Reassessing Zimbabwe's Look East Policy: Implications for Africa's Future Relations with the East and West

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Abstract

Zimbabwe's 2001 fast-track land reform program effectively dismantled private property rights to land, putting it at odds with neoliberal development advocates, mainly Western countries. Consequently, sanctions, capital flight, and isolation followed, leading to chaos for Zimbabwe's people (Moyo, 2011; Scoones et al., 2010) and undermining the land reform's original goals. During this time, Zimbabwe expected strong support from other African countries, whose land questions had also remained unresolved. However, Africanist solidarity did not materialize, as many African 'statemen' also feared the wrath of the Western sanctions if they supported the reform. By 2003, Mugabe realized he needed alternatives to compensate for the lack of support from the USA and Europe. Zimbabwe and China strengthened diplomatic and economic ties through what Mugabe later called the Look-East Policy (2003 to 2017). This policy aimed at achieving political, economic, strategic, and developmental goals, becoming a crucial lifeline for Zimbabwe during this challenging period (Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018; Younde, 2007). Several countries, including some in Africa and others in Asia (Malaysia), have benefited from this approach to international relations. In the context of the ideas of Afrasia and the benign community in the 2100s (Mine, 2022), where Africa and Asia will constitute over 80% of the total world population, this article explores how Pan-Africanism must re-emerge to become the basis for balancing Africa's interdependence on the West with increased cooperation with the East. This article raises important questions about Zimbabwe's Look East Policy and its implications for Africa. What are the long-term effects of this policy on Zimbabwe's sovereignty, economic stability, and relationship with the other 53 African countries? How can other African nations learn from it? How did this shift in foreign relations challenge and shape traditional views of Ubuntuism, pan-Africanist, development, and international cooperation? Finally, how can Africa balance reliance on Western and Eastern partnerships while maintaining political and economic autonomy amid global tensions within the context of Pan-Africanism? The study uses a mixed-methods approach to collect data, including from WB and FAOstat HDI databases, and China debt databases. These are analyzed through Excel, SPSS, and through thematic document analysis to examine Zimbabwe's Look East Policy. The article highlights the importance of African nations diversifying their partnerships and strategically managing relationships with both Western and Eastern powers for sustainable development.

Keywords: Land Reform, Look-East Policy, Sovereignty, Economic Stability, International Relations

1. Introduction and Context

If there is one thing we have learned from Sam Moyo's work spanning over 4 decades, it is that land reforms and land markets will always be politicized, thus justifying constant government intervention to promote justice and equality (Moyo, 1992, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2013; Moyo & Yeros, 2005). In the case of Zimbabwe, one might even argue that, for over three decades, through its monopoly of violence, the government intervened by stopping grassroots movements from initiating radical land reforms (Muchetu, 2018, p. 75). However, by the late 1990s, the pressure from below was overwhelming, and with the British government rolling back its Lancaster House agreements, Mugabe decided to step aside, unleashing the wrath of the War Veterans on the commercial farmers and igniting the first wave of land seizures. Formal land redistribution frameworks and pathways were later developed and implemented (2001) to cleanse the radical nature of the first wave.

A political economy (PE) reading of the reforms sees the events unfolding along a linear trajectory, in which a radical land reform was inevitable as the land question remained unresolved. For instance, as seen in other contexts such as Colombia's peasant-led armed struggle, the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil, and the Zapatistas' 1990s uprising in Mexico (Moyo & Yeros, 2005). The official Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP) lasted from 2000 to 2003, but some people continued to access land well into the 2010s. Thus, under this PE lens, a land reform led by peasants, such as that in Zimbabwe, was viewed as having challenged the unequal neoliberal property rights norms, disrupted unequal geopolitical narratives, disrupted exploitative global value chains, and, hence, eroded Western-backed governance institutions (Moyo, 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). For political economists, this was a move that should be studied, perfected, and implemented widely to reduce the negative impacts of the neoliberal hegemony.

On the other hand, to Western countries, the reform had violated numerous human rights, disregarded the rule of law, violated private property rights, disrupted global agricultural markets, and failed to compensate white farmers for improvements made to their farms (Muchetu,2018, p. 91). The reaction was decisive and swift. Zimbabwe was subject to a range of sanctions, including economic sanctions (trade, loans, aid), suspension of balance-of-payments support (by the IMF), targeted sanctions on individual leaders, and isolation (withdrawal from the Commonwealth) (Moyo & Yeros, 2005; Mujaji, 2025). Furthermore, an array of media attacks, support for the opposition, and anti-Mugabeism NGOs ensued.

A lot of research has been done on how Zimbabwe and Mugabe responded to Western and American condemnation of the land reform. However, most research highlights the uniqueness of Zimbabwe's land reform, as well as its ability to navigate its aftermath. For instance, Mujaji's (2025, p. 126) Zimbabwe Resilience Model (ZRM) argues that the Zimbabwean situation was unique, highlighting issues such as the comradeship of the liberation struggle ideology, the policy of localizing power after the reform, and Mugabe's use of diplomacy and political strategies. Ultimately, these studies underplay the replicability of the Zimbabwe land reform in other nations such as South Africa and Namibia.

Furthermore, the bulk of the literature focuses on how 'Mugabe and his cronies' survived the aftermath of the land reform through corruption and other backdoor strategies, without acknowledging the lessons from his post-land reform political and economic policies aimed at avoiding Western punishment for the land reform. In this article, we fill this gap and extrapolate the lessons to the rest of Africa and Asia, highlighting that the role of Pan-Africanism can serve as a basis for rebalancing relations between the West & the East. We seek to explore the long-term effects of Zimbabwe's Look East policy on its socio-economic status. We also ask about the role of other African countries in ensuring that Zimbabwe remained stable after the reform. Additionally, we seek to answer the question of how Africa can rebalance its reliance between Western, Eastern, and its own interests within the auspices of an 80% Afrasian-populated future.

In the following sections, the article discusses the immediate steps Mugabe took to steer his ship towards calmer waters after the land reform. Afterwards, we travel to the Bandung conference to assess the roots of Pan-Africanism and the concept of Afrasia. The following section summarizes recent radical shifts in international relations across the developing world and the consequences they have faced since then. This will establish context for the possibility of delinking and for a stronger pan-Africa and Afrasia. The study then evaluates the case of Zimbabwe through a literature review and secondary data from various databases, including the World Bank, FAOstats, and GDPC. Conclusions and implications for the study are provided after the presentation of the results in a section preceding it.

1.1. Mugabe's response to Western backlash

> "*The West is not the only source of assistance, nor is it the only area of market. Time has now come not just for Zimbabwe, but for the Third World to realize that the sun rises in the east. Let's look to the East where the sun rises. That's where the majority of the world are [sic], that's where we also get the greatest support because the East is the Third World. It sees things the same way we see them, thinks as we do, dreams as we do, so they are our greatest friends*." Robert G Mugabe, 15 August 2004 (as cited in Al-Jazeera, 2004).

The East, however, was not the first place Mugabe sought refuge. A Pan-African solution was sought first; he went to his neighbors, mainly South Africa under Thabo Mbeki, Mozambique, and Namibia. South Africa’s hands were tied; as the chief custodian of private property rights in Sub-Saharan Africa, it could not publicly help Zimbabwe. South Africa continued to maintain economic ties with Zimbabwe, providing the much-needed electricity at critical times. However, many studies have argued that, privately and in silence, Thabo Mbeki was instrumental in reducing the effect of the violence & gross human rights rhetoric around SADC and AU institutions (Chen, 2011; Mujaji, 2025). Other African countries (Tanzania, the DRC & Angola) also helped, but only in defending the premise of land reform within the AU and SADC dialogues (SADC, 2006; UN-Security-Council, 2001).

