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The Round Table

The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs and Policy Studies

ISSN: 0035-8533 (Print) 1474-029X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ctrt20

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To cite this article: Enock Ndawana (02 Jul 2025): China's security force assistance in Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe and its implications for peacebuilding, The Round Table, DOI: 10.1080/00358533.2025.2523980

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2025.2523980

Published online: 02 Jul 2025.

THE ROUND TABLE
https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2025.2523980

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China's security force assistance in Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe and its implications for peacebuilding

Enock Ndawana

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article examines the peacebuilding implications of Chinese military support to Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe. It is based on primary and secondary sources. The article mainly argues that China's security force assistance in Zimbabwe, premised on the security-development approach, shows that the country allows African agency in its international aid with both positive and negative consequences on peacebuilding. It found that Chinese security force assistance in Zimbabwe was in the form of arms and related technology transfers, and human resources and capacity development programmes. Although China's security force assistance in Zimbabwe has largely impinged on peacebuilding, it also supported it.

KEYWORDS

Peacebuilding; African agency; Zimbabwe; China; security-development nexus; security force assistance

Introduction

The role China plays in peacebuilding in Africa is not well understood. Chinese efforts towards peacebuilding in Africa, as in Asia, have been dubbed developmental peace because China primarily seeks to realise peace through development (Chung Wong, 2021; Wang, 2018). Scholars (Hanauer & Morris, 2014; Shinn, 2015) have discussed China's arms exports to sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and how China has cooperated with the African Union on security issues (Benabdallah, 2015; Sibiri, 2021). Little is known about the peacebuilding implications of Chinese security force assistance (SFA) in SSA, a gap this study seeks to fill using the case of Zimbabwe.

In this study, peacebuilding refers to the process of creating structures that eliminate the root causes of conflict at any stage of development (De Coning & Call, 2017, p. 1). The term peace is used in both the negative and positive sense (Galtung, 1964) because the Zimbabwean military and government in general tend to focus on negative peace (absence of direct violence and war), rather than positive peace (presence of conditions for political equality and social and economic justice) which the citizens desire. The term SFA denotes 'a donation in which all or most of the costs are borne by the provider and intended to enhance the military or coercive capacity of a recipient's security forces' (Carrozza & Marsh, 2022, p. 4). It 'involves providing arms, equipment, training, and

CONTACT Enock Ndawana ndawanaenock@yahoo.com; endawana@uj.ac.za

advice to allied and partner security forces with an aim to improve their coercive capacity and it is used as a tool to boost the capacity and quality of recipient states' coercive institutions' (Carrozza & Marsh, 2022, p. 2). In the context of this study, SFA means any form of military support China extended to Zimbabwe, targeting the improvement of its security forces, regardless of whether it was donated or exchanged for financial gain or any other resource. This conceptualisation is informed by the fact that, akin to many countries, information about security cooperation arrangements between China and Zimbabwe not only lacks transparency but is also a strongly guarded secret (Salman, 2025, p. 2).

Africa's significance as a market for SFA and the competition between China and other major powers, such as the United States of America (US), on the continent has grown (Carrozza & Marsh, 2022). Although the relationship between SFA and peacebuilding is contested, many scholars support the argument that the former produces human rights violations by reinforcing the state's capacity for violent coercion (Munoriyarwa, 2022; Sandholtz, 2016; Sullivan et al., 2020). There is no agreement among scholars on whether the military supports peacebuilding (Rigby, 2006; Woon, 2014). Similarly, scholars disagree on whether China's dealings in Africa promote peace (Carrozza, 2021; Conteh-Morgan & Weeks, 2016).

This study delves into China's SFA in Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe (1980–2017) and its impact on peacebuilding, motivated by two main reasons. First, regardless of their long history and strength, China–Zimbabwe military ties remain an under-researched area. Second, China's peacebuilding efforts differ from the liberal-inspired approach of traditional Western countries. This has resulted in China's role in peacebuilding in Africa not being well understood at a time when it is foolish for any discussion of African peace and security, politics, and economy to ignore the Beijing government's role. Therefore, this study also promotes a careful and better understanding of China's role in peacebuilding in Africa. The Zimbabwean case has been chosen because Zimbabwe is one of the African countries with a long history of receiving Chinese SFA dating back to its fight for independence from white rule (Carrozza & Marsh, 2022, p. 11). Still, there is a dearth of research on what this meant for peacebuilding in the recipient state post-independence. This study adds nuance to the SFA and peacebuilding scholarship and China–Africa relations. The latter confines debates about Chinese engagement in Africa to resource extraction and infrastructure development (e.g., Bagwandeen, 2022; Oqubay & Lin, 2019). Consequently, this study is relevant to African peacebuilding knowledge and policies and provides ideas for similar research in other countries.

