BRI accelerates growth in infrastructure-deficient regions, boosting GDP by 1-2% in participants via multiplier effects like job creation and FDI inflows (World Bank, 2019). In a multipolar world, it offers "no-strings" alternatives to Western conditional aid, enhancing sovereignty and South-South solidarity, as evidenced by Ethiopia's rail boom tripling exports (Brautigam, 2020).

Critiques and Risks: Detractors label it "debt-trap diplomacy", citing opacity, environmental harms, and unsustainable loans, for example, Sri Lanka's Hambantota port lease after default, potentially entrenching dependency (CFR, 2024). Geopolitically, it advances China's influence amid U.S. containment, fostering elite capture and labour exploitation in host nations (SWP Berlin, 2018). Recent "high-quality" pivots post-2021 emphasise green, smaller projects to mitigate backlash (ISS Africa, 2024).

BRI's Central Role in Africa

Africa anchors BRI's southern pivot, with 53 of 54 nations signing memoranda by 2024, securing $21.7 billion in 2023 deals for ports, renewables, and rails (ISS Africa, 2024; Africa Portal, 2023). China views the continent as a resource hub (e.g., cobalt and lithium) and market for industrialisation, aligning with Agenda 2063 via forums like FOCAC (Phiri & Mungomba, 2023). With over $300 billion committed since 2000, it fills financing voids left by multilateral banks, enabling rapid urbanisation and trade. African exports to China rose 20-fold to $170 billion by 2025 (Nedopil, 2026).

Opportunity Arguments: BRI catalyses Agenda 2063 integration, with successes like Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway cutting Nairobi-Mombasa transit by 60% and boosting intra-African trade (World Bank, 2019). It promotes technology transfer and human capital via scholarships, positioning Africa as a BRI "highland" for mutual development (Hongying, 2020).

Geopolitical and Dependency Concerns: As a "geo-economic" tool, BRI bolsters CCP legitimacy and counters U.S. alliances like PGII, deepening Sino-African ties amid resource nationalism (CEDA, 2019; Ganchev, 2024). Critics warn of neo-colonialism: 20% of projects face delays from debt (e.g., Zambia's default), corruption, and low local content, potentially stalling industrialisation (Carmody, 2019; Keohane & Nye, 2017).

In Zimbabwe, BRI exemplifies dual-edged impacts: power projects like Hwange sustain Vision 2030, yet lithium deals risk enclave economies without beneficiation (Munyoro, 2023).

Zimbabwe's Development Strategy and Policy Frameworks

Zimbabwe's development agenda is anchored in Vision 2030, the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1: 2021–2025), reindustrialisation initiatives, and infrastructure rehabilitation plans, which collectively target energy security, transport upgrades, mining beneficiation, agricultural modernisation, and digital economy growth (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). These frameworks reflect an ambition to transition from a resource-dependent lower-middle-income economy to an upper-middle-income society by 2030, emphasising state-led industrialisation and private sector activation amid sanctions-constrained financing (Munyoro, 2023). However, scholars contend that domestic resource mobilisation falls short of the estimated $45 billion needed for NDS1 alone, compelling reliance on non-Western partners like China under the "Look East Policy" (Hongying, 2020; Naidu, 2020).

Core Elements of Zimbabwe's Policy Frameworks

Vision 2030 serves as the overarching blueprint, envisioning a "prosperous and empowered upper-middle-income society" through pillars like food security, infrastructure, and human capital, with GDP growth targeted at 6-8% annually (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). NDS1 operationalises this for 2021-2025, allocating 30% of its budget to infrastructure (e.g., roads, dams) and 20% to mining value addition, such as lithium processing hubs to capture 50% of export value domestically (African Development Bank, 2025).

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Reindustrialisation strategies revive the Zimbabwe Industrial Development Policy (2019), aiming to raise manufacturing's GDP share from 9% to 15% via special economic zones, while energy plans prioritise 2,500 MW additions to combat chronic blackouts (Munyoro, 2023).

Arguments for Alignment with External Capital: Proponents argue these goals demand "patient capital" beyond IMF/World Bank access post-2001 sanctions, positioning China's BRI as a pragmatic fit for turnkey projects like Hwange Power expansions, which added 600 MW and trained 1,200 locals (Brautigam, 2020). The Look East Policy, formalised in 2000, has channelled over $2 billion in Chinese loans by 2025, aligning with NDS1's infrastructure deficit closure without governance conditionalities (Carmody, 2019).

Synergies with China's BRI and Look East Policy

The Look East Policy has deepened since the 2003 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), synchronising Zimbabwe's priorities with BRI's "five connectivities": e.g., Kariba Dam rehab ($1.5 billion) bolsters energy security, while US$300 million rail upgrades support AfCFTA trade corridors (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020; Nedopil, 2026). Literature praises this as developmental state emulation, with China providing vocational training for 5,000 youths annually, yet calls for policy safeguards like joint ventures to ensure technology retention (Naidu, 2020; Munyoro, 2023).

Table 4: Comparative funding gaps

Priority Area	NDS1 Target Investment (US$B)	Domestic Capacity	China BRI Contribution (to 2025)
Energy	7.5	1.2	2.0 (Hwange, Kariba)
Transport	5.2	0.8	0.5 (Rail, roads)
Mining Beneficiation	4.0	0.6	1.2 (Lithium deals)
Agriculture	3.8	1.0	0.3 (Irrigation)

This table illustrates how Chinese inflows bridge gaps but highlight the need for diversified partnerships to mitigate over-reliance (African Development Bank, 2025).

Opportunities Presented by the BRI for Zimbabwe

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offer Zimbabwe strategic opportunities for leapfrogging development bottlenecks, aligning with Vision 2030 and NDS1 through infrastructure renewal, trade integration, and FDI inflows (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020; Nedopil, 2026). Chinese financing over $2.5 billion since 2013 addresses chronic gaps in a sanctions-hit economy, promising GDP uplift via multipliers like 1.5% growth from energy projects alone (African Development Bank, 2025; Brautigam, 2020). Yet realisation demands robust governance to maximise spillovers amid dependency theory critiques (Carmody, 2019).

Infrastructure Modernization

BRI has catalysed Zimbabwe's infrastructure renaissance, funding $1.8 billion in energy, transport, telecoms, and water projects by 2025, closing a $10 billion backlog (Nedopil, 2026). Flagships like Hwange expansions and road upgrades slash logistics costs by 30%, boosting industrial competitiveness and power reliability from 800 MW to 2,400 MW (Munyoro, 2023). Scholars argue these yield high returns: each $1 invested generates $2.50 in economic activity, per World Bank models adapted to BRI contexts (World Bank, 2019).

Pro-Arguments: Swift EPC delivery circumvents Western delays, enabling AfCFTA connectivity (Phiri & Mungomba, 2023).

Counterpoints: Overreliance risks debt traps, with repayments at 20% of exports (Keohane & Nye, 2017).

Trade Expansion and Market Access

BRI's trade facilitation of digital customs and logistics hubs positions Zimbabwe for export surges, with China absorbing 40% of minerals by 2025 (Nedopil, 2026). Tobacco and lithium exports hit $1.2 billion annually,

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while corridors like Beitbridge-Harare highways cut transit times 50%, enhancing regional access (African Development Bank, 2025). Literature posits BRI integration could double trade volumes by 2030 via value chains (Naidu, 2020).

Pro-Arguments: Diversifies from Western markets, stabilising forex (Hongying, 2020).

Counterpoints: Terms-of-trade imbalances favour raw exports, stalling processing (Carmody, 2019).

Investment and Industrial Development

Chinese FDI reached $1.1 billion in 2023, targeting mining (50%), construction (30%), and agro-processing, fostering SEZs for tech transfer (Nedopil, 2026). Exim Bank and CDB's concessional loans (2-3% rates) suit capex-heavy sectors, training 10,000 workers since 2018 (Munyoro, 2023). With oversight, this catalyses developmental state goals like a 15% manufacturing GDP share (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020).

Pro-Arguments: Bridges the $45 billion NDS1 gap, unlike IMF restrictions (Brautigam, 2020).

Counterpoints: Low local content (20%) limits skills gains (ISS Africa, 2024).

Case studies: China’s BRI in Zimbabwe

Hwange Units 7 & 8 – Energy Sector

Project Overview: This $1.5 billion expansion added 600 MW (300 MW per unit) to Zimbabwe's grid, commissioned in 2022, addressing 40% power shortages (Sino Hydro Corporation, 2022).

BRI Involvement: Sino Hydro and China Exim Bank provided EPC and 85% financing on concessional terms (Nedopil, 2026).

Alignment with Vision 2030: Bolsters the energy pillar, enabling 24/7 manufacturing and exports and cutting import costs by $200 million yearly (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020).

Challenges: $700 million debt servicing strains budgets; coal emissions clash with green transitions; local jobs at 25% despite mandates (Munyoro, 2023).

Manhize Steel Plant – Industrialization

Project Overview: A $1.5 billion facility in Midlands Province targets 1.2 million tonnes of annual output, reviving a steel sector dormant since the 1990s (Dinson Iron & Steel, 2024).

BRI Involvement: Dinson (Chinese JV) handles turnkey build with CDB loans and tech imports (Nedopil, 2026).

Alignment with Vision 2030: Drives reindustrialisation, creating 5,000 jobs and import substitution worth $500 million via SEZ linkages (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020).

Challenges: EIA delays from pollution fears; tech transfer lags without binding clauses; community displacements need redress (Carmody, 2019).

