

Research Article

# Reflections on Zimbabwe-Zambia Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## Abstract

The article explores the changing relationship between Zimbabwe and Zambia in the 21st century, focusing on the intrinsic synergy of political and socio-economic factors. Historically, the diplomatic relationship was hinged in shared colonial experiences and liberation struggles, the bilateral ties between these neighboring countries have been significantly influenced by contemporary governance challenges, economic fluctuations, and regional integration efforts. Dual Theoretical Framework of Realism and Constructivism was adopted as a tool for analysing the interplay between power, interests, norms, and ideas in shaping bilateral relations between the two nations. By analysing key events from the early 2000s, a document review methodology was used to illustrate how Zimbabwe and Zambia navigated their shared interests and challenges in a rapidly changing global landscape. The findings revealed that while historical legacies and domestic issues continue to impact relations, there exists a significant potential for enhanced cooperation through strategic partnerships and regional initiatives. The role of organizations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU) is critical in shaping these dynamics. Ultimately, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of Zimbabwe-Zambia relations, offering insights that are essential for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to foster stability and collaboration in Southern Africa Region.

## Keywords

Reflections, Zimbabwe-Zambia Relations, 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## 1. Introduction

The dynamics of Zimbabwe-Zambia relations in the 21st century have been influenced by different challenges, such as political, economic, governance issues, and regional integration efforts. The two neighboring countries in Southern Africa's interactions back dates to the era of colonialism and liberation struggles. However, this article's discourse is hinged on the 'Reflections on Zimbabwe-Zambia Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. This intends to explore the contemporary

dimensions of Zimbabwe-Zambia relations, focusing on the impact of political developments, trade agreements, and mutual cooperation initiatives.

In reflecting key events and policies from the early 2000s to the present, the article seeks to provide insights into how both nations navigate their shared interests and challenges in a rapidly changing global landscape. Also, the investigation highlighted the role of regional organizations, such as the

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Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU), in mending bilateral ties. Understanding these relations is important not only for policymakers in Zimbabwe-Zambia but also for regional stability and development in Southern Africa. Through this article, researchers aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on international relations and cooperation within the context of African geopolitics. Furthermore, the article's central argument for this research is that the development of Zimbabwe-Zambia relations in the 21st century could be predominantly influenced by an intrinsic synergy of political, economic, and social factors that portray both countries' aspirations for sovereignty and regional stability. This article posits that while historical legacies and contemporary governance issues continue to pose challenges, the potential for enhanced collaboration through strategic economic partnerships and regional integration initiatives presents significant opportunities for Zimbabwe and Zambia. The reflections on the two nations' relationships have been guided by critical questions; What historical factors have shaped the current state of Zimbabwe-Zambia relations in the 21st century? How have political changes in Zimbabwe and Zambia influenced their bilateral relations? In what ways do regional organizations impact the diplomatic and economic relations between Zimbabwe and Zambia? What are the main challenges facing Zimbabwe-Zambia relations, and what strategies can be implemented to enhance collaboration between the two nations?

## 2. Historical Context

Contextually, Zambia and Zimbabwe have shared an intrinsic and dynamic relationship since attainment of independence from 1964 and 1980, respectively, which was even confirmed by the Zambian Information and Media minister Cornelius Mweetwa who said, "Zambia and Zimbabwe enjoy cordial relations, we are one people. You know, there was a time when Zambia and Zimbabwe were one; it was called Northern and Southern Rhodesia. It was made one by the British, but they are now separate" [1]. However, the two nations have cooperated on different regional initiatives, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and African Union (AU) [2]. These relationships were enhanced by historical events. During the liberation struggle (1960s-1970s), Zimbabwe's independence efforts gained support from Zambia. In post-independence cooperation (1980s-1990s); both states worked towards regional development projects and security initiatives which fostered strong ties. When Zimbabwe experienced economic crash and political turbulence in the 2000s, that led to strained relations with Zambia for several reasons such as economic contagion, refugee crisis (Zimbabwean refugees into Zambia, strained the host's resources and infrastructure). With regards to political tension in Zimbabwe's controversial elections and human rights abuses invited international condemnation, with Zambia caught in the middle as a member of regional organ-

izations like SADC [2].

