

Solidarity to Strategy: Reviewing Commitments to Pan-Africanism and Regional Integration Post-1990s by Lusaka, Harare, and Pretoria Nexus

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Abstract

This study looks at how South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia approached their commitments to regional integration and Pan-Africanism since the 1990s. Using a qualitative, comparative desktop method and theme analysis, it explores how each country's political views, economic standing, diplomatic strategies, and historical heritage have shaped its roles and contributions in the Southern African region. While Zimbabwe has pursued symbolic and assertive activities like land reform and regional peacekeeping with varying results, Zambia has maintained a consistent, quiet diplomacy approach based on its backing from the liberation period, according to the studies interrogated. Although South Africa has pushed for institutional and economic unification through its post-apartheid influence, it still has an inconsistent foreign policy and regional engagement. Findings indicate that the three states have taken a variety of noteworthy but inconsistent actions, underscoring the need for further collaboration, strategic goal alignment, and further research into the long-term effects of their regional roles. This study argues that national priorities must be in line with common African objectives for regional integration to be successful.

Keywords: Pan-Africanism, Regional Integration, Diplomacy, Africa By Bus

1. INTRODUCTION

Pan-Africanism and regional integration have long been central pillars in Africa's pursuit of freedom, unity, and emancipation. Pan-Africanism is the ideological and political movement that seeks the unity and liberation of African people globally, has long been a target of both external and internal suppression (Adebajo, 2020). Moreover, according to Monyae and Nkala (2023), regional integration is a political and strategic process that aims to address colonial disunity and underdevelopment in Africa through cooperation, solidarity, and group effort. The 1990s are marked by the end of the Cold War, liberation of most African countries, but most importantly, the emergence of regional blocs in Africa and beyond. Although there has been a notable effort to write about Pan-Africanism and integration on a continental level, not much has been done on a regional level. The Lusaka, Harare, and Pretoria Nexus provides an excellent study base to review Pan-Africanism and regional integration post the 1990s. These three countries, although distinct, have interrelated trajectories marked by the quest for unity through liberation movements, radical policy moves, and vocal global standing. Thus, a comparative analysis of their efforts is crucial for understanding Pan-Africanism and regional integration. This paper seeks to understand how much and in what specific ways Zambia, in comparison to Zimbabwe and South Africa, has contributed to Pan-Africanism and regional integration since the 1990s. Through a desktop qualitative analysis, this paper will present its findings centered on the argument that while the Lusaka, Harare, and Pretoria Nexus have made remarkable contributions on these two pillars, the nature and extent of these contributions have been deeply influenced by each country's respective political ideologies, diplomatic strategies, the extent in which colonial legacies exist, and the level of economic development. Overall, highlighting the uneven efforts in advancing the Pan-Africanism and regional integration agenda.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, regional integration and Pan-Africanism have been central to Africa's political vision, while their implementation and expression have varied widely across national contexts. The African Union (AU) and the broader

ideological legacy of Pan-Africanism are often highlighted in continental studies, but regional interactions, particularly in Southern Africa, remain insufficiently studied. The contributions that South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia have made to the advancement of regional integration and Pan-Africanism since the 1990s are examined critically in this literature study. It uses the Lusaka–Harare–Pretoria relationship as a prism to understand how political ideologies, economic prowess, diplomatic strategies, and liberation history interact. The assessment highlights these governments' diverse and sometimes contradictory approaches to Pan-African ideals and regional responsibilities rather than treating them as homogeneous entities.

2.1 Zimbabwe: Radical Symbolism and Strategic Ambiguity

It is common to evaluate Zimbabwe's participation in Pan-Africanism following the 1990s from the standpoint of extreme decolonial symbolism. The most notable of these efforts is perhaps the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP), which was started in 2000. Some African leaders and scholars have hailed the program as a brave statement of economic independence and historical correction, even though Western governments and financial institutions have widely criticized it for its haphazard implementation and negative economic effects (Raftopoulos, 2009; African Union, 2003). According to Mamdani (2008), the FTLRP re-engaged citizenship and land in ways that mirrored broader Pan-African calls for fundamental transformation. In contrast to the neoliberal ideas that had become prevalent in African development discourse, Zimbabwe positioned itself as a pioneer in postcolonial resistance in this work.

