Zimbabwe's Re-Engagement Efforts in The Face of Strategic Dependency on China: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities.

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ABSTRACT

Strategic dependency remains a critical challenge to Zimbabwe's sovereign autonomy, as a protracted "Look East" policy has resulted in a deep structural reliance on Chinese financing for essential infrastructure and resource extraction. This paper posits that while China remains a vital developmental partner, Zimbabwe's nascent re-engagement initiatives and industrial reforms offer a viable, though complex, pathway toward restoring strategic agency. Employing a theoretical synthesis of Dependency Theory and Neorealism, the analysis critically examines the achievements, challenges, and opportunities characterizing Zimbabwe's efforts to diversify its global partnerships. Findings indicate that recent diplomatic milestones including the removal of the final entities from EU and UK sanctions lists in 2025 and a 49% surge in Foreign Direct Investment signify a pivotal shift toward international normalization. However, the efficacy of these efforts is constrained by a debt overhang of US $12.2 billion, institutional fragility, and a regressive mining fiscal regime that hampers non-traditional investment. The paper contributes to the discourse on South-South cooperation by proposing a multi-aligned foreign policy model that leverages resource nationalism and regional integration. It highlights the 2027 ban on raw lithium exports and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as transformative opportunities to transition from a low-value exporter to a regional industrial hub. The study concludes with evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at accelerating sovereign debt resolution, rationalizing mining taxes, and institutionalizing technology transfer. These measures are essential for ensuring that Zimbabwe's developmental trajectory is driven by diversified autonomy rather than singular external reliance, thereby fostering long-term economic resilience and sustainable human development.

Keywords: strategic dependency; re-engagement; foreign direct investment.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic dependency occurs when a nation-state relies disproportionately on a single external partner for political capital, economic liquidity, and infrastructure development, thereby compromising its sovereign autonomy and policy flexibility (Clarke & Payne, 2026). Zimbabwe serves as a primary case study of this phenomenon; its Look East policy has evolved into a deep structural reliance on Chinese financing for critical projects, including the expansion of the Hwange Power Station, the Robert Gabriel Mugabe International Airport, and extensive lithium and gold mining concessions. While this partnership has catalyzed resource-led growth, evidence suggest a widening trade deficit and a rising debt-to-GDP ratio that leaves Zimbabwe vulnerable to external leverage (Dube, 2025). Within this geopolitical landscape, diversification and strategic re-engagement emerge as the primary frameworks for restoring agency. Defined as the "multi-dimensional pursuit of diverse diplomatic and economic partnerships to mitigate over-reliance on a single power" (Cramaro, 2024), diversification transcends mere trade and embeds national interest into a broader spectrum of global alliances. This aligns with the principles of neorealism, which argue that states must maximize their maneuverability within a multipolar system to ensure long-term survival and economic resilience (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001).

This paper argues that while China remains a vital development partner, Zimbabwe's current re-engagement initiatives and industrial policy reforms represent a necessary, albeit nascent, attempt to decouple its developmental trajectory from a singular external axis. The utility of this re-engagement lies in its capacity to attract diverse Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), modernize domestic industry, and re-establish creditworthiness with international financial institutions. The analysis pursues three objectives: To theorize strategic dependency within the context of Zimbabwe's political economy, specifically examining the mechanics of the Look East policy and its impact on sovereign debt. To analyze the manifestations and limitations of current re-engagement efforts, focusing on diplomatic shifts toward the West and the efficacy of recent industrial policy reforms in reducing import reliance. To evaluate the feasibility of these strategies in extricating Zimbabwe from structural reliance, providing actionable policy recommendations for achieving a balanced, multi-aligned foreign policy.

Theoretical Framework: Dependency Theory and Neorealism

To effectively analyze Zimbabwe's re-engagement efforts within the context of its relationship with China, a dual theoretical lens is applied linking structural historical constraints to contemporary strategic maneuvers. This study adopts Dependency Theory and Neorealism as its core theoretical framework. This combined approach allows for a comprehensive evaluation of how historical structural imbalances, characterized by a core-periphery dynamic, interact with the state's rational pursuit of autonomy and power within an anarchic, multipolar global system. An integration of these perspectives in the study moves beyond a descriptive account of foreign policy to a critical evaluation of how Global South states navigate structural reliance to achieve diversified autonomy.