The study sought to answer the question: How did China's military support affect peacebuilding in Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe? It argues that China's military support for Zimbabwe, premised on the security-development approach, shows that the country allows African agency in its international aid with both positive and negative consequences on peacebuilding. It demonstrates that, on the one hand, arms transfers strengthened the Zimbabwean state's coercive capacity, resulting in increased repression of the citizens. The human resources and capacity development programmes also exposed and socialised the Zimbabwean military personnel to the Chinese professional military education and values, resulting in the military being more inclined to support regime security at the expense of genuine state security. On the other hand, arms transfers and human resources and capacity development-related programmes assisted

and empowered the Zimbabwean military to be in a position to continue to meet the country's security provision needs. The article concludes that although China's military support for Zimbabwe has largely impinged on peacebuilding, it also supported it.

This article's analysis draws on four key informant interviews. The key informants were drawn from Zimbabwean military officials who comprise the military elite. According to Barnett (1967, p. 21), regular staff officer corps and staff and high command elements constitute military elites and wield decision-making power about the direction of a country's defence and security. Consequently, the military officers were deemed suitable for participation in this study based on their understanding of the bilateral ties that culminated in Chinese SFA in Zimbabwe, as well as their experience in Chinese-led military exchange programmes, and training in China and Zimbabwe, respectively. To overcome the challenge of relying on a small sample, I used accessible documentary sources, including published journal articles, reports of non-governmental organisations, books and private and public print and electronic media. The article begins by providing a literature review as its analytical framework. The discussion then briefly explains the nature of China–Zimbabwe relations before examining China's military support for Zimbabwe and its effects on peacebuilding.

China and peacebuilding in Africa

Before discussing China and peacebuilding in Africa, it is worth clarifying the concepts of negative peace and positive peace. On the one hand, negative peace refers to the absence of physical or direct violence and war, involving the massive killing of people by the military and other groups (Galtung & Fischer, 2013, p. 174). Negative peace is associated with social and political repression because it aligns with the 'realist view that peace is found whenever war or other direct forms of organised state violence are absent' (Barash & Webel, 2018, p. 38). On the other hand, positive peace refers to the presence of conditions for harmony, political equality and social and economic justice (Galtung, 1964, pp. 1–4). In other words, positive peace not only denotes 'a social condition in which exploitation is minimized or eliminated and in which there is neither overt violence nor the more subtle phenomenon of underlying structural violence' but also 'the continuing presence of an equitable and just social order as well as ecological harmony' (Barash & Webel, 2018, pp. 38–39). Accordingly, the absence of violent conflict does not necessarily mean the presence of desirable conditions for people to live meaningful lives. The latter can only be found in interactions consistent with positive peace, which is characterised by cooperation and structural integration of different groups of people.

Among the previous studies on Chinese peacebuilding in Africa (Kuo, 2020), Lina Benabdallah (2016) argues that China's military and diplomatic engagement in Africa is anchored in the security-development nexus. The security-development nexus refers to 'the belief that security and development are closely connected, and that security and development objectives should therefore be closely aligned and integrated' (Walton & Johnstone, 2024, p. 430). It is largely associated with liberal peace and combines two formerly different policy domains and engages diverse groups of individuals and organisations (Lemay-Hébert, 2013). Although the security-development nexus has roots in the Cold War, it became widespread in the post-Cold War era, mainly spurred by the

human security concept and its popularisation of the 'freedom from fear and want' concerns at the individual level (de Carvalho & Lima, 2023, pp. 108–109). As Sempijja and Letlhogile (2021, p. 45) observe, the major driving force behind the security-development nexus was that 'conditions of need and insecurity need to be collectively addressed as they are mutually reinforcing'. As a result, the need to eradicate poverty, prevent conflict and maintain peace and security have become central to both the United Nations 2030 agenda and organisations, such as the European Union, as well as major powers, including the US and the United Kingdom, based on the understanding that security and development are inextricably connected (de Carvalho & Lima, 2023, pp. -109–110; Sempijja & Letlhogile, 2021, p. 45). Despite that, some of the main criticisms against the security-development approach include the tendency for the objective to reduce poverty being hijacked by strategic and security goals and involving the armed forces in missions to which they are not suited, as was the case with the US's War on Terror campaign in many countries (de Carvalho & Lima, 2023, p. 109).

From the foregoing, one can say that China, akin to those countries and organisations that adhere to liberal peace approaches, subscribes to the idea that security is important in reducing poverty and improving people's welfare, which is impossible when there is insecurity. Therefore, China's military support to Africa, in general, can be seen as designed to promote peace and security through not only military arms and hardware supplies but also human resources and related capacity development programmes targeting the empowerment of African countries to be in charge of their security and economic needs (Benabdallah, 2016). This suggests that although Chinese SFA is designed to achieve negative peace at best, it also harbours strong positive peace possibilities. After all, both negative and positive peace are useful concepts that military leaders can use to advise policymakers and develop short-term and long-term strategies to promote sustainable peace (Shields, 2017). This study not only exposes the degree to which Chinese SFA in Zimbabwe was in sync with the Chinese security-development approach to peacebuilding. It also reveals the level of agency enjoyed by the recipient state's ruling and military elite and related consequences for the Chinese SFA's use against the Zimbabwean people's needs and aspirations hinged on the reduction of poverty and improvement of their welfare.

There are constraints to China's capacity to effectively work within the dominant liberal peacebuilding order with inbuilt provisions for protecting human rights and good governance in a recipient state (Jutersonke et al., 2021; Yuan, 2022). Liberal peacebuilding is premised on the idea that the achievement of sustainable peace in societies impacted by conflict depends on the execution of state-building initiatives and democratic standards by outside agents. These principles encompass the rule of law, multi-party democracy, free and fair elections, individual freedom, free market economy and security sector reform, which have been promoted as fundamental foundations for achieving peace (De Coning, 2018; Paris, 2010). The bases of liberal peacebuilding are strongly rooted in the security-development nexus, which as discussed above, combines two formerly different policy domains and engages diverse groups of individuals and organisations. For some scholars, such as Franks and Richmond (2008), liberal peace seeks to establish enduring peace by eliminating direct and structural violence and synchronising social, economic and political systems with a combination of liberal and neoliberal international benchmarks in an

interconnected world. Nevertheless, growing criticisms of the liberal peace paradigm point out its structured top-down approach and inability to ensure lasting peace, avert the recurrence of conflict, create structural stability and guard against exclusionary tendencies (Richmond, 2024). Consequently, China's strict adherence to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, which also guides its SFA practices in Africa, hamstrings it from reconfiguring a country's laws, norms and institutions that can regulate violent behaviour and arbitrary state practices (Barton, 2018).

Linked to this, critics argue that China's non-interference policy is part of its broader strategy to achieve its security and development objectives regardless of the human rights record of its partners. Strong Sino-African ties are consistent with the Chinese core objectives of creating 'a multipolar global order and new norms that advance its geostrategic, political and economic interests' (Diallo & Descamps, 2024, p. 2). Therefore, China, like all major powers, has long-term plans to use its diplomatic and military assets in Africa to project its power. For example, China's pressure has prevented many African states from recognising or dealing with Taiwan, in accordance with its one China policy (South African Institute of International Affairs, 2009, p. 20). Also worth noting is African countries' support for China at the United Nations, which has largely been driven by their close cooperation in the economic and security spheres (Muekalia, 2004; Yu, 2018). Besides, Africa has fulfilled China's need for natural resources, especially oil, gas and critical minerals, as well as markets for its goods and services (Chiyemura, 2024).

The link between SFA and peacebuilding remains contested. On the one hand, many studies support the idea that SFA produces a rise in human rights violations by reinforcing the state's capacity for violent coercion (Munoriyarwa, 2022; Salman, 2025; Sandholtz, 2016; Sullivan et al., 2020). On the other hand, research has also found that the socialisation of foreign troops to professional military education and democratic values through their exposure to such countries as the US decreases state-sponsored human rights abuses (Atkinson, 2014; Darden, 2019; Ruby & Gibler, 2010). Sullivan (2023, p. 467) has recently established that 'the impact of security assistance on state violence varies based on the type of assistance provided and the institutional environment in the recipient state'. The foregoing studies strengthen this article's analysis of the kind of socialisation and values Zimbabwean military officers learnt from their exposure to Chinese professional military education and how this, in turn, shaped peacebuilding in Zimbabwe. It reveals the impact of Chinese SFA on Zimbabwe's human rights, governance and peace.

Studies of China in Africa address it from different angles, from the peace and security implications of its economic engagements to its non-interference policy and conflict resolution (Berhe & Hongwu, 2013; Hodzi, 2019). Research on China–Zimbabwe relations mainly focuses on the benefits and limits of the ruling elite's agency in their economic engagements with China post-2000 (Chipaike & Bischoff, 2019; Lahtinen, 2018; Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018). How Zimbabwe holds agency in determining the SFA it receives from China and its effects on peacebuilding in the recipient state needs a better understanding to inform how best to minimise or promote those initiatives undermining or encouraging peace, especially positive peace.

Contemporary China–Zimbabwe relations: an overview

Contemporary China–Zimbabwe relations can be traced back to the 1960s when China was the chief sponsor of one of Zimbabwe's main liberation movements, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), in its fight against white colonialism and racial oppression (Taylor, 2007, p. 106). The People's Republic of China provided ZANU with much-needed military and strategic assistance (Martin & Phyllis, 1982), which assisted it in growing into a dominant liberation movement (Taylor, 2007, p. 108). What made ZANU turn to China was its failure to get support from the Soviet Union, which preferred the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). China's split with the Soviet Union also worked to ZANU's advantage as China became more interested and invested in supporting it against its rival's beneficiary, ZAPU (Chun, 2014, p. 6). Zimbabwe's military officers were methodically exposed to the Chinese political system and society through the military training they received from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) instructors in China, and at the numerous rear bases in neighbouring countries, such as Tanzania (Mazarire, 2017, pp. 87–101).

Again, the Chinese shared their revolutionary ideology and influence with ZANU's military wing, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) cadres and those of other African countries. This resulted in, among others, the PLA's military structure being adopted by ZANLA and other liberation movements. As Paul Nantulya (2023, p. 6) notes, 'The high command included a commander, chief political commissar, chief of staff, functional directors, and regional commanders'. ZANLA's military strategy was fundamentally transformed from conventional military tactics to the Maoist model, which involved mass mobilisation of the population, primarily owing to Chinese tutelage (Lan, 1985, pp. 127–188). There is no doubt that the basis for the present relationship between China and Zimbabwe under the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), even after its leadership change in 2017, was laid during the 1960s when the former supported the latter's fight for national liberation.

When Zimbabwe officially gained independence in April 1980, Mugabe became Prime Minister after winning an election. According to Zhang Chun (2014, p. 6), Mugabe's government started 'as a vaguely social democratic one-party dictatorship and he promptly established official relations with China'. Still, Mugabe only rhetorically referred to socialism. In practice, he accepted and continued Zimbabwe's integration 'into the global financial and capitalist system' (Chun, 2014, p. 6). Soon after independence, Mugabe and his government officials travelled to China to thank the country for the support it had rendered for Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. Between 1980 and 1999, Zimbabwe's relations with China remained cordial, even though the close political dealings did not translate into greater economic cooperation. Although China extended some loans to Zimbabwe and was invited to do some construction work, the latter was more inclined to the West, which provided substantial aid (Taylor, 2020, pp. 7–8). In fulfilment of their cordial relations, Zimbabwe supported China in the face of the Tiananmen Square controversy in 1989, which dented China's global image but further strengthened its ties with Zimbabwe (Chun, 2014, p. 7). Still, it is noteworthy that in the 1980s China's major benefactor, North Korea, which had also supported Zimbabwe's fight for independence from white rule, played an important role in training the notorious Fifth Brigade that Mugabe used to suppress the Matabeleland disturbances (*Gukurahundi*)

(Choi & Jeong, 2017). The resultant heinous human rights violations committed by Mugabe and the Fifth Brigade during the *Gukurahundi* against ZAPU politicians and supporters were wilfully disregarded by Western countries, especially Britain and the United States, based on their Cold War calculations and strategic interests in Zimbabwe (Cameron, 2018).

The relationship between China and Zimbabwe grew stronger after the early 2000s when President Mugabe adopted the 'Look East Policy' in the face of economic sanctions imposed by the West. Zimbabwe's fast-track land reform programme, which was accompanied by violence and human rights abuses that also marred elections, prompted Western sanctions (Grebe, 2010, pp. 8–10). Zimbabwe's 'Look East Policy' coincided with the establishment of China's Africa re-engagement policy, the Forum on Africa-China Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, which further cemented the relationship between the two countries. On its part, FOCAC was created as a 'platform to cement and expand its[Chinese] political and economic ties with African countries' (Chun, 2014, p. 8). Among other developments, Zimbabwe obtained an array of benefits from China economically and diplomatically (Lahtinen, 2018; Wuthnow, 2013) while China gained preferential business opportunities and contracts in Zimbabwe, ranging from retail and agriculture to mining (Mhandara & Chipaike, 2013, pp. 212–218). China–Zimbabwe relations include military exchanges, which, as shown in the following discussion, go beyond arms transfers to involve human resources and capacity development-related programmes. Chinese military support for Zimbabwe emerges as an essential element of the strong relations between the two countries, with far-reaching consequences for peace, considering that the Zimbabwean military remains a prominent political player (Ndawana, 2020).

Chinese military support for Zimbabwe and peacebuilding

Arms and related technology transfers

China is Zimbabwe's dominant supplier of arms and related technology, which have largely adversely affected peace and governance in the country. Between 2000 and 2018, Zimbabwe acquired over 90% of its military equipment from China (Nantulya, 2023, p. 15). For example, in 2004, the Zimbabwean government bought new military equipment from China at a cost of US$240 million. This was delivered in 2006 in two batches (Muleya, 2006) and included '12 fighter jets and 100 military vehicles' (Staff Reporter, 2004). The 'new military [K-8] aircraft [was] for training and combat' (Muleya, 2006). In 2011, Zimbabwe imported 20,000 rifles from China (Mariani, 2021, p. 20). The same year also saw Zimbabwe receiving '21 000 pairs of handcuffs and 12–15 military trucks' (Chun, 2014, p. 13).

