Zimbabwe's Future

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Discussant: Knox Chitiyo, Africa Director
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Alex Vines: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to Chatham House. My name is Alex Vines and I am the head of the Africa Programme here at Chatham House. I am very pleased to welcome you to this meeting on Zimbabwe's future.

I am very pleased today to welcome to Chatham House Michelle Gavin, the International Affairs Fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations. She has recently completed a study on Zimbabwe's future. The report is not published yet but she is going to give us some

insight into the report; it is completed and is just at the printer's. I am also doubly appreciative that she has come to the United Kingdom today. She has got a bad flu or cold that is just getting better, but more importantly she arrived on an airplane from New York this morning and she is back on an airplane back to New York this afternoon. She has come just for this meeting so I really would like to record my appreciation.

We have as a discussant, who probably needs no introduction to some of you, Knox Chitiyo, the Africa Director of the Royal United Services Institute here in London. He was formerly Deputy Director of the Centre for Defence Studies at the University of Zimbabwe, which is where I first had my dealings with Knox. Knox has kindly agreed to be the discussant, to bring out some of the points that Michelle makes in her presentation.

Finally, I just want to draw your attention that although there is not a publication yet from Michelle Gavin, the report of the Council on Foreign Relations, when it is ready, we will certainly notify everybody through email. *The World Today*, in the August edition, had an article by Michelle on Zimbabwe, so that gives you some flavour of the type of things she is saying.

Anyway, that is enough of me. I'll hand over to Michelle. Michelle, you are very welcome.

Michelle Gavin: Thank you so much. Thank you all for being here. I want to thank Chatham House and Alex and Knox as well for this lovely invitation and opportunity to speak with you. It is always a bit intimidating for an American to come to the UK and talk about Zimbabwe. We think about it less, we know less about it, and I have no doubt that I could learn a lot from everyone in the room.

I just want to start off with a couple of disclaimers. One point to set you at ease: while I have this ridiculous cough and may hack away during the presentation, I am assured by a physician that I am not infectious. So it will be annoying but it should not be alarming.

I also want to make clear that what I have to say, these are my views; they are not the views of the Council on Foreign Relations. What I write in the report will be my views. It

is something called a Council Special Report and they are the views of the author. The Council publishes them but it should not be attributed to the Council as a body.

What I have done is try to think about what those on the outside looking in at Zimbabwe's crisis might do to respond that they are not doing already. I focus particularly on the US role, obviously because it is what I know best. I am going to just briefly describe the thrust of my argument so that we have ample time for Q&A and discussion.

Before I do, and this may be a bad, cough medicine, jet lag-fuelled diversion, I will share with you some of my thoughts as I was coming over on the plane and looking at people reading through their newspapers and news magazine's and whatnot. The past few weeks, I have really been struck by how recent events in Burma, or Myanmar if you like, shine a light on some of the same challenges as those on the outside looking in confront with countries in crisis. Of course they are both very compelling cases of manmade disaster, but the historical context and internal dynamics are quite different. I am not suggesting these are cases that are perfect parallels. But you do see in this situation as well that those who are most outspoken in condemning an abusive regime tend to be those with the least leverage to do anything about effecting change and regional actors, who do potentially possess more power to be influential, are ambivalent about the best way forward. Their own interests in stability sometimes conflict with momentum for change. I think here of how President Bush in 2003, during his travels in southern Africa, called South African President Mbeki 'our point man', the US point man on Zimbabwe – and yet our policies have been different enough that Zimbabwe has been an irritant in the bilateral relationship, these strange mixed messages coming through.

From the US perspective – and I realise that Zimbabwe is a much more politically potent issue here – but in the States we see it in some ways the same way we see Burma, in the sense that its general profile heightens when there is some kind of high-stakes confrontation. Suddenly it is in the media and in the news, and we saw this in March with Zimbabwe with the crackdown. One searches in the policy community for ways to toughen up policy. But when the front-page stories fade, so too does a lot of the high-level focus and attention – which is not to say there are not people who have been working for years on Zimbabwe issues in the US government and in the advocacy

community, but that high-level focus and energy, the sort of pace and momentum of the discussion, tapers off. The issue tends to be reduced frankly to fodder for speeches in which one ticks off a list of odious regimes.