Next, Mugabe went to Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya, where he secured substantial support through a fuel deal, investment, and technical cooperation, which kept Zimbabwe afloat for a while (Johnson, 2012; Mujaji, 2025). Although Johnson’s (2012) account of the extent of the relationship between Gaddafi and Mugabe is grossly sensationalized, Libya played a significant role in helping Zimbabwe survive during the post-reform, sanctions era. Libya and other South African countries felt distant, given what Zimbabwe was going through. It might be argued that the success of the Libyan friendship gave Mugabe the impetus to seek further help in Asia (including Russia). It is as if, after years of searching for alternatives within Africa to no material avail, Mugabe decided to spread the net a little wider. Perhaps he finally remembered the help of the communist and anti-imperialist movement that had helped them fight colonialism in the liberation struggle (rooted in China & Russia). Could it be that he had finally remembered the promises and the potential of the movements? One might imagine he was asking himself, what had happened to the strong Ubuntu or pan-African ideology they had used to unite against colonialism? What had happened to the spirit of Bandung and the ideas of the great Afrasia?

2. The Unfulfilled Promise of Bandung: Abandonment of Afro-Asian Solidarity in Favor of Re-embracing Former Colonizers

While we have heard of the Bandung Conference several times in literature, we have seen very little fundamental analysis of its impacts and significance (Acharya, 2016). The Bandung Conference was sponsored by five countries: Indonesia (host), Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma, India, and Pakistan (the Colombo Powers) (Acharya, 2016, p. 343). About 29 countries participated, including Japan. A few African countries were independent and could attend, but the ANC fighting apartheid in South Africa was invited as an observer among other such organizations. The West viewed the Bandung Conference as a threat because it opposed Western imperialism. Australia, which had been invited to previous meetings of “colored people,” took the West's side, viewing the conference with suspicion.

It is one of the most unbearable ironies of the post-colonial era that the very countries which gathered at Bandung in April 1955 to define a pathway to de-linking with Western domination would, within a decade of independence, rush back into the lukewarm but exploitative embrace of their former colonial masters. Nehru's lamentation in 1955 remains memorable: "…it is an intolerable thought to me that the great countries of Asia and Africa should come out of bondage into freedom only to degrade themselves or humiliate themselves in this way […]" (Nehru, 1955, p. 109). Yet that is precisely what happened: joining the Commonwealth *en masse*, retaining the CFA franc zone, signing military defense pacts with Paris and London, and, in some cases, even inviting French or British troops to remain stationed on their soil long after the flags had been lowered. What explains this collective amnesia, this apparent betrayal of Pan-Africanism and the Bandung Spirit?

One might argue that the answer lies partly in the West's aggressive counteroffensive mounted immediately after Bandung. The CIA monitored the conference with obsessive intensity (CIA, 2000), while the United States and Britain deployed proxy states (Turkey, Pakistan, the Philippines, and even post-occupation Japan) to dilute, deflect, and, when possible, derail the proceedings (Acharya, 2016, pp. 345–346; UK Foreign Office and Far East Department, 1955). Speeches were vetted in advance, voting instructions circulated, and the very idea of a permanent Afro-Asian organization was strangled at birth. The West understood, with crystalline clarity, that a formal Afrasian bloc would constitute an existential threat to the post-1945 order; hence, every effort was made to ensure that the "threat" remained stillborn.

Yet external sabotage, however ruthless, cannot fully account for the enthusiasm with which newly independent states reconnected with former colonial powers. Many African leaders, confronted with the difficult task of state-building in societies ravaged by centuries of extraction, decided that Western capital, technology, and diplomatic protection were still the path of least resistance. The Cold War binary offered a cruel choice: align with the Soviet bloc and risk pariah status, or accept the poisoned chalice of neo-colonial partnership, with loans, arms, a seat at the Commonwealth table, and the comforting illusion of modernity. Most chose the latter. Brautigam (2009) and others have sought to answer whether the same logic had reproduced itself, with more benign rhetoric, as Asian powers, especially China, began courting African resources. The fear of "new colonialism" voiced today is merely the fear of old Western wine in new Asian bottles (Acharya, 2016, p. 346).

The return to old colonial ties had severe effects. Pan-Africanism, which leaders like Nkrumah hoped would unite Africa after Bandung, was weakened by lingering colonial systems in language, money, law, and defense. French-speaking countries stayed tied to France through the CFA franc and defense agreements, while English-speaking countries kept the Commonwealth, which acted like a neo-colonial club pretending to be postcolonial unity. Even the Non-Aligned Movement, Bandung's most enduring institutional offspring, gradually lost its radical edge, becoming little more than a talking shop where leaders could posture as sovereign while quietly negotiating bilateral deals with Washington, London, or Paris (Ampiah, 2007, pp. 214–215).

2.1 Ripe'n'Ready: Why it's time for an authentic Afrasian Renewal.

While Mine (2022, p. 6) implores Africa and Asia to look beyond Pan-Africanism and Pan-Asia in favor of Pan-Afrasianism, it can still be understood how the development of each of the pan-Afro or pan-Asia may be key in the grand idea of Pan-Afrasia (the struggle to free Africa and Asia from imperialism and other types of oppression) (Bodomo, 2023). At the same time, to what extent can Asia resist the urge to take the path of the West? Brautigam (2009) has thus far disputed the idea of an exploitative or sub-imperialistic China in Africa. But this could change. Acharya's (2016) call for a genuinely Global International Relations: one that removes Europe's exploitative coupling to its former settler colonies, offers the most fertile intellectual terrain for re-imagining the unfulfilled promise of Bandung. Conventional IR, imprisoned within Westphalian myths and American hegemony, ignores Bandung or reduces it to a colorful footnote in Cold War history. A Global IR perspective, by contrast, would place Afrasia at the center of analysis and ask: under what conditions might the solidarity glimpsed in 1955 be resurrected in the 21st century (Acharya, 2016, pp. 353–355)?

The answer, one might be inclined to suggest, lies in the radical shift in the global balance of forces that has occurred since the 1990s. In 1955, most of Africa was still under direct colonial rule; colonial administrative structures, security apparatuses, and economic dependencies remained deeply entrenched. Today, every African country is formally independent, and the demographic-economic center of gravity has moved decisively towards Asia (Phillips, 2008, pp. 17–19; POMEPS, 2019). It will likely continue into the 2100s, with Africa potentially accounting for the other half (Mine, 2022). China, India, Korea, and Indonesia are no longer lobbyists at the Western table; they are shapers of global rules themselves. So, one can say with certainty that the tide has turned and will steer in this direction for a while to come. An authentic Afrasian formation is structurally more feasible now than at any moment since Bandung.

