

The Not-so-Minor China Presence in Zimbabwe

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*Who stands to benefit from the recent military toppling of Mugabe in Zimbabwe? The military and his own party have “convinced” 93-year-old **Robert Mugabe** to surrender office after 37 years of iron-fisted rule over one of resource-rich Africa’s richest lands. Little discussed is the fact that the country holds some of the world’s most valuable mineral deposits and that China, USA, and former colonial power Britain all have their eyes on that wealth. The problem is that the US and Britain have soured their chances by years of severe economic sanctions, leaving China in a very positive position.*

The basic facts leading up to the military intervention are well documented. Mugabe’s ambitious wife, the 52-year-old **Grace Mugabe**, nicknamed “Gucci Grace” by her political opponents for her lavish lifestyle in one of the world’s poorest countries, apparently persuaded her husband to fire her main rival to succeed Mugabe as president. Days before the military intervened, on November 6, Mugabe fired **Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa**, his long-term ally since the war of independence from British rule, who went into exile in neighboring South Africa.

The Mugabe plan was reportedly to make his wife his successor as President. Mugabe’s two sons, **Robert Jr and Bellarmine Chatunga Mugabe**, and Grace Mugabe’s son by a previous marriage, **Russell Goreraza**, were also being positioned to take key posts in the Mugabe regime. All sons were notorious in the country for their [playboy lifestyle](#), sharing the lavish spending habits of their mother, Grace.

From public evidence, at that point **General Constantine Chiwenga**, commander of the Zimbabwe Defense Force and **Chris Mutsvangwa**, the head of the powerful War Veterans’ Association, in consultation with ousted Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa, moved to stop the machinations of Mugabe and wife and stage the putsch. The day Mugabe fired Mnangagwa, General Chiwenga was in China and was informed that Mugabe had ordered his arrest on his return. Through aid of loyal soldiers, he managed to get back to Harare to carry out the putsch on [November 12](#).

In a mostly bloodless operation Chiwenga ordered tanks to control key government buildings and the Harare airport, which in a touch of irony had just been renamed the Robert Mugabe International Airport on November 9. Chiwenga had support of the military and of internal security forces as well as leaders of Mugabe’s own ZANU-PF party. Mugabe and his family were put under house arrest. To prevent appearance of a coup which would draw sanctions from the African Union, the military spent six days of negotiations to get Mugabe out of office via public pressure, impeachment threats and hours of cajoling.

On November 21, Parliament interrupted impeachment proceedings to announce Mugabe had agreed to resign. Although under the Constitution of Zimbabwe Mugabe should be succeeded by **Vice President Phelekezela Mphoko**, a supporter of Grace Mugabe, ZANU-

PF chief whip Lovemore Matuke stated that former Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa, now party chairman, would be appointed as President which was done on [24 November](#).

British media reports that before moving to oust Mugabe, General Chiwenga informed Washington as well as [Beijing](#). What it did not report was the fact that several days before he ordered his tanks to surround Harare government buildings, General Constantine Chiwenga was in Beijing on a “routine visit,” where he met with senior Chinese military officials.

Notably, when Chiwenga returned to Zimbabwe and ordered the house arrest of Mugabe, the Chinese government responded with a non-committal statement that Beijing was “paying close attention to developments.” On November 17, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman **Geng Shuang** officially stated that,

“China’s friendly policy toward Zimbabwe will not change. We will continue to advance friendly cooperation with Zimbabwe in line with the principle of equality, reciprocity and win-win [cooperation](#).”

China is careful not to tie its economic relations abroad with US-style interventions into domestic affairs. In this case it would seem Beijing is interested in an orderly continuity of relations and was persuaded neither Mugabe nor his wife whom they had formerly regarded as likely successor, would be able to provide this. It’s clear the Chinese officials gave General Chiwenga the assurances that Geng Shuang made public days later. They would back the government of Zimbabwe, not side with Mugabe, even though a year earlier they indicated they would be willing to accept Grace Mugabe as successor. For China stability is sine qua non.

