

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

Center for Preventive Action

POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. 25

Date: August 9, 2012
From: John Campbell
Re: Zimbabwe: An Opportunity for Closer U.S.-South Africa Relations

As Zimbabwe moves closer to elections, the prospect for political violence, even civil war, grows. President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) are wrangling over a new constitution and the timing of upcoming elections. The eighty-eight-year-old Mugabe is suffering from cancer and wants elections soon to ensure his "liberation" legacy. At the same time, Mugabe-allied military factions, flush with off-the-books cash from Marange diamonds mined in the eastern part of the country, are mobilizing to stay in power when Mugabe dies. Political murder is on the upswing and Zimbabwe is as tense and divided now as it was during the run-up to the violent 2008 elections.

The United States wants a peaceful succession to Mugabe in Zimbabwe through credible elections. So, too, does Zimbabwe's southern neighbor, South Africa, which bore the brunt of the hundreds of thousands of Zimbabwean refugees who fled across the border from the 2008 violence. These shared interests create an opportunity for Washington and Pretoria to forge a partnership on Zimbabwe. If successful, it might improve the tone of the overall U.S.-South Africa relationship. The margins of the upcoming United Nations (UN) General Assembly provide an excellent venue for the United States and South Africa to hold high-level conversations about Zimbabwe.

ZIMBABWE'S ACCELERATING CRISIS

Developments in Zimbabwe are accelerating. The chief of staff of the Zimbabwe National Army says that the military will not allow a presidential candidate to assume office if he does not share President Mugabe's ZANU-PF "ideals." Mugabe's chief rival, Tsvangirai, and his MDC accuse the army of lowering its recruitment standards to incorporate ZANU-PF youth militias in anticipation of early elections. These militias could be the muscle to ensure a Mugabe win through violence and intimidation—a role they played in the last elections—especially if elections are soon. The finance minister, an MDC founder, is claiming credibly that government diamond revenue is bypassing him and going directly to the ZANU-PF-controlled ministry of defense. South Africa and the Southern African Development Community

(SADC), the relevant regional organization, brokered a power-sharing arrangement between ZANU-PF and MDC to end the bloodshed after the 2008 elections. That is falling apart as new elections approach.

If MDC wins the elections, whenever they are held, a military faction may try to seize power ostensibly on behalf of Mugabe if he is still living or invoke his legacy if he is dead. The MDC, possibly supported by other military factions, would resist, which could result in civil war, drawing in various party militias. Under such circumstances, South Africa would face renewed cross-border refugee flows for which it is ill prepared.

WASHINGTON AND PRETORIA'S DIPLOMATIC OPPORTUNITY

Washington and Pretoria should work together to solidify SADC support for a democratic transition. Already, there are strong ambassadors in both cities to facilitate a dialogue between the Obama and Zuma administrations on specific steps.

South African president Jacob Zuma's incentives should be strong to move in concert with the United States on Zimbabwe. Through SADC, he has been pushing Zimbabwe to defer the elections until necessary political and electoral reforms are implemented. Zuma's government has already threatened sanctions if Zimbabwe does not follow the SADC-sponsored sequence: a new Zimbabwean constitution approved by a referendum, followed by the compilation of a new voter roll. Only then could elections be held with international observers.

Moreover, in South Africa, popular resentment against Zimbabwean immigrants and refugees fleeing Mugabe's violence, who may number up to three million, has led to xenophobic outbreaks, tarnishing the country's international reputation as "the rainbow nation." Zimbabweans competing for jobs in South Africa cause domestic political problems for President Zuma and the governing African National Congress (ANC). (South Africa's unemployment rate is around 25 percent.) Former presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki saw Mugabe as a fellow colleague in the "liberation" struggle and too often looked the other way. Zuma, who defeated Mbeki for the party leadership, does not appear to have the same personal interest in maintaining close ties with Mugabe. Like many of his fellow South Africans, he would like the Zimbabweans to go home. That requires an end to the ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe. Under Zuma, South Africa has finally assumed the regional leadership role on Zimbabwe that Mandela and Mbeki often sidestepped.