My project was by and large about how do we get beyond playing the kind of predictable role of the outsider with limited leverage: there to condemn what is clearly appalling in terms of human rights abuses, denial of civil and political rights; there to provide humanitarian assistance and to wring our hands about the devastating economic crisis; but not very effective in terms of helping the people of Zimbabwe move forward. So how to go beyond rhetoric and beyond targeted sanctions and find some new policy options.

It seems to me that it is an important time to do this because there are a number of factors pointing toward change on the horizon in Zimbabwe. They are primarily internal or regional dynamics. You have the increased regional attention with the new SADC mandate. While one can debate the efficacy of that exercise thus far, it is a new dynamic. It is not where we were last year or two years ago. You have the increased unsustainability of the economic situation. You have hit that point right where hyperinflation on the chart goes straight up – it is not a curve anymore, it tends to go straight upward and it is very difficult to see how this can be sustained for long. Various studies of other countries in similar hyperinflationary scenarios suggest that it does not go on for forever and typically there is some significant political change.

You have more prominent agitation from would-be successors to President Mugabe, including those within the ruling party. Of course you have the factor that, quite simply, President Mugabe is not a young man. He seems quite robust but the precise situation in which we find the Zimbabwean government today cannot persist indefinitely. It is clear that something, some sort of change is in the cards.

There are other factors that seem to pull in the direction of the status quo. There is the fact that remittances and food aid, high-risk investors who think Zimbabwe's economy is going to turn around eventually so they want to snap up those assets now while the pickings are cheap – these kinds of things provide the foreign exchange that can keep the current situation going for a little longer. You have the indigenisation bill providing new patronage opportunities to keep people invested in keeping the house of cards

stable. You continue to have very strong control from the intelligence organization and parts of the security apparatus. You have a divided and, frankly, perhaps hopelessly divided opposition.

For now it would appear you have a constitutional amendment and a regional endorsement of it that appears to keep us in the same place in terms of the same elite actors within the ruling party, able to define the agenda and the pace of how things move forward. That said, I think the jury is still out on that. It remains to be seen whether this Amendment 18 is one step in a sequence of events that could significantly alter the political landscape or whether it stands on its own.

Any way you slice it, the current situation seems to me unsustainable over time. Only stopgaps of a temporary nature can keep it going. But change in Zimbabwe, when it comes, also seems likely to be less about people power and dramatic transformation than perhaps incremental transformation largely within the ruling party itself.

So the question becomes, in my view: how profound will change be? I do not know when it is coming; I am not interested in sort of placing my bets on timing. But it is clear that change will have to come. How profound will it be? What are the possibilities for genuinely empowering the Zimbabwean people, setting the country on a course for sustainable growth and development? How can the US aim to influence that question? In particular, how can we ensure we do not get caught in the trap of personalising our concerns about the nature of Zimbabwe's government, the nature of the crisis in the country, such that we end up embracing a sort of 'anyone but Mugabe' approach, ending up with a new face on the same old system of patronage and corrupt governance, intolerance of dissent, that led the country to the rather desperate place where we see it today. How do we help get Zimbabwe on a path such that there is space for Zimbabwean voices outside the circle of ruling party elites, so that civil society voices – many of whom feel shut out today, shut out not just from the government but shut out from the regional talks aimed at breaking through the political crisis – how does one create the context so that they have a seat at the table and a role to play in affecting their country's future?

It seems to me that the best bet for the US is to think about what it could do to help a reformed Zimbabwe grow and develop – putting in place the structures to provide the support that would be needed for meaningful recovery. In other words, we cannot make change happen in Zimbabwe. This is going to be an internal Zimbabwean process and it will probably be extremely difficult to discern exactly what the result is once one of the pieces moves and what is probably going to be a series of rolling, somewhat murky transitions begins to unfold. But what we can do is think about the Zimbabwe we would like to be able to partner with and try to get ready to do that, working with the UK and with others to build multilateral consensus around governance-related conditions for reengagement and recovery assistance. What those would be are fairly obvious: the end of political violence and the politicisation of humanitarian assistance, particularly food aid; repeal of the most repressive legislation; genuinely free and fair elections.

We need to make the incentives for reform tangible by marshalling meaningful resources now in a trust fund for Zimbabwe, so that our commitment to reconstruction is not purely rhetoric – it is money on the table. This can provide real incentives for a fairly diverse array of forces within Zimbabwe who are interested in moving the country forward and getting out of the fairly miserable spiral of economic collapse and political repression in which the people of Zimbabwe find themselves today.

The US can think through then reconstruction needs and donor coordination and be prepared to be a constructive actor down the road. By doing this publicly, by trying to build this consensus around governance-related conditionality and putting money on the table, that might be the most effective thing an actor like the US can do to influence change.

It is clear that Zimbabwe is going to need more than just macroeconomic stabilisation and more than just help in encouraging the human capital currently residing here in the UK or in South Africa or elsewhere to return. It is going to need much bigger projects and they are going to require international support. Certainly there needs to be international help in reviving the agricultural economy. This touches on the very sensitive issue of land and land tenure. There can be absolutely no denying that before the fast-track land reform programme there was injustice and imbalance in the Zimbabwean land tenure system. That does not make the fast-track land reform programme that unfolded

any less problematic. But there is no going back to where things were before. The international community needs to work with Zimbabwean actors to think about how we might move forward in terms of a clear land audit, providing security and predictability in the land tenure system, ensuring that landholders have title to land and there is mobility within markets for land, and that human capital – particularly those skilled farm workers who were out of a job and in many cases out of a home – is used to try and bring the agricultural economy back to life.

There is going to need to be reform in the security sector, an incredibly important issue – a reorientation of Zimbabwe's security sector away from simply protecting regime survival and using, as my colleague Knox has written about, the country as a battle space in a militarised political struggle. A whole rethinking on the part of Zimbabweans themselves about what the security apparatus is for. Zimbabwe has had a fairly proud history as a contributor to peacekeeping missions. This is just one example of what might be in the cards down the road. But this is going to require international engagement and a focus on reprofessionalising the security sector that – at least I know in the US – will be politically sensitive but absolutely critical, particularly given the possibility for spoilers to emerge from this sector and damage the chances to achieve lasting reform.

I think it is going to be critical to think through the needs of youth. More than 70% of Zimbabweans are under the age of thirty. Any kind of lasting reform and economic revival is going to have to take youth needs and a youth agenda as sort of the national agenda. This means getting serious about job creation on a massive scale and thinking through how to address the fact that many Zimbabwean youths have now been socialised in a kind of political violence and a template of militancy that does not translate particularly well to a stable democracy down the road. What can be done to help give them the tools to be the base of this Zimbabwe of the future that one can envision and work toward? This is a sector that needs much more attention than it has received to date. Obviously the Commonwealth has given a lot of thought to youth development but this will have to be a multilateral effort that I think the US should join with the Commonwealth in addressing. It cannot be shunted aside as some sort of soft issue or touchy-feely add-on to the hard politics of addressing political reform in Zimbabwe. It is absolutely essential.

Finally on this point, a number of people, when you talk to them about Zimbabwe's future, they are quite bullish. They talk about how it is just going to be all led by private sector investment; private sector-led growth will bring the country back and there will not be nearly as much need as people think for international assistance. One hopes that is true. Certainly it is hard to see how the most responsible investors, the kind of investors that can really help build a thriving Zimbabwean economy, will want to come back until they have the kinds of governance assurances that only pressure from Zimbabweans themselves and pressure multilaterally can provide.

It is also important to be sensitive to fears of a fire sale. Zimbabwean sovereignty is much discussed within Zimbabwe. That is legitimate and it is an important point. It is going to be important going forward to recognise that this is a population that has been told there is some sort of conspiracy to strip them of their resources and assets. There are sensitivities to the sort of gorilla that is the South African economy within the region. Thinking through corporate social responsibility, job creation, incentives for joint ventures with Zimbabweans – this should all be a part today of US government planning and planning with other like-minded donors.

