

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trade, Arms, and Development in Africa

The Italian Cooperation with the Congo in the Sixties

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Abstract

By June 1960 the Congo gained independence from Belgium and almost immediately entered a prolonged and tragic civil war, characterized by conflicting visions among Congolese leaders on how to forge a path for the new state. Given its vast wealth in raw materials, the Congo quickly captured the attention of international actors, including Italian authorities and private companies. Rome sought to strengthen its relations with Léopoldville to expand exports. At the same time, Italy's membership in the Western bloc required the government to address the demands of its international partners to participate in the Congo's military assistance. Consequently, Italy had to balance domestic interests with the expectations of both the Western alliance and the newly independent African state. This paper analyses the evolution of the Italy-Congo relations during the Sixties, with a specific focus on economic and military cooperation.

Keywords: Italy; Congo; Development Cooperation; Arms; Africa

Introduction

1960 was a crucial year in African history. Many territories which had been under colonial administration for decades experienced a radical shift that finally led to their independence. Following the path of Ghana and Guinea, seventeen countries, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa, were formally recognized as independent and sovereign by the end of the year. The Belgian Congo gained independence in June, becoming the Republic of the Congo.

The United Nations had a central role in this process. It provided the arena where decolonization gained international validation through the historic approval of Resolution 1514. This resolution was backed by numerous countries, including Italy, marking a notable difference from the abstention of other Western powers (Villani, 2010).

The sovereignty over resources was central to the broader North-South debate (Caviglia & Varsori, 2008). Countries with significant oil reserves, such as Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Libya, demanded a shift in the balance of power. Their goal was to counter the dominant role of mostly Western multinationals which had long held exclusive extraction and trading rights (Dietrich, 2017). These countries formed the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960, advocating for a shift away from a colonial extractivist logic and toward gaining national agency over resource wealth.

The Belgian Congo possessed immense economic potential due to its extraordinary wealth of raw materials. Its territory contained huge reserves of copper, diamonds, gold, uranium, silver, and tin. At the time of independence, Léopoldville supplied 60% of the Western bloc's

cobalt, mostly extracted from the Katanga region¹. Belgian companies, such as the *Société Générale de Belgique*, which derived nearly 40% of its profits from the Congo, extracted massive value for the European metropole (Gibbs, 1993). The Katanga region was the epicentre of these interests, dominated by the *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga*, a powerful Belgian mining company that controlled mineral extraction and trade in the province.

The Italian perspective on Africa and the Congo's new path

At the beginning of the so-called first development decade, the Sixties, Italian authorities were ready to prove their willingness to participate in the international assistance directed to developing countries (Calandri, 2013). Since the late Fifties, Italy, a NATO member and supporter of the European collaboration with Africa, sought to revitalize its role in the Mediterranean by introducing a new attitude in foreign affairs. This innovative orientation was called neo-Atlanticism (*neoatlantismo*) and saw part of the leading party, the Christian Democracy, reinterpreting the two pillars of Italy's foreign policy, Atlanticism and Europeanism, by adding a third one, the Mediterraneanism (Leonardi, 2015; Giovagnoli & Tosi, 2010; Martelli, 2008). Several of its leaders, such as Amintore Fanfani, Giovanni Gronchi, and Giorgio La Pira, looked for stronger relationships with Arab and African territories (Bagnato, 2008). Another crucial figure was Enrico Mattei, the founder and head of the national oil company, *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi* (ENI), who was convinced of the need to shift Italy's attitude towards the African continent (Tremolada, 2015; Labbate, 2010; Cricco 2002). By signing agreements with many recently independent countries, he leveraged Italy's presence in the region and challenged the Western multinationals, by offering more promising terms than those other Western oil companies were prepared to grant (Pozzi, 2011; Bucarelli, 2010).

Italy wanted to position itself as a friendly ally to these emerging countries. A challenge that the Italian authorities thought to be useful for Italy's Western allies too, in order to draw African countries into the Western sphere of influence rather than conceding ground to the Soviet bloc (Tosone, 2011). Nonetheless, it was also a way to promote Italian companies and exports in the emerging African market. Rome needed to increase its exports in order to support an economy on the verge of the "economic miracle". The former Belgian Congo was among the countries that captured Italian interest. Not only the national authorities but also private companies started to look at the country with greater attention. By 1960 a community of around 4,000 Italian nationals lived in the country, a significant number considering the relatively minor historical relationship with Léopoldville. Italy ranked third in terms of imports, following Belgium and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the Italians residing in the former Belgian Congo had participated in several important projects for the country's development, such as the construction of the Matadi-Léopoldville railway line (Genin, 2013; Diana, 1961).

While some Italian diplomats and corporations believed that investing in the country was premature, others considered it very promising, especially in view of its imminent independence, agreed with Belgium in February and concretely realized in great haste at the end of June (Rognoni, 2012). The Congo possessed extraordinary wealth in terms of raw materials and investment opportunities. During the early months of 1960 the Italian Ambassador to the United States (US), Manlio Brosio, reported that various international loans were under discussion (Genin, 2015, p. 116). Despite a faltering economic situation, the World Bank was considering a loan of 40 million US dollars guaranteed by Brussels, while

¹ National Security Council Briefing Washington, 25 July 1960, in Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1964–1968, Volume XXIII, *Congo, 1960–1968*.

the United Trust Bank, *Banque Lambert*, and *Banque de Bruxelles* had agreed upon a loan exceeding 9 million US dollars (Genin, 2015). Italian deputy Giuseppe Vedovato, a politician attentive to the private sector engaged in Africa, was requested by the Prime Minister Fanfani to attend the celebration of the Congolese independence in July. There, he expressed to local authorities the willingness to strengthen a sincere and friendly collaboration, offering scholarships for young Congolese².

