

Zimbabwe-Russia Relations in the 21st Century

Percyslage Chigora and Dorothy Goredema *

Abstract

The 21st century has witnessed the intensification of relations between Zimbabwe and the East and other favorable states, Russia among them. Historically under the socialist rhetoric the two countries shared a common political ideology. Zimbabwe-Russia relations dates back to the era of the liberation struggle. The Soviet Union aided Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe People's Union and later the Patriotic Front which included Mugabe's Zimbabwe National African Union. The Soviet Union aided the Patriotic Front freedom fighters with training, material and logistical support. After Zimbabwe's independence in 1981, diplomatic relations between Russia and Zimbabwe were efficiently established. These relations were interrupted in 1989 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia maintained her ties with Zimbabwe during this interruption but all the same the relations were non-eventful. The inception of the 21st century witnessed the revival intensification of relations between the two states. Russia's ties with Zimbabwe were re awakened following the invasion of Iraq by the US led coalition of the willing in March 2003 which coincided with the unprecedented pressure on Zimbabwe following the 2002 elections. The revival of these relations is depicted by trade agreements signed between the two states, actions of government officials concerned, in the diplomatic and academic circles as well as by the media reports. The aim of this paper is to highlight how common ideology, foreign policy principles and

* The authors are lecturers in the Department of History and Development Studies, Midlands State University, ZIMBABWE, chigorap@msu.ac.zw.

objectives and commonality of interests between the two states have led to cooperation. Issues characterizing the revival and intensification of relations between the two states will be highlighted and these will provide the appropriate framework upon which the relations between Zimbabwe and Russia could be understood. The paper brings to evidence that the revival of relations between the two states is partly driven by the deterioration of relations between Zimbabwe and the West.

Key words: Foreign policy, Zimbabwe, Russia

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed the intensification of relations between Zimbabwe and Russia. Prior to the 21st century, diplomatic relations between the two states had been interrupted with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. The revival and intensification of relations in the 21st century is partly driven by the deterioration of relations between Zimbabwe and the West which has seen Zimbabwe adopting the Look East Policy, commonality of ideologies, foreign policy principles and objectives as well as common interests between the two states.

Background to Zimbabwe-Russia Relations

Relations between Zimbabwe and Russia, dates back to the era of the liberation struggle. The Soviet Union supported the Patriotic Front which comprised of both Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union and Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union. Military and moral support from these socialist countries influenced the parties to adopt scientific socialism. At the zenith of their struggle from 1976-1979, both ZANU and ZAPU professed scientific socialism in line with the ideological and military traditions of their main international supporters, Russia and China. Moreso, the need to crush colonialism and the international dimensions of the struggle led the two nationalist parties to ally with all the progressive forces and embrace the Marxist-Leninist and Mau Tse Tung Thought ideologies. According to Mugabe,

The requirements of our present situation demand an alliance with such progressive forces (Marxist-Leninist)... the bond between us and them is

our commitment to overthrow the settler, imperialism and the achievement of popular democratic power.¹

In 1976, ZAPU proposed the formation of the Patriotic Front as a step towards “the greater unity of all anti-colonial forces” or towards building a broader front against colonialism and imperialism.”² The patriotic Front enabled ZANU to begin receiving assistance from the Soviet Block ranging from sanctuary, military assistance, political support, to economic and technical assistance. The two partners produced a unity document which spelled out and articulated a clear cut ideological stance of socialism very identical to that of the Russians though adjusted to the Zimbabwean situation. Mugabe stated that,

I think the organization of society on Marxist-Leninist principles is the best thing that could ever occur in a sphere of trying to get people to work together towards building a harmonious society.³

When Zimbabwe attained independence it emerged as a socialist state. Her foreign policy principles were guided by the same principles which have guided her liberation struggle. As such, at independence Zimbabwe aimed at moving towards “an egalitarian, democratic and socialist society.” Since Zimbabwe was “dedicated to the attainment of a socialist, egalitarian and democratic society” it welcomed assistance from socialist states in her reconstruction and development efforts.”⁴

She however declared that the Zimbabwean socialism will have to take place in full cognisance of the concrete situation in Zimbabwe. The agreement to establish diplomatic relations with USSR was signed on the

18th of February 1981. The two states agreed that the major principle which was to guide their relations was,

Non-interference in each other's internal affairs and that diplomatic relations between the Republic of Zimbabwe and the USSR will be on government to government basis only.⁵

Afterwards the relations between the two states were enhanced with women's delegations, trade unionists, agricultural experts, diplomats and academics from Zimbabwe visiting and undergoing training in the USSR. These relations were interrupted with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1986. The collapse saw Russia riddled with internal problems that she had no time to continue nurturing her diplomatic relations with Zimbabwe. All the same, she did not cut links with Zimbabwe during this period (1996-2005).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Zimbabwe had no choice but to look to the West. However, she did not abandon the socialist ideology altogether, she maintained it and borrowed some of the capitalist traits and fused them with socialism. As such with the adoption of ESAP in 1992, Zimbabwe had a dual economy which included tenets of socialism and capitalism.

However, the turn of the 21st century saw relations between Zimbabwe and the West deteriorating. This was due to the West's reaction to Zimbabwe's Land Reform Programme of 2000. As condemnation, demonization and pressure from the West mounted, Zimbabwe reacted by looking for friendship and acceptance elsewhere. Friends and acceptance, she found in the East. The "Look East Policy" was officially promulgated

by the Zimbabwean government in 2005. Zimbabwe was looking for friendship from the East at a time when Russia was/is pushing to raise its economic profile within the African Southern region. As such commonality of interest between those two states has led them to co-operate with each other in the 21st century. Furthermore Mugabe's Look East Policy came at a time when Russia is strongly opposed to the occasional unilateral tendencies of the US which since the end of the cold war has given the US an assumption of power. This American attitude coupled with what Russia interpreted as provocative policies by US towards countries which once had strong ties with the Soviet Union such as the Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and the Czech Republic as well as Zimbabwe has seen Russia strongly supporting what she called her friends Zimbabwe included.

Zimbabwe-Russia Relations in the 21st Century

The intensification of Zimbabwe's relations with Russia in the 21st is partly driven by the deterioration of relations between Zimbabwe and the West. At the turn of the 21st century Zimbabwe received condemnation particularly with the implementation of the controversial land reform programme of 2000. Her image within the region and abroad has been tattered due to reports of abandonment of the rule of law as evidenced by and general political instability. These reports on Zimbabwe have had an effect on her public profile. Furthermore, these events have resulted in Zimbabwe losing many friends, especially those from the West. The country was suspended from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Commonwealth, her relations with Britain has deteriorated whilst she is at loggerheads with the US. The US have applied targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe whilst Scandinavian countries which have previously supported Zimbabwe's Social services such as health, reduced and threatened to close their missions.

As her relations with the West deteriorated, Zimbabwe lost all the benefits she had hitherto enjoyed from her previous relations. External investments dried up and the Zimbabwean economy went into a free-fall.

In line with her foreign policy objective which is "fundamentally geared towards the implement of the quality of life of the Zimbabwean people."⁶ The Zimbabwean government looked for new parties to supplant Western Investors and development assistance programmes. These new parties were found among the Eastern countries and Russia lately. As such the intensification of Relations between Zimbabwe and Russia in the 21st century is partly driven from conflict of interest between Zimbabwe and the West. The antagonism which resulted from the conflict saw Zimbabwe

turning to the East and Russia lately. Russia appears to compliment Zimbabwe's domestic issues than the West. Furthermore Russia also found an ally in Zimbabwe since it was opposed to the US's policies of attacking sovereign states.

Zimbabwe and Russia also share a common foreign policy principle i.e. the principle of non-intervention and non-interference in the affairs of sovereign state. This principle has resulted in co-operation between the two states in the 21st century. In pursuit of this principle of non-interference and non-intervention, Russia vetoed UN Security Council sanctions on Zimbabwe in 2008. The US and Western members of the Security Council had supported that Zimbabwean authorities be punished for actions that in their opinion undermined democracy and suppresses human rights in Zimbabwe.

The Russian Foreign Minister explained that,

Russia has taken into account that the situation in Zimbabwe did not pose a threat to regional let alone international peace and security and therefore did not warrant adoption of sanctions against Zimbabwe.⁷

Russia's stance on Zimbabwe made her to be very unpopular with the other G8 countries of the UN Security Council. This intensified Britain and US anger leading to deterioration of relations between the European nations. Britain's Foreign Secretary David Miliband and US Ambassador to the UN, stated that,

We are disappointed that the UN Security Council should have failed to pass a strong and clear resolution on Zimbabwe. Russia's actions are

incomprehensive and raising questions about her reliability as a C8 partner.⁸

Sticking her neck out for Zimbabwe, the Russia foreign Minister made clear Russia's stance by stating that,

We (Russia and China) categorically reject the aspirations of certain security council member states to take this body outside its charter prerogatives i.e. beyond the limits of supporting world peace and security. We consider attempts like these to be illegitimate and dangerous leading towards unbalancing the whole UN system.⁹

All the same, Russia's actions towards Zimbabwe were regarded as a diplomatic setback in Europe by exercising her right together with China as permanent members of the security council to veto the resolution. Other European countries vowed to intensify pressure on Mugabe until a solution was found that would reflect the will of the Zimbabwean people, whose will was in the opinion of many European nations "continuously brutally denied".

The support Russia rendered to Zimbabwe on the international arena has intensified relations between Zimbabwe and Russia. In trading circles these cordial relations are reflected by the numerous trade agreements the states have signed. In October 2006, Zimbabwe initiated five agreements with a Russian company for the execution of projects with a Russian Company in its power, aviation and mining sectors with a potential value of \$300 million.¹⁰ According to Yung, external affairs director with Rusaviatrade,

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These (MOUS) memorandum of understanding are worth \$300m but we hope we will develop our relations so that they bring more investments into the country.¹¹

In 2008, Panchenko, part of the 48 member Russian Trade Mission sought mining opportunities in Zimbabwe as well as opportunities in transport, power and tourism and telecommunications. Other Russian prospects involve boosting Zimbabwe's power capacity, raising local output at the Hwange Colliery Company, developing a rail link between Harare and Hwange and marketing local tourist resorts.¹²

It should be noted that common interest between the two states has led to the co-operation and enhancement of relations between the two states. Both states are guided by the objective to enhance their economies for the betterment and improvement of the quality of their people's lives. Zimbabwe's foreign policy is designed to allow and encourage investment and economic development through forming partnership with other countries to create large markets and to attract greater investment interest from outside and regional players. Furthermore, the policy is designed to allow companies to benefit from the economies of scale that come with bigger markets.¹ Coincidentally for Zimbabwe, the Eastern Hemisphere not only has the fastest growing economies but it also has over half the global population which translate into a big market for the Zimbabwean products, including the diamonds which are eyed jealously by the Westerners. As such Zimbabwe could benefit immensely from the ballooning trade with the East/Russia.

Furthermore, commonality of interest between the two are seen when one considers the fact that in the 21st century Russia's foreign policy is also geared towards the enhancement of her economy through investments in the Southern African region. The enhancement of relations, a situation depicted by the current state of relations between Zimbabwe and Russia rightfully qualifies Chigora's observation that co-operation between nations exists primarily when there is a commonality of interests of which the absence of the same presents some degree of enmity.¹³

The intensification of relations between Zimbabwe and Russia is also depicted in the cordial relations of the government officials concerned. Russian diplomats i.e. the ambassador Sergey Kryukor has appeared on the Media showering praises for the Zimbabweans. He stated that,

The political and economic situation in Zimbabwe was different from what was portrayed by the Western media. Zimbabwe has potential to revive its economy through agriculture.¹⁴

In another occasion, the Russian ambassador in the company of a delegation from his country described Zimbabwe as a safe investment destination. He stated that his country had expressed interest in investing in Zimbabwe's mining sector.

We want to enhance economic relations between our two countries. We went to invest in Zimbabwe particularly in the mining sector.¹⁵

On his part, Cde Khaya Moyo ZANU PF's National Chairman has also praised Russia's friendly gestures and overtures towards Zimbabwe. He explained that,

Russia is our all weather friend and has weathered a lot of storms on our behalf. Together with China, they have stood with us during these times and we are very grateful about this."¹⁶

The intensification of relations between the two states is again depicted by the actions of the government officials concerned. Still on the note of urging Zimbabweans to embrace Russia's good will towards them Cde Moyo again stated that,

We want to see closer ties between us in terms of trade. We want to see airlines flying between the two countries and the entire world should see that the relationship between Zimbabwe and Russia remains extremely cordial.¹⁷

On his part, the Zimbabwean President, President Mugabe urged the Zimbabweans to look East in all earnest. He stated that,

Look East, I say, because that is where the sun rises and where the people are awake. We shall be awake with them.¹⁸

On the 4th of June 2010 the president again reiterated Zimbabwe's stance on the East. He state that "Zimbabwe is very much looking east and there is no turning back."¹⁹

On the academic circles, the cordial relations between Zimbabwe and Russia have seen Russian academics flying into Zimbabwe to strengthen academic exchange of ideas between the two countries. In April 2010 a group of Russian academics led by Professor Vladimire Shubin, the Deputy Director of the Institute of African Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences were flown into Zimbabwe. On the 23rd of April 2010 the Russia academics presented a paper at the University of Zimbabwe. Again on the 25th of April 2010 they presented an academic paper at the Midlands State University on Russia-Zimbabwe Relations. The presentation was open to academics, scholars and students and it proved that indeed Zimbabwe-Russia relations had stood the test of time. In his opening speech at the Midlands State University, Professor Shubin stated that,

We are a group of academics who have decided to look at possibilities areas of Russian co-operation. We are here to assess the situation on the ground and we are happy with what we have seen because this country has great potential. We hope to enhance academic and economic relations between our countries.²⁰

It also emerged that Russia had trained a number of lecturers at the Midlands State University. According to Mr. Mukwembi, Lecturer at the Midlands State University he was a living testimony of the academics who had received training in Russia. He explained that a number of lecturers in the University particularly in the Faculty of Lands and Natural Resources had been trained in Russia.²¹

The intensification of relations between the two states again are depicted in the media. The media constantly refers to Russia as Zimbabwe's

all weather friends.” The media reports praise Russia for her steadfastness and faithfulness. On the 4th of June 2010, The Herald reported that,

Without the unconditional support of ... Russia and other non-permanent members of the Security Council, the westerners would probably have managed to launder their dirty sanctions.²²

The Herald in June also urged Zimbabweans to look East in Ernest.

It’s high time we invested all our energy into the Look East Policy adopted by the government at the turn of the millennium and learn how the Asian tigers managed to transform their economies without prescription from the Briton Woods institutions.²³

On the 22nd of April 2010 the print media again reported Russian firms’ good intentions towards Zimbabwe. The Russian firms which wanted to invest in the country had vowed to comply with Zimbabwean laws.

...prospective Russian investors will invest in Zimbabwe in accordance with the indigenization laws. Despite the difficult moments that Zimbabwe has gone through, it is now showing great signs of recovery. Zimbabwe has a diversified economy with qualified human resources which would make investment viable.²⁴

On their part, the Russians have also written favorable reports on Zimbabwe in their media. The St. Petersburg Times also reported Zimbabwe as a safe investment destination for its potential investors. At another occasion the paper explained that the economic situation in Zimbabwe was different

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from what was portrayed by the Western media.²⁵ These favorable media reports saw many potential investors coming into Zimbabwe with the intention to invest in the mining, transport, power, tourism, and telecommunication sectors.

The Future of the Relationship

Zimbabwe-Russia relations are bound to remain cordial as long as there is conflict of values and the pursuance of divergent national interest between Zimbabwe and the West. Zimbabwe and the West share divergent views over the land reform programme and economic development as well as issues of governance, political stability, race relations and equality. Commonality of interest between Zimbabwe and Russia will mean that co-operation between the two countries will be enhanced even in future. Zimbabwe is on the campaign to seek investments to mend and resuscitated her gravely ill economy after her fall out with the West whilst Russia is pushing to raise its economic profile in the region through economic investment in the mining, agricultural, power, telecommunication sectors. So co-operation between the two states is bound to continue as long as they share common national interests.

More so, as long as leadership in Zimbabwe does not change; Zimbabwe-Russia ties will remain cordial. Continuously ruled by a socialist liberation party, Zimbabwe's objective is to move towards an egalitarian, democratic and socialist society" and this will see her strengthening ties with progressive forces such as the East and Russia who do not believe in meddling in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. Also the liberation movement heritage means that even in future, it will have an influence in the pattern of Zimbabwe's foreign policy. The country is most likely going

to maintain ties with Russia, a revolutionary state which aided her in the liberation struggle.

This was summed up by Mudenge when he said,

Zimbabwe's foreign policy has been influenced by its revolutionary origins which places emphasis on the solidarity with the down trodden and the dispossessed and a decision to pay back the support we enjoyed during our struggle for independence.²⁶

Conclusion

This paper posits that the intensification of relations between Zimbabwe and Russia in the 21st century is partly due to the deterioration of relations between Zimbabwe and the West, and also the deterioration of relations between Russia and the US. As such Zimbabwe and Russia share a common enemy the US. Also relations between the two countries have been intensified due to the fact that the two countries share common national interests; they share a common ideology of socialism as well as common foreign policy principles of non-interference and non-intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states. They also share the same foreign policy objectives of improving the quality of their people's lives. These common interests and values have resulted in co-operation between the two states. The co-operation is evidenced by trade agreements between the two states, favorable media reports and in the action of government officials concerned. These relations are bound to remain cordial as long as Zimbabwe and the West remain at loggerheads and as long as the two countries share common national interests and values.

NOTES

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