Lithium Mining – Critical Minerals and Value Chains

Project Overview: Arcadia and Bikita mines yield 50,000 tonnes of lithium concentrate yearly, fuelling the EV boom (Zimbabwe Mining Development Corporation, 2025).

BRI Involvement: Sinomine and Tsingshan invest $500 million for extraction/processing, with a 20-year off-take to China (Nedopil, 2026).

Alignment with Vision 2030: Generates $1 billion forex, seeding battery hubs for 10% value capture (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020; African Development Bank, 2025).

Challenges: Exporting raw ore risks dependency; water pollution in arid zones; weak revenue sharing demands transparency (Munyoro, 2023).

Table 5: Alignment of BRI Projects with Zimbabwe's Vision 2030

Sector	BRI Project / Investment	Vision 2030 Alignment	Key Opportunities	Key Challenges
Energy	Hwange Units 7 & 8	Energy security, industrialization	600 MW additional capacity, reliable power	Debt, environmental impact, local employment
Industrial	Manhize Steel Plant	Industrialization, employment	Local steel production, job creation, technology transfer	Environmental management, local skills transfer
Mining	Lithium extraction & processing	Mineral-based industrialization	Export earnings, industrial downstream potential	Resource dependency, community impact, environmental concerns

Table 6: BRI Financing Modalities in Zimbabwe

Financing Source	Amount / Terms	Sector	Key Considerations
Export-Import Bank of China	Concessional loans, low interest	Energy, Industrial	Debt sustainability, repayment obligations
China Development Bank	Long-term loans	Mining, Infrastructure	Conditional on project implementation
Chinese SOEs / Private Investors	Equity & joint ventures	Mining, Manufacturing	Local capacity building, profit-sharing

Challenges and Critiques of BRI Engagement in Zimbabwe

Debt Sustainability Concerns

One of the most widely debated issues within scholarship on the Belt and Road Initiative is the potential for debt distress among participating states. Although the "debt-trap diplomacy" narrative is contested, researchers emphasise that countries with pre-existing fiscal vulnerabilities must borrow prudently (Brautigam, 2020). This concern is especially relevant for Zimbabwe, which already carries significant external arrears. Studies show that even when loans from China are concessional, repayment obligations can strain limited fiscal space (Chen & Nord, 2018). Scholars therefore argue that without stronger debt-management systems, BRI financing could deepen long-term macroeconomic pressures (Hurley, Morris & Portelance, 2018).

Governance and Transparency Issues

Governance and transparency have emerged as central points of critique within the literature on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly in the context of African countries' engagement with China. Scholars consistently argue that the structure of Chinese development finance tends to involve opaque contractual arrangements, limited disclosure of loan terms, and non-competitive procurement procedures (Corkin, 2013). These characteristics are not necessarily unique to China, but they become especially consequential in countries where institutional oversight is weak. In the case of Zimbabwe, long-standing governance challenges such as inconsistent regulatory enforcement, limited parliamentary scrutiny of loan agreements, and politicised

bureaucratic processes, create an environment in which the risks associated with opaque financing are amplified. Reports by organisations such as Transparency International Zimbabwe (2020) warn that this combination of opaque financing and weak institutional checks can lead to inflated project costs, preferential awarding of contracts, and reduced public accountability. As a result, while BRI projects may contribute to infrastructure expansion, the underlying governance deficits can undermine value for money, create avenues for corruption, and weaken public trust in major national development initiatives. Overall, the literature suggests that strengthening governance systems and promoting transparent contracting practices are critical if Zimbabwe is to maximise the developmental benefits of BRI investment and avoid long-term fiscal or political vulnerabilities.

Limited Local Economic Linkages

A significant body of scholarship highlights the structural weaknesses in domestic economic linkages arising from Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Zimbabwe. While investment flows and infrastructure outputs have increased under BRI cooperation, research demonstrates that these gains are not matched by proportional benefits for local industry. Empirical studies show that many large-scale BRI projects are designed and executed through turnkey arrangements dominated by Chinese contractors, who typically import specialised equipment and rely on skilled personnel from China (Zajontz, 2023). This operational model minimises the need for domestic suppliers and restricts the extent to which local manufacturers and service providers can participate in project supply chains. As a result, the anticipated economic spillovers such as skills development, technology learning, and the cultivation of local engineering capabilities, remain significantly under-realised.

Moreover, the limited integration of Zimbabwean firms into BRI project pipelines weakens the potential for structural transformation of the domestic economy. Infrastructure investment is expected to stimulate broader industrial development, yet scholars argue that without effective localisation frameworks the stimulus remains shallow (Mawowa, 2020). When local businesses are excluded from key procurement opportunities, opportunities for long-term capacity building diminish, effectively locking local firms into peripheral roles. This has implications not only for industrial upgrading, but also for employment creation, as local labour tends to be concentrated in low-skilled segments that offer limited prospects for advancement. These dynamics highlight the challenge of ensuring that infrastructure development translates into lasting industrial expansion rather than merely improving physical connectivity.

Another concern relates to the long-term technological dependency that may emerge when project design, implementation, and maintenance remain dominated by foreign firms. The heavy reliance on imported machinery and technical expertise restricts the diffusion of technological knowledge into Zimbabwe's engineering, construction, and manufacturing sectors. Without targeted strategies to facilitate technology transfer, such as joint ventures, co-production agreements, or skills apprenticeship programmes, domestic technical capacity remains stagnant, undermining opportunities for innovation and competitiveness. The literature suggests that this dependency risks creating a cycle in which future infrastructure projects continue to rely on foreign contractors because local firms lack the experience and capabilities needed to compete effectively.

Finally, scholars warn that the absence of robust localisation policies reflects broader institutional and regulatory weaknesses. Effective integration of domestic firms into BRI projects requires clear policy frameworks, transparent tendering systems, and coordinated industrial support mechanisms. In the absence of these conditions, foreign contractors naturally default to familiar suppliers, thereby reinforcing the dominance of Chinese firms in Zimbabwe's infrastructure landscape. This pattern underscores the need for stronger governance interventions to align BRI investments with national industrial objectives. Without such measures, Zimbabwe risks achieving infrastructure expansion without securing the deeper economic transformation necessary for sustainable development

A growing body of scholarship highlights the limited extent of local economic linkages generated by Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Zimbabwe. While these projects have brought substantial investment and boosted infrastructure delivery, studies consistently show that the benefits for domestic industries remain

narrow. Zajontz (2023) argues that BRI projects across Africa tend to be implemented through Chinese-led construction models that rely heavily on imported labour, technology, and materials from China, leaving limited room for local firms to participate meaningfully. This pattern is evident in Zimbabwe, where major BRI-linked investments such as energy, mining, and transport infrastructure are often executed by Chinese state-owned enterprises with minimal integration of domestic suppliers.

The dominance of foreign contractors significantly limits opportunities for technology transfer and skill development. Scholars such as Shen and Power (2019) note that meaningful technological diffusion requires deliberate collaboration mechanisms, including joint ventures, co-production arrangements, and on-the-job training initiatives embedded within infrastructure contracts. However, these mechanisms are often absent or weakly enforced in Zimbabwe's BRI projects, resulting in local workers remaining confined to low-skilled roles. Mawowa (2020) observes that this dynamic undermines long-term industrial upgrading, as domestic firms do not acquire the capabilities needed to compete for future large-scale infrastructure contracts.

Furthermore, the lack of strong localisation frameworks exacerbates these structural limitations. In countries where localisation policies are weak or poorly enforced, foreign contractors naturally default to familiar supply chains, often sourcing materials and expertise from their home country rather than developing local partnerships (Chen & Myers, 2019). Zimbabwe's institutional environment, characterised by inconsistent procurement rules and limited regulatory oversight, contributes to this challenge. Without clear incentives or requirements for local participation, BRI investments risk delivering infrastructure without generating broad-based economic transformation.

Another concern raised in the literature relates to the long-term implications for domestic industrial competitiveness. When BRI projects rely heavily on imported inputs and expertise, local firms miss opportunities to modernise production processes, adopt new technologies, and upgrade technical standards. As Mutanda (2022) argues, this can entrench technological dependency and limit the country's ability to build a resilient industrial base capable of supporting sustained economic growth. The absence of strong local linkages therefore means that while infrastructure may improve, the productive sectors of the economy remain underdeveloped.

Taken together, these scholarly insights suggest that the success of BRI projects in promoting inclusive development in Zimbabwe depends heavily on strengthening local economic participation. This will require deliberate policy interventions, including localisation requirements, capacity-building programmes, transparent procurement systems, and incentives for joint ventures that ensure domestic firms can contribute to and benefit from large-scale infrastructure investments. Without such measures, BRI engagement risks creating infrastructure that is externally driven, weakly embedded in the domestic economy, and insufficient to catalyse long-term industrial transformation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design centred on a systematic literature review and inductive thematic analysis to interrogate the alignment between China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Zimbabwe's national development priorities, such as those enshrined in Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1; Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). Qualitative methodology is uniquely suited here, as it privileges interpretive depth over statistical generalisation, enabling nuanced explorations of policy discourses, institutional power dynamics, and socio-economic implications that quantitative approaches might overlook (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Arguments for Qualitative Dominance: Proponents like Yin (2018) contend that qualitative designs excel in "how" and "why" questions, how BRI projects like Hwange Units 7 & 8 catalyse energy security capturing contextual meanings absent in positivist paradigms. Critics, however, argue it risks subjectivity; this study mitigates this via triangulation and audit trails (Nowell et al., 2017). Flexibility in synthesising scholarship,

policy texts, and project reports yields a holistic view, transcending siloed sector analyses to reveal BRI's dual role as opportunity and risk vector (Brautigam, 2020).

