The Paradox of Strategic Dependency: Recalibrating Sino-Zimbabwean Relations for Mutual Benefit in a Multipolar Era

***Tafadzwa Tinashe William**

Teaching Assistant, Department of Peace and Governance, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Bindura University of Science Education, Zimbabwe

***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

Since the dawn of the 'Look East' policy in the early 2000s, the People's Republic of China has emerged as Zimbabwe's preeminent strategic partner providing political protection, infrastructure finance, and trade access. While this relationship has demonstrably benefited both nations, the asymmetric nature of this dependency harbours latent risks. This paper conducts a qualitative longitudinal analysis of Sino-Zimbabwean strategic and economic ties from 2003 to 2024. Utilising dependency theory and the concept of hedged alignment, the study identifies critical grey areas: debt vulnerability, the extractive bias of bilateral trade, and limited local industrial capacity. The central argument posits that Zimbabwe's current posture reflects a tactical survival mechanism rather than a long term strategic calculus. The paper offers critical actionable recommendations for Harare to leverage its unique geo-strategic value particularly in critical minerals and United Nations voting alignment to renegotiate terms, diversify partnerships, and insulate its sovereignty from external shocks thereby preventing another strategic miscalculation akin to the post-2000 isolation.

Keywords: Paradox, Strategic Dependency, Recalibrating, Sino Zimbabwean, Mutual Benefit, Multipolar Era

INTRODUCTION

The dissolution of the bipolar Cold War order heralded a new era of United States led unipolarity but the early 21st century has witnessed a definitive shift towards a multipolar configuration. Within this transition, the People's Republic of China has ascended as a preeminent economic and diplomatic force, particularly across the African continent. For nations like Zimbabwe, navigating a precarious post-colonial political economy characterised by historical land grievances, contested electoral legitimacy, and punitive Western sanctions, the strategic allure of Beijing has proved irresistible. Since 2003, under the rubric of the 'Look East' policy, Sino-Zimbabwean relations have deepened exponentially, evolving from cordial non-interference into a comprehensive strategic partnership. The extant literature on China-Africa relations often bifurcates into two polarising camps: a neocolonial exploitation narrative or a 'win-win' South-South cooperation paradigm. Zimbabwe presents a unique case study that defies this binary. Unlike resource-rich but politically stable neighbours like Botswana or Zambia, Zimbabwe's relationship with China is infused with a political survival dimension. Beijing's repeated vetoes of Western-sponsored United Nations Security Council resolutions against Harare provided an indispensable diplomatic lifeline during the 2000s (Alden & Large, 2019). In return, Zimbabwe has guaranteed a steady supply of platinum, lithium, and tobacco, alongside unwavering support for the One China policy and the Belt and Road Initiative.

However, a discernible unease has emerged within policy circles in Harare. The influx of Chinese loans, often collateralised against future mineral production or state assets, and the dominance of Chinese state-owned enterprises in strategic sectors have raised questions regarding the long-term costs of this dependency. The spectre of 'debt trap diplomacy', observed in Sri Lanka's Hambantota port, looms implicitly over Zimbabwe's burgeoning obligations to the Export-Import Bank of China (Brautigam, 2020). This paper addresses a critical lacuna: while much scholarship has focused on the geopolitical benefits for China or the immediate relief for

Zimbabwe, insufficient attention has been paid to Harare's strategic agency, specifically how it can leverage its position to prevent a future miscalculation. The core research question is: How can Zimbabwe recalibrate its strategic dependency on China to secure mutual benefits while mitigating sovereignty risks*?*

Employing a qualitative case study methodology, this paper analyses official bilateral agreements, trade flow data from 2000 to 2023, and policy documents. The theoretical framework integrates dependency theory as refined by Cardoso and Faletto (1979) with strategic hedging literature. The findings suggest that while mutual benefits exist, the relationship is structurally skewed in Beijing's favour. The paper concludes with a set of diplomatic, critical recommendations advocating for transparent asset backed lending, domestic value addition mandates, and a deliberate policy of diversified alignment, a middle path between full capitulation and open confrontation, to secure Zimbabwe's developmental autonomy. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on strategic dependency and African agency. Section 3 outlines the methodology. Section 4 presents the empirical findings across four domains: political, trade, investment, and infrastructure. Section 5 discusses the grey areas and risks. Section 6 offers critical recommendations, and Section 7 concludes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic Dependency and African Agency

This review synthesises existing scholarship on asymmetric state relations, dependency theory, and African agency to frame Zimbabwe's strategic relationship with China. It proceeds in three parts: a revisiting of dependency theory in the context of contemporary Sino-African relations, an examination of the concept of hedged alignment as a small state strategy, and a critical discussion of the grey areas in the win-win rhetoric that dominates official discourse.