The first pillar of this framework, Dependency Theory, posits that the global economic order is structured to create a hierarchy where the development of dominant nations occurs at the expense of subordinate nations (Friedmann & Wayne, 1977). In Zimbabwean, this theory explains how Western isolation and sanctions in the early 2000s necessitated the 2003 Look East policy, which effectively replaced one form of external reliance with another. Dependency theory is particularly salient for analyzing the financial entanglement where Chinese credit now accounts for over 95% of Zimbabwe's non–Paris Club external debt, estimated at approximately US $2 billion Moucka, 2025). This indebtedness, compounded by repeated defaults, functions as a mechanism that reduces Harare's leverage in negotiations and maintains its status as a low-value exporter of raw minerals with minimal domestic industrial advancement or technology transfer (Besada et al., 2024).

Complementing this, Neorealism provides the framework for analyzing Zimbabwe's recent re-engagement initiatives as a strategic pursuit of national interest. Neorealism argues that states must maximize their maneuverability and economic resilience to ensure long-term survival within a competitive international system (Taliaferro, 2006). From this perspective, Zimbabwe's efforts to diversify its diplomatic and economic partnerships such as the landmark removal of the Zimbabwe Defence Industries from EU and UK sanctions lists in 2025 (Murambiwa, 2025) are viewed as rational attempts to restore strategic independence and agency. The utility of this re-engagement lies in its capacity to attract diverse Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and re-establish creditworthiness with international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank, thereby mitigating over-reliance on a single power.

Both theories however possess inherent limitations that necessitate their synthesis. Dependency Theory can be criticized for a deterministic focus that may underplay the role of domestic elite-state alignment in reinforcing cycles of reliance. Conversely, Neorealism often treats the state as a unified, rational actor, potentially overlooking how institutional weakness, corruption risk, and a high domestic tax burden which is currently nearly 70% in the mining sector hamper the success of outward-looking reforms. Bridging these gaps, allows this study to frame Strategic Re-engagement as a neorealist strategy intended to dismantle a dependent structural reality. This dual lens allows for a critical assessment of whether policies like the 2027 ban on lithium concentrate exports genuinely represent a move toward lithium value chain upgrading or merely a temporary adjustment within existing global power imbalances.

Zimbabwe's Strategic Dependency on China

Zimbabwe's strategic dependency on China emerged in response to Western sanctions and international isolation in the early 2000s (Chipaike & Mhandara, 2013). Following Zimbabwe's controversial land reform policies, the "Look East" strategy was introduced in 2003 to deepen ties with China as an alternative development partner (Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018). This pivot ushered in massive Chinese investment in critical sectors. From 2004 onward, Chinese FDI accelerated dramatically, rising from $11 million in 2009 to over $1.3 billion by 2013

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across agriculture, mining, and infrastructure (Kambudzi, 2022). Key infrastructure such as the Kariba South hydropower expansion, Hwange power station upgrades, Zimbabwe's new parliament building, and airport renovations were bankrolled by Chinese state-owned firms under concessional loan agreements (Kambudzi, 2024).

This financial entanglement created heavy indebtedness; Chinese credit now accounts for over 95% of Zimbabwe's non–Paris Club external debt estimated at around US $2 billion making the country heavily reliant on Beijing's capital and subject to its terms (Moyo, 2023). Moreover, repeated defaults, including a $180 million repayment due in 2014 and cumulative arrears reaching $2.2 billion by 2019, reduced Harare's leverage in negotiations (Ncube & FINANCE, 2019). Politically, China's policy of non-interference enabled Zimbabwe's ruling elite to bypass democratic restraints and elite training programs tied to Chinese political and military institutions deepened institutional alignment (SAIIA, 2025). The absence of substantive technology transfer and limited inclusion of local suppliers means Zimbabwe continues as a low-value exporter of raw minerals with minimal domestic industrial advancement (Mpofu, 2021).

Zimbabwe's Re-Engagement Efforts

In recent years, Zimbabwe has initiated measures to diversify its foreign partnerships and restore strategic independence. A landmark moment occurred in February 2025 when the European Union removed Zimbabwe Defence Industries (ZDI) its last sanctioned entity from its restrictive measures list (Murambwa, 2025). This move marked the first time no Zimbabwean individual or institution remained under EU sanctions although broader frameworks remained in place (SAIIA, 2025). Shortly thereafter, the UK lifted sanctions on ZDI and several officials signaling further diplomatic progress.