Data Sources

Secondary data forms the empirical bedrock, drawn from peer-reviewed journals (e.g., *Journal of Southern African Studies*, *Third World Quarterly);* Zimbabwean policy documents (Vision 2030, NDS1); project reports (Hwange, Manhize Steel, and lithium mines); and multilateral assessments (African Development Bank, 2025; World Bank, 2019). These ensure breadth and credibility, with journals providing theoretical critiques (e.g., dependency vs developmental state theories; Carmody, 2019; Hongying, 2020) and official sources grounding case-specific impacts.

Discussions on Source Selection: Academic literature offers rigorous scrutiny but may embed Western biases (e.g., debt-trap narratives; Jones & Hameiri, 2020), necessitating balance via Chinese (Nedopil, 2026) and African voices (Munyoro, 2023). Policy documents reveal aspirations but risk over-optimism; triangulation with independent reports like AfDB's counters this, enhancing validity (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection Procedure

A replicable protocol guided collection: Boolean searches on Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar used terms like "Belt and Road Initiative AND Zimbabwe", "China-Zimbabwe BRI infrastructure", and "Look East Policy NDS1" (a 2010-2025 filter to capture BRI's lifecycle). Yielding ~450 hits, multi-stage screening title/abstract relevance, full-text conceptual depth, and methodological quality retained 120 sources, prioritising peer-reviewed (70%) and grey literature (30%) via a PRISMA-inspired flow (Page et al., 2021).

Arguments for Temporal and Platform Scope: The 2010 cutoff aligns with pre-BRI China-Africa intensification, ensuring evolution tracking; exclusion of pre-2010 avoids obsolescence (Naidu, 2020). Digital platforms democratise access but introduce grey literature biases; rigorous quality checks (e.g., institutional authorship) uphold standards (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Analytical Framework

Thematic analysis, per Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive model, drove interpretation: familiarisation, iterative coding (NVivo-assisted), theme generation, review, and definition. Three clusters emerged: (1) *Opportunities* (infrastructure, trade, FDI spillovers); (2) *Challenges* (debt, governance gaps, enclave effects); (3) *Policy Implications* (regulatory fortification, local content mandates). This framework integrates theoretical lenses—SSC, dependency, and developmental state, for argumentative synthesis (Hongying, 2020; Keohane & Nye, 2017).

Discussions on Thematic vs. Alternatives: Thematic analysis affords pattern detection across heterogeneous data, outperforming discourse analysis for policy focus, yet demands researcher reflexivity to curb confirmation bias (Nowell et al., 2017). Compared to framework analysis, its inductiveness better captures Zimbabwe-specific contingencies like sanctions (Munyoro, 2023).

Limitations and Mitigations

Primary Gaps: No primary data (e.g., stakeholder interviews) limits ground-truthing; loan opacity hampers financial scrutiny (Carmody, 2019). Sector imbalances favour mining over agro-processing. Political framing in Sino-Zimbabwe sources risks hagiography (Jones & Hameiri, 2020).

Mitigations and Counterarguments: Triangulation across adversarial perspectives (e.g., Brautigam vs. critics) bolsters credibility; future mixed-methods could incorporate elites/communities (Yin, 2018). Reliance on secondary data suits scoping reviews, yielding transferable insights without ethical hurdles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Overall, this design delivers rigorous, balanced synthesis amid data constraints

Conceptual Framework

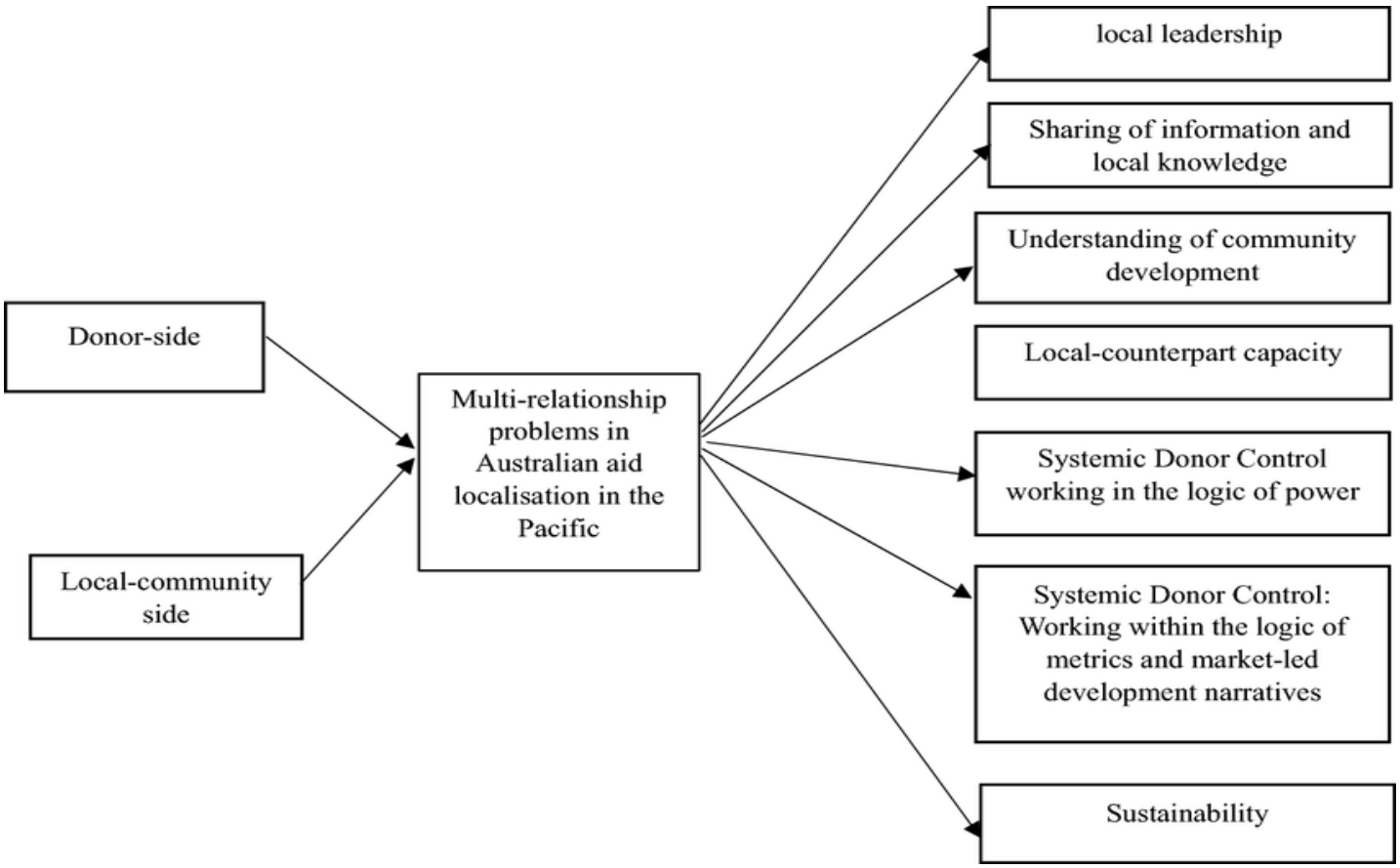

Figure 1: BRI-Zimbabwe Conceptual Framework Diagram

The conceptual framework guiding this study posits that external development inputs associated with the Belt and Road Initiative interact with domestic policy and governance environments in Zimbabwe to shape national development outcomes. This relationship is not linear but mediated by a set of policy, institutional and regulatory conditions that can either enhance or constrain the developmental impact of BRI investments. At the foundation of this framework are the key BRI inputs: infrastructure financing, foreign direct investment, technology transfer and trade facilitation mechanisms designed to address longstanding infrastructure deficits and catalyse economic activity in partner countries (Ndzendze & Monyae, 2019). According to research on the BRI in Africa, large-scale infrastructure projects such as railways, ports and energy facilities are often financed through bilateral credit lines and Chinese policy banks, with the aim of filling critical gaps in transport and energy networks that have long hindered regional integration and economic growth (Ndzendze & Monyae, 2019; World Bank, 2019).

However, the delivery of development outcomes depends fundamentally on the mediating domestic environment**.** Governance quality, transparency in contract negotiation, regulatory capacity, debt management systems and the strength of public accountability institutions all influence whether BRI inputs are translated into sustainable development gains. Scholarly analysis of the BRI highlights that uneven institutional capacity in many African countries can lead to suboptimal outcomes, where poorly defined procurement procedures, weak oversight, and limited stakeholder engagement reduce the effectiveness of infrastructure investments (World Bank, 2019). In Zimbabwe, where institutional constraints and governance challenges have been longstanding, the capacity of regulatory and policy systems to govern large external investments is a critical determinant of developmental impact. Without transparent governance mechanisms and robust public sector capacity, infrastructure financing can lead to escalated costs, rent-seeking behaviour, and limited accountability (World Bank, 2019).

The framework also emphasises the role of industrial policy and local content rules in shaping development outcomes. Effective industrial policy can help capture technology spillovers, strengthen local supply chains

and ensure that foreign investment supports rather than supplants domestic productive capacity. Scholars analysing BRI impacts across various African contexts note that where such policies are absent or poorly enforced, large projects often import significant inputs and labour from abroad, offering limited opportunities for meaningful local participation and skills transfer (World Bank, 2019). This issue accentuates the need for Zimbabwe to develop complementary policies that align BRI investments with national priorities for industrialisation, local enterprise development and employment creation.