The relationship between Zimbabwe and Zambia has deep historical roots, especially in the era of the liberation struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Zambia played a crucial role as a frontline state, providing support to Zimbabwean liberation movements such as the Zimbabwe African national Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) [3]. This solidarity was built on shared goals of anti-colonialism and regional stability, as highlighted in [2] noted that the cooperation established during this period laid a foundation for post-independence relations. Following Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, the two nations initially enjoyed strong diplomatic ties, characterized by mutual support in different regional initiatives. However, as both countries faced their own political and economic challenges, the relationship began to strain. The political landscape in Zambia shifted dramatically with the introduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s, leading to a change in leadership and divergence in political orientations. The coming into leadership of Frederick Chiluba in 1991 as the president of Zambia brought about a marked turning point. His government had a pro-Western stance, which was against Robert Mugabe's authoritarian regime in Zimbabwe. This divergence in political ideology created a rift, due to differing governance styles and political priorities fostered misunderstandings and tensions between the two states [4].

The assertion of [3] portray that, the regional interventions between 2008-2017 by SADC and AU interventions in Zimbabwe's political crisis affected Zambia's relations with its neighbour. The transition to the Second Republic from 2017 to date, birthed Zimbabwe's new leadership and foreign policy, bearing negatively on relations with Zambia. According to [5], Zimbabwe's Second Republic and its foreign policy seem to have betrayed mutual ties with Zambia due to diplomatic incidents and communication breakdowns embedded in public disagreements and diplomatic discord such as the expulsion of diplomats in post 2023 Zimbabwe's general elections. Differentiation to regional security; Zimbabwe's focus on military solutions to regional security challenges differed from Zambia's emphasis on diplomacy and cooperation. Further to that The Second Republic of Zimbabwe shifted from Pan-Africanism to nationalism by focusing on national interests over regional cooperation which led to perceptions of disengagement from SADC and AU initiatives. Recent studies by [6] and [7] established the impact of Zimbabwe's political transition on regional dynamics, hence the role of external actors like China and the United States, in shaping regional security dynamics has also impacted on the relationships between the two countries.

In reflecting the role of the SADC and Electoral Observations, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the regional block has been instrumental in mediating relations, particularly during electoral periods. As Emmerson Mnangagwa became president of Zimbabwe in 2017, the disputed Zimbabwean national elections of 2023 marked the strained relationships between

Zimbabwe-Zambia [8]. The appointment of Zambian politician Nevers Mumba as head of the SADC Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM) to Zimbabwe has been contentious. The mission faced criticism for perceived bias, especially from the Zimbabwean government, which accused Zambia for lacking impartiality during critical elections. The absence of a credible observer mission has further exacerbated tensions, leading to accusations of interference and undermining Zimbabwe's sovereignty [5].

The diplomatic tensions and public exchanges between two nations were exacerbated by critiquing flows of electoral processes. This resulted in public altercations between diplomats and government officials from both countries. The ZANU spokesperson, Christopher Mustvanga, has been vocal about perceived Zambian interference, often resulting in angry outbursts and diplomatic spats. These public altercations have polarised relations, with each country accusing the other of destabilising their political landscape. The situation has been described as a recipe for the disaster. Broadly, the deterioration of Zimbabwe-Zambia relations has implications for regional unity within SADC and AU [1]. Contrary to the preceding report, Mutsvanga argued that, "We have no quarrels with Zambia, it is a sister Republic of Zimbabwe. The people of Zambia love us, we also love them". Despite these assertions, tensions had already created divisions within SADC, complicating collective efforts to address regional challenges such as economic development and political stability [9].

Zimbabwe's economic crises led to transportation and trade disruptions hindering Zambia's access to vital ports and markets. Furthermore, long standing issues between the two nations, including Zimbabwe's land reform disputes, and disagreements over shared electricity and water resources, have strained their historically cordial relations [8]. As established in [10], despite the prevailing tensions, there were potential avenues for reconciliation which can be achieved through diplomatic engagement, shared economic interests, regional cooperation initiatives and civic engagement. On the same view of diplomatic engagement, [9] reported that Zimbabwe pledged its confidence in continuing to maintain relationships with Zambia, as neighbours. Continuous dialogue facilitated by neutral parties could help mending relations rather than public confrontations. Through trade and infrastructure development, economic benefits can coerce common ground for cooperation. Through the encouragement of civil society organisations in both countries, they can foster grassroots connections which may ease political tensions and promote understanding. It is against this backdrop that this article argues that the diplomatic fallout between Zimbabwe and Zambia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has resulted in significant consequences for bilateral relations, regional stability, and integration, primarily due to the divergent foreign policy approaches and ideological variants between the two states.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The study employs dual Theoretical Framework (Realism and Constructivism) as tools to analyse the diplomatic fallout between Zimbabwe and Zambia during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The framework also acknowledges the interplay between power, interests, norms, and ideas in shaping bilateral relations. According to [11] Realism Theory refers to a tradition of analysis that stresses experiences states face to pursue a power politics of national interest, which emphasise the constraints on politics imposed by human egoism and the absence of international government, requiring the primacy in all political life of power and security. Realism theory enhances the understanding of how Zimbabwe's political transition and economic struggles affected its regional influence, leading to diplomatic fallout with Zambia. It also assumes that international cooperation is difficult to achieve and sustain due to conflicting state interests. In the case between Zimbabwe and Zambia, realism explains how both countries pursued their national interests, sometimes at the expense of bilateral relations. For security concerns, realism reflects how Zimbabwe's political instability and security challenges raised concerns for Zambia, contributing to diplomatic tensions. The theory also enshrines how Zimbabwe's Second Republic demonstrated increased autonomy in its foreign policy, sometimes at the expense of regional cooperation with Zambia. In defining Constructivism Theory as a social theory, [11] asserts that it is the significant aspect of international relations shaped by ideational factors which are collectively held beliefs that construct the interests and identities of actors. Constructivism enhanced the study to understand how norms and identities shaped diplomatic interactions between Zimbabwe and Zambia, influencing the fallout. Also, the differing perceptions and interpretations of events and policies contributed to diplomatic tensions. The interconnectedness of Realism and Constructivism theories have been reflected by the adopted document review methodology, which uncovered evidence of both realism for example., state interests, power dynamics and for constructivist examples the norms, ideas as well as discourse factors at play in the diplomatic fallout.

### 4. Methodology

The study employed qualitative document review methodology, in which [12] assert that it is an approach which involves systematically analyzing and interpreting documents to gain insights into a research question or phenomenon. In this regard, the methodology provides a comprehensive analysis of primary sources, including government statements, diplomatic correspondence, and media reports. The design enables researchers to find patterns and themes in the data, providing a detailed understanding of the diplomatic fallout and its implications for Zimbabwe-Zambia relations during Zimbabwe's Second Republic between 2023-2024. According to [13] the methodology has potential to examine with

in-depth analysis of primary sources, comprehensive coverage for researchers to analyse a wide range of documents to cover the topic under review. In terms of objectivity, it minimises researchers' biases, as the analysis is based on existing documents rather than personal experiences. However, limitations of document review are that the quality of documents assessed may impact the validity of the findings, access to certain literature may be difficult which affects the scope of the analysis. Also, documents to be assessed may lack context which researchers may end up basing on assumptions.

The document selection criteria were based on relevance to the research questions and topic, authentic and from credible sources, and must be from a period under the 21st century. The study used a triangulation for document analyses; the discourse analysis was employed for examining language and communication patterns that reflect diplomatic tension between two countries under review. The thematic and content analyses augmented the former by identifying and coding themes and sub-themes in the documents which are relevant to the topic and exclude material not relevant to the topic. By ensuring validity; through content validity, the use of primary sources ensured that the data was relevant and accurately reflected the diplomatic fallout and its consequences. With construct validity the adopted methodology allowed for an in-depth examination of the data, enabling the researcher to identify patterns and themes that accurately represent the geopolitical security dynamics. For reliability reasons, the methodology ensured consistency in data analysis and minimising researcher bias, and enabling other researchers to replicate the study and verify the findings.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

### 5.1. Causes of Diplomatic Fallout

The diplomatic relationship between Zimbabwe and Zambia had been through significant tension during the late Robert Mugabe era but mostly during Zimbabwe's Second Republic. The tensions were marked by a series of public disagreements, verbal spats, and diplomatic incidents. This period has witnessed a notable deterioration in relations, with far-reaching consequences for regional cooperation and political stability. Report news from [5] states that;