The anti-peace, particularly positive peace, consequences of Chinese military support for Zimbabwe have been palpable in the continued transfer of arms to the country, regardless of human rights conditions. Western countries not only stopped extending military assistance and arms sales to the Zimbabwean government. They also imposed sanctions on the country's ruling elite and top security personnel in an effort to halt human rights violations since the early 2000s (Grebe, 2010, pp. 11–12). Chinese military support for Zimbabwe was essentially pro-

negative peace and anti-positive peace in that it strengthened the state's coercive capacity to repress its citizens. For example, in 2005, some civil society groups criticised China's support for Zimbabwe, noting that it was solely the Chinese who were ready to help ZANU–PF stay in power against the desires of the people. The Chinese support for Zimbabwe at a time when the government was becoming increasingly authoritarian was seen as a result of China's disregard for democracy and related human rights, and Beijing's preoccupation with controlling its citizens (Sokwanele Special Report, 2005).

The foregoing accusation was laid bare in 2008 when China supplied an assortment of military equipment to Zimbabwe, ranging from AK-47 assault rifles and ammunition to mortars and rocket-propelled grenades at a time when state-sponsored human rights abuses and violence were on the rise (Beresford, 2008; Dugger, 2008). One key informant's emphasis on the need to separate Chinese SFA from how it is used in Zimbabwe is consequently impractical.[1] There is no doubt that Chinese military support for Zimbabwe negatively impacted peacebuilding because of the political environment in the country, which was primarily characterised by a predilection towards increased militarised, electoral authoritarianism (Masunungure, 2011). In 2008, there were no remaining doubts that Chinese security assistance in Zimbabwe increased state-sponsored human rights abuses. A key informant intimated that 'with an assured supply of military hardware, the government felt no pressure to force it to accommodate the opposition and do better in upholding democratic tenets'.[2] As Mhandara and Chipaike (2013) observed, China's disregard for good governance and human rights concerns contributed immensely to the entrenchment of authoritarianism in Zimbabwe. Indeed, Chinese arms transfers to Zimbabwe support the Beijing government's reputation for supplying 'rogue aid' as it has been the major supplier of Zimbabwe's weapons needs. Major powers, such as the US, also allow or facilitate arms transfer to 'rogue' regimes, that is, non-democratic countries and those with a bad record of human rights (Hendrix, 2020).

Issues of good governance are not part of the Chinese activities abroad, which have far-reaching implications for positive peace. This is why China exchanged its small arms for ivory from Zimbabwe in the early 2000s, at a time when the international community, through the International Trade in Wild Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES), was opposed to the country's sale of its ivory (Taylor, 2020, p. 13). Consequently, China's donation of weaponry, and permitting or facilitating the sale of arms to Zimbabwe, where the government was accused of abusing human rights, was largely anti-positive peace.

In addition, China's military support for Zimbabwe also included the transfer of surveillance technology and radio jamming technology. For example, in 2005, it was rumoured that China traded to 'Zimbabwe's internal-security apparatus water cannons to subdue protesters and bugging equipment to monitor cell phone networks' (Taylor, 2008). During the same year, China also allegedly delivered a military-strength radio jamming device to the Zimbabwean government. This was 'used to block broadcasts of anti-government reports from independent media outlets during the 2005 parliamentary election campaign' (Edinger & Burke, 2008, p. 4). The anti-positive peace consequences of using the radio jamming equipment rested in undermining press freedom. As Reporters Without Borders commented about the radio jamming equipment, 'Thanks to support from China, which exports its repressive expertise, Robert Mugabe's

government has yet again just proved itself to be one of the most active predators of press freedom' (McLaughlin, 2005).

For its part, Chinese surveillance technology that has found its way to Zimbabwe has been used by the military to ensure ZANU-PF's political survival through increased repression and control. As Allen Munoriyarwa (2022, p. 456) asserts, the military-driven 'surveillance [in Zimbabwe] provides gateways for human rights abuses and shrinks the civilian spaces of protest and engagement, leading to digital authoritarianism'. This makes Zimbabwe a good case study for demonstrating how militarisation undermines state capacity to provide human security (Ndawana & Nganje, 2024). Consequently, Chinese surveillance technology has reinforced the coercive capacity of the Zimbabwean state, strengthening negative peace and undermining positive peace.