The US needs to be honest about the appallingly bad and abusive nature of governance in Zimbabwe today, but spending lots of time on why we want to see the current regime go has not been terribly effective. I think the US government needs to spend a lot more time thinking and talking about and acting on the theme of how we want to help a reformed Zimbabwe grow in the future. I think that can be a complement to SADC's effort instead of leading us to a tussle with regional powers over different approaches. SADC wants stability; they are likely to be more forward-leaning on reengagement and assistance. But support for better governance would really complement their investment and help to safeguard it. I do not think we need to be working at cross-purposes. We can incentivise reform within Zimbabwe and hopefully we can get ourselves on a better footing for recovery and reconstruction, not always a strong suit of US foreign policy.

Alex Vines: Michelle, thank you very much. I forgot to mention that this meeting is not under the Chatham House rule; everything is being recorded. Knox, some comments please…

Knox Chitiyo: Thank you very much. I think it is very good to hear Michelle do this presentation, charting out the architecture and the shape of US foreign policy toward Zimbabwe and efforts to help in reconstruction. The fact is that the US and Zimbabwe do not have a good relationship, certainly at the government level – or in the real sense of the word, much of a relationship at all. The US has also, particularly this year, had issues with South Africa and the region as well. So I think it is very good to have this kind of frank and open discussion where in a sense we are trying to move beyond the rhetoric and the posturing and look at real issues and what perhaps can be done to help Zimbabwe.

A few things I picked up which I thought were very useful. Michelle talked about the agricultural aspect and the help that needs to be given for Zimbabwe's agricultural reconstruction. I think this is clearly vital. I do not need to spell out to you – everyone knows our agricultural situation is dire at the moment, particularly on the issue of land tenure and title deeds and so on. In some instances you have three or four families claiming rights to the same piece of land. This situation, regardless of whether we are talking about Zimbabwe now under President Mugabe or the post-Mugabe Zimbabwe, the situation will probably get worse. So I think any assistance that can be given in the form of a land registry, a computerised land audit or whatever, I think will go a long way toward starting to make inroads on this. In other words, we have had a land revolution from 2000 – the land redistribution act – but we now need part two or part three, which is really getting the statistics and noting who really has title to the land. It is not an easy process. It is not going to take a short time. But any assistance that can be given in that regard, irrespective of the politics, I think would be very welcome in Zimbabwe. It is a process that has to be done. It is a part of national reconstruction, nation-building – it has to be done. Without it, we are going to go endlessly with the land problem. So I was very glad for Michelle to note this point and suggest specific ways in which the US can assist in this regard.

Moving on to the security sector, again, if we are talking of the future Zimbabwe, the new Zimbabwe or whatever we want to call it, the security sector is always going to be an issue. In some ways, as I pointed out earlier, I think the security sector is probably the paramount issue that needs to be tackled, both now and in the future, because it is the security sector which is running the country at the moment. There needs to be, first of all, some kind of discussion or negotiation – whatever political discussions that are going on both now and in the future – the security sector needs to be consulted and there has to be a dialogue with the security sector. Without that dialogue, if the security sector is made to feel in some way that they are not a part of the political process, if they feel threatened, then they have the power to clampdown, as we know, on any kind of change. So I think it is absolutely correct for Michelle to note the importance of the security sector. As a corollary to that, the aspect of the youth – because many of the youth within the security sector, as we know, are in militias. There is a lot of politicisation going on. So the de-politicisation of the security sector will be very, very important.

It is not a lost cause. Zimbabwe still retains a high level of professionalism, despite all the violence that is going on. We do see the Zimbabwe national army taking part in peacekeeping exercises and so on. So there is a history of professionalism; it is not a lost cause. I think it will not be an incredibly difficult process to emphasise professionalism as opposed to politicisation for the security sector. There is still a high level of professionalism within the security sector. So I think that is very important for Michelle to emphasise that.