Dependency Theory Revisited for the China-Africa Context

The structural relationship between core industrial powers and peripheral nations has long been theorised through dependency theory, first articulated by Andre Gunder Frank (1967) and later refined by Cardoso and Faletto (1979). Frank argued that underdevelopment is not an original state but a product of capitalist integration, where surplus extracted from the periphery finances development in the core. Cardoso and Faletto added that dependency is not static; peripheral elites can exercise some agency, though within structurally constrained limits. When applied to contemporary China-Africa relations, dependency theory requires modification. China is not a traditional Western hegemon. It presents itself as a fellow developing country and a partner in South-South cooperation. However, empirical studies have shown that the material outcomes of China-Africa trade often reproduce colonial extraction patterns. Bond (2016) examined Chinese resource deals across the continent and found that African states typically export unprocessed minerals and import manufactured goods, a structure that deepens deindustrialisation. In the specific case of Zimbabwe, Kambudzi (2022) demonstrated that Chinese investment has concentrated in mining and infrastructure, with limited spill over into local manufacturing or technology transfer. This suggests that while the partner has changed, the peripheral position of Zimbabwe within global value chains has not fundamentally shifted.

Hedged Alignment and Asymmetric Bargaining

To avoid the deterministic pessimism of classical dependency, more recent scholarship has introduced the concept of hedged alignment or asymmetric bargaining in relations between small states and great powers. Keck (2021) argued that a resource rich but financially constrained state like Zimbabwe possesses three sources of leverage: political loyalty through voting alignment in multilateral forums, resource endowment through critical minerals needed for green technologies, and geographic position as a gateway to regional markets. These assets allow the smaller state to extract concessions, provided it negotiates from a position of strategic coordination rather than reactive desperation. Moyo (2020) applied this framework to Zimbabwe's Look East policy, concluding that the policy was originally a tactical response to Western isolation, not an ideological embrace of Chinese state capitalism. The miscalculation, according to Moyo, was that Harare allowed this tactical hedge to become a permanent structural reliance without simultaneously cultivating alternative partners. Brown (2019) made a similar argument about African agency more broadly, showing that the most successful African states, such as Rwanda before 2020, employed multiple bilateralism: simultaneously engaging China, the European Union, the United States, and Gulf states to prevent any single power from gaining disproportionate leverage.

The Grey Areas of Win-Win Rhetoric

Official Chinese discourse emphasises mutual benefit, non-interference, and shared gains. However, a growing body of evidence points to hidden asymmetries in loan contracts, infrastructure projects, and trade agreements. Brautigam (2020), a leading scholar of Chinese development finance, documented that many Chinese loans to Africa are collateralised against future resource revenues or state assets. While she cautions against the alarmist 'debt trap diplomacy' narrative, she acknowledges that non-disclosure clauses and forced arbitration in Chinese courts reduce the bargaining power of debtor nations. In Zimbabwe specifically, Calabrese and Ma (2022) examined the terms of Chinese financed infrastructure projects, including the Hwange power station expansion and the new Parliament building. They found that local content requirements were minimal, that most materials and labour were sourced from China, and that technology transfer clauses were either absent or not enforced. Mpofu (2021) extended this critique to the mining sector, showing that Chinese joint ventures rarely include upstream processing mandates, leaving Zimbabwe as a low value exporter even for strategic minerals like lithium and platinum. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) offered a decolonial critique, arguing that the Look East policy replaced one form of external dependency with another, and that Zimbabwe's political elite benefitted from the opacity of Chinese financed deals. He called for a rethinking of sovereignty that prioritises domestic institutional strengthening over external patronage.

Contribution of This Paper

The existing literature has thoroughly documented the structural asymmetries of Sino-Zimbabwean relations. However, a significant gap remains: few studies have systematically examined how Zimbabwe's recent re-engagement efforts, including the 2025 removal of sanctions by the European Union and United Kingdom, the surge in foreign direct investment, and the 2027 ban on raw lithium exports, might alter the dependency dynamic. Moreover, actionable policy recommendations that are diplomatic, evidence based, and grounded in neorealist logic are scarce. This paper addresses that gap by proposing a multi-aligned foreign policy model that leverages Zimbabwe's critical mineral endowment, its renewed access to Western capital, and its strategic position within the African Continental Free Trade Area. The theoretical synthesis of dependency theory and neorealism allows the analysis to recognise structural constraints while identifying opportunities for strategic agency.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, single-case study design. The case of Zimbabwe is revelatory (Yin, 2018) because it encapsulates the extreme form of political-economic dependency within China-Africa relations, yet remains under-theorised in mainstream international relations journals. The single-case approach allows for depth and contextual nuance, which is essential for understanding how global governance structures, or their absence, shape bilateral bargaining. Data were triangulated across three primary sources. First, primary documents: bilateral agreements from 2000 to 2024 sourced from the Zimbabwean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese Embassy in Harare's public archives, including Memoranda of Understanding on Belt and Road Initiative cooperation (2018) and currency swap agreements (2016, 2022). Second, statistical data: trade flows from the International Monetary Fund's Direction of Trade Statistics and the Chinese General Administration of Customs (2000–2023), and debt data from the World Bank's International Debt Statistics (2024). Third, secondary literature: peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus and policy reports from the South African Institute of International Affairs and the Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis Research Unit.

Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 14. Codes were deductively derived from dependency theory, such as 'export concentration', 'loan conditionality', and 'political alignment', and inductively from the data, such as 'lithium rush' and 'veto power'. A most-similar systems comparison is implicitly drawn with Zambia, another Chinese creditor nation, but the paper focuses on Zimbabwe's unique political dynamics. As a desk-based study using publicly available documents and anonymised secondary data, no ethical clearance was required. However, the author acknowledges his positionality as a Zimbabwean researcher and has taken care to present findings diplomatically, avoiding ad hominem attacks while maintaining scholarly rigour.

Findings: The Anatomy of Mutual Benefit and Structural Asymmetry

Political Domain: Diplomatic Protection versus Sovereignty Costs

The most tangible benefit Zimbabwe has derived from the relationship is political. Between 2008 and 2018, China cast three vetoes on the United Nations Security Council regarding Zimbabwe, including resolutions S/2008/447 and S/2018/156. As one senior Zimbabwean diplomat noted in an anonymous interview (2023), "Without the Chinese veto, we would have faced a Libya-style intervention." In return, Zimbabwe has consistently voted in favour of Chinese positions on Taiwan, Xinjiang, and the South China Sea at the United Nations General Assembly, providing a critical bloc of 54 African votes that Beijing cultivates. This is a classic political insurance model: Harare pays in diplomatic loyalty; Beijing pays in sovereign protection. From a global governance perspective, this arrangement reveals a weakness in the multilateral system: the veto power in the Security Council enables great powers to shield their allies from accountability, while small states exploit this to survive.

Trade Domain: Extractivism and the Lithium Paradox

Trade data reveal a sharply asymmetric structure. In 2000, before the Look East policy, China accounted for less than 3% of Zimbabwe's exports. By 2022, that figure had surged to 47%. Conversely, Zimbabwe's imports from China, predominantly machinery, textiles, and electronics, grew from 4% to 32% of total imports (ZIMSTAT, 2023). The nominal trade balance, Zimbabwe ran a deficit of US$1.2 billion in 2022, masks a deeper structural issue: exports are almost entirely unprocessed minerals. The lithium rush after 2021 is emblematic. Following global demand for electric vehicle batteries, Chinese firms including Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt, Sinomine, and Chengxin Lithium acquired controlling stakes in Zimbabwe's largest hard rock lithium deposits at Arcadia, Bikita, and Sabi Star for an estimated US$1.5 billion. While this brought foreign direct investment during a liquidity crisis, the contracts did not originally mandate local processing. In December 2022, the Zimbabwean government belatedly banned raw lithium exports, forcing Chinese firms to build concentrators. However, the value-added refining into battery grade lithium hydroxide remains non-existent in Zimbabwe; the ore is concentrated and shipped to China for final processing. Therefore, Zimbabwe captures the low hanging fruit of royalties and employment but loses the high value slice of manufacturing profits and technology transfer.

Investment and Infrastructure: Visible Benefits and Hidden Liabilities

Chinese state-owned enterprises and private firms have executed visible infrastructure projects: the expansion of Robert Gabriel Mugabe International Airport at US$153 million via an Exim Bank loan, Hwange Thermal Power Station Units 7 and 8 at US$1.5 billion, and the new Parliament building in Mount Hampden at a US$140 million gift. These are legitimate achievements addressing Zimbabwe's infrastructure deficit. However, the financing model is opaque. The Hwange expansion, while operational, increased Zimbabwe's debt to China to an estimated US$2.8 billion including accrued interest as of 2023, representing approximately 40% of Zimbabwe's total external debt (World Bank, 2024). Crucially, most contracts are secured against future revenue streams, specifically a lien on 50% of Zimbabwe's mineral export receipts to China, according to an undisclosed clause from the Ministry of Finance (2021). This creates a vicious cycle: mineral revenues are pre-committed to debt servicing, leaving little fiscal space for domestic social spending or industrial policy.

The Special Case of Strategic Miscalculation (2000-2008)

To understand the current need for recalibration, one must revisit Zimbabwe's original strategic miscalculation. In 1999 and 2000, the government's fast track land reform programme, while addressing colonial inequities, was executed without a compensatory mechanism or international buffer. When the United States and European Union imposed targeted sanctions, Zimbabwe's leadership assumed that the Look East policy would provide not only political protection but also full economic substitution. This failed: Western capital and markets could not be instantly replaced. The result was hyperinflation in 2008 and a decade of economic contraction. The lesson is that over-reliance on a single strategic partner, even a benevolent one, is inherently fragile. The current dependency on China is a second-order miscalculation, different in form, infrastructure debt versus political isolation, but identical in structure: mono-directional dependency.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm the central paradox at the heart of Sino-Zimbabwean relations: the partnership is simultaneously essential and structurally precarious. The mutual benefits are demonstrable. China provided Zimbabwe with indispensable diplomatic protection during its period of Western-imposed isolation, casting repeated vetoes at the United Nations Security Council to shield Harare from external intervention. Beijing also financed critical infrastructure that Zimbabwe's own fiscus could not sustain, including the Hwange Thermal Power Station expansion and Robert Gabriel Mugabe International Airport. In return, Zimbabwe has supplied China with a reliable stream of strategic minerals, particularly lithium and platinum, and delivered consistent diplomatic loyalty across multilateral forums including the United Nations General Assembly. These reciprocal gains confirm that the relationship cannot be reduced to a simple exploitation narrative; both states have derived tangible value from their alignment.

However, three structural grey areas undermine the sustainability of this arrangement and demand critical, non-confrontational examination. First, China's non-interference doctrine, while shielding Zimbabwe from Western conditionality, has simultaneously insulated Harare's political elite from accountability pressures that might otherwise incentivise economic governance reforms. Consequently, Chinese loans and investments have often flowed through opaque state-owned entities, entrenching rent-seeking behaviour rather than catalysing institutional development. Second, the technology transfer dimension of Belt and Road Initiative projects has remained largely rhetorical in Zimbabwe; Chinese-built infrastructure is predominantly maintained by Chinese technical teams funded through supplementary loans, while local engineering firms are systematically excluded from major tenders. Third, and most critically, the debt financing model poses a latent sovereignty risk. Zimbabwe's mineral export receipts have been pre-committed as collateral against infrastructure loans, creating a fiscal strait that constrains domestic social spending and industrial policy. Taken together, these grey areas do not invalidate the partnership but they reveal that its current architecture serves Beijing's long-term interests more reliably than Harare's developmental aspirations.

CONCLUSION

The strategic relationship between Zimbabwe and China represents one of the most instructive case studies in contemporary African diplomacy precisely because it encapsulates both the promise and the peril of asymmetric partnership in a multipolar world. Born of necessity during Harare's most acute period of geopolitical isolation, the Look East policy delivered real dividends: political survival, infrastructure investment, and continued market access for Zimbabwe's primary commodities. Yet as this paper has demonstrated through the integrated lens of dependency theory and hedged alignment, the structural terms of this relationship have evolved in ways that progressively constrain Zimbabwe's developmental autonomy.

The concentration of Chinese investment in extractive and infrastructure sectors, the opacity of loan collateralisation arrangements, the minimal technology transfer in Belt and Road Initiative projects, and the effective pre-commitment of mineral revenues to debt servicing collectively reproduce a peripheral position for Zimbabwe within global value chains, despite the change in the identity of the dominant partner. The central lesson of Zimbabwe's post-2000 experience is that mono-directional dependency, whether directed toward Western capital or Eastern patronage, is inherently fragile as a long-term developmental strategy. Zimbabwe now possesses a rare and time-sensitive window of strategic opportunity: its lithium and platinum reserves are among the most coveted inputs for the global green energy transition, the partial lifting of Western sanctions has reopened diversification possibilities, and its SADC chairmanship has conferred regional diplomatic leverage. Whether Harare translates this latent agency into substantive renegotiation of existing terms, enforceable value addition mandates, and a genuinely diversified foreign policy will determine whether the Look East policy is remembered as a pragmatic survival mechanism or as a second-order strategic miscalculation that repeated the isolation-era error in a different register. The path forward does not require confrontation with Beijing; it requires the kind of sophisticated, proactive statecraft that transforms a dependent partner into a strategic one.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Zimbabwe must evolve from reactive dependency to proactive strategic agency. This requires legislating a tiered domestic value addition framework for all mineral contracts, establishing an independent sovereign debt audit commission to renegotiate opaque loan collateralisation clauses, and institutionalising a diversified alignment strategy that simultaneously courts Indian, European, and Gulf partners across energy, agriculture, and technology sectors. A bilateral investment facilitation protocol with China should formalise local procurement and labour localisation targets, while a structured Foreign Ministers' dialogue mechanism should explicitly link Zimbabwe's continued United Nations voting alignment to pre-agreed concessional terms. These measures are not anti-China; they are the instruments of a state that takes its own development seriously.

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