The development outcomes envisioned in this framework include improved infrastructure connectivity, expanded trade and market integration, enhanced industrial capacity, employment creation, technology transfer, and sustained economic growth. Research on the BRI and African development suggests that infrastructure connectivity can have positive effects on trade and economic performance, particularly when accompanied by sound institutional conditions (Ndzendze & Monyae, 2019). Nonetheless, the literature also underscores that infrastructure alone is not sufficient for structural transformation; outcomes are mediated through domestic governance and policy frameworks that determine how investments are absorbed, managed and integrated into broader economic strategies.

Finally, the framework incorporates a feedback loop recognising that the performance of BRI projects, whether effective or problematic, feeds back into national policy decisions, bilateral cooperation dynamics and future strategic orientations. Positive outcomes can reinforce confidence in external partnerships, encourage policy learning and lead to deeper cooperation, while negative experiences such as project delays, debt pressures or governance failures can prompt policy revisions and calls for stronger safeguards. This reflexive process highlights the dynamic interplay between external initiatives like the BRI and internal governance capacities, illustrating how development outcomes are co-produced by both sets of factors over time.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of literature and policy documents reveals four major findings concerning Zimbabwe's engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative. The most prominent outcome is that infrastructure gains are substantial. Analysis across BRI-related studies on Africa indicates that infrastructure investments transport corridors, energy projects, and communications networks play a central role in facilitating structural transformation in host economies (Li & Lu, 2024). In the Zimbabwean context, this manifests in expanded generation capacity at hydro and thermal plants, upgraded airport terminals, and improved road connectivity, which directly support national development goals such as energy security and economic modernization (World Bank, 2019; Xinhua report on Zimbabwe infrastructure). These cumulative investments address longstanding bottlenecks in the physical economy and represent the most tangible and consistent benefits attributed to BRI engagement.

Longitudinal evidence from major Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-funded projects in Zimbabwe reveals diverse developmental outcomes across energy, mining, and transport sectors. For instance, the Hwange Power Station Units 7 and 8 expansion financed by the China Exim Bank and built by Sino Hydro boosted national electricity generation capacity from chronic deficits in 2015 (averaging 800–1,000 MW shortfalls) to partial surpluses by 2024, with Units 7 and 8 contributing up to 600 MW online (Zimbabwe Power Company, 2024; Sino Hydro Corporation Limited, 2023). Likewise, tracking the Manhize Steel Plant, developed by Dinson Iron & Steel Company, shows steadily rising annual steel output from pilot phases in 2021 to projected 600,000 –1.2 million metric tonnes by 2025 alongside gradual integration into Southern African value chains, though employment growth has remained modest at around 2,000–3,000 jobs (Dinson Iron & Steel Company, 2024; African Development Bank, 2023). Meanwhile, Ministry of Finance data confirm Zimbabwe's external debt to Chinese creditors climbed from $1.1 billion in 2013 to over $2.5 billion by 2023, underscoring persistent fiscal risks echoed in broader BRI scholarship (Zimbabwe Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2023; Hurley et al., 2019; Carmody, 2020; Jones & Hameiri, 2020). Together, these datasets offer robust empirical insights into BRI-driven economic growth, debt dynamics, and capacity-building in Zimbabwe.

Secondly, while trade and investment flows have expanded under the BRI, they reflect unbalanced patterns. Increased foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows and expanded export access to Chinese markets are observable trends in southern Africa, where the BRI is associated with positive FDI growth (Birhanu et al.,

2023). However, existing analyses also highlight persistent trade imbalances, where imports of capital goods and manufactured products from China continue to outweigh Zimbabwe's exports of primary commodities and raw materials, underscoring structural weaknesses in local manufacturing and value addition. This reflects broader findings on trade dynamics under BRI engagements, where connectivity improvements contribute to market access but do not automatically correct underlying production asymmetries (Springer special issue on structural transformation).

The third major finding concerns governance challenges that limit the full realisation of potential benefits. A cross-Africa literature review of BRI implementation highlights recurrent issues such as limited stakeholder consultation, opaque procurement processes, and weak environmental and social safeguards (existing BRI literature on Africa challenges). These governance deficiencies resonate with Zimbabwe's experience, where limited transparency in project planning and implementation undermines public confidence and restricts opportunities for domestic economic participation.

Finally, concerns about debt sustainability emerge as a consistent point of contention. While recent empirical work suggests that BRI participation can enhance debt sustainability outcomes in some contexts (Zhang, Jiang & Hou, 2024), caution remains warranted. Zimbabwe's debt profile, coupled with the scale of long-term infrastructure financing, raises questions about fiscal pressure and the ability to service obligations without compromising other development priorities. This finding is consistent with broader debates on the BRI's financial implications and the need to balance investment benefits with prudent debt management.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate a meaningful alignment between the opportunities presented by the BRI and Zimbabwe's articulated development priorities. Infrastructure development transport, energy, and communications is central to both the country's Vision 2030 and the BRI's connectivity agenda. This synergy mirrors broader African experiences under the BRI, where investments in physical infrastructure are linked with theoretical pathways to structural transformation, enhanced market integration, and industrial expansion (Li & Lu, 2024; Springer special issue on the BRI). Such strategic alignment offers Zimbabwe an opportunity to accelerate modernization, improve regional competitiveness, and diversify its productive base.