Michelle was talking about the economy in general, ways in which the United States can assist with Zimbabwe's economy. I think it is very important. America, not as a government but certain companies and so on, is still currently within Zimbabwe right now as we speak, assisting with HIV/AIDS and so on. There has not been a total disengagement. So I think it is important for that assistance to remain in the interim until some kind of negotiated political process occurs. I think it is very important for that engagement, at however low a level, to remain. Once perhaps the situation has changed, then it can be ramped up depending on how the situation is.

A couple of caveats though that perhaps I would make – I think it is as important for America to try and repair its image within southern Africa as it is to assist Zimbabwe.

This may be part of that process but certainly I think the United States does have an image problem within southern Africa, perhaps within Africa as a whole, over various issues. The UN has been one issue, Zimbabwe has been another; Iraq and so on. I think it is quite important for America to try and mend fences. I was very glad to hear Michelle talk about the US mending fences with South Africa and SADC. I think this is absolutely vital.

It is paramount that America recognises the role that South Africa and SADC is playing, the regional role they are playing within the current context within Zimbabwe. People complain and say South Africa is not moving fast enough, they are not exerting enough leverage – but in real terms, in terms of *realpolitik*, this is basically the major game in town and it is vital for the Americans to come on board and support whatever the South Africans are doing with respect to negotiations. So I was very glad to see Michelle's acknowledgement of that. I think it is very pragmatic and realistic. If America takes us on board, I think it will go some way toward repairing some of the rather, shall we say, less than brilliant image that America has in the region.

Sovereignty – I think again a pragmatic assessment of sovereignty. The reality is within the region – as much as we talk about democracy and human rights – the reality is that within southern Africa, within Zimbabwe, within the region, sovereignty will be and is paramount. People may disagree with that emphasis but this is the reality of the situation. SADC, the southern Africa forces, will always put the sovereignty of particular nation-states within SADC first. If that means that it impacts on the notion of democracy and good governance, then unfortunately that is the way it is. So it is also very important for America to recognise the impact of sovereignty. Obviously there are serious implications there because there are times when notions of sovereignty conflict with the issue of democracy and good governance. I think this has been a longstanding dispute between, if you like, the West and southern Africa, but recognition of this is important. It is not something that is going to be solved overnight but I think recognition is very important.

The youth, I think that is again very important – the youth agenda must be a national agenda. There was a time past when the youth agenda was very much a national agenda in a constructive sense, within our Ministry of Youth and employment creation

and so on. Unfortunately in recent times it has been rather subverted by events in Zimbabwe. The youth now have been politicised and made to do other things. Certainly it must be a very important item on any reconstructive agenda within Zimbabwe: what do we do with the youth to create jobs and so on? I think that is absolutely vital. It is as vital as dealing with the security sector.

One thing perhaps I would want to mention. We do have the elections coming up next year within Zimbabwe, in 2008 – scheduled for March. They may or may not be postponed but the chances are that the elections will happen. It may be useful for Americans and everyone else to look at this as a baseline event on which to hang or to discuss our analysis of Zimbabwe, so that we are not talking about something theoretical or something that may happen sometime in the future. There is an election coming up and it may be useful for all the stakeholders to really engage around this most significant event. There are going to be huge differences about it but this is an event which is going to happen. There is not much time, if we are talking about March 2008 or at latest maybe June 2008, but I think this is something around which concrete discussions can and must happen. If the elections come and go and it is the usual rerun of what we have had since 2000, I think it will be an opportunity lost, and Zimbabwe at the moment does not have many more opportunities, unfortunately. So this is a crucial event around which we should frame some of our discussions within the US.

I do not want to talk too long. I think these are the main things. Just one more point, which is we also perhaps should not ignore the role of civil society. Michelle was talking about the constitutional amendment which, as I understand it, civil society has not been very happy about – Constitutional Amendment 18. Again, this suggests the rise perhaps of a third force within the political landscape of Zimbabwe, along with the state and the formal opposition. Civil society now is more and more establishing itself. In a sense perhaps this simply complicates the picture but in another sense perhaps it leads to more issues in which to discuss and to take cognizance of. But I think it is very important to recognise that civil society within Zimbabwe is becoming more and more assertive and drawing itself away from the big two of the state and the formal opposition.

I think I will leave it there and perhaps take questions on that.