The Congolese civil war: a turning point

Léopoldville's independence soon revealed its fragility. The elections in May saw the victory of the *Mouvement National Congolais* (MNC) with the exception of the *Confédération des Associations tribales du Katanga* (CONAKAT) winning in Katanga. Ethnic divisions between the Lundas, supported by the CONAKAT, and the Lubas were harshened by the political debate. The civil disorders increased the widespread uncertainty on the stability of the future government led by Patrice Lumumba, leader of the MNC (Morone, 2020). On 5 July Joseph Kasavubu and Lumumba, respectively President and Prime Minister, faced the sudden mutiny of the Congolese troops protesting against the presence of Belgian officers among them, calling it a sign of enduring colonialism. The following secession of the Katanga region on 11 July, led by Moïse Tshombe (leader of CONAKAT), triggered chaos and raised fears of external influence in the process (O'Malley, 2015; O'Brien, 1962). Lumumba and Kasavubu called upon UN Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld, for UN assistance in response to the internal disorders. Lumumba wanted the UN to condemn the Belgian military presence formally dispatched to protect the European citizens threatened by the increasing violences (Rognoni, 2012; Merriam, 1961). On 14 July, the UN Security Council (UNSC), acting under Tunisian initiative, agreed to send support to the national government and to call on Belgium to withdraw its troops. However, the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC) was deployed without a mandate to end the secession in Katanga, leading to a profound disagreement between Lumumba and Hammarskjöld over UN strategy (MacQueen, 2011). The embattled Kasavubu and Lumumba had different understandings of the future of the independent Congo. Opposite visions that hindered reconciliation and the fight against civil disorders and secessionist movements. Kasavubu was the primary advocate of a federalist approach, viewing it as the only way for such an ethnically complex state to survive, while Lumumba favoured centralization to counter internal fragmentation and foreign interference (Finizio, 2018, p. 96).

The persistent instability deepened with the secession of South Kasai, strongly influenced by a local Belgian diamond mining company, the *Forminière – Société internationale forestière et minière du Congo* (Gibbs, 2000). The Congolese crisis represented a multifaceted international entanglement, only partially attributable to Cold War dynamics (Rognoni, 2003). Hammarskjöld's decision – to withhold direct ONUC involvement in ending the Katangese secession – was strongly condemned by Lumumba, marking a pivotal shift in his attitude towards the UN. His request for Soviet military support deepened Western suspicions and fuelled attempts to destabilize his leadership. Only months after becoming Prime Minister, he was dismissed by President Kasavubu in September 1960. In a dramatic turn of events, Lumumba publicly denounced his dismissal and, subsequently, declared the deposition of the President. Amid general chaos, Lumumba still seemed to emerge victorious from the political standoff. While Kasavubu lacked the political strength to counter his influence, Colonel Joseph-Desiré Mobutu, head of the *Armée Nationale*

² La missione Vedovato è rientrata dal Congo, «Il Popolo», 10 July 1960, in Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze [Florence National Library] (BNCF), Giuseppe Vedovato, box (b.) Missioni politiche africane, folder (f.) A.h.3.37.

Congolaise (ANC), the Congolese National Army, possessed the military leverage Kasavubu lacked. Backed by the US Department of State and the UN, he orchestrated a coup, presented as a temporary takeover to restore national stability (Weissman, 2014; Gibbs, 2000, p. 375). The rapid and volatile exacerbation of the situation continued, ultimately leading to the assassination of former Prime Minister Lumumba in January 1961. ONUC strengthened its mandate in the Katanga region, trying to tackle interferences and civil strife. On 18 September 1961 the tragic death of the UN Secretary-General in a plane crash on the way to Ndola, where negotiations for ending the hostilities were taking place, exemplified the complexities that the international and African communities had to face. The emergence of profound divisions within the African bloc signalled that the Congo crisis was not just an international confrontation among the Western and Eastern blocs. Of the African countries, a large majority sided with Kasavubu, most notably those who would later form the “Brazzaville Group”, which was aligned with European powers and tied to France. Conversely, a smaller bloc of radicals had initially supported Lumumba during the crisis, united by their rejection of foreign interference and their opposition to the Katanga secession (Rognoni, 2019).

Since the beginning of the crisis, the UN debate around ONUC, which formally terminated its operations in June 1964, had been particularly important for Italy for several reasons. The country had been deeply affected during the initial, frantic stages of the crisis by the death of its Vice-Consul in Élisabethville, Tito Spoglia. The latter had died in July 1960 assisting several Italians living there who feared repercussions and were ready to evacuate in neighbouring countries. A death that Tshombe sinisterly described to the Italians as an “*atto di simpatia*” [an act of goodwill] (Genin, 2013). Furthermore, Italy worried dangerous analogies between the Katanga’s secession and the ongoing dispute over the Italian South Tyrol, an Italian territory peopled by a German-speaking majority protesting the lack of implementation of the De Gasperi-Gruber agreement and demanding greater autonomy, with the backing of the neighbouring Austria. At the United Nations, Italy feared that Vienna might cite the Katanga’s secession as a precedent against Rome, arguing that South Tyrol was not merely an Italian domestic affair as claimed by Italy (Scarano, 2014; Toscano, 1968). In the autumn of 1960, the matter was set to be discussed in the UN General Assembly and Italy was anxious to gain the favour of the African countries and confirm the support of NATO allies, such as Belgium. This strategy was soon tested in the UN Security Council votes in July and August. As a non-permanent member, Italy voted in favour of the Security Council’s resolutions of 14 and 22 July, requiring the withdrawal of Belgian troops, the respect of the territorial integrity of Congo and the establishment of UN military assistance to the Congo to restore order. However, Italy recommended certain adjustments in favour of the Belgian presence to ensure the security of the many Europeans in the Congo (Genin, 2015). On 9 August, during the vote for UNSC Resolution 146 for the immediate withdrawal of the Belgian troops, the Italian diplomat Egidio Ortona, Chief of the Italian Delegation at the UN, abstained, thereby avoiding publicly positioning Italy against Belgium in the matter (Brosio, 2008)³. The Italian Ambassador in Paris, Leonardo Vitetti, remarked to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that nothing more could have been done in the Security Council to protect Belgium’s position, while shedding light on the negative consequences if the Katanga’s secession was to succeed (Rognoni, 2012). Ortona expressed his dissatisfaction, declaring that he had abstained together with France alone, losing “70% of what [he] had built with the Afro-Asian bloc and within the OECE’s Development Assistance Group” (Ortona, 1986, p.