We argue in this article that neutrality, or more precisely, a principled non-alignment rooted in mutual respect and a balancing of inclinations toward the West and the East, remains the safest strategic posture for Africa. The West's current anxiety about "losing" Africa to China replicates almost verbatim the panic of 1955 about "losing" Asia and Africa to communism (Marnham, 1955, as cited in Acharya, 2016). Nevertheless, history reminds us that whenever Africa has allowed itself to become a chessboard for great-power rivalry (Western or otherwise), it bled profusely. A rejuvenated Bandung Spirit should therefore insist on mutually beneficial relations, not on zero-sum competition, but on the original principles of 1955 (respect for sovereignty, non-interference, equality, and mutual benefit), updated for a multipolar world through the additional principles adopted in 2005 and 2015 (Khudori, 2018).

Zimbabwe's own trajectory illuminates the costs of isolation and points towards the possibilities of a renewed Afrasian path. Having been abandoned by many African "brothers" during the sanctions era that followed the Fast-Track Land Reform, Harare turned eastward not out of ideological romance but out of sheer necessity. That the Look East Policy prevented total collapse is now beyond dispute (Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018; Younde, 2007). Yet it also revealed the limits of purely bilateral pragmatism in the absence of a broader Afrasian solidarity framework. A genuine comity of civilizations, rather than the clash peddled by both Western and some Asian narratives (Acharya, 2016, p. 351), would transform such bilateral experiments into a continental strategy of delinking from neo-colonial dependence while avoiding new forms of subordination.

The Bandung Conference's promise is still unfinished. Africa and Asia will make up over 80% of the world's population (Mine, 2022), so the real choice is not between East and West. It is between keeping a system that benefits only 1% of people or creating a fair world that serves everyone else. The spirit of 1955 did not die; it was buried alive. The task of the present breed of intellectuals, perhaps with Pan-Africanism as a base, is to dig it up, dust it off, and let it breathe again.

3. Redefining Development for the Afrasian inter-regional block

Can one still speak of international development when the interaction enriches Europe more than it benefits Africa? Marxist scholars have long insisted that systematic underpayment for resources amounts to theft (Amin, 2011) because it reproduces exploitation under the polite guise of trade. Any honest redefinition of development must therefore begin with this uncomfortable question: whose freedom, whose choices, whose future (Sen & Dreze, 1999) is being enlarged? Development has never been a neutral or universally agreed concept. As Frankema (2013) reminds us, we possess multiple "developments" but no single definition that commands consensus across time and space. The United Nations speaks of enlarging people's choices and making the process participatory (UN, 2001), while Sen (1999) frames it as the expansion of substantive freedoms. From a pan-Africanist standpoint, however, development must mean something a little more radical: the simultaneous achievement of independence, unity, self-reliance, technological transformation, and the dismantling of external domination (Ola, 1979, p. 90). Anything less is merely growth without development, a phenomenon Africa knows only too well and despises.

Western ideas of development have failed because they primarily benefited cities and industries in rich countries, leaving the majority in rural areas behind (Decker & McMahon, 2021). Economic Structural Adjustment Programs (ESAPs) destroyed institutions, removed social protections, and deepened dependency (Mkandawire, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The Development Merchant System, instituted since US President Truman's Four Point speech and perpetuated through Bretton Woods conditionality, ensured that African economies remained outward-oriented suppliers of cheap primary commodities within global value chains, whose rules were written and enforced elsewhere (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, pp. 20–31). Land, the very foundation of rural life for over sixty-five per cent of Africans (World Bank, 2020), has continued to be commodified, financialized, and opened to foreign bidders under the banner of "private property rights" and "investor confidence" (Moyo & Amanor, 2008).

Will the East repeat the same path? Here, the picture is more complex. On the one hand, Asian models, particularly the East Asian experience analyzed by Sen (1999) and Hayami (1977), combined land reform, universal basic education, health provision, and strategic industrial policy in ways that dramatically expanded human capabilities in Asia. These societies achieved high growth with equity without passing through primitive accumulation on the backs of other continents. China, India, and Korea never colonized Africa; their own recent escape from poverty gives them no legacy of racial superiority to defend. South-South rhetoric and the revived Bandung principles of mutual benefit and respect for sovereignty suggest a different starting point. That notwithstanding, skepticism is warranted. Infrastructure-led engagement, however impressive the roads and railways, does not automatically translate into structural transformation if the underlying pattern remains the extraction of primary goods in exchange for manufactured goods (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2024). Perhaps an argument might be made that the East is not inherently virtuous; it is simply newer to the game and constrained mainly by a more polycentric world in which African agency is marginally stronger than in 1955.

This returns us to the core argument. Authentic African development cannot be imported, whether from the West or the East. It must be defined and driven from within, rooted in pan-Africanist imperatives: control over land and resources, regional integration beyond colonial borders, equitable community-market-state collaboration (Hayami & Godo, 2005), and the deliberate construction of technological and institutional capabilities that enlarge real freedoms for the majority rather than profits for foreign elites. Only when the distance measures development travelled away from dependency and towards self-determination will the term recover its emancipatory meaning. This is the basis of our thesis in this article: Pan-African development is understood to equate pro-African people, bottom-up, and capability-improving development from the grassroots.

The Bandung Spirit, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Group of 77, and even the contemporary BRICS formation all trace their lineage to the refusal to accept a world in which one continent's progress is built on another's perpetual subordination (Adem & Thomas, 2017). Redefining development today means reviving that refusal in institutional form and grounding it in the lived realities of African peasants, workers, and youth. Nothing less will do.

4. Historical Radical Shifts in International relations and their outcomes around the word

A growing body of literature now documents how countries of the Global South have, in recent decades, executed radical pivots in their international alignments, often away from traditional Western patrons and toward Eastern or non-Western powers (Phillips, 2008; POMEPS, 2019; Zakowski & Kowalski, 2019). These shifts have been driven by economic necessity, balance-of-power calculations, ideological realignment, military expediency, and, in several cases, direct reaction to Western sanctions. Their outcomes have varied across economic, political, social, and cultural domains. Yet, a pattern emerges: where deliberate state strategy, domestic cohesion, and favorable external conditions converge, the pivot has often produced resilience and partial delinking from neo-colonial circuits.

Ethiopia and Angola exemplify economically motivated reorientation. Facing the collapse of commodity prices and the punitive conditionalities of IMF programmes, both states turned to Chinese resource-backed infrastructure loans that bypassed Western governance demands (Brautigam, 2009). Ethiopia's Addis-Djibouti railway and Angola's post-civil war reconstruction illustrate how "no-strings" financing can accelerate industrialization and physical integration, even if debt sustainability remains contested. Balance-of-power logic is equally visible. South Africa's accession to BRICS and joint naval exercises with Russia and China, alongside Nigeria's deepening energy and arms ties with Moscow and Beijing, reflect deliberate hedging against unipolar dominance (Phillips, 2008). These moves have granted both countries greater maneuvering room in global trade negotiations and reduced vulnerability to unilateral Western pressure.

Ideological realignment has been starkest in the Sahel. Mali and Burkina Faso, after military coups, explicitly rejected French influence as neo-colonial and embraced Russia's sovereignty-first narrative (Phillips, 2008). The expulsion of French forces from Mali in 2022 and the arrival of Wagner/Africa Corps mercenaries underscore how ideological affinity with anti-Western postures can rapidly translate into new military dependencies. Sanctions have frequently catalyzed the most dramatic ruptures. Zimbabwe's post-2001 Look East Policy, South Africa's refusal to condemn Russia at the UN, and Burkina Faso's defiance of ECOWAS isolation all demonstrate how punitive measures intended to enforce compliance often accelerate diversification toward partners willing to transact without political sermons.

Outcomes have not been uniform. When countries combined foreign policy shifts with real domestic reforms, like Ethiopia's infrastructure push or South Africa's BRICS strategy, their economies became more stable and gained leverage. But when shifts only aimed to keep regimes in power, as in the Central African Republic and parts of the Sahel, old patterns of exploitation continued under new partners (wa Thiongo, 2016, pp. 39–40). Cultural and social spillovers remain understudied, though rising anti-Western sentiment and the diffusion of Chinese vocational models suggest longer-term normative shifts. Literature thus converges on three drivers of successful reorientation: massive counter-hegemonic investment (Belt and Road, BRICS mechanisms), a pragmatic "don't ask, don't tell" policy that respects formal sovereignty, and the growing market power of an Asia that already comprises the demographic majority of humanity (K. S. Amanor, 2013; K. S. Amanor & Chichava, 2016; Bergamaschi et al., 2017). Sometime between 2030 and 2040, China is projected to match or surpass the United States in composite power, further tilting the global center of gravity eastward (Phillips, 2008, p. 21).

These historical ruptures confirm that radical shifts are neither anomaly nor romance. They are rational responses to an international order that has consistently punished autonomy. Zimbabwe's survival, Ethiopia's rail network, and South Africa's multipolar diplomacy all testify that when the West weaponizes interdependence, the East becomes not merely an alternative but, for many, the only remaining path to sovereignty. In the next section, we provide a desktop review and secondary data analysis of Zimbabwe as a case study.

5. Rebalancing relations towards the East: The Zimbabwe case study

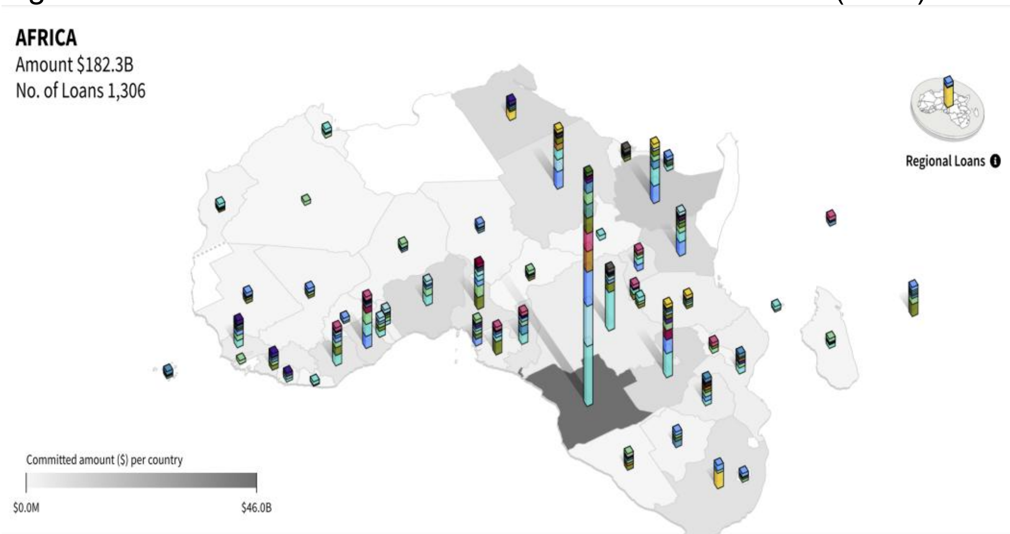
In this results section, the study uses Zimbabwe as a case study to examine the impact of Chinese cooperation, primarily through the effects of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Loans on both the economic and socio-political spheres.

5.1. The Chinese model in Africa.

The documentation of Chinese activities in Africa is slowly increasing, given how obscure and unreported the bulk of some bilateral agreements have been in the past. In both quantity and quality, Angola is the largest recipient of Chinese loans in Africa (see Figure *1*), while South Africa (see Figure *2*) is the largest recipient of FDI (AIDDATA, 2025). Between 2000 and 2023, Chinese financiers committed at least US$182.3 billion across 1,306 separate loan agreements to African sovereigns and state-owned enterprises. Zimbabwe is the 8th country in terms of receiving loans from China (GDPC, 2025; Johns

Hopkins University, 2025). What we are witnessing is nothing less than the materialization of the radical shifts discussed in the preceding sections.

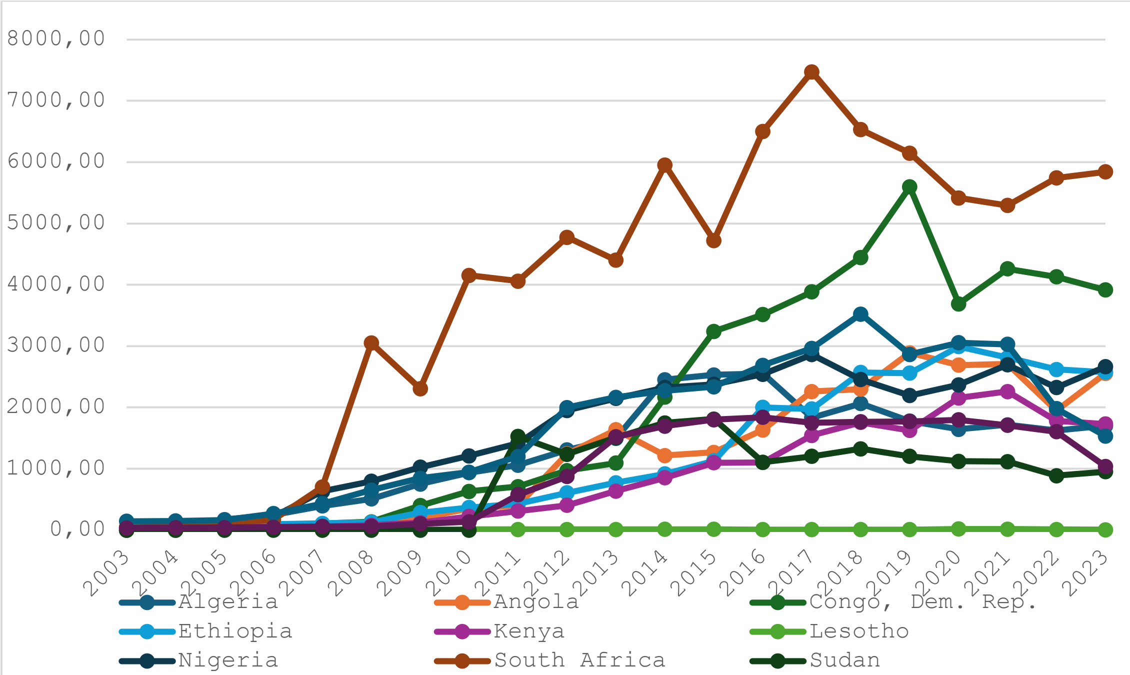
Figure 1: Distribution of Chinese loans to African countries (2020)



Source: GDPC (2025).

Zimbabwe’s shift to the East after sanctions, Ethiopia’s move away from IMF conditions, and Angola’s rebuilding with resource-backed loans all show how countries turned to new partners for survival and growth. The concentration of commitments in Southern Africa, Central, and the East African corridor mirrors precisely the countries that have most aggressively diversified their partnerships since the early 2000s. China not only pays little attention to the recipient's politics but also seems not to hesitate to invest in conflict regions in the Horn of Africa. Where Western lenders retreated or attached governance strings that African governments deemed neo-colonial, Chinese policy banks filled the vacuum, often at scale and speed previously unimaginable, frequently raising concerns of possible exploitation (see Figure 2). Nevertheless, countries that are still held up in the traditional Francophone belt, still tethered to Paris through the CFA franc and French Treasury guarantees, display markedly shorter columns. The message is unmistakable: monetary sovereignty and borrowing autonomy remain inversely related. Where colonial financial architectures persist, the new geography of credit barely penetrates.

Figure 2: Chinese FDI in selected African Countries (2003~2023)



Source: (Created by author based on Johns Hopkins University, 2025 database)

Yet the figure equally cautions against romanticization. The sheer height of specific commitments (Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya) raises legitimate questions about debt sustainability and the return of commodity-backed lending in a twenty-first-century guise. Will these loans become the infrastructure of genuine industrialization, or merely new conduits for primary commodity extraction? The literature reviewed earlier suggests the outcome hinges less on the identity of the creditor than on domestic political capacity to negotiate, regulate, and channel resources toward structural transformation (Brautigam, 2009; Moyo & Amanor, 2008).

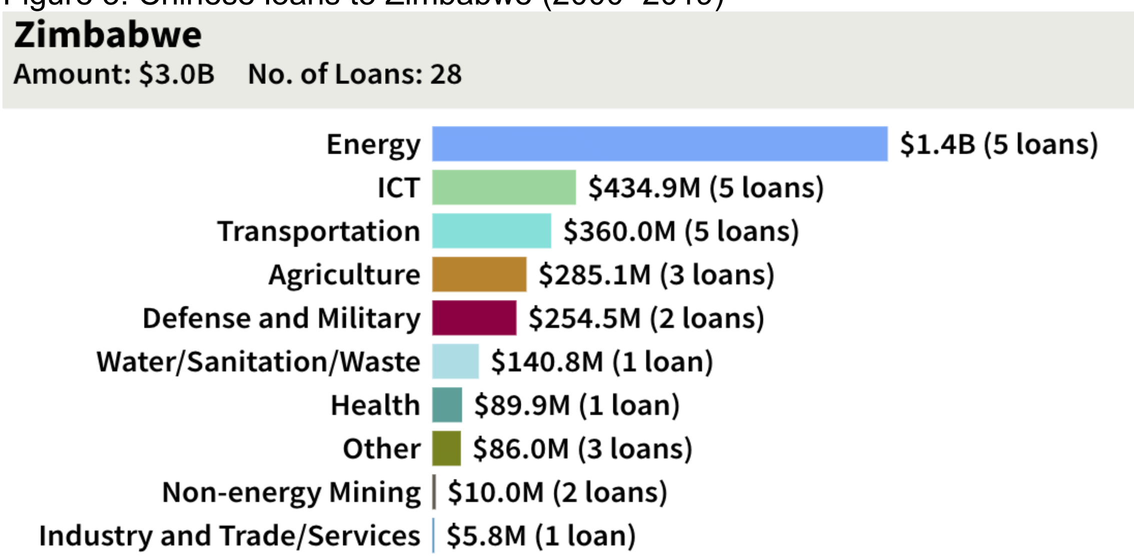
In the sections that follow, we examine whether these commitments by China actually amount to real development from a pro-African (conflated to mean pan-African) and Asian perspective. The study uses Zimbabwe as a case study.

5.2. Re-examining the Zimbabwe Look East Policy.

Having redefined development in section 3, and argued for a multipronged view of development beyond economic terms, the results and discussion section is therefore divided into two parts. In the first part, we analyze secondary macroeconomic data to identify correlations between Chinese investment and lending and productivity, employment, and capital formation. In the second part, we analyze Chinese FDI and loans using available secondary data on common Human Development Indicators (HDI) to empirically go beyond development as defined by neoliberal dictates.

Between 2000 and 2019, Harare secured US$3.03 billion across twenty-eight separate Chinese commitments, an average of over US$150 million per year, despite being declared international *persona non grata* by the entire Paris Club. This is the Look East Policy translated into hard currency. Energy dominates, at US$1.4 billion across five loans, confirming that electricity generation (Kariba South extension, Hwange expansion) has been the lifeline keeping Zimbabwe's industry and cities breathing when Western capital fled. ICT (US$435 million) and Transport (US$360 million) follow closely, reflecting deliberate investment in the physical and digital arteries required for any meaningful re-industrialization (see Figure *3*).

Figure 3: Chinese loans to Zimbabwe (2000~2019)



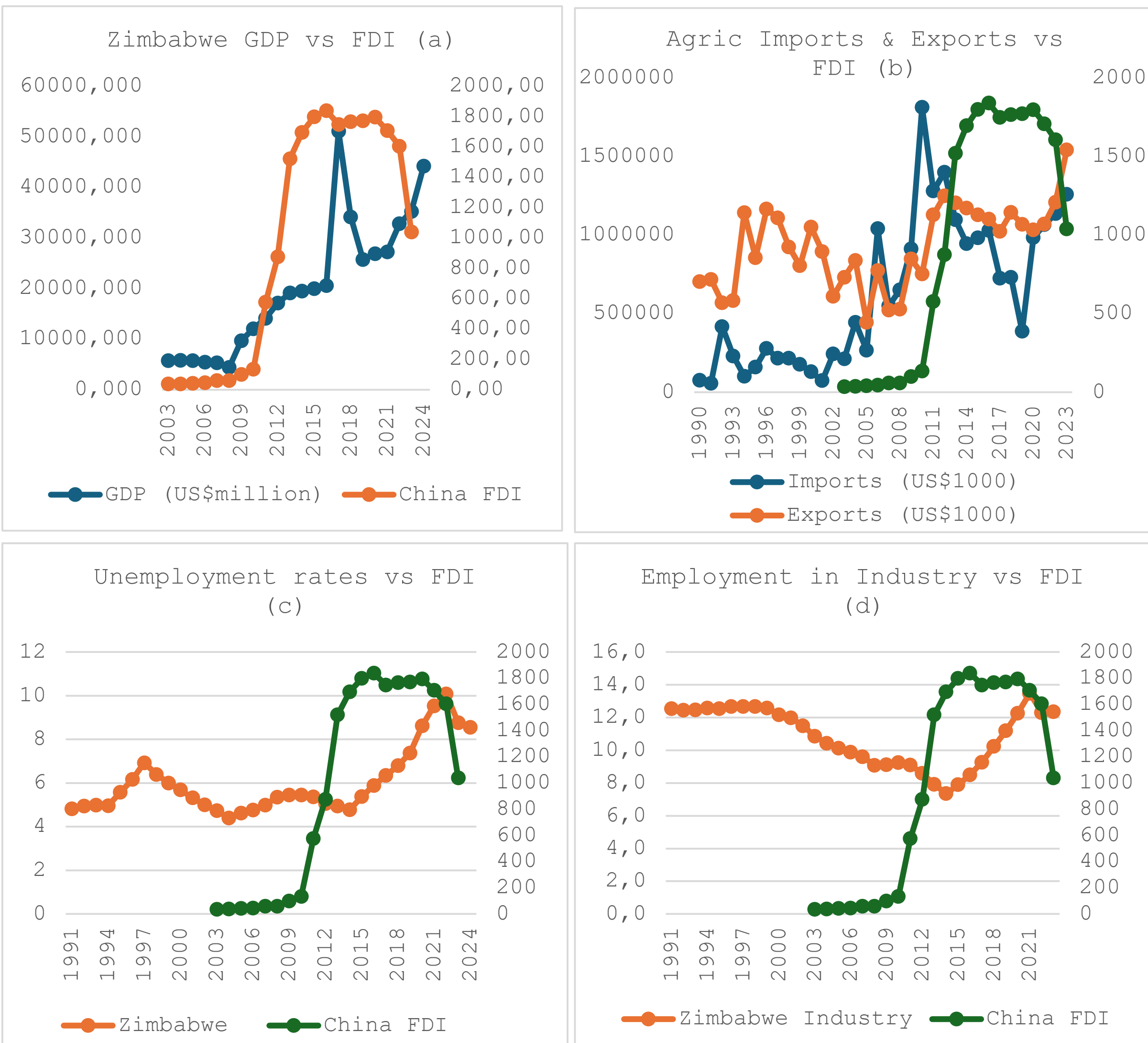
Source: GDPC (2025)