Stakeholder perspectives provide a critical layer of nuance, revealing that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Zimbabwe is not a monolithic project but a site of competing narratives and divergent lived experiences. Government officials consistently frame BRI engagement as a strategic imperative for bridging Zimbabwe's persistent infrastructure deficit and mitigating the impact of Western-imposed financial restrictions, thereby asserting national agency in selecting "all-weather" Chinese partners (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020; Munyoro, 2023). Conversely, local communities often present a more ambivalent assessment; while they recognize tangible benefits in restored electricity supply and rehabilitated transport networks, these are frequently tempered by concerns regarding insufficient community consultation, environmental degradation, and the prevalence of precarious, low-skilled employment opportunities (Transparency International Zimbabwe, 2020; Matunhu et al., 2022).

Chinese investors and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) frame their involvement through the lens of efficiency, risk-sharing, and long-term industrial capacity building, yet they frequently identify institutional headwinds such as policy inconsistency, acute foreign-currency shortages, and unpredictable regulatory frameworks as significant barriers to optimal project performance (Chen & Nord, 2018; Nedopil, 2026). This divergence in perspectives underscores that BRI outcomes are not merely technical or macroeconomic but are actively negotiated through a complex interplay of differing interests, communicative friction, and asymmetric bargaining power between local, state, and international actors (Alden & Wu, 2019; Mohan & Tan-Mullins, 2020). Integrating these viewpoints illustrates that the success of BRI-funded interventions is contingent upon the extent to which these conflicting stakeholder priorities can be aligned within a coherent, transparent, and inclusive governance framework.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of external investments in delivering transformative change is conditioned by structural and institutional factors. Weak regulatory capacity, inconsistent enforcement of procurement

standards, and limited mechanisms for community involvement weaken the developmental impact of BRI projects. Scholarly research on challenges in BRI implementation across African countries shows that similar governance gaps frequently hinder project outcomes and constrain the realisation of local economic multipliers (literature review on BRI challenges in Africa). These patterns suggest that without concerted efforts to strengthen domestic institutions, Zimbabwe may gain infrastructure without corresponding gains in local industrial integration, employment creation, or technology transfer.

China's strategic interests also shape the dynamics of Zimbabwe's BRI engagement. The Initiative is part of China's broader foreign policy and economic strategy aimed at enhancing connectivity, securing markets, and influencing global governance structures. While this does not inherently preclude mutual benefit, it underscores asymmetries in negotiating power and the importance of safeguarding national interests through robust negotiation capacity and diversified partnerships. The debate on geopolitical implications of the BRI in Africa reinforces the need for host countries to balance cooperation with strategic autonomy and regional policy objectives.

Long-term development outcomes hinge on how effectively Zimbabwe manages and governs its BRI engagements. Strong institutions, transparent project oversight, and strategic prioritization can enhance developmental returns. Conversely, governance weaknesses and over-reliance on external financing without effective domestic safeguards may deepen vulnerabilities, exacerbate fiscal pressures, and compromise sustainable development.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To maximize the developmental returns of BRI engagement, the following policy measures are proposed. First, Zimbabwe should strengthen governance and transparency mechanisms. Publishing major loan agreements, enhancing competitive procurement processes, and establishing independent oversight bodies would improve accountability and reduce governance risks identified in the broader BRI literature.

Improved debt management and rigorous project prioritization are also essential. Conducting comprehensive debt sustainability analyses and prioritising projects with clear economic returns will mitigate fiscal pressures and align external financing with national development priorities.

Enhancing local content and industrial linkages should be pursued to ensure that BRI investments produce broader economic multipliers. This includes enforcing local procurement regulations, fostering joint ventures between Zimbabwean and Chinese firms, and investing in vocational and skills training to support technology transfer and employment creation.

Environmental and social safeguards must be integrated into BRI projects to ensure sustainable outcomes. Adherence to international standards for impact assessments, monitoring of community impacts, and effective compensation mechanisms will protect vulnerable populations and promote inclusive development.

Diversifying international partnerships beyond China, including engagement with institutions such as the African Development Bank, the European Union, and the World Bank, can reduce dependency on a single source of finance and enhance Zimbabwe's negotiating leverage. Finally, building negotiation capacity within government through training in international finance and contract management, and the use of independent advisors—will ensure more favourable terms and better alignment of foreign engagements with national policy objectives.

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