³ Ortona to Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rapporto segreto 2183, 10 July 1960, in Documenti sulla Politica Internazionale dell’Italia (DPPI), Serie G, Organizzazioni internazionali e questioni globali, *L’Italia all’ONU nel primo mandato in Consiglio di Sicurezza (1° gennaio 1959 – 31 dicembre 1960)*.

393). Italy voted in subsequent sessions in favour of the Congolese unity and provided firm support for the United Nations, by participating in the UN mission in the country. Italy's approach balanced national needs, such as the UN imminent debates on South Tyrol, with its relation with allies such as Belgium. Italy's participation in the UN peacekeeping forces on the ground was soon confirmed: on 14 July 1960, Hammarskjöld asked Ortona Italy's willingness to send a military medical unit to the Congo⁴, followed by aeronautical support. Italy's support was reaffirmed even after the Kindu massacre of 11 November 1961, in which thirteen Italian aviators were killed by Congolese militiamen who had mistaken them for mercenaries. A shock for Italy's civil society and authorities that, nevertheless, did not compromise Italy's commitment to international alliances (Martellini, 2017).

Italy-Congo Economic partnerships in 1963

The Congolese government formed after the coup was led by Cyrille Adoula, Prime Minister from August 1961, and had to face a fragile and uncertain future for the newly independent country. Soon, after the assassination of Lumumba, Antoine Gizenga – a close partner of the latter – challenged the unity of Congo by receiving the recognition of its government in Stanleyville by many countries, all of which were member of the Soviet bloc. From the South, with Tshombe, to the East, with Gizenga, the Congo's future was marked by heavy incertitude.

The civil war that broke out over the control of power had also the consequence of freezing many opportunities for economic collaboration with international partners. Though highly interested, Italian companies had to wait for an improvement in the local conditions, and 1963 seemed a good moment. In the early months of the year, ENI managed to reach an agreement with the new Adoula government for an Italian-Congolese venture and the construction of a 600,000 tons refinery (The Times, 1963b). Four Western companies – Petrofina, Shell, Mobil, and Texaco – were already present in the country, with an overall economic volume of 60 million US dollars. However, the Congolese authorities wanted to expand the market, despite the reluctance of the foreign companies already present (Klieman, 2008). Before finalizing the agreement with ENI, Adoula authorized the release of the news. He knew that Western countries and multinationals would have disagreed with ENI joining the market (Klieman, 2008).

The four Western companies, formed into a consortium, started to negotiate with the Congolese government an alternative proposal. Adoula tried to play ends against the middle, receiving a counteroffer from the international consortium for a refinery with a higher capacity than that of the Italian-Congolese venture (18,000 barrels per day instead of 12,000) and more promising conditions regarding foreign currency. In both scenarios, production would have exceeded the country's domestic needs, thus requiring exporting the surplus. The US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, made it clear to Adoula that choosing the consortium would demonstrate loyalty toward the foreign companies that had protected the Congo's earnings during the Katanga crisis by deciding not to pay the secessionist Tshombe, thereby refusing to legitimize him (Klieman, 2008). It was evident to all the actors involved that the Congo's needs were very limited, as its internal demand was calculated at 7,000 barrels per day, thus not requiring two refineries. The move was intended solely to avoid ENI entering in the market and to induce it to drop the deal. For some, "this proposal was not built on the economic or development needs of the Congo" (Swain, 1963). Nonetheless, ENI was also advocating for its cause, reaching out to many deputies in the

⁴ Ortona to Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Telegramma urgentissimo 24686/231, 14 July 1960, in Documenti sulla Politica Internazionale dell'Italia, *L'Italia all'ONU nel primo mandato in Consiglio di Sicurezza (1° gennaio 1959 – 31 dicembre 1960)*.

Congolese national parliament, and pressuring Adoula for a commitment that would be difficult to retract. Consequently, the Prime Minister indicated to the Western consortium that he would opt for both proposals in order to achieve a tangible result (Klieman, 2008).

As noted by British diplomats, the Congo was at the centre of renewed Italian attention, which was expressed through ENI's proposed refinery and a pharmaceutical plant proposed by an Italian company, Montecatini⁵. 1963 showed a significant improvement in Italian-Congolese economic relations. This was evidenced by the Congolese trade mission that visited Italy and the response of the Italians who, led by deputy Mario Pedini, had in turn travelled to the African country. The companies involved in the visit were among the most important of the European country and covered different industrial sectors: ENI, Farmitalia, Montecatini, Necchi, Italconsult, Elettroconsult, and Marzoli⁶. Some operated in the pharmaceutical sector, as Farmitalia, others in the metallurgical and manufacturing sector, such as Necchi, or in the mechano-textile one, as Marzoli. British diplomats noted that the Belgian former colony was a more accessible market for Italian interests than the French Congo, as the latter remained closely aligned with France leaving fewer opportunities for new economic partnerships⁷.

In Léopoldville, an important role was played by the Italian company Astaldi Estero, from 1956 present in the country with the *Société d'entreprise Astaldi au Congo*. The latter formed a new company in view of significant future contracts: the Italian-Congolese Society for Industrial Activities (SICAI).

SICAI was interested in the massive undertaking of harnessing the power of the Congo River and its rapids, which, less than 50 km from the city of Matadi, plunged with explosive force in a waterfall of nearly 100 meters. By building dams and hydroelectric power infrastructures, Italy showcased the industrial capacity and expertise of Italian technical assistance. Astaldi Estero succeeded in convincing the public-led *Istituto per la ricostruzione industriale* (IRI)⁸ to join the construction of the Inga dam in the Congo River: a dream that both the Congolese and the Belgians had long had, which in 1963 seemed tangibly achievable (Carbone, 2019). The dam, a representation and symbol of man's control over nature, was to become, in those years, the emblem of the independent Congo's new relations with the Italian market and of the friendly collaboration desired by both sides, European and African. Italians had already gained experience in the Fifties in building dams in African countries such as Ethiopia, Sudan, and Rhodesia. As a result, they were able to present themselves to the Congolese government with clear evidence of their capabilities.

However, the oil controversy was far more politically sensitive, impacting all Italian activities in the country and the very stability of the Congo. In September 1963, the Congolese parliament decided not to support the international consortium's proposal in a vote that sparked numerous adverse reactions but was favourable to the Italians. Based on this decision, a joint-venture company, the *Société Congo-Italienne de Raffinage* (SOCIR), was created in the country's coastal region. In what has been defined as an "oil war" the American, Belgian, Dutch, and British companies, belonging to the consortium, initially

⁵ The Commercial Secretary, B.W. Gordon, UK Embassy in Léopoldville, to E.J.B. Scriven, Commercial Relations and Exports Department, Foreign Office, Restricted, 28 June 1963, in The National Archives (TNA), Foreign Office FO 371, General Correspondence from 1906-1966, Subseries Italy, folder (f.) FO 169359.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The Acting Commercial Secretary, P.J. Monk, UK Embassy in Léopoldville to E.J.B. Scriven, Commercial Relations and Exports Department, Restricted 1163/63, Foreign Office, 5 August 1963, in TNA, Foreign Office, General Correspondence from 1906-1966 (FO 371), Subseries Italy, f. FO 169359.

⁸ The *Istituto per la ricostruzione industriale* (IRI) was a state-owned holding company established in 1933. After the Second World War, IRI supported Italy's industrial policies, enhancing the development of a national industry.

resolved not to surrender. They proposed (without any apparent deal with the ENI) that the Italian company participate in the refinery with a share distribution of 10% for each company, while leaving 50% to the Congolese. In addition to this, the US diplomacy, through a meeting in Rome between Assistant Secretary of State Alexis Johnson and Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Attilio Piccioni, expressed to Italy the view that pursuing ENI's course of action would lead to the destabilization of the Congolese government (Klieman, 2008, p. 190). Prolonging the instability of the country was considered a dangerous option to be avoided, however it was rapidly becoming concrete, given that the companies themselves launched a campaign against Adoula through newspapers and political pressure. In November, Adoula threatened to expel two oil company representatives in connexion with the ENI affair (The Times, 1963a), because – according to Adoula – they had claimed that he had accepted bribes from the Italian company (Lukas, 1963; Klieman, 2008).

Testing Italian military and economic assistance amid Congo's turmoil

Amid this complex international scenario, where the entry of the Italian oil company was viewed as a threat to the economic and commercial balance in the Congo, Italy pursued a multifaceted strategy. Relations between the Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, and Adoula had been positively oriented towards increasing Italian economic and technical assistance. In May 1963, the Congolese Premier visited the new international training centre established in Turin by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in collaboration with the Italian government. On that occasion, the Italian and Congolese authorities signed two agreements: one regarding economic cooperation and another focused on the military aviation sector. Adoula requested a medium-term credit too, receiving the favourable answer of Moro. Before the signing of the agreement, the governor of the National Bank of the Congo, during a stay in Italy, obtained 5 million US dollars from an Italian banking consortium with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This was a loan tied to the purchase of Italian goods: “although this loan did not meet expectations” it was sufficient in the eyes of Léopoldville to “give some concrete substance to the signing of the economic cooperation agreement”⁹. A few months later, the Congolese government fell, transitioning from the moderate Adoula to the controversial Tshombe, who had led the secessionist movement in Katanga. Though he had been the protagonist of many violent chapters in the Congo crisis, he returned from his exile in Spain with a revised political stance, seeking to lead the entire country (Gleijeses, 1994). After his return to power, he had to face the Kwilu and Simbas rebellions, with the latter gaining rapid ground across the Eastern provinces, from Uélé (northeastern Congo) to North Katanga (Kisangani, 2012, p. 20; Macola 2021).

By that time, Italy was already assisting the Congo through UN operations, having committed a contingent of the Italian Air Force to the mission. As ONUC began phasing out, the United States established the Western International Ground Maintenance Operations (WIGMO). Heavily influenced by the CIA, the WIGMO was a private company, registered in Lichtenstein, designed to train personnel and mercenaries while supporting covert operations (Lemarchand, 1976).

Congolese military needs concerned both training and equipment, including the aviation programme. Since the time of Adoula, Italy had confirmed its willingness to provide military training and assistance until the end of 1965. In the first semester of 1963 the US supplied six T-28 fighter planes armed with rockets and machine guns, ten C-47 military transport planes, six H-21 heavy-duty helicopters, vehicle spare parts, along with trainers. Through the private company, WIGMO, the CIA was responsible for providing the country with Cuban

⁹ The Director-General for Political Affairs, Giovanni Fornari, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Giuseppe Saragat, 18 March 1964, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato [Central State Archives] (ACS), Aldo Moro, b. ex 184.

exile pilots ready to fly on Italian T-6 training planes. Belgium military assistance was also involved in the fight against the Stanleyville self-proclaimed government, and Israeli technical assistance supported the training of Congolese paratroopers. In August, Rusk approved supporting Tshombe to “raise gendarme mercenary force along with bolstering whatever force there [was] to hold present strong points and to start rebel roll back” (Weissman, 1979). Italian mercenaries took part in the conflict against the rebel government in Stanleyville, joining the military campaign led by Tshombe (Macola, 2023).

Italy was very much involved in the Congo crisis both to demonstrate active participation in international alliances and to strengthen economic ties with new countries in Africa. The change of government in Léopoldville, with a figure such as Tshombe leading the country, pushed the Italian authorities in a delicate situation at the domestic level too. The sensitivity was proven by Tshombe’s visit in December, invited by the Vatican, with the knowledge and implicit consent of the Italian Minister of Foreign Trade, Bernardo Mattarella. Moro’s government was widely criticized by the Italian Communist Party (PCI), though it received some harsh comments by Pietro Nenni, the leader of the Italian Socialist, then part of the governing coalition. Moro had to publicly clarify that the approval for the Congolese Prime Minister’s visit was just an act of “international courtesy” to secure the position of Italian companies such as ENI and FIAT (Borruso, 2024). As the 1965 renewal of the military agreement approached, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) observed that the strategy of supporting the Congolese government, through technical and military assistance was successfully facilitating deeper economic penetration. The agreement with the Adoula government for technical assistance from the Italian Air Force, aimed at training a Congolese Air Force, was set to expire in December 1965 with a high likelihood of renewal. By February of that year, following Tshombe’s visit to Rome, the Italian MFA had already identified several projects of interest to national entrepreneurs in Congo.

The Inga hydroelectric plant, strategically located near major mineral deposits, was a primary objective. The project’s scale was extraordinary for its era; its projected annual capacity was estimated to nearly match the total power capacity of the six European Economic Community (EEC) countries combined. IRI and Astaldi managed the project dossier, having already completed the feasibility studies, initial analyses, and preliminary construction phases. Additionally, FIAT secured significant contracts for the production of tractors and trucks, alongside the training of local personnel, in a deal valued at nearly 8 million US dollars.

In parallel, the Italian industrial group Innocenti, active in the mechanical engineering sector, worked to establish commercial ties with Congolese firms, while Montecatini expressed interest in copper mining. Furthermore, Edison secured an Italian government commission to conduct a preliminary study for a joint Italian-Congolese insurance venture. Finally, there was the most delicate issue: ENI. In February 1963, under the Adoula government, the company had secured an agreement to construct and manage a refinery. Through a joint-venture company, ENI had negotiated a clause with Adoula that effectively granted it a monopoly on the local market until the refinery was able to fully satisfy national demand. However, in July 1964, ENI found itself bogged down by the change in government and the obstructive manoeuvres of multinational corporations already established in the country. The agreement remained in limbo following local events, to the point that it was uncertain whether such advantageous clauses would be respected by the Tshombe government¹⁰.

Certainly, the aviation technical assistance played an important role, so much so that by July 1964 it was understood by the Italian authorities that there was already a request for a

¹⁰ Italian MFA, Italo-Congolese Economic Relations, Note (*Appunto*), 27 February 1965, in ACS, Moro, b. ex 184.

continuation of the Italian Air Force's intervention through 1966. The Italian MFA believed that while Italy was gaining relevant positions in the Congolese development affair, with companies such as ENI and FIAT, there were industrial sectors where – without technical assistance – no significant commercial initiatives would be achieved¹¹. The arms trade was one of these. However, the extension of the military assistance would cause a substantial economic burden on the State coffers, initially estimated at 450 million but later confirmed at 580 million Italian liras, less than a million US dollars¹². The extension of the Italian aviation mission to the Congo necessitated a joint decision between the Ministries of Defence, Treasury, and Foreign Affairs in an attempt to secure the necessary funding. Fanfani, Foreign Minister from March 1965, wrote to the Defence Minister, Giulio Andreotti, to consider the inclusion of the costs in the Defence budget, precisely for the possibility of military supplies that could follow¹³. The Defence Ministry issued a polite refusal: the technical assistance to the Congolese Air Force was an initiative launched by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Defence did not see an interest in its extension¹⁴. While at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs it was recognized the validity of the reasons explained, it was nonetheless reiterated the need to confirm somehow the assistance in order to create “a favourable atmosphere” for economic initiatives in the country¹⁵. Roberto Gaja, Director-General for Political Affairs at the MFA, was still confident that the renewal of the 1964 Protocol was possible. Despite the uncertainty of the Congolese political situation, Italy's assistance achieved concrete results within a single year, from the signature of the Protocol in November 1964 to the middle of 1965: 47 Italian Air Force officers were stationed in the Congo to train local personnel, 10 Congolese pilots had already completed their training in Italian centres, and 17 Congolese specialists were then undergoing instruction. In addition, part of the 20 T-6 training airplanes had been already sent in the Congo¹⁶. However, passing a specific Italian law, to cover the military costs of the Italian mission in the Congo, was considered impossible for two reasons: first, the tight timeframe, with only a few months remaining before the beginning of the year; and second, the political sensitivity surrounding Tshombe. The Italian MFA remarked clear objections to Tshombe's leadership within the Italian government. This internal friction was exemplified by Pietro Nenni's protests during the former Katangese leader's visit to Rome the previous year¹⁷.

Nevertheless, the Farnesina – the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' headquarters - also believed that the new Congolese government was gaining stability and international recognition, to such an extent that a continuation of the mission would be possible to envisage. The extension would consolidate the progress already made by the ongoing mission. Regarding the broader Congolese context, Italian military officers remained optimistic about training African pilots, a prospect viewed sceptically by other powers like

¹¹ Italian MFA, Note (*Appunto*) 20 November 1965, in Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale [Historical Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation] (ASD-MAECI), Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Ufficio X (ex Ufficio VII) 1963-1977 [Directorate General for Political Affairs, Department X (former Department VII) 1963-1977] (DGAP Uff. X), 1965, b. 16.

¹² The Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Amintore Fanfani, to the Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, Letter 17/60161/22, 2 March 1966, in ACS, Aldo Moro, b. ex 184; Italian MFA, Note (*Appunto*), 13 July 1965, in ACS, Aldo Moro, b. ex 184.

¹³ Letter (Draft) from Fanfani to Andreotti, 1965, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1965, b. 16.

¹⁴ Italian MFA, Note (*Appunto*), 16 June 1965, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1965, b. 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Telepresso* Riservato 17/00285, from Director-General of DGAP Gaja to the Italian Embassy in Belgium, 5 April 1965, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1965, b. 16.

¹⁷ Letter 17/00673/79, from Gaja, to the Diplomatic Counsellor, Cottafavi, 6 October 1965, in ACS, Aldo Moro, b. ex 184.

France and the United Kingdom. Indeed, when responding to a specific US inquiry sent to its three major Western allies concerning the feasibility of such training, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the only one to provide a positive assessment. While for London and Paris there was a substantial “incapacity” among Africans due to “scarce psycho-physical adaptability”¹⁸, the Italians considered the training in the Congo overall satisfactory, in contrast to their far more negative experience in Somalia¹⁹.

Furthermore, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it was noted that the Congo was perhaps the most promising country in terms of economic development and that Italian entrepreneurs were gaining significant positions in its market. Clear benefits and potential further requests, both for assistance and for supplies, were expected to arise from the mission. Whether it was feasible to cover the costs, however, was still not clear²⁰. The Directorate General for Political Affairs (DGAP) studied the possibility of requesting part of the missing funds (approximately 270 million liras) from the US assistance. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Amintore Fanfani, seemed to carefully weigh the idea. In any case, the request could not originate from Rome; instead, it had to be suggested to the Congolese that they ask to the US to cover the Italian assistance. Nevertheless, this option soon raised multiple doubts and was rejected by the Prime Minister, Aldo Moro²¹. The dismissal of Tshombe at the end of October 1965, proving that his leadership was not as stable as had been believed, gave space for a new government under the head of the ANC, Mobutu. This change represented a further factor that left the Italians uncertain about approving the aviation mission for 1966. Moreover, the atmosphere within the African country became even more oppressive, with the centralisation of power in the hands of the new premier. In the first months of his government, he hanged four political figures accused of having acted against the good of the State. He, then, banished all political parties (Carbone, 2019).

Italy's military cooperation

Amid the internal turmoil leading to Mobutu gaining power over Tshombe, the Congolese domestic struggles, in the eyes of international partners, were not meant to change the country's established alliances. In November 1966 Dean Brown, the Director of Central African Affairs at the US Department of State, and US Senator Ted Kennedy, brother of the late President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, travelled to Rome to reassure the Italian government that the US did not ask for any Italian participation in operating technical missions with the Congo Air Force but just for training purposes²². For Washington the involvement of European allies was vital. Their perception was that Europeans “have not played role in this Congo operations”, leaving the US standing alone in providing assistance. According to the US this was not something for which the Europeans were to be entirely blamed, since for them “part of fault [was], of course, Mobutu's”²³. Since the signing of the Protocol in 1964 Italy had always clarified that its assistance was absolutely not to be intended as a hierarchical and direct management of the Congolese Air Force or as a way to

¹⁸ *Telespresso* 17/00282, from Gaja to the Defence Ministry, 18 May 1965, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1965, b. 16.

¹⁹ *Telespresso* Riservato 17/00453, from DGAP Uff. VII to the Italian Embassy in US, 19 June 1965, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1965, b. 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Gaja to Cottafavi, Letter 17/00694/82, October, 1965, in ACS, Moro, b. ex 184.

²² Secret Telegram 014269 from US Secretary of State, Rusk, to the US Embassy in Italy, 29 July 1967. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, USA (NARA), Record Group 59 – General Records of the Department of State (RG 59), Subject Numerical Files 1967-1969 (A1 1613-C), b. 1560.

²³ *Ibid.*

deploy its own forces in the Congolese military scenario²⁴. However, these limitations were not fully accepted by the US. In general, the discussions among the countries involved in the Congo's military assistance (United States, Belgium, Italy, and Israel) were not always easy, with the Italians feeling strained relations with Bruxelles, accusing Belgium of obstructionism and interference in the Italian assistance²⁵. The Italian Ambassador to the Congo, Ettore Baistrocchi, wrote to Gaja pointing out that US officials too were interfering in the Italian military assistance, with no clear understanding on the reasons behind that: "Sometimes the impression [was] that they [didn't] really want an efficient and autonomous Congolese Air Force"²⁶.

The evolution of the Italian military assistance was navigating turbulent waters and several elements had to be taken into account. Diplomats and the military held diverging views on the future of the *Delegazione Italiana di Cooperazione Tecnica Militare Aeronautica* (DICTMA), the Italian delegation for the technical assistance to the Congolese Air Force. By the summer of 1967, as Belgium's military influence began to recede, Italian military representatives, such as Colonel Pistani, advocated for an expansion of the DICTMA. On the contrary, Baistrocchi and Gaja from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs held the opposite view. According to the latter, Mobutu was too fragile and the Congo still had to cover the first payment of 270 million of liras due at the beginning of the year. In addition, Gaja saw no immediate prospect of a stabilized Congo: "there were situations in the Congo where it was better to stay out for the risk of compromising the favourable atmosphere we had earned"²⁷. As a final decision for both, no expansion was possible before "certain conditions were met"²⁸.

From an economic perspective, the military assistance was becoming more of a problem than an opportunity. Its costs had doubled since 1964, from the initial sum of 336 million of liras to the 635 million required from 1967²⁹. Difficulties in obtaining payments from the Congolese authorities persisted; in addition, the sudden appointment of the Turkish general, Suat Eraybar, as aeronautical advisor to the commander of the Congolese armed forces was considered a breach of the 1964 Protocol and, substantially, a sign of lack of consideration from both the US and the Congo. No information was provided to the Italians before the appointment, which raised strong condemnation by the Italian military officials. General Aldo Remondino, the Italian Chief of the Air Force, caused embarrassment to the Italian MFA by writing directly – and without prior coordination – to the US Embassy in Italy and to the Congolese President Mobutu. To the former he claimed that Eraybar was appointed to facilitate a US disengagement while maintaining an advisor supportive of US military supplies, such as the T-28. He also added that if the Italian Air Force was to perceive a lack of US support, it was ready to consider an overall withdrawal from the country³⁰.

With the increased tension between the US and Italy over the future of the Italian assistance to the Congo, the Italians requested clarifications from US diplomats. The US *chargé d'affaires*, Robert Orris Blake, specified that the appointment of the Turkish general was deemed necessary because the Italians had declared that they were not ready to

²⁴ Telespresso 117/00227, from Ortona, DGAP, to Ministry of Defence, 25 March 1967, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1967, b. 13.

²⁵ Note 117/00525 for Gaja, 26 July 1967, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP, 1967, b. 13.

²⁶ Baistrocchi to Gaja, Letter, 8 August 8 1967, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP, 1967, b. 13.

²⁷ Letter 117/00609, Riservata, from Gaja to Baistrocchi, 31 August 1967, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1967, b. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Telespresso 117/00367 Riservato from Ortona to the Embassy of Italy in Congo, 18 May 1967, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1967, b. 13.

³⁰ Note of the Italian MFA, 30 March 1967, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1967, b. 13.

increase their responsibilities with the Congolese Air Force.³¹ Additionally, there was an unstated competition between international partners for future military contracts in the Congo. According to Italian authorities, the perceived US disengagement would whet appetites of France, the United Kingdom, and Israel. In April, in a meeting between the Italian Defense and Foreign Affairs Ministries, the former clarified that the the Italian aircraft manufacturer AerMacchi was interested in the affair. Colonel Broso specified that an initial step had already been taken: a Congolese pilot had been dispatched to Italy to begin training on AerMacchi aircrafts³².

The engagement in the assistance to the Congo, alongside the involvement in other international consortia for Africa's development, was seen by Italy as a way to promote the internationalisation of its own industry and export. Participating in the Western initiative in the Congo enabled Italy to showcase and expand the industrial capacity of strategic military companies such as AerMacchi. The company, now part of the Leonardo group, was active in the aeronautics sector from the post- Second World War period until the early Seventies, serving as a pivotal member of the Italian private sector that tried to regain space in the international market after the conflict (Vagnini, 2025). Even if only related to training, this participation opened new possibilities for the company. After receiving reassurances from Justin Bomboko, the Congolese Foreign Affairs Minister, that Colonel Conti, the Italian military leading the DICTMA, was held in high respect as a military advisor while General Eraybar was, in comparison, nothing more than just a "mercenary"³³, the Italian MFA requested that the Embassy in Ankara cooperate to prevent Turkey from becoming a competitor in the military sector. While the Italian Ministry of Defence favoured prioritising commercial compensation in exchange for assistance to the Congo, the Ministry of the Treasury remained unconvinced. The latter argued that it was neither the right time nor the right method to secure benefits for Italian industry, suggesting that such moves could be perceived as an "undue pressure that could undermine the value of the aeronautical assistance"³⁴.

For the US diplomats, who attentively monitored the evolution of the Italian engagement in the Congo, the Italian participation was closely linked to the possibility of finalizing contracts to benefit arms exports, especially those from AerMacchi³⁵. However, the US authorities were equally eager to secure their own military supply lines to the Congolese government. They pressured the Congolese to accept the free provision of T-28s while advising them against purchasing jet aircraft, such as those offered by AerMacchi. The North American T-28 Trojan was a propeller aircraft while the AerMacchi MB-326 was a jet one, a new model that many countries were eager to have. While the Italians closely monitored the progression of these US-Congolese negotiations, they were simultaneously reassured by Mobutu's persistent interest in the Italian jets, which he considered superior in quality and more promising for the needs of the Congo³⁶.

Italy's strategy to expand its development assistance towards Africa was driven by different elements, including the potential benefits for the Italian private sector. At both the bilateral and multilateral levels, the logic was evident. The construction of the Inga Dam, for instance, was only partially funded by Italian public capital. Instead, it relied heavily on international funding, a method strongly preferred by Rome for obvious reasons. The Italians had invested heavily in the dam, even during the most turbulent phases of the civil

³¹ *Telespresso* 525, from Baistrocchi to the Italian MFA, 19 March 1967, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1967, b. 13.

³² Note of the meeting, 18 April 1967, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1967, b. 13.

³³ *Telespresso* 456, from Baistrocchi to the Italian MFA, no date, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1967, b. 13.

³⁴ Note for the Director-General, 31 July 1967, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1967, b. 13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Telegramma* 525 from Baistrocchi to the Italian MFA, 19 March 1967, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1967, b. 13.

war and continued despite the 1965 coup that brought Mobutu to power. This went beyond the first phase of the Inga project; following the latter's completion in 1967 the Inga II project would also be realised. For the first dam, the Italian consortium (comprising Italmimpianti, GIE, and Astaldi) estimated a cost of nearly 80 million US dollars, broken down as follows: Belgium and Italy contributed 20 million each, the Congo 24 million, and 16 million came from the European Development Fund (Carbone, 2019). The European Commission funded the first phase half through grants and half through concessional loans. This strategy of prioritising international funding appeared to be the ideal solution for showcasing Italian expertise while compensating for the limited national resources available.

In the arms sector the matter was far more sensitive. In 1967, the Italians negotiated with the Congo for a three-year extension of the Italian training mission only if the Congolese were ready to contribute with 270 million of Italian liras (approximately 432,000 US dollars) per year. After receiving a counteroffer to spend the total amount in arms and goods from the Italian market, rather than paying the sum directly, Italy refused. The Italian authorities were not willing to agree to any other type of payment, specifying that Congolese currency would not be accepted. By 1967, the Italians understood the importance of their presence and were firmly asking the Congolese to balance their requests³⁷. Even though the US was aware of the differing opinions between the two partners, Washington believed that the participation of Italy was vital for the development of the Congolese Air Force. Furthermore, it served to solidify Italy's commitment to the multilateral effort to develop the Congolese security forces. For the Americans, it was fundamental that Italy maintain its involvement, ensuring that the US would not be forced to assume greater responsibilities to fill the gaps left by its allies³⁸.

However, by the late Sixties, it became evident that Italy was reconsidering its overall military engagement in the Congo. Rome aimed to scale back its training program for several reasons, including the high economic costs and the difficulties encountered in finalising the sale of AerMacchi aircrafts. This sale was, in fact, considered a high priority by the Italian authorities. Nonetheless, several obstacles were highlighted³⁹. The purchase would trigger the 1968 Conte-Long Amendment, a US law aimed at reducing US aid to developing countries that allocated significant resources on 'sophisticated' weapons systems. Initially, Italian diplomats attempted to convince the US Department of State that the AerMacchi aircraft lacked the technical complexity to be classified as 'sophisticated'⁴⁰. However, the US diplomats upheld the amendment's application. At the Farnesina, the Italian diplomats explored ways to bypass the amendment and secure the procurement; one proposal was to restructure the payment over a ten-year period to minimize the immediate impact on the Congolese budget⁴¹. AerMacchi was ready to accept the deal, and the new head of DICTMA, General Abramo Pappalardo, started to discuss the matter with Belgian representatives to obtain their support⁴². The DGAP from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs cautiously wrote to the Defence Ministry: selling the AerMacchi's jets would cause the obligation to assist the

³⁷ Secret Telegram 020821 from Ambassador Reinhardt to the Secretary of State, 25 January 1967, in NARA, RG 59, A1 1613-C, b. 1560,

³⁸ Telegram 131 from the US Embassy in Italy to the Secretary of State, 16 October 1968, in NARA, RG 59, A1 1613-C, b. 1560.

³⁹ *Telespresso* 2015, 7 September 1968, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1968, b. 11.

⁴⁰ Telegram 26047, from the Italian Embassy in US to the Italian MFA, 11 July 1968, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1968, b. 11.

⁴¹ *Telespresso* 2194 from Baistrocchi to DGAP, 28 September 1968, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1968, b. 11.

⁴² *Telespresso* 2194 from Italian Embassy in the Congo, 28 September 1968, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1968, b. 11.

Congolese not only with supplies but also with technical experts and training⁴³. At least two trainers, plus the training in Italy of Congolese specialists and then technical support from Italy should be added as a cost to cover⁴⁴. An extension of the programme that was against the conviction of many officers, among the different Ministries, to gradually withdraw the military assistance in the country.

The Italian participation in the assistance to the Congo was becoming more and more difficult, and among the several problems the unstable economic situation of the Congo was a primary concern. However, the AerMacchi's jet aircrafts were of great interest to Mobutu. In November 1968, on the occasion of the visit of General Sergio Duilio Fanali – the new Chief of the Italian Air Force – Mobutu declared that the purchase was a “great priority” to boost the efficiency of the Congolese Air Force⁴⁵. For Ambassador Baistrocchi, the Congolese leader was “jumping the gun” (“*bruciare le tappe*” in the original wording), having been persuaded by General Pappalardo (and the former head of DICTMA, Colonel Conti) that on one side, the Congolese Air Force needed seventeen jets, to defend the country against internal and external threats, on the other, Mobutu needed the purchase for reasons of prestige among other African leaders. While the Ambassador viewed these arguments as proof of DICTMA's brilliant long-term strategy, not all diplomats at DGAP were convinced of the strategy; a handwritten note on the document stated: “*e che io invece disapprovo nel modo più assoluto*” [which I, instead, absolutely disapprove]⁴⁶. Indeed, Mobutu had faced internal struggles in July 1967 and, on the occasion of the annual commemoration of the regime on November 24, intended to showcase the new jets to the Congolese public opinion.

While some US officers understood the Italian concerns regarding the efficiency of the international military assistance, which were exacerbated by an unofficial division of responsibilities among the allies that the Italians found unsatisfactory⁴⁷. Consequently, Washington was prepared to endorse and support the AerMacchi purchase to preserve the Italian engagement, as communicated to General Pappalardo in the autumn of 1968. During this dialogue, the Pappalardo declared that his “government is not content with its political position in the Congo” and was preparing for a disengagement at the end of the decade⁴⁸. However, before leaving the country, the Italians were ready to prepare the Congolese military for Italy's departure in order to ensure the programme's continuity beyond 1969⁴⁹.

On the contrary, other US representatives were more negative on the Italian achievements. The US Embassy in Congo, for instance, was quite certain that “Italians blamed the US government for their lack of commercial success with Macchi jets” and that in any case the results of the Italian training program were “rather poor” both on quality and quantity⁵⁰.

Negotiations continued between the Congo and Italy, while the US diplomats were determining how to respond if the worst-case scenario materialised – the Italians ending the programme. Nonetheless, the volatility of the situation was evident by December 1968

⁴³ Telespresso 18554 from DGAP, 22 August 1968, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1968, b. 11.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Defence, prot 3/33888, 11 September 1968, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1968, b. 11.

⁴⁵ Telespresso 2594 from Italian Embassy in the Congo, 27 November 1968, in ASD-MAECI, DGAP Uff. X, 1968, b. 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Secret Telegram 428, from US Embassy in the Congo to US Secretary of State, 5 October 1968, in NARA, RG 59, A1 1613-C, b. 1560,

⁴⁸ Secret Telegram 253 from US Embassy in the Congo to US Secretary of State, 15 October 1968, in NARA, RG 59, A1 1613-C, b. 1560,

⁴⁹ Memorandum from the Defence Attaché to the US Ambassador to the Congo, 15 January 1969, in NARA, RG 59, A1 1613-C, b. 1560.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

when the US diplomats noticed that the Italians were changing their minds on leaving the country, thus, suggesting that the AerMacchi affair was “probably back on the rails”⁵¹. The affair was indeed destined to be concretized and seventeen Macchi MB-326GB aircrafts, locally named *Sukisa*, and twelve Siai Marchetti SF-260 MC aircrafts were bought by Mobutu’s government from the Italian company (Merlo, 2020).

Conclusions

During the Sixties, Rome navigated a delicate political phase characterized by a new orientation known as neo-Atlanticism. This policy sought to leverage Italy’s central position in the Mediterranean to cultivate stronger relationships with Arab and African countries. By 1963, the “opening to the left” (*apertura a sinistra*) brought the Italian Socialist Party into the government, which had direct consequences for its foreign policy (Nuti, 2002). The Italian authorities did not underestimate the importance of African independence. Certain African countries were prioritised over others. While Rome maintained a focus on those countries with which it shared a colonial past, countries like Morocco and Egypt were also central to the new, friendly collaboration Italy sought with the African continent.

Italy focused on the Republic of the Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) for several reasons. To begin with, as one of the first Sub-Saharan African countries to gain independence, it offered a fresh diplomatic start with fewer potential controversies than Italy’s former colonies. Furthermore, the Congo was exceptionally rich in minerals and potential oil reserves, and it actively sought new partners to invest in its industrial development. Finally, the international confrontation between the superpowers heavily impacted Léopoldville’s first steps as an independent state, testing the solidity of the new African leaders.

The United States sought the collaboration of its allies in stabilising the Congo, specifically through participation in military assistance programs. Although Italy had limited resources for financing military training and grants at the time, it decided to participate to reaffirm its participation in the Western bloc and the collaboration with its allies. Rome’s military training programme was maintained over many years despite the profound internal challenges faced by the Congo. From the administrations of Lumumba and Adoula to those of Tshombe and, eventually, Mobutu, Congolese domestic politics underwent massive shifts. Though, having suffered the direct consequences of the Congolese civil war, with the assassination of its Vice-Consul and thirteen aviators in the Kindu massacre, Italy kept its commitment to Congolese unity over the years.

Beyond the motivations related to international alliances, a primary reason for Italy’s decision was the strategic importance that prominent national companies had placed on this new African country. Companies such as ENI, