

China in Zim... Story of solidarity, chickens and mega deals

Last week, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi concluded his tour of five African nations in Zimbabwe. Previously, Wang Yi had visited Egypt, Djibouti, Eritrea and Burundi.

On his arrival in Harare, he was met by his Zimbabwean counterpart, Sibusiso Moyo, who is well known for having taken over the airwaves, in military fatigues in November 2017, in a midnight broadcast which set the tone for the unthinkable ouster of Robert Mugabe through a military coup d'état.

Then, he remarked that "the situation had moved to another level", as tanks rolled, setting the tone for the ouster of the then nonagenarian leader, now late. With the Chinese minister in Zimbabwe, the situation had once again "moved to another level" at least in terms of diplomacy.

And yes, there was a great importance to Wang's visit. Being a foreign minister of the world's second largest economy, it was expected that Wang would meet and deliberate with Zimbabwe's top political hierarchy. With President Mnangagwa on leave, the Chinese minister, a long-serving diplomat met Constantine Chiwenga, the country's vice president who successfully engineered the ouster of Robert Mugabe before his subsequent "elevation". Meanwhile President Emmerson Mnangagwa had to cut short his annual leave to attend to the minister, who had come on a mission to deepen ties in the various areas of cooperation with the chosen five nations.

According to Mr Wang's spokesperson Geng Shuang, his visit was designed to advance the China-Africa Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and build on the China-Africa traditional friendship. Another symbolic aspect was that Wang's visit

coincided with the 20th anniversary of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The visit also came some three months after the commemoration of China's 70th independence anniversary! Furthermore, the visit is important considering the breakneck progress which China has made during the seven decades in which it has risen from obscurity to the position of the world's second largest economy. Meanwhile, Zimbabwe has remained stagnant for forty years, despite its promising conditions at independence!

Another distinguishing aspect was the fact that the visit prioritized "small nations" in terms of geographical location, political power, population and size of economy. The only exception was Egypt, which is one of the biggest economies in the continent.

This article will briefly focus on China's pre- and post-independence relationship with Zimbabwe, focusing on the defining period between 2000-2008. A further exposition of China-Zimbabwe relations is again portrayed from 2009, which birthed the Government of National Unity (GNU) between the Zimbabwe African National Patriotic Front (Zanu PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) until 2013. Finally, the article will focus on the pertinent period between 2013 to date, which saw the demise of Robert Mugabe and the subsequent installation of Emmerson Mnangagwa in November 2017.

No doubt, China has brought a different approach to diplomacy, at least in its relationship with African countries individually and the continent at large. China's modus operandi is different from the undying Western perceptions of Africa as one huge monolithic block, which is an epithet of global diplomacy. This is precisely why the United States of America, or Europe in general, regards Africa as a low foreign policy goal. The West may be trying to address this anomaly, but it is too late with the Chinese who have strongly established themselves across the continent!

While China's embrace is welcome, Africa should however not make the mistake of seeing Beijing in the old camaraderie sense of the ideological prism and solidarity in the anti-colonial fight. African states, most of whom hold China dearly for its ideological support, should also not see Beijing in the context of the politics of Cold War polarities of the time.

As Wang was in town for the three-day visit, government was at a standstill. Literally, the entire cabinet and state apparatus were present at Wang's reception held at a top hotel. Officials dined and wined while chatting about the "win-win cooperation" with the Emperor! The camera flashed as intermittent shutter sounds dominated, as the legion of local and foreign press jostled for shots between Wang and Chiwenga.

One would have thought comrade Xi was in town. But alas, it was the country's foreign minister, representing the principal, Xi Jinping. The hype which Chinese (or even Western) government officials get whenever they visit African states is quite frightening. However, when African presidents visit China, let alone ministers, there is not much reciprocal excitement. Which is worrisome!

Beyond the dining and wining, Wang Yi denounced the "unjustified sanctions imposed by Western countries". This was sweet news to Harare, which has over the past two decades called for the removal of sanctions, which have become a convenient excuse for bad governance. Even better, Wang's statement was important, especially in view of the anti-sanctions march which the Zimbabwean government held in October 2019. As usual, Harare was thankful for these remarks, which it construed as solidarity for Zimbabwe.

But this does not mean that China is unaware of the inhibiting political and economic conditions which enabled Zimbabwe's collision course with the West. Even China doesn't seem to be moving at a fast pace, as it has done across other

African countries in setting up some key investments. Was Wang Yi making a “lip-service” political statement to his hosts? Maybe!

As Chinese foreign minister, there is no doubt that he understands the West’s duplicity and strangulation of weak nations. But this does not mean that Beijing is unaware of Harare’s complicity in instituting massive reforms which benefit Zimbabweans first! Zimbabwe’s lack of reform has therefore affected its domestic and foreign policy cohesion at a time the country seeks to rediscover itself.

Though Zimbabwe and China share a common historical experience in the fight against colonialism, they are now poles apart. China cherishes its history which is the backdrop of the country’s post-independence success. Zimbabwe equally values its war-time contributions and the support it received from “progressive” nations such as China but has remained stuck in the past. China may be “an all-time weather friend” as Robert Mugabe put it in the wake of support it extended to Zimbabwe, especially in the aftermath of the land reform exercise.

Before independence, China supported the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA). *This support was in the form of arms and training for Zimbabwean fighters at Chinese ideological academies in Nanjing, among other areas. Beyond Zimbabwe, China’s support in the construction of the Tazara railways (in 1976), linking Zambia and Tanzania depicted the economic orientation of Beijing.*

Yet despite the historic role of China in Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe invested more energy in his relations with the West led by the erstwhile coloniser Britain. Although China’s contribution is largely framed in 2003 when Robert Mugabe announced the Look East Policy (LEP), there is however some evidence of transforming relationships with Eastern countries in the economic frontiers. Robert Mugabe’s pronouncement of the LEP in 2003 was therefore an activation of a previously

espoused diplomatic position a decade earlier!

With Zimbabwe retaking the land, Western nations imposed sanctions on Harare in 2002. To Robert Mugabe, this stance was part an orchestrated stance to institute a “regime change agenda” seeking to dislodge Zanu PF from power and replace it with the MDC, then fronted by Morgan Tsvangirai! Despite the changes which have occurred especially in the last decade, there is some strong evidence of China’s solidarity with Zimbabwe, especially between 2003-2008. In 2008, China and Russia co-vetoed a decision by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to place more sanctions on Harare. Despite the solidarity, the relationship has however been in controversial undertones. In April 2008, for instance, there was an uproar regarding a Chinese ship loaded with armaments and destined for Zimbabwe. Despite protestations by the Zimbabwean government which argued that it had rights to acquire arms as a sovereign state for its security requirements, there were strong opinions suggesting that the armoury would be used to instigate violence and intimidation especially in the run-up to the June 27 run-off election, after the first “inconclusive” results of the March 2008 election!

The official rhetoric on China somewhat dissipated briefly after the inception of the GNU! With the MDC having come to the fore, Harare invested much energy to rekindling relations with the West in a mission led by then Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai who engaged with the then newly elected American President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel among others. With Zanu PF having won the 2013 elections (which the MDC contested), the party once again resorted to its all-time weather friend while Robert Mugabe once again continued his tirades against the West. With Xi Jinping visiting Zimbabwe ahead of the 5th FOCAC summit in South Africa, Zimbabwe once again went home, crusading about the significance of this visit. The visit by Xi was instructive given that the last sitting Chinese president to visit

Zimbabwe was *Jiang Zemin* in 1996.

Despite its renown for non-interference, China however invested itself in the fierce power struggle between Robert Mugabe and his then deputy Emmerson Mnangagwa.

The fact that the then commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF) Constantino Chiwenga (now vice president) met Li Zuocheng, the chief of the joint staff of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) few days before the coup d'état (in November 2017) portrayed Beijing's "blessing" of the well-orchestrated ouster of Robert Mugabe.

Although Wang came on a mission to enhance economic cooperation, his visit was nonetheless characterised by underlying political forces. Yet despite what appears a watertight bond, there is some evidence of China's growing distrust of the Zimbabwean government. It is even curious that the Chinese have gone public about the reservations which they have with Harare, potentially opening avenues for policy shifts! Last year, the Chinese embassy in Harare disputed the figures of aid extended to Zimbabwe, which were recorded in the Budget Statement. The official figures stated that the USA, United Kingdom and other Western countries had bigger contributions to Zimbabwe than China.

The Zimbabwean Government had declared Chinese support to the tune of \$4 million, while the Chinese government pegged the figures to the tune of \$133 million. The deputy ambassador Zhao Baogang satirically remarked that China "had given Zimbabwe five chickens; but the authorities could only account for two." Despite the two friends having closed ranks, after an "establishment of a common accounting position", much damage had already been done.

Zimbabwe is more accustomed to Western diplomats, who are fond of rattling their hosts at any given chance. In 2007 the Zimbabwean government fired the American ambassador

Christopher Dell for his “undiplomatic criticism” and political meddling in the country’s politics. It was ominous that the relationship with the “all time weather friend” was now being reduced to an analogous situation of a “dishonest partner”, withholding three chickens in an egregious act of dishonesty bordering on corruption. Despite the official portrayal of calm and normalcy, there was some evidence of background ructions existing between the two.

Apart from the apparent signs of distrust from the Chinese, the Zimbabwean government faces low confidence and trust by its citizens! This presents a twofold problem in terms of foreign and domestic policy! President Emmerson Mnangagwa may wince about the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China, or any other nation for that matter, but citizens are not seeing any corresponding tangibles to the official rhetoric.

While China may have carried out key infrastructural projects which include the refurbishment of the Victoria Falls Airport, the construction of Long Cheng Plaza in Harare and the Defence College in Mazoe among others, Zimbabweans still need more convincing. In the past decade, there has been some Western-inspired and internal African criticism of the way China is “ripping off” African countries in various construction-related deals. That has been understandable. Those concerns aside, the Chinese investment vehicles have been more felt in countries like Rwanda, Kenya and Ethiopia among others. Despite clutching to old war-time bonds, Zimbabwe continues to scratch the barrel!

Although officials went head over heels to throw all manner of superlatives in explaining Wang Yi’s visit, hard-pressed Zimbabweans continued with their daily toil. Since becoming president in November 2017, Emmerson Mnangagwa has made all manner of countless foreign visits which have not brought much. The Zimbabwean government may have experienced some goodwill after Mugabe’s demise, but all that is now lost!

Zimbabweans are now even worse off, given the numerous challenges they are facing. These include: an energy crisis (in terms of electrical power and erratic fuel supplies), increased unemployment rates, collapse of healthcare, currency challenges (leading to the three tier pricing system) and runaway inflation.

Zimbabweans are in search for answers from their government's domestic and foreign policy undertakings. However, there is a growing reservation on the opaque nature of deals being conducted with shady Chinese business establishments. Even with government's talk of investments from China, there is much derision for China's poor adherence to local labour laws while authorities remain aloof. This may be a common problem across African states, but it is compounded by the disenfranchisement of workers due to low wages and other poor labour practices!

Wang Yi and his delegation may have requested Zimbabwe to submit six projects for consideration in funding, but that is meaningless to citizens. In any case it is not his fault, but that of Zimbabwe. Citizens have become tired of all sorts of mega deals which government preaches whenever it interacts with the Chinese, Russians and Indians. Robert Mugabe's frequent foreign trips did not bring any real mega deals, just as his successor Emmerson Mnangagwa has done!

In the end, despite the symbolism and significance of Wang Yi's visit to Zimbabwe, there was not much which locals saw in terms of direct benefits! They have over the years been accustomed to such highly-celebrated visits, which have failed to bring them any direct benefits!