*'Relations between Zimbabwe and Zambia have been tense since Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema took office. The situation worsened after Nevers Mumba, head of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Electoral Observer Mission to Zimbabwe, declared Zimbabwe's August 23, 2023 elections neither free nor fair. This report was met with disapproval from some members of Zimbabwe's ruling party, Zanu-PF. President Hichilema, who has close ties with Zimbabwe's opposition leader Nelson Chamisa, appointed Mumba to the observer mission'*

The researchers observed that the appointment of Mumba

to the observer mission also influenced tension, because the move was perceived as an attempt to align with Zimbabwe's opposition and isolate the ruling ZANU-PF party, which was contrary to the Zimbabwe Liberation Movement's philosophy perpetuated since the late Robert Gabriel Mugabe's era. Though ZANU-PF was defeated in 2008, Mugabe declared that 'We are not going to give up our country for a mere X on a ballot. How can a ballpoint pen fight with a gun?' [14]

According to News Reporter, Thandiwe Garusa [15], President Emmerson Mnangagwa the Second Republic of Zimbabwe vowed not to relinquish power under any circumstances, claiming there was no way in which an opposition leader can rule Zimbabwe. As it was not enough, Emmerson Mnangagwa further declared that "ZANU-PF is the only party which has a history and a legacy for this country. We will not allow *zimbwasungata* (sellouts) to rule this country" [15]. However, these statements were widely condemned by opposition parties, civil society, and international observers, who viewed them as a threat to democracy and the electoral process in Zimbabwe.

News Reporter, Lenin Ndebele, reported that the final report by the SEOM to Zimbabwe, maintained that the polls fell short of regional and international standards. Given that report, clarification was made as a base for not accepting the results as credible. The allegation was that Zimbabwe's election has been glared by irregularities. This sparked an uproar from the government in Harare, which accused Zambia of harbouring a regime change agenda. The attack by Harare discredited the SEOM and its head, Nevers Mumba, a former Zambian vice-president, however, these could not sway the final report. The Zambian president Hakainde Hichilema, in his capacity as chairperson of the SADC troika on defence and politics, raised concern for the attack on the SEOM as undermining SADC's role [15].

On another point of conflict, [5] reported on 'Rift between Zimbabwe and Zambia deepens over geopolitical security'. This incident was reported as the Government of Zambia sought an official clarification from the government of Zimbabwe over comments made by The President of Republic of Zimbabwe that the security sector of Zambia is being heavily sponsored by the United States of America (USA). The reporter, Kester Kenn Klomegah, commented that the Zimbabwian President shared these statements with Russian President Vladimir on the sidelines of an investment summit in Russia [16]. Accordingly, the media [5] established that President Emmerson Mnangagwa claimed that the USA is consolidating its power in Zambia while isolating Zimbabwe, which means Zimbabwe becomes a victim of encirclement by Western power.

In Nyashadzashe Ndoro's report, Zambia has described the situation as "an unwanted attack on Zambia's sovereignty" Furthermore, Zambian government argued that the presence of a United State Africa Command (AFRICOM) office in Lusaka should not be viewed as a security threat in the region. Rather, AFRICOM office should be understood as instru-



mental at strengthening security structure and fostering greater cooperation in fighting transnational threats. This should be a testament to commitment to regional peace and stability [17, 18]. Due to this diplomatic fallout between two countries, Staff Reporter of [17] noted that Zambian government had officially appealed to the SADC and AU for assistance in resolving an escalating diplomatic dispute with its neighbour Zimbabwe. In [5], the Zimbabwean Statements against Zambia were damaging the spirit of unity and mutual respect that underpins our regional co-operation, hence SADC and AU are called to address this matter decisively and conclusively to preserve the integrity of the regional partnerships. The researchers observed that the idea of appealing to SADC and the AU signifies the complainant's desire for a regional approach to conflict resolution towards solidarity and mutual respect since the two organisations have a duty to facilitate peace and security among member states. This could also minimise chances for escalating tensions. Zambia's initiative is a critical stance to promote regional harmony and its unwavering commitment to its sovereignty. Above that the nation is expecting an intervention response in such complex diplomatic terrain.

## 5.2. Consequences of Diplomatic Fallout

A diplomatic fallout between Zimbabwe and Zambia could have multifaceted effects for both countries, the region, and the African continent. As established in news reports; [1], some potential consequences may be broader than what the two countries might be thinking about. The diplomatic tension can spill over from these two actors and affect regional co-operation and stability. As mediation actors try to intervene either side of the conflicting parties might remain unsatisfied with the decision. As established in [20, 21] geopolitical security is very critical so that trading relations are not to be disrupted which may highly impact on the economic activity and livelihoods. Since early 2000, when Zimbabwe's economy slumped, Zambia became the neighbour for informal traders and fertile for green pastures like South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique among others. Therefore, if this diplomatic tension remains unresolved economic trade might be grossly affected. Diplomatic fallout could also lead to economic sanctions, reduced investments, decreased tourism, affecting both countries' economies. As enshrined in the report by [22], the conflict has a bearing on regional security implications, potentially affecting the SADC and AU efforts to maintain peace and stability. As observed by the researchers, currently, there is intense fight between African Liberation Movements and the rising post-independent political parties in the Southern Africa region. According to [23] the liberation movements in all African countries were able to liberate African people from colonial masters. Nevertheless, history has shown that they failed to sustain power and deliver the needs of the people which leads to the emergence of post-independent political movements. As the former resist to

cede power conflicts escalate which is the case in Zimbabwe.

The article noted with great concern that international reputation for both countries could be tarnished, affecting their relationships with other nations and international organisations. This could be affirmed in the report by [24] that, a meeting between Zimbabwe and Russia presidents discussed West abandoning Zimbabwe while supporting its neighbours (Zambia and Malawi) very heavily. However, in the situation of diplomatic tensions, this can affect environmental cooperation and conservation efforts, affecting shared natural resources and ecosystems such as Kariba power generation as well as Vic-falls tourist resource. In terms of humanitarian crisis, this could reduce cooperation between two nations in issues such as refugee management, health pandemics, and food security [25]. It can also lead to security concerns, including border disputes, smuggling, and human trafficking. In this discourse the article suggested that it is crucial for both countries to settle their differences and maintain a strong cooperative relationship. Because of unresolved diplomatic relations between Zimbabwe and Zambia, reported that the 44<sup>th</sup> SADC summit held in Zimbabwe which was supposed to be attended by all regional Head of States, the Zambian president did not make but sent his representative for reasons best known by himself. The Zimbabwean media critiqued his attitude of isolating self because of his pettiness, inexperience, and puppetry stance.

Generally, researchers argue that the prevailing scenario of Zimbabwe-Zambia relationships is a reflection of strained diplomatic relations among the SADC counterparts. The situation seems to remain delicate, with Zimbabwe authorities believing Zambia's move to seek SADC mediation suggests a loss of faith in bilateral interaction. As both countries navigate this diplomatic fallout, finding common ground and resolving historical grievances will be crucial for regional stability.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of Zimbabwe-Zambia relations in the 21st century reveals a complex landscape shaped by historical legacies, political dynamics, and economic interdependencies. Despite facing various challenges, including governance issues and economic instability, both nations have demonstrated a capacity for resilience and adaptation. The interplay of these factors underscores the importance of fostering dialogue and cooperation to enhance bilateral relations and contribute to regional stability in Southern Africa.

## 7. Recommendations

For strengthening diplomatic engagement, both countries should promote diplomatic initiatives to enhance communication and trust, facilitating more effective collaboration on shared interests.

In order to sustain economic cooperation Zimbabwe and Zambia should continue with mutual trade agreements and

joint ventures to address economic challenges and promote sustainable development, benefiting both nations. Regional Integration Initiatives through SADC and the AU can provide platforms for addressing mutual concerns and fostering collective growth.

It is also of paramount importance for both nations to embark on cultural exchanges and educational programs that can deepen mutual understanding and strengthen ties between the citizens of both countries. To ameliorate governance challenges, both governments should work towards improving governance and addressing corruption to create a more conducive environment for cooperation and investment. Overall, by implementing these recommendations, Zimbabwe and Zambia can not only enhance their bilateral relations but also contribute positively to the overall stability and development of the Southern African region.

## Abbreviations

AFRICOM	United States Africa Command
AU	African Union
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SEOM	SADC Electoral Observation Mission
USA	United States of America
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union

## Authors Contributions

**Dorothy Goredema:** Writing – review & editing

**Joseph Muwanzi:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Writing – original draft

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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