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CHINA IN AFRICA

Beijing cools on Mugabe

By Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Andrew Small
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HARARE, Zimbabwe — The walls surrounding the Chinese Embassy in Harare are getting higher. "Extra security," our host explained nervously - and one small indicator that China's relationship with Zimbabwe is changing. Formerly a staunch supporter of President Robert Mugabe, Beijing has said conspicuously little about the current crisis in Zimbabwe, which started on March 11 when the government began a bloody crackdown on opposition leaders.

China, which once perceived the West's condemnation of Mugabe and sanctions against his regime as an economic opportunity, now views its involvement in Zimbabwe as a liability both for its investments and its international reputation.

Mugabe's "Look East" policy, announced in 2003, was followed by a flurry of loans, memorandums of understanding and weapons deals. It was supposed to herald a new alliance: China would gain access to Zimbabwe's mineral riches - chrome, gold and platinum - while providing Harare with financial and political backing that could help stymie the West's attempts to isolate Mugabe.

But in the last few months, Beijing's support has dropped almost as quickly as the value of the Zimbabwe dollar. In December, the Chinese government was already so irked with Mugabe's trumpeting of their relationship that it hauled in Zimbabwe's ambassador to Beijing for a dressing down, and soon afterwards dismissed suggestions that a \$2 billion loan was in the offing.

In a conspicuous snub, President Hu Jintao's trip to Africa in February included stops in virtually all of Zimbabwe's neighbors, but not even a stopover in Harare (the recent visit by Jia Qinglin of the Politburo was a paltry consolation prize).

Senior Chinese leaders had given prominent support to previous government crackdowns, including Mugabe's 2005 campaign to demolish the homes of hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans living in opposition strongholds. But the current crisis has Chinese diplomats in Harare confessing to their foreign counterparts that they are embarrassed to be associated with the regime.

Beijing's pullback was no great act of moral courage. China knows fully well that this is a dying regime. Although Mugabe announced that he will stand for re-election, factions in the ruling ZANU-PF party are feverishly planning for succession. Diplomats in Harare suggest that China has been carefully gathering intelligence and cultivating relationships to prepare for a post-Mugabe future.

For anyone who followed the money rather than the grand promises, the writing was already on the wall. Beijing has realized that, in a country facing what Chinese officials in

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Zimbabwe described to us as "the worst economic situation in the world," most loans and investments are money down the drain.

Zimbabwe's government has struggled to repay China for fighter jets it bought on credit in 2005. Multibillion dollar projects announced with great fanfare in sectors such as thermal-power generation have rarely taken off.

Officials of China's Ministry of Commerce have described recent efforts by the Zimbabwean government to encourage new investment in power stations, railways and coal mining as little more than a "headache." Chinese money has largely been focused in sectors such as tobacco, where returns are quick and exposure is low, and in positional investments, readying China to take advantage if the situation changes for the better.

Ordinary Zimbabweans have been complaining about working conditions in Chinese companies, the low quality of cheap Chinese imports and the destruction of jobs in Zimbabwe's small-scale manufacturing sector. Some are reported even to have attacked the property of Chinese expatriates.

While the financial prospects of China's relationship with Zimbabwe have dimmed, its costs to Beijing's reputation have increased. As China prioritizes its global image, boosts its leadership role and massages its relations with the West, it is increasingly clear that lending fulsome support to regimes such as Mugabe's is bad politics, with little payoff.

In a related change of heart, Chinese pressure on the Sudanese government has widely been seen as critical to its agreement last week to accept a UN force in Darfur.

These developments suggest that China's Africa policy is moving into a more mature phase. In its initial flush of enthusiasm following the vacuum left by the West and the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War, Beijing saw the continent as an investment opportunity and a giant repository of natural resources.

Now the risks of investing in failing economies and of supporting fragile regimes are becoming apparent. The fierce training of the international spotlight on China's behavior is also starting to yield results.

China is making increasingly pragmatic calculations about its involvement with regimes like Mugabe's, and it is finding that it's not in its interest to be the symbolic head of a coalition of despots.

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