Agriculture (US$285 million) and water/sanitation (US$141 million) reveal a focus on rural productivity and basic service delivery that the Bretton Woods institutions had long abandoned under the ESAP. Defense and military credits (US$255 million) remind us that sovereignty is never cost-free; when the West imposed an arms embargo, Beijing quietly filled the gap. Tellingly, non-energy mining receives only US$10 million. Zimbabwe's chromium, lithium, and gold continue to flow eastward, but mainly through off-balance-sheet concessions rather than formal loans, a classic resource-for-infrastructure swap that keeps debt figures artificially low while transferring tangible assets.

5.2.1 Neo-liberal development and the Look East Policy.

Does a surge in FDI from the East, coupled with concessional loans, equate to development when measured against the neo-liberal yardstick of unfettered markets, export-led growth, formal sector expansion, and human capital optimization? Figure 4 traces Chinese FDI against Zimbabwe's GDP (a), agricultural trade (b), unemployment (c), and industrial employment (d) from the 1990s to 2024. On balance, they suggest partial vindication of the Look East Policy's stabilizing role, yet expose its inadequacy in delivering the holistic, market-driven transformation prized by Washington Consensus paradigms. Notwithstanding, the study is cognizant that correlation, as established through these illustrations, does not imply causation and explores the effects of Chinese loans and FDI with this in mind.

Figure 4: Impact of Chinese FDI (US$M) on GDP, Trade & employment (1990~2024)



Source: (Adapted from FAOstat, 2025; Johns Hopkins University, 2025; World Bank, 2024)

GDP has increased since Zimbabwe's land reform, rising from under US$4 billion in 2003 to over US$30 billion by 2023, despite the 2008 hyperinflation and persistent sanctions. Correlating with FDI, peaking at nearly US$1.8 billion around 2012–2015, this trajectory aligns with neoliberal faith in capital inflows as catalysts for growth (World Bank, 2024). Chinese finance filled the gap left by Western retrenchment, enabling infrastructure for recovery. One might argue this vindicates FDI as a vector for aggregate output, echoing Sen's (1999) emphasis on capability expansion through productive assets. Agricultural trade tells a more nuanced story as imports and exports zigzag through the 1990s–2000s commodity slumps, but post-2010, both accelerate amid a rise in FDI. Exports, in particular, crest above US$1.2 million by 2022, suggesting value-chain integration via Chinese-backed irrigation and mechanization(Moyo & Amanor, 2008). Neo-liberals would applaud this as the fruit of trade liberalization: diversified partners, reducing dependence on Europe, and fostering comparative advantage in tobacco and minerals. Yet the asymmetry persists, as seen in imports outpacing exports in volatility, suggesting a persistent primary reliance rather than a processed ascent.

Unemployment offers guarded optimism. Hovering at 10–12% through the sanction-ravaged 2000s, dips below 5% in the mid-2010s as FDI surges, before rebounding post-COVID. This inverse correlation flatters neo-liberal priors: foreign capital as a job creator, alleviating "unfreedoms" via formal absorption (Sen, 1999). Chinese projects in energy and transport, as mapped earlier, likely generated short-term employment, stabilizing the social fabric amid chaos. Industrial employment, however, indicts the model. In theory, industrial employment should be highly sensitive to FDI and loan injections into the energy, ICT, and transportation sectors. *Alas*, it stagnates at 12–14% pre-2010, then plummets to 8% despite FDI inflows. Neoliberal theory expects foreign investment to boost manufacturing, but instead it mostly goes into mining and utilities, not industries that add value (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The post-2015 FDI plateau coincides with deindustrialization, underscoring how Eastern pragmatism, while a lifeline, can sometimes mirror Western extractivism in outcome. Figure 4 shows that Chinese loans and investments have helped Zimbabwe in the short term, as evidenced by boosts in GDP and trade and a reduction in overall unemployment. While working with China provided Zimbabwe with temporary relief, the graphs suggest that true independence will only come if the country breaks free from reliance on any powerful outside country.

In Figure 5, we further analyze FDI impacts on four more macro-economic indicators: employment in agriculture (a), GDP/capita (b), gross capital formation (c), and producer price index (d). An examination of these will further help us understand the impact of the Look East policy. Neo-liberal scorecards, as we have seen, might award the Look East Policy a passing grade on aggregate GDP and a failing mark on structural transformation. Agricultural employment remained stubbornly above 65–70% throughout the sanction years, a textbook symptom of deindustrialization imposed by ESAP and Western withdrawal after the land reform. The rise in Chinese FDI disbursements does not seem to correlate with agricultural employment, which even decreased after 2010. Perhaps it is prudent to read Figure 5 alongside Figure *3*, given that the bulk of Chinese investments (FDI & loans) targeted energy (Kariba power plant), ICT, and transport (Mugabe airport). Only 10% of all loans from China went into agriculture.

Figure 5: Impact of Chinese FDI (US$M) on agric work, GDP/capita, GCF & PPI (1990~2024)

Source: (Adapted from FAOstat, 2025; Johns Hopkins University, 2025; World Bank, 2024)

Thus, while there is low correlation with agricultural sectors, China overall positively impacted the macroeconomy. GDP per capita confirms the point. From as low as US$500 in 2008, to approximately US$2,000 by 2023. For a population that endured 79.6% monthly inflation in the late 2000s, this represents a material expansion of choices, perhaps akin to what Sen (1999) and other human security scholars envisaged. Gross capital formation tells the same story in reverse. The savage collapse from 25% of GDP in the early 1990s to near-zero by 2008 reflects the investment nuclear strike orchestrated by multilateral institutions and private Western capital. The FDI then rises vertically since 2010, 'pulling domestic investment out of its grave'. By 2015, gross fixed capital formation was back above 20, the highest sustained level since independence. Infrastructure that sanctions & isolation were designed to prevent (power stations, highways, dams) was built anyway, with Chinese balance sheets. Finally, the Producer Price Index shows farm-gate and factory-gate prices more than doubling between 2010 and 2023 as FDI flooded in.

Chinese finance did not merely "save" Zimbabwe from collapse; it began, however imperfectly, the re-industrializing and modernizing project that the West abandoned. Development, understood adequately as expanded African agency (financial in this case) rather than integration into Western value chains, is visibly underway. The task now is to deepen that agency, lest yesterday's lifeline become tomorrow's leash.

5.2.2 Pan-Africanist development and the Look East Policy.

In this section, the study adopts the second approach, which examines the impact of Chinese cooperation on socio-political indicators, including human development indicators. With Figure *3* in mind, a learned scholar may easily deduce that Chinese cooperation in Zimbabwe, or the Look East policy, should exhibit high sensitivity across three main Pan-Africanist themes. First, improving Zimbabwe's quality of life through access to energy; second, through connectivity and mobility; and finally, through improvements in productive capacity (human resource development). Notwithstanding, Chinese cooperation with Zimbabwe is not yet mature (with about 12-15 rounds of disbursements since 2003), we ran a few regression analyses in Excel and SPSS to determine, statistically, the correlations between Chinese FDI and cooperation with over ten HDIs. The study looked at data from the World Bank, FAOstat, and the Johns Hopkins University database. A complete list of variables is shown in Appendix 1 while Figure *6* summarizes selected indicators across the three themes.

Regression analysis caveat

We must read these regressions with the sobriety they demand. Twelve data points over two chaotic decades provide only a faint signal, not strong evidence. A single hyperinflation spike or drought year can swing a coefficient wildly, so every p-value below 0.05 should be treated as a provocative invitation to dig deeper, not a judicial verdict. Outliers are not statistical nuisances here but should be considered historical facts, for instance, the 2008 crisis, the Government of National Unity in 2009, the 2017 coup, and COVID-19. Correlation is not causation, but in Zimbabwe's case, the direction of causality can be guessed with a higher degree of confidence given that the West closed the tap, and the East opened another. In short, the statistical relationships uncovered henceforth are signposts along the way, not the destination.

Energy as the foundation of modern human freedoms

As already noted, the bulk of the Chinese RMB went to the Kariba energy generation project. Western capital retreated after the reform, starving Zimbabwe of power-station finance and possibly turning electricity into a weapon of regime change. Chinese loans rebuilt Kariba South, added 600 MW at Hwange, and installed solar mini-grids across the country. Yet the regressions for electric power consumption (kWh per capita) and energy use per capita show only weak, marginally significant relationships with cumulative FDI (see Figure *6*). What could account for this?

Figure 6: The effect of Chinese FDI on energy (2000~2024)

Indicator	**R^2**	**Adj. R^2**	**Coefficient**	**Std. Error**	**t Stat**	**p-value**
Electricity consumption (kWh/capita)	0.279	0.206	-22.14	11.27	-1.96	0.08
Energy use (kg of oil per capita)	0.233	0.157	-19.69	11.29	-1.74	0.11
Life expectancy at birth (years)	0.333	0.266	779.09	348.84	2.23	0.05*

Source: (Adapted from FAOstat, 2025; Johns Hopkins University, 2025; World Bank, 2024)

Perhaps the answer lies in the concept of lag and distribution, as Kanayo et al. (2025) also concluded for South Africa using the Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) Approach. Grid extensions and new turbines did not immediately translate into per-capita consumption, given that the newly resettled rural black majority started from near-zero infrastructure. The more statistically substantial link with life expectancy (p=0.05) is therefore a little more revealing, despite its R^2 of 0.333. Energy is not consumed for its own sake; it is the silent enabler of bodily survival and human dignity. The regression coefficient may be modest, but the lived freedom is immeasurable: children who once studied by candlelight can now read at night through solar lamps and other such light-emitting technologies.

Connectivity and Mobility as Pathways Out of Rural Isolation.

Transport ($360 m) and ICT ($435 m) together form the second-tallest bars. Although the bulk of the ‘transport’ investment went to the refurbishment of the airport (hence less likely to directly affect the ordinary citizen deep in rural Zimbabwe), FDI regressions were statistically correlated with changes in these variables. Mobile subscriptions per 100 people increase significantly with FDI (R^2=0.331, p=0.050), while industry value-added (% of GDP) follows the same pattern (although not significant at 95% CI, see Figure *7*). This is the spatial revolution the Fast-Track farmers would never have received from

Bretton Woods: all-weather roads now slowly find their way to former "dead zones," fibre optic cables run alongside new highways, and, although informally, EcoCash agents rise where colonial trading stores had dared to enter.

Figure 7: The effect of Chinese FDI on connectivity & mobility (2000~2024)

Indicator	**R^2**	**Adj. R^2**	**Co-efficient**	**Std. Error**	**t Stat**	**p-value**
Mobile cellular subscriptions (/100 people)	0.331	0.264	100.2	45.03	2.23	0.050*
Urban population growth (annual %)	0.037	-0.06	-1002.9	1627.6	-0.62	0.552
Gross capital formation (% of GDP)	0.035	-0.061	-315.8	524.04	-0.6	0.56
Industry (+ construction), (% of GDP)	0.331	0.264	345.4	155.2	2.23	0.050*

Source: (Adapted from FAOstat, 2025; Johns Hopkins University, 2025; World Bank, 2024)

From a Pan-African perspective, connectivity is not about joining global value chains on subordinate terms; it is about shrinking the distance between profits made on resettled land and those made in the markets. The statistically insignificant result for gross capital formation reminds us that Chinese finance remains biased toward state-led megaprojects rather than toward diffuse SME lending. This point is popularly cited (for instance, see Younde, 2007). Still, the mobile and industrial correlations (see Figure *7*) confirm that the physical and digital infrastructure is functioning. A rural woman in Mudzi district can now sell her crop via mobile money and buy inputs the same day; a young welder in Chinhoyi town can watch YouTube tutorials under a solar-powered LED light. These are not trivial conveniences; they are the material dissolution of colonial geography. The Look East Policy did not invent these freedoms, but it helped finance the roads and towers that made them possible after the West had punished Zimbabwe for redistributing land.

Productive Capacities and Bodily Survival of the Black Majority

Among the three themes discussed, Chinese cooperation shows the strongest link to improving productive capacity by building skills and education, thereby aligning with the vision of real development beyond economics, as advocated by thinkers such as Amartya Sen and Marcus Garvey. For instance, under-5 mortality drops sharply (R^2=0.518, p=0.008), adolescent fertility collapses (R^2=0.550, p=0.006), agricultural employment share falls (R^2=0.542, p=0.006), and primary completion rises (R^2=0.356, p=0.041). The correlations here are statistically significant and explain an average of 50% of the variation in the dependent variable (see R^2 values in Figure *8*).

It can be argued that agriculture loans ($285 m), water/sanitation ($141 m) (see Figure *3*), and the energy used to power boreholes and irrigation pumps directly lessen the triad of hunger, disease, and early pregnancy that ESAP previously naturalized. Every percentage-point decline in child mortality is a statistical echo and empirical evidence that land reform, plus Eastern capital, can break inter-generational poverty, whereas Western conditionality only deepened it.

