



## Research Article

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## Strategic Statecraft and Its Implications for Regional and International Relations: An Analysis of Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy Under the Second Republic

Aleosy Hlabiso

Department of Governance and Public Management, University of Zimbabwe. And Department of Humanities, International Relations Unit, Africa University, Zimbabwe.

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**Abstract:** This research critically analyses the transformative trajectories of Zimbabwe's foreign policy under the Second Republic, particularly focusing on the Government of Zimbabwe's (GoZ) strategic regional and international engagements within a rapidly evolving international system. By analysing the intricacies of Zimbabwe's diplomatic interactions, the research aims at providing a comprehensive understanding of how the country, informed by its unique historical, political and economic background, can potentially enhance its position in regional and international affairs. Furthermore, the research aims at assessing the implications of GoZ's foreign policy on Zimbabwe's sovereignty, economic development, and global standing. In addition, it explores the challenges and opportunities encountered as the country seeks a more integrated and influential role in regional and international relations. Special thought is given to the country's assumption of the Chairmanship of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and GoZ's engagement with ongoing global issues, such as the protracted security situation in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and conflicts like those between Israel-Hamas and Russia-Ukraine. The research is particularly important to the broader discourse on the dynamics of strategic foreign policy in developing countries, offering insights into the complexities of diplomatic manoeuvring in an increasingly multipolar system.

**Keywords:** Axis of Evil, Balancing Act, Bilateral Relations, BRICS Plus, Defiance, Economic Development, Economic Freedom, Economic Liberalisation, Economic Sanctions, Economic Trajectory, Engagement and Re-Engagement, Foreign Policy, Geo-Politics, Global Order, Global South, Global Standing, Global North, Governance Strategy, Hybrid Warfare, Intelligence Warfare, International Image and Perception, International Isolation, International Relations, International System, Look East Policy, Modern Statecraft, Multipolar System, Neo-Colonial Interference, Outposts of Tyranny, Political and Economic Warfare, Re-Integration, Second Republic, Self-Determination, Sovereignty, Strategic National Interests, Strategic Partnership, Strategic Statecraft and Vision 2030.

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## INTRODUCTION

In modern-day international relations, a country's foreign policy is often sculpted by the exigencies of global geopolitics, prioritizing national interests over collective global objectives. Statecraft, therefore, must focus not only on bilateral relations but also on shaping international perceptions to align with a country's strategic interests. As Janice Gross Stein notes, the power to persuade and influence global opinion has become a critical component of modern statecraft. This influence extends to shaping the policies of other countries to promote one's own national interests. In the context of Zimbabwe, particularly under the Second Republic, an analysis of its foreign policy reveals a strategic balancing act between cultivating relations with the global West, led by the United States (US), and fostering ties with progressive countries such as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, which often stand in opposition to Western interests. As a result, this research aims at proffering a foreign policy trajectory for Zimbabwe which is primarily aimed at securing economic support, enhancing military collaboration and fostering political unity with both sides, without alienating either, in order to navigate the complexities of

a dynamic multipolar world system.

In the past, Zimbabwe's historical alignment with progressive countries such as Iran has led to its classification by Western powers, notably the US, as part of the "*outposts of tyranny*" alongside countries like Cuba and Belarus. For instance, in January 2002, US President, George Walker Bush, referred to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an "*axis of evil*." On 20 January 2005, US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, expanded this "*axis of evil*" to include Zimbabwe, Cuba, Myanmar and Belarus. This categorization by the US, was largely based on a "guilt by association" fallacy rather than an accurate assessment of the country's state of affairs. The repercussions of this have been detrimental, especially to Zimbabwe's economy as the country has struggled to shed this negative image for over two decades. This historical development poses significant challenges for the Second Republic under Zimbabwean President, Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, who has adopted a foreign policy posture of being "*a friend to all and an enemy to none*". Notably, the fallacy of association appears to have negatively impacted efforts by President Mnangagwa to cultivate relations with Western-aligned countries. This reflects

the need for a re-evaluation of Zimbabwe's foreign policy in order to foster favourable engagement from both the West and other progressive countries aligned with the East.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Transition from the First to the Second Republic*

The Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP), a hallmark policy of Zimbabwe's First Republic, precipitated significant international backlash, particularly from Western countries, which threatened regime change through hybrid war machinations, including legal, economic, information, psychological, intelligence and political campaigns. In response, the then President, Robert Gabriel Mugabe, pursued a "*Look East Policy*," forging alliances with countries such as Russia and China, which had supported its independence. During this presidency, President Mugabe in September 2002, encapsulated the First Republic's foreign policy through the bold declaration to then United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister, Tony Blair: "*Blair, keep your England and let me keep my Zimbabwe.*" According to analysts, this declaration indicated Mugabe's emphasis on national sovereignty and independence, reflecting his determination to shield Zimbabwe from external influence. By distancing the country from entities like the European Union (EU), the Commonwealth and Western allies, President Mugabe sought to assert Zimbabwe's autonomy on the global stage. However, while the move symbolized a significant moment of defiance against neo-colonial interference, research suggests that it had adverse effects on Zimbabwe's economic trajectory, contributing to its prolonged decline as it led to unwarranted economic sanctions accompanied by international isolation.

In view of the above, upon assuming office in November 2017, President Mnangagwa as the leader of Zimbabwe's Second Republic, initiated a transformative agenda aimed at revitalizing the country's international image and fostering global engagement. Declaring Zimbabwe "*open for business*," he introduced a foreign policy centred on economic liberalization, diplomatic outreach, and re-engagement with countries whose relations had deteriorated during the First Republic. This included applications to re-join international forums such as the *Commonwealth* and *BRICS Plus*. Domestically, his administration sought to address historical grievances, notably through a global compensation deed to compensate former white landowners for seized farmland. Additionally, the Second Republic demonstrated its commitment to human rights by abolishing the death penalty, signalling a broader dedication to preserving both human and property rights.

On infrastructure and development, industrialization efforts were significantly enhanced through crucial projects, including road rehabilitation, the comprehensive upgrade of the Beitbridge Border Post and the expansion of the Robert Gabriel Mugabe

International (RGMI) Airport. These initiatives not only enhanced the country's logistical capabilities but also indicated the government's commitment to creating a more conducive environment for economic growth and development. By improving these critical infrastructure points, the Second Republic aimed to streamline trade processes, increase efficiency and attract additional investment. Ostensibly, these measures reflect President Mnangagwa's dual focus on economic reform and reconciliation as pillars of the Second Republic's governance strategy.

Regionally, the Second Republic has demonstrated strong regional leadership, exemplified by its assumption of the SADC Chairmanship in August 2024, during a period characterised by significant regional political and security challenges. This leadership role coincided with presidential elections in the region, which heightened political tensions in countries like Mozambique, as well as ongoing conflicts in the eastern DRC, involving both regional and international actors. As a result, the GoZ has been actively collaborating with the Tanzanian led SADC Organ Troika on Politics, Defence and Security Co-operation in order to address these issues and promote regional peace and stability. Notably, President Mnangagwa's tenure as SADC Chair has positioned the country as an instrumental figure in fostering regional co-operation and development. The Second Republic's successful hosting of the 44th SADC Ordinary Summit of Heads of State and Government further allowed Zimbabwe to highlight its economic potential, cultural heritage and diplomatic capabilities, while strengthening its influence within the region. The Summit also emphasized innovation as a driver for sustainable economic growth, aligning with SADC's priorities of trade integration, industrialization, and infrastructure development. Importantly, through its chairmanship, the Second Republic has reaffirmed Zimbabwe's historical commitment to advancing unity and progress among member states.

Continently, the Second Republic has made significant strides in advancing its continental and international influence. On 25 March 2024, Zimbabwean Senator, Chief Fortune Zephania Charumbira, successfully reclaimed the presidency of the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), a notable achievement reflecting Zimbabwe's growing leadership role in Africa. Building on this momentum, the country has been effectively leading the continent and is now pursuing a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the period 2027- 2028. This bid has garnered substantial support, with Russia pledging its full backing during a meeting on 3 February 2025, between Russian Ambassador, Nikolai Krasilnikov, and President Mnangagwa. Other notable supporters of the country's UNSC bid include SADC member states as well as Cuba and India. Ambassador Krasilnikov emphasized that Zimbabwe's participation in the UNSC would contribute

to a multipolar and equitable global order. Likewise, the Second Republic continues to champion solidarity with developing countries through platforms such as the *Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)*, *South-South Co-operation*, the *Group of Fifteen (G15)* and the *Group of Seventy-Seven (G77)*.

In a related context, on 20 March 2025, Zimbabwe's Minister of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture, Kirsty Coventry, was elected as the 10th President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) during its 144th session in Costa Navarino, Greece. This milestone marked a historic moment as Minister Coventry became the first woman and the first African to lead the IOC. A five-time Olympian and Africa's most decorated athlete with seven Olympic medals, including two golds in the 200-meter backstroke, Coventry's election is celebrated internationally as her achievement not only highlights her illustrious sports career, but also represents the Second Republic's commitment to pushing forward gender and regional representation in international leadership. Notably, Minister Coventry's accomplishment has elevated Zimbabwe's profile on the international stage and is widely regarded as a groundbreaking moment in the history of the Olympic movement.

Eminently, the victory by Kirsty Coventry has enticed optimism as well as solidarity messages from key regional and international players such as Russian President, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, who praised her unique experience and commitment to advancing Olympic ideals. The gestures follow Coventry's postulation against barring countries like Russia from the Olympics due to their ongoing conflicts, instead advocating for a task force to establish policies and guiding frameworks for countries involved in disputes. Additionally, she expressed interest in resuming discussions about Russia's potential return to the games. However, despite these diplomatic strides, Zimbabwe's relations with Western countries remain strained due to its position on contentious global issues such as the Israel-Hamas and Russia-Ukraine conflicts, highlighting ongoing challenges in its international re-integration. These tensions are further exacerbated by internal political opposition and their anti-Government machinations aimed at undermining Zimbabwe's international image for political clout and mileage.

### **Geo-Political Dynamics**

Despite the Second Republic's commitment to re-engagement and its diplomatic principle of being "*a friend to all and an enemy of none*," recent geopolitical developments such as the Israel-Hamas and Russia-Ukraine conflicts have placed the government in a dilemma, forcing it to make certain public declarations. For instance, at the Second Russia-Africa Summit in July 2023, President Mnangagwa openly declared unwavering support for Russia, calling it a "*true friend*." This alignment was influenced by historical ties,

including Russia's support during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle and its veto of a 2008 UNSC resolution aimed at sanctioning Zimbabwe. However, this declaration coincided with Western efforts to isolate countries allied with Russia, leading to Zimbabwe's classification as a Russian ally. While Russia continues to back Zimbabwe, including its bid for a non-permanent seat in the UNSC, the government must balance relations between Eastern and Western powers in order to benefit from both sides without alienating the other. For instance, African countries such as South Africa, Morocco, Algeria and Senegal are aligned with Russia, but still enjoy cordial relations with the West.

Equally, some African countries support Palestine but maintain solid relations with Israel. On that note, the Israel-Hamas conflict has spotlighted Zimbabwe's long-standing support for Palestine's right to self-determination. This position has drawn comparisons to Iran's support for Hamas despite Zimbabwe's relations being with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Research points out that, Western powers, through a fallacy of false equivalence, appear to hold the belief that by supporting Palestine, one also supports Iran and the "*Axis of Resistance*." Noteworthy is that, during the beginning of the conflict, Zimbabwe maintained a neutral position and through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (MoFAIT) issued a statement condemning Hamas' October 2023 attacks on Israel, while urging Israeli restraint. However, as Israel intensified its retaliatory actions, Zimbabwe was forced to shift its position and openly condemn Israel's indiscriminate measures.

Further afield, on 22 March 2023, Zimbabwe and Palestine had strengthened their diplomatic relations by signing four Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) encompassing political consultation, agriculture, veterinary services and education. Later that year, on 30 December 2023, the GoZ donated US\$35 000 to the Palestinian embassy to aid victims of violence in Gaza. This support continued into 2024 when Zimbabwe's then Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Ambassador Fredrick Shava, announced an additional US\$500 000 donation on 9 April 2025, to assist Palestinians suffering in Gaza. Similarly, in May 2024, Zimbabwe's Vice President, General (Rtd) Constantino Gueya Nyikadzino Chiwenga, represented Zimbabwe at the Second Iran-Africa International Economic Conference, where he announced that he had secured over 1 000 scholarships from Iran during the visit. These partnerships with countries such as Iran, Palestine, Russia and China have notably drawn criticism, particularly from Western observers and Israel, who argue that these alliances prioritize military benefits over economic development. Critics also argue against the lack of tangible outcomes from the numerous MoUs signed between GoZ and these countries, including Algeria and India (S. Amin, 1991). This illustrates the complexities of navigating foreign policy amidst shifting

global dynamics.

### ***Re-Looking Government's Foreign Policy and Management of International Opinion***

Notwithstanding Zimbabwe's perceived alignment with anti-Western countries, significant FDI from these countries remains limited, with China standing out as the only exception. Despite Russia and Iran being noted as important investors, their actual trade and investment relations with the government remain relatively modest. Interestingly, countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have rapidly emerged as Zimbabwe's second-largest trading partners, in spite of only having established open relations recently. Notably, China's foreign policy engagements reveal a pragmatic, business-oriented approach rather than one based on political solidarity (Y.L Doz & G. Hamel, 1998). For instance, in September 2024, Beijing pledged US\$1 billion to the Tanzania-Zambia Railway project, even though Zambia's government under President Hakainde Hichilema has expressed a pro-Western stance, highlighting China's prioritization of economic interests over political alignment. Consequently, Zimbabwe should strengthen its strategic alliances with the East, while simultaneously pursuing enhanced relations with Western countries. Efforts to join **BRICS Plus** as well as to re-join the **Commonwealth** should thus, be expedited to rebuild trust. This requires improving Zimbabwe's international image by highlighting government's efforts in addressing governance issues, including alleged human rights violations and the rule of law.

Moreover, the reformation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to incorporate International Trade indicates a strategic shift towards economic diplomacy, emphasizing the focus on foreign direct investment (FDI) and the need to enhance the country's competitiveness in global trade. This approach aligns with theoretical principles of economic diplomacy, which advocate using diplomatic means to secure investment, technology transfer, and expanded markets for national products (L. Yueh, 2020). To enhance this strategy, the government may be required to initiate international campaigns showcasing its reform progress, tourism potential, and rich cultural heritage. Mobilizing the Zimbabwean diaspora as economic ambassadors could further amplify these efforts. Additionally, leveraging regional integration through organizations like COMESA and SADC is crucial, particularly given Zimbabwe's current leadership role as SADC Chair. Noteworthy is that regional integration has historically been instrumental in fostering trade liberalization and economic co-operation among member states. Furthermore, advocating for African Union (AU) support on issues such as climate change, governance, trade, and sanctions removal aligns with Pan-African priorities and could strengthen Zimbabwe's position within continental initiatives. Active participation in peacekeeping missions may also enhance the country's international reputation. However, this requires careful financial

planning to avoid overburdening state resources. Collectively, these measures could recalibrate the Second Republic's foreign policy to align with international expectations while safeguarding its sovereignty and advancing national interests.

### ***Implications of BRICS Membership for Zimbabwe***

The BRICS alliance, originally comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, has evolved into a formidable counterweight to the Western-dominated global order. The recent expansion of BRICS to include Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, forming the **BRICS Plus** grouping, has significantly reinforced its economic influence and attracted interest from over 40 countries, with more than 23 having formally applied for membership. This growth enhances the alliance's role in international organizations like the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Bretton Woods (BW) institutions, amplifying the voice of developing countries.

For Zimbabwe, pursuing BRICS membership holds substantial implications for its economic trajectory and geopolitical positioning. With backing from key members like Russia and Brazil, Zimbabwe's bid could provide access to alternative financial resources through the New Development Bank, enhance Government's Vision 2030 by diversifying credit sources, and reduce dependence on Western financial institutions. This membership could also grant access to new markets for natural resources and increase political clout globally.

However, the Second Republic must navigate policy harmonization with other member states while prioritizing national interests and inclusive growth. The alliance with **BRICS Plus** also positions Zimbabwe to counter Western dominance in international relations, but it requires careful management given the geopolitical tensions as evidenced by US President Trump's threat on 30 January 2025, of 100% tariffs against BRICS members seeking to replace the US dollar as a reserve currency. Notably, through such similar tensions, the US entered into a trade war with Canada. As a result, mismanagement of this integration into BRICS by the Second Republic, could ultimately hinder the country's re-engagement trajectory with the West, hence the need for a pragmatic and cautious approach.

## **CONCLUSION**

Modern-day foreign policy and statecraft are increasingly centred around national interests, with economic considerations serving as the primary driving force. Accordingly, Zimbabwe may need to reassess its foreign policy framework, shifting from a focus on political solidarity to one that prioritizes economic benefits. This strategic realignment could potentially enhance the country's economic dividends, aligning the Second Republic's international relations more effectively with its national economic objectives

encapsulated in its “*Vision 2030*.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Zimbabwe's foreign policy necessitates a strategic re-evaluation to effectively promote national interests while maintaining international solidarity. The dynamics of modern-day statecraft emphasizes economic interests over political solidarity, indicating the need for Zimbabwe to reassess the benefits derived from its anti-Western allies and balance these with potential gains from engaging with the Western bloc. This balancing act involves leveraging economic and diplomatic tools to mitigate the dominance of powerful countries, aligning with the balance of power theory's principles of soft-balancing (Waltz, 1979). By utilizing its mineral resources to attract investments from both the West and anti-Western blocs, Zimbabwe can create mutually beneficial partnerships. As such, as the world transitions towards a multi-polar order, the formation of "issue-based" synergies becomes increasingly prevalent. This strategic partnership approach allows countries to collaborate on specific issues while diverging on others, based on national interests (Keohane, 1984). For instance, Russia and China's support for Iran on certain issues while opposing its nuclear ambitions illustrates this flexible approach. Zimbabwe could adopt a similar strategy, supporting the anti-Western bloc on select issues while maintaining flexibility to abstain or align with other blocs when necessary. This nuanced approach would enhance Zimbabwe's national security and economic prosperity by fostering diverse alliances and minimizing reliance on one single global power.

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