This iconic Pan-Africanism has, however, been combined with tactical ambiguity. Officially, Zimbabwe's 1998 military engagement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) as part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) was portrayed as a commitment to regional peace and unity. It is questioned by scholars such as Rupiya (2002) and Hartzenberg and Maasdorp (1999) that the intervention was driven more by elite geopolitical plans and economic incentives than by Pan-African ideals. In addition to exposing the limits of regional consensus on security governance, the intervention put SADC relationships to the test.

Zimbabwe has maintained a consistent level of participation in regional organizations such as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and SADC. A willingness to participate in regional economic planning was demonstrated by the holding of the 34th SADC Summit in 2014 and support for the SADC Infrastructure Master Plan. Critics claim that Zimbabwe's standing as a regional leader has been harmed by its domestic unrest and contentious governance past. According to the literature, Zimbabwe's claimed commitment to Pan-Africanism and its patchy implementation clash, raising questions about the country's use of regional frameworks for internal legitimacy (Hartzenberg and Maasdorp, 1999).

2.2 Zambia: Foundational Solidarity and Normative Leadership

Zambia's heritage from the liberation era serves as a foundation for its influence on Pan-Africanism. Lusaka served as a haven for exiled political groups in the 1960s and 1970s, including South Africa's ANC and Zimbabwe's ZANU. This crucial unity, which is usually overlooked in popular narratives, made Zambia a moral leader in Southern Africa's decolonization operations (Chongo, 2024; Chongwe, 2024). Because of its symbolic support as well as the real and diplomatic risks it faced in resisting colonial and apartheid regimes, scholars have referred to Zambia as a "centre of decolonization."

Zambia adopted a quiet diplomacy policy after the 1990s, which was characterized by private mediation, reaching consensus, and purposefully avoiding public conflicts (Dlamini, 2003). During regional crises like Zimbabwe's political upheaval and the Democratic Republic of the Congo's electoral disputes, Zambia has been able to take on calming roles thanks to its diplomatic approach. Though less obvious than South Africa's institutional leadership or Zimbabwe's ideological aggressiveness, Zambia's nuanced diplomacy shows a normative commitment to Pan-African values of solidarity, dialogue, and respect for one another.

Zambia has consistently, but unremarkably, participated in regional integration. Zambia has consistently backed regional industrial expansion, infrastructure connectivity, and trade standardization as a member of SADC, COMESA,

and the East African Community (EAC). Zambia's role in supporting the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and promoting a consistent trade policy is highlighted by Edwards and Lawrence (2012). The North-South Corridor project, which aims to connect Southern and Eastern Africa with a network of highways and railroads, is an example of Zambia's infrastructure Pan-Africanism, which prioritizes connectedness above control (Foster and Dominguez, 2010).

However, Zambia's achievements are often ignored in popular narratives of regional leadership because of its little economic clout. Scholars such as Chongo (2024) argue that Zambia's moral leadership, which is based on historical unity and diplomatic restraint, offers an alternative Pan-African paradigm that deserves more recognition. This paradigm challenges the notion that regional leadership must be equivalent to economic or military might by emphasizing consensus over coercion and facilitation over assertion.

2.3 South Africa: Institutional Ambition and Contradictory Hegemony

The post-apartheid foreign policy of South Africa has been audacious and ambiguous. Incorporating democratic, human rights, and collective accountability principles into the AU's Constitutive Act, South Africa played a crucial role in the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) transformation into the African Union (AU) under President Thabo Mbeki (Mbeki, 2003; Sturman, 2004). Mbeki's "non-indifference" principle signalled a change from the OAU's traditional non-interference policy and the beginning of a new era of continental engagement. Gaining traction in global forums such as the G8, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), also led by South Africa, sought to link development assistance and governance reforms (De Waal, 2002; Sturman, 2004).