China's military support for Zimbabwe has undermined peacebuilding, especially the positive peace dimension. This is because China's arms transfers to Zimbabwe came at a huge cost to the Zimbabwean people. For example, in 2006, the Zimbabwean military allegedly received arms from China in exchange for chromium mining concessions. This involved the Zimbabwe Minerals Development Corporation, the Zimbabwe Defence Industries and a Chinese state-owned weapons manufacturer, Norinco International Corporation, which formed Wanbao Mining Zimbabwe. While Norinco held 60% of the shares, its Zimbabwean counterparts had 20% each (Brautigam, 2010; Hodzi et al., 2012, pp. 88–89). There were also allegations that diamonds from Chiadzwa in Marange were bartered for military hardware, which was important to guarantee that ZANU-PF and Mugabe stayed in power through the repression of opposition political parties (Malone, 2010). As Towriss (2013, pp. 111–113) observes, the beneficiaries of the diamonds-for-arms deal were Zimbabwe's military elites and the Chinese. Because of the lack of transparency regarding the diamonds-for- arms deal, it remained unclear whether the PLA mined the diamonds upon being hired by the Zimbabwean military, or the latter and local miners mined the diamonds under the supervision of the PLA, which were subsequently airlifted to China. Similarly, the secretive nature of the diamonds – arms deal meant few details are available of the military hardware delivered by the Chinese. Without confirming the quantity of the arms, a military source only indicated that Zimbabwe received military hardware in the form of guns, vehicles and bomb materials (Towriss, 2013, pp. 112–113). In light of this, one can say that most of the economic activities and deals involving the Zimbabwean military and Chinese-linked companies, including those that supply arms like Norinco, have generally been anti-positive peace.

Some observations from critical Zimbabwean civil society associations support the foregoing line of argument. For example, one civil society organisation commented that

> China is no longer the champion of African 'liberation' or even of African development . . . The political deals serve their own interests first, the ZANU-PF elite second, and the Zimbabwean people not at all. ZANU-PF seems to think that the Chinese will rescue them and the economy. It's possible that they will, but not in the name of sovereignty, not in the name of development and certainly not in the name of democratic progress. (Sokwanele Special Report, 2005)

Indeed, implementing the China–Zimbabwe politico-business deals did not lead to the country's economic development, and some later collapsed due to differences on

how best the deals should be implemented (Chikono, 2023). What is more, the anti-development nature of Chinese military support for Zimbabwe rested in the mortgaging of Zimbabwean resources for short-term benefits for the elite, while the people's misery deepened. This suggests that the Chinese SFA in Zimbabwe has not reduced poverty and improved people's welfare, regardless of anchoring it in the security-development nexus.

Still, the Chinese arms transfers to Zimbabwe also brought some benefits for negative peace. China's arming and training of Zimbabwe's armed forces was seen, from the government's point of view, as necessary for the country to continue to have security forces capable of discharging their mandate by detecting and thwarting security threats from both internal and external forces.[3] For instance, in 2006, President Mugabe openly noted that turning against the government was risky. This is because '[t]he defence forces have benefited from [the] government's Look East policy, through which they have not only acquired new equipment but also learned new military strategies' (Dzirutwe, 2006). A key informant also indicated that 'Chinese military support through arms transfers has been and remains very important for Zimbabwe's efforts to modernise its security forces'.[4]

Furthermore, Chinese SFA in Zimbabwe was meant to strengthen the country's security forces. In support of this, Chun (2014, p. 13) observed that '[t]he role that China has played in improving and maintaining the efficiency of the Zimbabwean Defence Force[s] cannot be underestimated, especially during Zimbabwe's international isolation'. In light of this, regardless of Zimbabwe's strategic importance in China's efforts to spread its influence on the African continent, it is clear that Beijing remains a key ally for Harare to have an army with some modicum of functional and efficient military equipment to meet its security provision needs in the face of international isolation, especially by Western countries. For that reason, the opportunities presented by China in security cooperation have gone a long way in allowing Zimbabwe to bust the targeted sanctions (Grebe, 2010, p. 21).

Human resources and capacity development-related programmes

Apart from arms and related technology transfers, human resources and capacity development-related programmes through personnel exchange and training also form a key element of Chinese military support for Zimbabwe. According to Chun (2014, p. 13), '[t]here are frequent training courses at the People's Liberation Army's National Defence University for Zimbabwean military officials, and Chinese military officials present courses at Zimbabwe's National Defence College'. A WikiLeaks (2003) cable also notes that '[t]he two countries frequently exchange senior-level visits by military delegations, and China regularly sends technical military advisors to work with their Zimbabwean counterparts. Zimbabwe sends significant numbers of military officers to Chinese training courses each year'. All the key informants also concurred with the foregoing and emphasised that Zimbabwe's military personnel go to China for advanced military training in different designated areas of expertise.

A key informant noted that Zimbabwean military personnel who went to China for training after 2000 learned from the Chinese ideological orientation about the indivisibility between the party and military, which extends to the state. This results in Chinese

military programmes feeding into national programmes and state activities that are attended by all service personnel involved in propagating party slogans. The key informant also intimated that

> The Chinese have extensive political structures within their military, as political personnel educate their soldiers on party and country politics. Zimbabwean officers also learnt that civil-military relations officers, who are members of the military rather than political party officials, teach soldiers about party and country politics.[5]

The foregoing exposé reveals some continuity of Chinese influence on the contemporary Zimbabwean military, akin to the older generation of military officers trained for the fight for Zimbabwe's liberation from white rule.

The above perspective is also buttressed by documentary evidence. For example, according to Nantulya (2023, p. 1), the many dialogues and military exchange programmes conducted by the PLA every year with African military officers, under the rubric of professional military education, target 'accomplishing Beijing's political and ideological goals'. Through its professional military education, China's education and training of external military personnel represents an occasion to encourage Beijing's governance model to advance closer ties with African militaries and governments and to construct a shared understanding of security. Therefore, Chinese professional military education is rooted within a larger agenda designed to produce political backing 'through party-to-party work, assistance in building infrastructure, and multifaceted soft power campaigns' (Nantulya, 2023, p. 1). Considering that Zimbabwe has experienced this kind of relationship with China, which appears to be beneficial primarily to China, the ruling elite and high-ranking military officials, one can argue that Chinese military support for Harare through professional military education did not promote positive peace.

The foregoing is further reinforced by the fact that exposure to Chinese professional military education and values socialises Zimbabwean military officers, akin to other African military officers, to regime security inclinations, rather than genuine national security which reinforces human security through upholding democratic values and related professional military conduct. It is no secret that the PLA 'is the army of the Communist Party of China (CPC) – not an entity separate from the party'. Its mission goes beyond fighting and extends to 'carrying out political and revolutionary tasks' (Nantulya, 2023, p. 3). Consequently, many Zimbabwean scholars (for example, Hove, 2017; Masunungure, 2011; Ndawana, 2020) have criticised the Zimbabwean security forces for being partisan and prepared to do anything to ensure ZANU-PF's continued rule with far-reaching consequences for peace and stability in the country, without discussing the extent to which the Chinese influenced them. I argue that China's influence on Zimbabwe's military officers did not end during the liberation struggle when ZANLA guerrillas carried out political and revolutionary work on behalf of ZANU. China's influence on Zimbabwe's military resumed in the 2000s through its professional military education programmes with negative consequences for peace, human rights and governance, especially considering the security forces' history of interfering in the country's electoral processes. This is the case even though, after the country's independence in 1980, the British oversaw the creation and professional training of the new Zimbabwean national army by integrating the Zimbabwe-Rhodesian Security Forces

with the two guerrilla armies, ZANLA and Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) (Young, 1997).

The construction of the National Defence College (Zimbabwe National Defence University since 2017), officially opened in 2012, was a major human resources and capacity development programme. There have been mixed views on its peacebuilding implications. It was constructed for US$98 million paid from proceeds from the diamond mining sector (Voice of America, 2011). For the ZANU-PF government, military institutions were a necessity: they were needed to improve the efficiency of the intelligence, defence and security systems through expert training (Chivara, 2013). As President Mugabe put it,

> [t]he theme that preoccupies any national defence college is that of national security aptly defined as 'defence against challenges to a nation's vital interests'. In this regard, both military and civilian officials share the platform availed by the National Defence College to study national security. (Mashininga, 2012)

This means that if the concerns about the role of a military academy in an increasingly authoritarian state (Mashininga, 2012) are put aside, we can argue that the advanced military training at the Zimbabwe National Defence University is meant to improve the security forces' efficiency in ensuring national security thus promoting peace in the long run. This perspective is supported by Robert Rotberg's (2003, p. 3) observation that 'the supply of security, especially human security', is the most critical political good every state should provide its citizens. He adds, '[t]he delivery of a range of other desirable political goods becomes possible when a reasonable measure of security has been sustained' (Rotberg, 2003, p. 3).

On the other hand, opposition political parties and civil society raised several concerns about the military academy. These included concerns that the payment for the construction of the institution itself with diamond proceeds was unfair to the country and not a priority at a time when there were other pressing issues. This included financing education and healthcare and improving the conditions of service for the entire civil service (Mashininga, 2012). Again, the military institution was primarily beneficial to China, ZANU-PF and the military elite. This is because of the latter's long history of participating in partisan politics in support of ZANU-PF's continuance in power and related benefits for China and the local military elite (Westcott & George, 2017). The deal was also seen as mainly beneficial to China partly because its company, Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Company, not only built the academy but also sourced and used building materials from China and employed Chinese key personnel (Hodzi et al., 2012, p. 89). This dovetails with Chiyemura's (2024) observation that even though this is not identical to Western countries tied aid, China also conditions its development assistance by prescribing the employment of Chinese companies, adherence to the 'One China' policy, and using Chinese technology and services. In addition, a key informant intimated that 'Zimbabwe is yet to be clear about its vital interests owing to the polarisation of society based on partisan politics'.[6] This makes it difficult for the security forces' activities to be seen as consistent with genuine national security aspirations. Instead, the activities of the Zimbabwe security forces are considered to be in line with those of the ruling party, which assigns them tasks regardless of the degree to which the assignments are constitutional or not.

Still, what cannot be denied is that Chinese military support for Zimbabwe represents a key avenue through which the Zimbabwean state has demonstrated its agency rather than solely being the passive recipient of China's aid. Regardless of criticisms of the terms of the deal to construct the state-of-the-art military institution, there is no doubt that Zimbabwe needed a National Defence University and got it at the terms negotiated by ZANU-PF officials and military elite. This confirms Jeremy Youde's (2007) observation that Zimbabwe's relations with China have been inspired by pragmatism, in which the former benefitted immensely from the latter by getting what ZANU-PF desperately needed in the face of Western economic sanctions. Of course, critics point out that strengthening ties between Zimbabwe and China has primarily benefitted the political elite and high-ranking military officials at the expense of the interests of the broader citizenry (Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018). It cannot be ignored that the human resources and related capacity development programmes China has extended to Zimbabwe have gone a long way in empowering the country to be in charge of its security and economic needs. As a key informant noted,

> The military exchange programmes positively impacted the skills development of Zimbabwe's security forces. The morale of military officers who could participate in the military exchange programmes was heightened. The operational effectiveness of Zimbabwe's security forces and war readiness were generally improved as a result of the Chinese military exchange programmes.[7]

Taken together, this study's findings on China's military support for Zimbabwe are consistent with several scholars who view increased military aid and arms transfer as anti-peace, especially positive peace, owing to human rights violations (eg Darden, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2020). There is no doubt that Chinese military aid and arms transfers to Zimbabwe have contributed to human rights violations, poor governance and human insecurity by reinforcing the state's capacity for violent coercion. Again, as argued by Sullivan (2023), Chinese SFA in Zimbabwe has negatively impacted peacebuilding because of the 'institutional environment', which is primarily characterised by a predilection towards increasingly militarised, electoral authoritarianism. Although anchored in the security-development nexus, Chinese military support for Zimbabwe in the Mugabe era failed to reduce poverty and improve welfare. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that Chinese military arms and hardware supplies, as well as human resources and related capacity development programmes, have gone a long way to empower the Zimbabwean military to meet the country's security needs, consistent with negative peace. Arms remain crucial for any government's capacity to defend its interests (Hendrix, 2020). Therefore, one can say that without Chinese military support, Zimbabwe's security forces were likely to be ill-equipped, ill-trained and could not provide the minimum security needs of the country.

Conclusion

This article complements studies on China–Africa relations and China's role in peacebuilding in Africa by discussing how Chinese military support affected peacebuilding in Zimbabwe between 1980 and 2017. It demonstrates that although China's military support for Zimbabwe under Mugabe largely impinged on peacebuilding, it also

supported it. On the one hand, arms transfers strengthened the Zimbabwe state's coercive capacity, resulting in increased repression of its citizens. The human resources and capacity development programmes also exposed and socialised the Zimbabwean security personnel to the Chinese professional military education and values, resulting in the military being inclined to support regime security at the expense of genuine state security. The study reveals that although Chinese SFA in Zimbabwe was anchored in the security-development nexus, it failed to reduce poverty and improve welfare. On the other hand, arms transfers and human resources and related capacity development programmes have assisted and empowered the Zimbabwean military's capacity to continue to meet the country's security provision needs. This means that the outcomes of China's military support for Zimbabwe and its implications for peacebuilding are unquestionably mixed. China's military support for Zimbabwe is anchored in the fledgling security-development nexus. It represents an alternative blueprint to the dominant liberal peace model and the rather simplistic depictions in the academic literature that confine debates about Chinese engagement in Africa to resource extraction and infrastructure development. Therefore, the pursuit of the security-development approach by China in the Zimbabwean context shows that the former allows African agency in its provision of international aid with both positive and negative implications on peacebuilding.

Notes

1. personal communication with Key Informant 3, 24 December 2023, Harare.
2. personal communication with Key Informant 2, 5 October 2023, Harare.
3. personal communication with Key Informant 1, 25 September 2023, Harare.
4. personal communication with Key Informant 3.
5. personal communication with Key Informant 4, 28 December 2023, Harare.
6. personal communication with Key Informant 3.
7. personal communication with Key Informant 2.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Enock Ndawana http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7159-2136

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