Further, the South African population is favorably disposed toward the United States and especially President Barack Obama. A coordinated approach by the two countries to achieve a peaceful transition in Zimbabwe would be popular among South African voters. Zuma faces a serious challenge to his leadership at the ANC convention this December. Enhanced identification with Obama before then could strengthen his hand with party activists who do pay attention to public opinion.

A DIPLOMATIC STRATEGY

To forestall a repeat of the 2008 scenario by which Mugabe held on to office, the Obama and Zuma administrations together should insist to the Mugabe regime that Zimbabwe elections be free, fair, and credible. The Obama administration should encourage Zuma and SADC to blanket the country with election observers as part of that effort. It should encourage participation by American election observers. The administration should ask Zuma to mobilize SADC support for American election monitoring in the face of inevitable ZANU-PF objections. If ZANU-PF resorts to postelection violence, the United States and South Africa should discourage another power-sharing arrangement. Instead, the United States should urge Zuma and SADC to impose targeted sanctions on the ZANU-PF elites, including barring their travel to South Africa where many of them have houses, receive medical care, and shop for luxury goods.

U.S. sanctions should go at least as far as those of SADC. In advance of the elections, the United States should encourage Zuma to lead SADC contingency planning for a police action in Zimbabwe to curb postelection violence.

As events in Zimbabwe unfold, White House and State Department public statements should affirm U.S. support for SADC's approach and publicly praise South African leadership whenever there is an opportunity to do so. At the same time, the United States should regularly and publicly reiterate its support for constitutional and democratic processes in Zimbabwe.

Presidents Obama and Zuma should meet about Zimbabwe on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September. Subsequently, at an appropriate moment, a telephone conversation between the two presidents followed by a joint press release that focuses on Zimbabwe should signal the new, higher level of partnership. If Mugabe does call snap elections before Zimbabwe adopts a new constitution and other reforms, the United States should support Zuma and SADC leadership in its official statements, including for implementation of a sanctions regime.

Finally, the Obama administration should quietly signal now that if cooperation between South Africa and the United States over Zimbabwe's transition to constitutional democracy goes well, there should be a South African state visit to Washington to celebrate the closer relationship. The twentieth anniversary of South Africa's transition to nonracial democracy in 2014 would be an appropriate timeframe.

WHAT IF SOUTH AFRICA SAYS NO

Over the next few months, Zuma's focus will be on internal ANC politics, where Mugabe has many admirers. To many of the black poor in South Africa he remains a hero of the region's struggle against apartheid and white domination. Julius Malema, the expelled head of the ANC Youth League, is exploiting this sentiment in his struggle to topple Zuma at the December ANC convention. These domestic pressures may limit Zuma's ability to maneuver. Zuma may also be cautious about partnering with Washington because of uncertainty about the outcome of the U.S. presidential election.

Even if Zuma rebuffs, the Obama administration should insist on free and fair elections in Zimbabwe, impose a stricter sanctions regime if necessary on the Mugabe clique, and acknowledge SADC's lead role on southern Africa security. However, the United States should decline to endorse power-sharing as the means to buy off ZANU-PF violence, as SADC did in the past. The U.S. approach to Zimbabwe need not be closely coordinated with South Africa's, though it might largely parallel it. What a rebuff would lose is the opportunity to build a closer bilateral relationship by working together on an issue where the United States and South Africa have parallel interests. The Obama administration should quietly make that point to Zuma in Washington and Pretoria.

But Washington should burn no bridges. Beyond Zimbabwe, the United States needs closer ties with South Africa in the face of crises in eastern Congo, Rwanda, Sudan and South Sudan, Somalia, and the Horn. South Africa is now the only African country with the clout to partner with the United States on such African strategic issues. In the past, Nigeria played that role. But Abuja is currently facing multiple domestic crises, and President Goodluck Jonathan cannot be as diplomatically active as former president Olusegun Obasanjo. South Africa is the only realistic alternative to fill that void. There will be other opportunities to strengthen the ties between the United States and South Africa after the ANC convention, whether Zuma stays or goes.

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