Washington and London Try to Gain

For its side, Washington has reacted with cautious optimism. The US State Department called for the post-Mugabe era to open the way for Zimbabwe to “rejoin the West” as before the 2000 US and EU sanctions. US State Department spokeswoman **Heather Nauert** called the Mugabe resignation “a historic opportunity” for the country’s people. She declared,

“The people of Zimbabwe have firmly voiced their desire for a new era to bring an end to Zimbabwe’s isolation and allow the country to rejoin the [international community](#).”

The CIA-tied “private democracy-promoting” NGO, National Endowment for Democracy wrote,

“there is nothing yet to suggest that Zimbabwe is about to undergo a substantive shift toward a more democratic and open society based on the full implementation of its 2013 [constitution](#)...”

Translated from the NED Orwell-esk, that “open society” means return to IMF austerity and US and UK economic domination.

Commenting on the developments and declaring Mugabe must leave, US Secretary of State

for Africa, **Donald Yamamoto** stated openly,

“The United States would discuss lifting multiple U.S. sanctions on Zimbabwe if it began enacting political and economic reforms.” He added, “Our position has always been that if they engage in the constitutional reforms, economic and political reforms, and move forward to protecting political space and the human rights, then we can start the dialogue on lifting [sanctions](#).”

Now we can be certain the full armamentarium of US “human rights” or fake democracy NGOs will try to reopen operations in Zimbabwe to bring the country fully into the camp of the IMF and World Bank and draw the country away from the deep ties to China.

London is also betting it can cut a better deal with Emmerson Mnangagwa in charge than with Mugabe as head of the former British colony. According to a Reuters report, hundreds of pages of documents from the Zimbabwe CIO intelligence agency state that Mnangagwa was in discussions with the British Ambassador, **Catriona Laing**, about leading a transitional government for five years with the tacit backing of some of Zimbabwe’s military. Mnangagwa reportedly was also in discussions with dispossessed white farmers about returning the lands forcibly taken from them in 2000 by Mugabe in a violent land redistribution that triggered western [sanctions](#).

In 2000 for a complexity of reasons, Mugabe approved radical land reforms that encouraged veterans from the fight for liberation to occupy some 4,000 white-owned commercial farms. At least 12 farmers were murdered. Most fled. They were replaced by Mugabe cronies and

inexperienced black farmers. The agriculture-based economy went into freefall. Before 2000, farming accounted for 40 percent of all exports. By 2010 it had dropped to just 3 percent. GDP almost halved from 1998 to 2008 and hyperinflation came as the central bank printed money endlessly in a vain effort to keep the economy [afloat](#).

In December 2001, the US Congress passed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA) and Zimbabwe was denied access to IMF and World Bank credit. The result of the West’s severe sanctions was dilapidated infrastructure, increased poverty, high unemployment, economic meltdown and hyperinflation.

In October 2015 in an attempt to regain access to western capital cut off by US and EU sanctions since 2001, Zimbabwe had agreed to the West’s so-called Lima Process.

The Lima Process called for the Zimbabwe government to pay off some \$1.8 billion in arrears to the World Bank, IMF and African Development Bank as precondition for getting a new \$2 billion IMF credit, hardly a game-changer for the embattled economy. As part of the deal Zimbabwe must agree to sharp cuts in the state budget deficit, and reduction of state sector employment, measures highly unpopular in the economically depressed country. By 2016, despite some small measures, Zimbabwe was clearly not going along with the US IMF measures. What intervened was China yuan [diplomacy](#).

A Chinese Carrot

In December, 2015, clearly realizing it was about to be eased out of Zimbabwe by the US and UK using the IMF, Beijing sweetened the game. It prepared a \$5 billion aid package independent of any IMF conditions. In July 2016 Zimbabwe’s Macro-Economic Planning and

Investment minister **Obert Mpofu** and Agriculture, Mechanization and Irrigation Development minister Joseph Made negotiated a deal with Beijing, giving Zimbabwe \$4 billion to improve agriculture productivity and \$1 billion for urban low-cost housing as well as US\$46 million for the construction of a new parliament building outside [Harare](#).

Now the stakes become high, with the USA and former colonial masters UK with the IMF and its “reforms” on the one side, and China on the other.

Zimbabwe is a treasure of untapped minerals. Under the British colonial era it was named Rhodesia after British miner and occultist of the Empire, Sir Cecil Rhodes.

China is today the key trade and investment partner of Zimbabwe.

Minerals Wealth Untapped

As a result of years of Western sanctions and hyperinflation as well as a ban on western investment, the country’s mining infrastructure is operating far under potential. The country is enormously rich in untapped minerals including copper, platinum, gold, diamonds and iron ore. Only five countries in the world, for example, produce platinum, a rare metal used among other places in catalytic converters for vehicles. The leading producers are South Africa and Russia. Zimbabwe is number [five](#). Total platinum reserves in Zimbabwe are estimated at 2.8 billion tons. Owing to lack of investment, only 2.4 million tons a year are mined.

Another major metal in Zimbabwe is chromite. Zimbabwe holds some 930 million tons of chromite, but is presently able to mine only 700,000 tons annually. The largest user of chromite ore today is China. Zimbabwe’s Great Dyke formation along with the Bushveld Complex in South Africa hold most of the world’s known chromite, the only ore of chromium suitable for making stainless steel, nichrome and superalloys used in jet engines. It is a strategic metal and one the USA produces [none of](#).

Zimbabwe holds the world’s largest diamond mine, mainly for industrial diamonds. Marange is currently ranked the largest diamond producing deposit on earth ranging over 300 square miles in Chiadzwa. In 2014 it produced 13% of world diamond [supply](#).

Two Chinese mining companies, Jinan Mining and Anjin Investments Ltd. were involved in Marange until Mugabe cancelled the mining licenses of Jinan and Anjin at the end of 2016 as he became increasingly incalculable. By 2017 there set in a complete chill in Mugabe relations with China. It clearly had more to do with economic desperation and politics than any Chinese behavior in the diamond area. This past August Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe ordered Zimbabwe platinum and chrome miners to surrender 80 percent of their export earnings to the central bank as a desperate move to restock dollar [reserves](#).

When Mugabe fired his Vice President, now his successor, Emmerson Mnangagwa, to prepare the way for his wife Grace to succeed him, Mnangagwa fled to South Africa in exile. From there he went to China for discussions in Beijing. The visit was organized by the influential head of the Association of War Veterans, Chris Mutsvangwa, former Zimbabwe Ambassador in [Beijing](#). In the 1960’s as a Marxist member of the anti-British XANU liberation army, Mnangagwa was in Beijing to study at the Chinese Communist Party’s Beijing School of Ideology. Mnangagwa is no stranger to China.

The junta around newly-installed President Emmerson Mnangagwa is not known in

Zimbabwe for their acts of Christian charity. In 1980 Mnangagwa was Minister of State Security during the Gukurahundi massacres in which up to 20, 000 mainly Ndebele civilians were killed. In his inauguration speech he spoke of compensation for disposed white farmers and of openness to rejoin with the world community, but offered few details. It is not at all clear if his rule heralds merely a face-change or genuine new policies to lift Zimbabwe, one of the most economically endowed lands in Africa, into prosperity. This remains to be seen.

Since 2014 Russia has also entered commercial negotiations with Zimbabwe, and neighboring South Africa is Zimbabwe's largest trading [partner](#).

China, Russia and South Africa are all members of the BRICS group which founded the BRICS Development Bank, able potentially to offer Zimbabwe investment for needed mining infrastructure. Now the real contest for the future of Zimbabwe begins in the post-Mugabe era. We soon will see who has the real attention of the new government.

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