Contradictions have, however, plagued South Africa's leadership role in the region. South Africa's attitude was seen as a betrayal of regional solidarity by Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia who were particularly irritated by Mandela's opposition to military intervention in the DRC (Sturman, 2004). The fundamental Pan-African ideals that South Africa claims to uphold have been undermined by Mbeki's tactful diplomacy on Zimbabwe, especially

his alleged support for delaying an AU report on human rights violations.

The economic domination of South Africa is both a benefit and a drawback. South Africa is sometimes described as the “engine of growth” for Africa, accounting for over one-third of the continent’s GDP (Leistner, 1992). In addition to facilitating regional integration, its financial investments in retail, infrastructure, and finance have raised concerns about economic domination. According to Africa by Bus reflections (2024), Zambian academics have expressed concerns that South African investments exacerbate inequality rather than foster shared progress by undermining indigenous companies. Projects like Eskom’s regional power systems and the Lesotho Highlands Water Project demonstrate important contributions while also exposing the systemic inequalities that undermine South Africa’s position as a leader.

Particularly complex has been South Africa’s engagement with SADC. Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe opposed Mandela’s attempts to restructure the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence, and Security, underscoring the region’s deep mistrust (Landsberg, 2000; Sturman, 2004). These regional disputes contributed to Mbeki’s later turn toward the AU. South Africa’s dual role as the architect and protector of regional integration, according to researchers, calls for a closer look. Its internal problems (such as xenophobia), presumed hubris, and unequal human rights stance have undermined its Pan-African narrative, despite its obvious institutional objectives (Agaigbe and Akuraga, 2025).

2.4 Comparative Reflections and Thematic Tensions

The literature indicates that although all three nations have played a role in Pan-Africanism and regional integration, their approaches have been distinctly different. Zimbabwe’s strategy is ideologically daring yet institutionally unreliable. Its land reform and military actions illustrate a radical Pan-Africanism based on sovereignty and decolonization, but its internal volatility and disputed governance weaken its credibility in the region. In contrast, Zambia presents a model of ethical leadership rooted in historical unity and subtle diplomacy. Its contributions may be less apparent but arguably more reliable, focusing on facilitation

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rather than assertion. South Africa represents institutional aspirations and economic power, yet its leadership is complicated by inconsistencies between statements and actions, especially concerning human rights and regional fairness.

These differences represent more than just stylistic differences; they also reflect deeper tensions within the Pan-African movement. What does it mean to be a Pan-African participant in a region marked by disparate historical pathways, political conflicts, and economic inequality? Does regional integration require hegemonic leadership, or can it be achieved through consensus? In what ways may countries balance their regional obligations with their domestic agendas? While the literature does not offer definitive solutions, it does show that successful regional integration involves more than institutional frameworks; it also calls for mutual recognition, trust, and a shared vision for Africa’s future.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology, which describes how a certain research approach was

chosen and used. This study adopted a qualitative research approach, suitable for exploring and comparing the political, economic, and socio-cultural contributions of Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa to Pan-Africanism and regional integration since the 1990s. The qualitative research design allowed the researcher to interpret complex social and historical phenomena in depth across different national contexts. According to Merriam (2009) and Hennick et al. (2010), qualitative research is a broad term that embraces research methodologies that deal with phenomena by analysing experiences, behaviours, and relations without the use of statistics and mathematics and the processing of numerical data. Similarly, Goertz and Mahoney (2012) highlight that a researcher who follows a qualitative research approach observes, summarizes, describes, analyses, and interprets phenomena in their real dimension. A documentary analysis method will be employed to evaluate secondary data from a variety of sources, including books, scholarly journals, policy documents, government publications, and credible reports from institutions such as the African Union (AU), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and United Nations (UN).

3.1 Research Design

The study employed qualitative, comparative desktop design that involved systematically reviewing secondary sources to compare the contributions made by the three countries. This design allowed the identification of thematic similarities and differences across political, economic, and social dimensions.

3.2 Data Collection

“Data collection is a process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest, in an established systematic fashion, that enables one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes” (Creswell, 2014). This study used documentary analysis as a data collection method. The method was chosen due to this study relying on existing records, such as government documents, policy reports, journal articles, and publications by regional institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Moreover, this method is appropriate for a comparative and historical study as it allows examination of how

policy documents and scholarly sources reflect evolving commitments to Pan-Africanism and regional integration.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a qualitative method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is suitable for identifying and analysing patterns in large textual data sets. This approach was appropriate for this study because it enabled the researcher to identify recurring ideas, patterns, and contrasts across multiple documents from different countries. By comparing these patterns, the study was able to reveal both convergences and divergences in the three countries' approaches to Pan-Africanism and regional integration.

The analysis was directed by the primary research questions of the study, concentrating on the impact of each state's historical experiences, diplomatic strategies, and national priorities on their contributions to regional unity. In accordance with Braun and Clarke's six-step process, the researcher engaged with the data through thorough reading, developed initial codes, organized these into overarching themes, assessed and refined the themes for consistency, defined and labelled each theme, and created an analytical narrative that links the findings to the research objectives. The six interconnected steps established the basis of the study's analytical process, facilitating a structured and transparent interpretation of documentary evidence across the three national contexts.

In conclusion, this chapter clarified the methodology used in this study. A qualitative research approach was employed to examine political, economic, and sociocultural contributions by Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa to Pan-Africanism and regional integration in a non-numerical, interpretive way. The study employed a descriptive and interpretive design using documentary analysis as the primary method of data collection. Moreover, the study followed a thematic data analysis that provided a structured approach to identifying meaningful patterns in the data, ensuring coherence between the findings and the study's research questions. The following chapter presents key findings from this analysis.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents and analyses the findings of the study, which explored how South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia have contributed to Pan-Africanism and regional integration since the 1990s. The findings of the study were gathered through the use of thematic analysis used to analyse the obtained secondary data. These include policy documents from the African Union and Southern African Development Community, publications from government websites, and work from different scholars. In addition, the use of intriguing insights obtained from the 'Africa by bus's field experience will be included as discussions that occurred in Lusaka and Harare universities were impactful and contributed significantly.

The chosen data collection method made use of the document analysis form of method. The study observed and identified themes that persistently emerged and will further highlight discourses that exhibit how each of the states that were studied operationalise the principles and values of Pan-Africanism. Three major patterns were identified from the thematic coding process, and these include: the leadership from the political and diplomatic domains, the engagement between the economic domain and institutions, and the different and contradicting perspectives from the principles of Pan-Africanism and the interests of states. Therefore, the following section will discuss the themes identified, as it will illustrate these themes that emerged from the collected data and further demonstrate the approaches that were adopted by each state.

4.1 Political and Diplomatic Leadership

The findings illustrate that after apartheid, the position of being a dominant regional actor was taken by South Africa's political and diplomatic leadership. From the data collected, it was observed that continental governance reforms were advanced as the African Union (AU) was transformed from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) due to the role that was played by the SADC and AU. According to Bischoff (2020), democracy and stability within the African region were promoted by the state, South Africa, through the established initiative, which includes the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). However, the credibility of South Africa's Pan-Africanism

principles and values has been undermined, and the events that have occurred within the state further contribute to this notion. This is because it has been identified that the state is practicing "quiet diplomacy" towards the Zimbabwean state and encounters persistent xenophobic attacks (Agaigbe and Akuraga, 2025).

On the other hand, data obtained from speeches and policy records have shown that Pan-Africanism has been consistently perpetuated through active contribution by the diplomatic role of the Zambian state. Since it had gained its independence, the first state in doing so, the Zambian government aimed at advancing regional cooperation and emphasised the practice of peace through adopting "quiet diplomacy". The traits that have been identified, by thematic coding, from the state include conflict mediation, consensus resolution, and brought about neutrality. Thus, stabilisation has been emphasised and imposed by Zambia within SADC and the AU (Dlamini, 2003). Unlike the observed literature, which aims to only highlight the solidarity that was enforced during the liberation struggle period in Zambia, the data that has been analysed illustrates that the state's diplomatic identity remains defined by this legacy. This can be seen through actions that involve active participation in measures of peacebuilding and integration.

Furthermore, Ideological nationalism and assertive Pan-African ideals have been identified as a pattern within Zimbabwe's political approach, though the analysis from the obtained policy documents, speeches, and AU communiqués. Measures of assertion of African sovereignty and the reversion of colonial injustices were pursued, during the presidency of Robert Mugabe, through established policies such as the "Fast Track Land Reform Programme (2000) (Raftopoulos, 2009). In addition, the findings illustrate Zimbabwe's desire to defend the self-determination of African states through the state's involvement and participation in the missions of regional peacekeeping. For instance, this can be observed when Zimbabwe intervened in the crisis that occurred in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1998. Despite this, these actions embarked by the state evoked international criticism, further straining the relations within the region, highlighting tensions between regional cooperation and the imposition of ideologies by powerful states.

4.2 Economic and Institutional Engagement

The economic power of the South African state has been positioned as an imperative force that influences regional integration, as observed through the analysis of the documents from SADC and the AU. SADC and other regional institutions have been strengthened by the state's leadership measures within the development of infrastructure, energy, and the facilitation of trade relations and agreements (Nathan, 2016). Additionally, Zambian scholars have illustrated their apprehension of South Africa's dominance through the field discussions and evidence from the documents. Although South Africa has been acknowledged as a contributing force for integration through the state's actions of investments, mainly in infrastructure and retail, these scholars further emphasised that this established the notion of dependency, and local industries were crowded.

The findings on Zambia's involvement and contribution within the economic sector indicated that, despite the state's financial capacity being limited, they have illustrated a strong constitutional commitment. Zambia's participation within organisations such as SADC, COMESA, and African Continental Free Trade (AfCFTA) was highlighted, and further highlighted that the cross-border infrastructure was supported through the North-South Corridor, as the analysed documents obtained (Foster and Dominguez, 2010). The data has portrayed Zambia's approach, emphasising the state's contribution to the projects established within the region, further illustrating its cooperation.

Zimbabwe's economic participation has been inconsistent. Even though the country remains part of SADC and COMESA, policy reports show that its economic decline, sanctions, and governance challenges have weakened its actual contribution. Still, Zimbabwe continues to push for Pan-African economic independence, promoting self-reliance and resistance to Western control. These ideas, though often expressed more in rhetoric than practice, still hold strong symbolic meaning and reflect the country's long-standing commitment to sovereignty and African pride.

4.3 Contradictions and Comparative Insights

The analysis shows that while South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe all speak the language of

Pan-Africanism, how they live it out differs based on their political stability, economic position, and historical background. Three key contradictions stand out:

Rhetoric vs Practice: South Africa's leadership role is often undermined by internal policy inconsistencies. Zimbabwe's nationalist tone does not always match its economic capacity, while Zambia's quiet and diplomatic approach, though effective, often goes unnoticed.

Leadership vs Equality: South Africa's economic strength gives it influence but also creates tension, as its dominance challenges the idea of equal partnership among states.

Sovereignty vs Integration: Zimbabwe's focus on self-determination and Zambia's cautious diplomacy sometimes slows down progress toward deeper regional unity.

Overall, these contradictions show that while Pan-Africanism still holds power as an idea, its implementation remains uneven. The three countries continue to pursue the same dream, but their different realities make unity more of an ongoing effort than a shared achievement. The findings further reveal that Zambia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe each contribute uniquely to Southern Africa's regional project, yet their lack of policy coordination weakens the broader integration agenda. Zambia often provides moral and diplomatic balance, South Africa offers institutional and economic strength, while Zimbabwe represents ideological resilience. However, Zambia's peace-driven diplomacy tends to neutralise Zimbabwe's more confrontational tone, and South Africa's economic policies, depending on how they're implemented, can either strengthen or strain regional relationships.