Simultaneously, Zimbabwe instituted a ban on the export of lithium concentrates effective January 2027 to encourage domestic processing and value addition (Weng, 2025). Processing facilities are under construction at Bikita Minerals and Prospect Lithium Zimbabwe to support this shift (Pambuka, 2019). To complement this, Chinese-supported educational initiatives continue for example, mechatronics training for Zimbabwean students at Ningbo Polytechnic though a broader domestic capacity expansion remains necessary (Zhou, 2025).

Achievements in Zimbabwe's Re-engagement and Economic Stabilization

Zimbabwe's strategic shift toward re-engagement has yielded tangible milestones in diplomatic normalization and economic recalibration. A central pillar of this success is the significant softening of the international sanctions regime. In February 2025, the European Union removed the Zimbabwe Defence Industries (ZDI) from its restrictive measures list, followed by the United Kingdom in May 2025 (Mujana & Sonan, 2025). These actions resulted in a historic turning point: for the first time in over two decades, no Zimbabwean individual or institution remains under direct Western sanctions, effectively dismantling the primary legal barriers to renewed diplomatic dialogue and broader market access (Murambiwa, 2025). Murambiwa added that the termination of the broader U.S. Zimbabwe Sanctions Program in March 2024 has provided an opening for international financial institutions and private investors to re-evaluate the risk profile of doing business within the country.

Parallel to these diplomatic gains, Zimbabwe has demonstrated remarkable resilience in attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), signaling a potential diversification of its investor base. According to UNCTAD's 2024 World Investment Report, FDI inflows surged by 49% in 2023 to reaching approximately US $588 million (UNCTAD, 2024). This momentum continued into 2025, with the Zimbabwe Investment and Development Agency (ZIDA) reporting the issuance of 190 new investment licenses in the second quarter alone, representing a projected investment value of US $2.47 billion (ZIDA, 2025). While the mining sector continues to record the highest number of licenses, there is significant growth in the energy sector, which accounted for US $1.8 billion (73%) of the projected value in Q2 2025, primarily driven by renewable energy and power infrastructure projects (Tanda & Genc, 2024). This influx of capital is critical for reducing mono-sectoral dependence on traditional partners and strengthening the domestic industrial base.

Macro-financial stability has also received international recognition, providing a foundation for long-term growth. In its 2024 and 2025 Article IV assessments, the IMF noted that disciplined monetary policies

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specifically the introduction of the gold-backed ZiG currency in April 2024 have helped stabilize the local exchange rate and bring month-on-month inflation down to an average of 0.5% between February and May 2025 (Garita, 2025). Despite the headwinds of an El Niño-induced drought that slowed growth in 2024, the IMF projects a strong rebound to 6% GDP growth in 2025, supported by recovering agricultural output and record-high gold prices. The transfer of past debt obligations from the central bank to the Treasury has further enhanced fiscal discipline, limiting the 2024 budget deficit to an estimated 1% of GDP (UNCTAD, 2024).

Zimbabwe is making strategic strides in resource nationalism and value-chain upgrading to ensure its mineral wealth translates into domestic development. The lithium sector, in particular, has seen a surge in activity, with export volumes rising 30% in the first half of 2025 to over 586,000 metric tons (Scot & Price, 2025). To prevent the continued loss of value through raw ore exports, the government has enforced a ban on unbeneficiated lithium concentrates effective January 2027 (Chagumira et al, 2025). This policy has already catalyzed over US $1.4 billion in investment into local processing facilities, including new lithium sulphate plants at Bikita Minerals and Prospect Lithium Zimbabwe (Mutlokwa & Okoloise, 2025). These facilities are essential for moving the country up the global battery minerals supply chain, creating skilled employment and ensuring that the nation's strategic dependency is replaced by high-value, autonomous industrial growth

Challenges to Zimbabwe’s Re-engagement and Strategic Autonomy

Despite significant diplomatic and macroeconomic milestones, Zimbabwe’s path toward full strategic autonomy is hindered by deep-seated structural and fiscal challenges (Mahuni et al., 2025). A primary obstacle remains the nation's unsustainable debt profile, which is classified by the IMF as being in external and overall debt distress (Mapuvire, 2023). As of late 2025, Zimbabwe owes approximately US $12.2 billion in external arrears to multilateral and bilateral creditors, including US $1.5 billion to the World Bank and US $657 million to the African Development Bank (Mudzviti-Zhou, 2025). This level of indebtedness creates a debt overhang that effectively bars the country from accessing conventional concessional financing, forcing a reliance on high-cost, short-term domestic borrowing and complex bridge financing strategies, such as the US $2.6 billion target sought for mid-2026.

The domestic business environment also presents significant hurdles to diversifying the investor base beyond traditional partners. While the government has initiated Ease of Doing Business reforms, many sectors still face a regressive and burdensome regulatory landscape (Vambe, 2023). For example, some sub-sectors must navigate up to 28 different legal and regulatory requirements involving multiple government agencies. The mining sector the country’s primary engine for growth faces an exceptionally high tax burden. In 2024, the average effective tax rate for mining reached approximately 25%, the highest since 1943, with some estimates suggesting a combined effective tax burden of nearly 70% when accounting for all royalties, levies, and non-wage costs (Tanda & Genc, 2024). These high costs, combined with persistent power cuts estimated to cost the country up to 6% of its GDP annually, discourage long-term investment from non-Chinese entities.

Institutional fragility and governance deficits further complicate the re-engagement agenda. Although there has been progress in halting the direct monetization of the budget by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, fiscal financing pressures remain intense (Muchinguri, 2023). The accumulation of domestic expenditure arrears, which reached nearly US $600 million in 2024, reflects a persistent gap between revenue collection and public spending needs (Tichaona, 2024). Additionally, the IMF has identified "weak governance in state-owned enterprises" and unmet anti-corruption reforms as critical barriers to long-term sustainability. The author added that the centralization of over 30 state-owned enterprises under the Mutapa Investment Fund has raised concerns regarding fiscal transparency and the potential for unreported domestic arrears.

The economy remains highly vulnerable to external shocks and commodity price volatility, which underscores the structural limitations of its export base. In 2023, just five product categories precious stones, tobacco, nickel, stones, and ores accounted for over 80% of total exports (Garikayi, 2024). This lack of diversification was acutely felt in early 2025 when mineral production for key exports like lithium and diamonds dropped by 60% and 45%, respectively, due to subdued global demand and power supply disruptions. Without significant progress in domestic value-addition and a more robust policy reform track record supported by a Staff-Monitored Program (SMP), Zimbabwe remains susceptible to a cycle where market confidence remains low and fiscal needs continue to crowd out private sector growth.

Opportunities for Strategic Diversification and Value-Chain Transformation

Zimbabwe's current economic landscape presents significant opportunities to transition from a position of strategic dependency toward a model of diversified autonomy. These opportunities are primarily anchored in the maturation of the domestic lithium value chain and the strategic leverage provided by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). By moving beyond raw material extraction and integrating into regional trade frameworks, Zimbabwe can reclaim its strategic agency and reduce its structural reliance on any single external partner.

The global green energy transition has positioned lithium as a strategic mineral, offering Zimbabwe a historic opportunity to catalyze domestic industrialization. As home to the largest lithium reserves in Africa and ranking among the top five globally, the country is well-positioned to lead the continent's lithium industry (Whitfield et al., 2025). The 2027 ban on raw lithium concentrate exports serves as a cornerstone of this strategy, specifically designed to attract investment into local refineries and battery manufacturing plants. The construction of high-impact processing facilities at sites like Bikita Minerals and Prospect Lithium Zimbabwe signals a critical shift toward capturing downstream revenues. For example, the development of lithium sulphate production plants acts as a bridge to battery-grade materials, which command significantly higher per-ton export prices compared to raw concentrates. Effective beneficiation is projected to have a transformative social impact by creating specialized chemical engineering and metallurgical roles, while locally manufactured lithium-ion batteries could support solar irrigation and off-grid storage for the agricultural sector (Kushwaha & Chandwani, 2025).

Strategic leverage through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) provides Zimbabwe with a powerful mechanism to diversify its diplomatic and economic partnerships beyond its traditional reliance on China. By connecting 1.3 billion people with a combined GDP of approximately $3.4 trillion, the AfCFTA offers a vast continental market that allows Zimbabwean firms to cumulate with the rest of the continent (Nesongano, 2022). Participation in the AfCFTA facilitates the development of regional value chains (RVCs), allowing Zimbabwe to export value-added goods, such as processed lithium chemicals and manufactured components, to its African neighbors. The agreement serves as a platform to attract diverse Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from within Africa and from Western nations seeking access to an integrated African market (Korsah et al., 2025). The framework particularly benefits Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) by reducing non-tariff barriers and providing access to streamlined cross-border trade systems, which reduces the need for scarce foreign currency.

To fully capitalize on these opportunities, Zimbabwe is aligning its national strategies, such as Vision 2030, with continental agendas like the AU Agenda 2063. A key component of this institutional innovation is the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) focused on lithium refining and green manufacturing to centralize industrial clusters. These zones offer tax exemptions and energy solutions intended to attract global technology firms. Complementing these structural shifts is a focus on human capital development through partnerships with regional universities and international entities. Initiatives such as the mechatronics training for Zimbabwean students at Ningbo Polytechnic are essential for bridging the technical expertise gap and ensuring that technology transfer is integrated into the local workforce.

Policy Recommendations: Strategies for Enhancing Strategic Autonomy

To effectively navigate the structural constraints of dependency while capitalizing on emerging geopolitical and economic opportunities, Zimbabwe must adopt a proactive and multi-dimensional policy approach. The following recommendations are grounded in the theoretical synthesis of Neorealism and Dependency Theory, aimed at maximizing national maneuverability and institutionalizing economic resilience.

Accelerating Sovereign Debt Resolution and Financial Re-engagement

A primary recommendation is for the Government of Zimbabwe to prioritize a transparent and consistent debt-restructuring framework. As the study identifies a debt overhang of US $12.2 billion as a fundamental driver of dependency, the state must move beyond ad hoc bridge financing toward a formal, multi-lateral engagement strategy. This requires the sustained implementation of the IMF Staff-Monitored Program (SMP) to demonstrate fiscal discipline and build the international credibility necessary for a comprehensive arrears-clearance plan with the World Bank and African Development Bank. By clearing these arrears, Zimbabwe can unlock low-interest, long-term development financing from diverse sources, thereby reducing its reliance on high-cost bilateral credit that often carries restrictive resource-backed conditions.

Rationalizing the Mining Fiscal Regime and Promoting Value-Addition

To ensure that the 2027 ban on raw lithium exports translates into genuine industrial growth, the government must rationalize its mining fiscal policy to remain regionally competitive. Currently, the combined effective tax burden in the mining sector estimated at nearly 70% risks stifling the very exploration and downstream investment the state seeks to promote. It is recommended that the Ministry of Mines and Mining Development, in collaboration with the Treasury, implement a sliding scale royalty system that incentivizes domestic beneficiation while lowering the overall non-wage cost of doing business. This should be supported by the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) equipped with dedicated power infrastructure, ensuring that processing facilities at Bikita and Prospect Lithium have the operational stability required to move the country up the global battery-grade mineral supply chain.

Deepening Regional Integration through the AfCFTA

Zimbabwe should strategically leverage the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as a neorealist power-balancing tool to diversify its trade partners. Rather than maintaining a monosectoral focus on East Asian markets, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade should prioritize the development of Regional Value Chains (RVCs) within SADC and the broader continent. This involves harmonizing rules of origin for manufactured goods and fully adopting the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) to facilitate trade in local currencies, which mitigates the perennial challenge of foreign exchange scarcity. By becoming an industrial hub for processed minerals and components within Africa, Zimbabwe can cumulate economic power with regional peers, effectively diluting the leverage of any single external hegemon.

Institutionalizing Transparency and Technical Capacity

Successful re-engagement depends on strengthening the domestic institutional framework to prevent the politicization of economic policy. It is recommended that the government enhance the oversight and transparency of the Mutapa Investment Fund to ensure that state-owned enterprises are managed according to commercial principles rather than as vehicles for fiscal leakage. To sustain the technical demands of industrial value-addition, the state must institutionalize technology transfer mandates in all Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) agreements. Building on models like the mechatronics training at Ningbo Polytechnic, the government should expand domestic vocational training in chemical engineering and metallurgy. This focus on human capital ensures that the "structural transformation" of the economy is driven by a skilled local workforce, securing long-term strategic agency and sustainable human development.

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