Figure 8: The effect of Chinese FDI on productive capacities (2000~2024)

Indicator	R^2	Adj. R^2	Co-efficient	Std. Error	t Stat	p-value
Mortality rate, under-5 (per 1000 live births)	0.518	0.47	-272.04	83	-3.28	0.008*
Adolescent fertility rate (births/1000 15–19)	0.55	0.505	-2678.9	766.1	-3.5	0.006*
Fertility rate, total (births per woman)	0.291	0.22	-9980.7	4930	-2.02	0.07
Agriculture, forestry, & fishing (% of GDP)	0.542	0.497	-1285.6	373.5	-3.44	0.006*
School enrollment, primary (% gross)	0.413	0.354	-710.6	267.9	-2.65	0.024*
% Primary completion rate	0.356	0.291	104.3	44.4	2.35	0.041*
Immunization, measles (% 12–23 months)	0.151	0.067	479.88	359.31	1.34	0.211

Source: (Adapted from FAOstat, 2025; Johns Hopkins University, 2025; World Bank, 2024)

From a Pan-African lens, these regressions are the empirical vindication of the entire Look East gamble. Sanctions were designed to make land reform collapse into famine and despair. Instead, Chinese loans and FDI have given the new farmers electricity, roads, water, and schools, turning redistributed acres into platforms for human flourishing.

6. Conclusions

The evidence assembled all converges on a single, explosive certainty: the Look East Policy was never romantic; it was a meeting of needs, with China having access to resources and advancing its global impact on one end, and Zimbabwe trying to find its feet after being abandoned by Western investors on the other; a classic supply and demand situation. Sanctions were designed to reduce Zimbabwe to a failed-state exhibit, and it almost did. However, they produced an early learning point for African leaders that African states can survive, stabilize, and begin to flourish outside the Paris Club cage. In under 25 years, Chinese loans and FDI are yet to deliver the textbook neo-liberal miracle of export-led industrialization. However, at the rate at which it’s going, it promises to provide something far more precious under the circumstances. Thus, electricity in former white farms now owned by black families, boreholes that end cholera, highways that cut transport costs for new farmers, and mobile money that reaches resettlement areas the World Bank had written off. Additionally, a sustained fall in child mortality and adolescent fertility that no amount of Western governance and tied aid has ever achieved in over a century of colonialism and post-colonialism.

This is the quiet resurrection of the Bandung Spirit. Zimbabwe proves that even the most isolated, most vilified state found a lender willing to transact without political crucifixion. That fact has changed the strategy for African governments seeking true independence. Still, investments focus on big projects that support regimes, rather than the broad, patient capital needed for full industrial progress. The move from hyperinflation to expanding rural electrification signals a goal of 'growth with development."

Mugabe's 2004 prophecy that "the sun rises in the East" may have been rhetoric, but now in his grave, the data show it was a prophecy in the biblical sense. The Bandung Spirit did not die in 1955. It simply waited for the financial center of gravity to shift far enough eastward for African agency to breathe again. This gives African (and third-world) leaders options and better cards to play when negotiating and balancing relations and deals with the East and the West. In Zimbabwe, it is stabilizing, though imperfectly, debt-laden, but unmistakably alive. The Afrasian renewal is no longer a dream in the following decades.

7. References

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Appendix 1: Regression analysis FDI & HDI (2000~2023)

Variable	R^2	Adj R^2	Co-efficient	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
GNI, Atlas method (current US$)	0.768	0.745	4.91e-07	8.53e-08	5.76	0.000
Personal remittances, received (current US$)	0.758	0.734	4.50e-06	8.02e-07	5.60	0.000
GNI per capita, Atlas method (current US$)	0.682	0.650	8.15	1.76	4.63	0.001
Inflation, GDP deflator (annual %)	0.620	0.582	12.20	3.02	4.04	0.002
Population growth (annual %)	0.011	-0.08	1481.87	4420.11	0.34	0.744
Population density (people per sq. km of land area)	0.556	0.511	950.56	268.83	3.54	0.005
External debt stocks, total (DOD, current US$)	0.550	0.505	1.20e-06	3.43e-07	3.50	0.006
Adolescent fertility rate (per 1,000 women ages 15-19)	0.550	0.505	-2678.92	766.12	-3.50	0.006
Immunization, measles (% of ages 12-23 months)	0.151	0.067	479.88	359.31	1.34	0.211
Prevalence of HIV, total (% of population ages 15-49)	0.672	0.639	-1063.28	234.89	-4.53	0.001
Terrestrial & marine protected areas (% of area)	0.433	0.377	365.10	132.02	2.77	0.020
Annual freshwater withdrawals (% of resources)	0.433	0.376	548.14	198.51	2.76	0.020
School enrollment, primary (% gross)	0.413	0.354	-710.61	267.90	-2.65	0.024
GDP (current US$)	0.431	0.374	2.99e-07	1.09e-07	2.75	0.020
Urban population growth (annual %)	0.037	-0.06	-1002.91	1627.55	-0.62	0.552
Energy use (kg of oil equivalent per capita)	0.233	0.157	-19.69	11.29	-1.74	0.112
Electric power consumption (kWh per capita)	0.279	0.206	-22.14	11.27	-1.96	0.078
Net ODA and official aid received (current US$)	0.427	0.370	1.62e-05	5.93e-06	2.73	0.021
Primary completion rate, total (% of relevant age)	0.356	0.291	104.37	44.43	2.35	0.041
Industry (+ construction), value added (% of GDP)	0.331	0.264	345.40	155.20	2.23	0.050
Life expectancy at birth, total (years)	0.333	0.266	779.09	348.84	2.23	0.050
Military expenditure (% of GDP)	0.551	0.507	-4148.58	1183.23	-3.51	0.006
Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people)	0.331	0.264	100.23	45.03	2.23	0.050
High-technology exports (% of manufactured exports)	0.005	-0.1	245.72	1144.34	0.21	0.834
Total debt service % of exports (goods, services & income)	0.013	-0.09	-75.38	205.95	-0.37	0.722
Net migration	0.071	-0.02	0.03	0.04	0.87	0.404
FDI, net inflows (BoP, current US$)	0.270	0.197	1.39e-05	7.23e-06	1.92	0.083
Fertility rate, total (births per woman)	0.291	0.220	-9980.74	4930.20	-2.02	0.070
Mortality rate, under-5 (per 1,000 live births)	0.518	0.470	-272.04	83.00	-3.28	0.008
Cum Loans	0.868	0.855	7.89	0.97	8.11	0.000
Chinese Loans ($m)	0.022	-0.08	-3.22	6.73	-0.48	0.643
Chinese FDI ($m)	0.212	0.133	4.07	2.49	1.64	0.132
GNI, PPP (current international $)	0.287	0.216	1.43e-07	7.14e-08	2.01	0.072
GNI per capita, PPP (current international $)	0.158	0.074	1.76	1.28	1.37	0.200
Forest area (sq. km)	0.498	0.447	-0.93	0.29	-3.1	0.010
GDP growth (annual %)	0.014	-0.09	132.65	352.98	0.38	0.715
Agric, forestry, and fishing, value added (% of GDP)	0.542	0.497	-1285.67	373.53	-3.44	0.006
Exports of goods and services (% of GDP)	0.054	-0.04	-271.09	357.95	-0.76	0.466
Imports of goods and services (% of GDP)	0.007	-0.09	-105.67	410.09	-0.26	0.802
Gross capital formation (% of GDP)	0.035	-0.06	-315.83	524.04	-0.60	0.560
Merchandise trade (% of GDP)	0.001	-0.1	-13.62	181.48	-0.08	0.942
Net barter terms of trade index (2015 = 100)	0.100	0.010	371.07	351.78	1.05	0.316

Source: (SPSS & Excel regression based on FAOstat, 2025; GDPC, 2025; Johns Hopkins University, 2025; World Bank, 2024)