4.4 Preminent: Zambia's Role

Zambia's influence stands out for its tone and substance. The document analysis points to its consistent push for collective decision-making, evident in SADC and AU communiqués. The idea of "quiet diplomacy," which emerged frequently in the data, captures Zambia's use of soft power as a tool for regional cohesion. Unlike South Africa's assertive leadership or Zimbabwe's ideological militancy, Zambia's approach focuses on mediation, partnership, and solidarity.

Insights from the Africa by Bus engagements reinforced this observation: academics and students in Lusaka often described Zambia not as a “power-broker” but as a “bridge-builder.” Despite its limited resources, Zambia’s continued engagement in continental affairs reflects a deep-rooted commitment to unity that values peace over prominence. This demonstrates that regional influence is not determined by economic power alone but by credibility and consistency in action.

4.5 Synthesis of Findings

The synthesis suggests that post-1990s Pan-Africanism in Southern Africa has evolved from liberation solidarity to strategic cooperation. South Africa leads through its institutional capacity, Zimbabwe through ideology, and Zambia through diplomatic balance. Yet, these efforts remain fragmented. The findings make it clear that uneven political will and resource gaps continue to undermine regional integration.

In essence, while South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia each represent different faces of Pan-Africanism, their collective strength is weakened by inconsistent commitment and a lack of mutual trust. Thematic evidence from reports and dialogues confirms that South Africa remains the institutional and economic leader, though its internal contradictions affect its legitimacy. Zambia continues to show principled, steady leadership rooted in diplomacy and advocacy for integration. Zimbabwe maintains ideological influence despite its declining economic standing. Together, they paint a picture of a region striving for unity yet still bound by competing national interests. The Lusaka, Harare, Pretoria nexus, therefore, captures both the promise and paradox of Pan-Africanism in the post-1990s era, where unity is celebrated in principle but inconsistently applied in practice.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

For Pan-Africanism to shift from aspiration to tangible progress, this paper recommends that these three states must move beyond rhetorical speeches to renewed political will towards Pan-Africanism and regional integration. Firstly, in order to maintain regional influence and leadership, South Africa must address its policy inconsistencies by aligning national priorities with regional and continental resolutions. Secondly,

while commendable, Zimbabwe needs to move beyond a nationalist standpoint by adopting Pan-African and regional integration to strengthen its economy and contribute to the broader regional agenda. Moreover, the quiet diplomacy attitude by Zambia seems to be working partially; this state needs to be more vocal and visible in the diplomatic arena. Furthermore, the paper recommends that the three states should respectively promote civic education on Pan-Africanism and regional integration by engaging grassroots communities on the importance of this subject. To harness this, the ability of technology to connect communities should be leveraged by creating online spaces where regional integration can take place and where Pan-Africanism becomes an identity that citizens proudly wear on digital platforms. Overall, the Lusaka, Harare, and Pretoria nexus needs to leverage each other’s abilities to amplify and contribute to regional integration and Pan-Africanism.

6. CONCLUSION

Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa have each contributed uniquely to Pan-Africanism and regional integration since the 1990s. Zambia’s historical role as a refugee camp created a culture of peace and neutrality, making it a quiet but effective stabilizer in regional affairs. Its support for infrastructure and trade demonstrates commitment, although limited resources necessitate a more strategic approach. Zimbabwe has played a symbolic

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and active role through land reform, regional peacekeeping, and participation in SADC and COMESA. Despite criticism, it remains a strong voice for sovereignty and African unity, acting as a counterweight to South Africa's influence. South Africa has led in institutional development and infrastructure, but inconsistencies in its foreign policy, particularly "quiet diplomacy"

towards Zimbabwe, have drawn mixed regional responses. While influential, it must better balance national interests with its Pan-African vision. Their combined efforts demonstrate both possibilities and difficulties. Regional integration may be strengthened by these nations' greater alignment and collaboration, but this will take political will and a shared strategic vision.

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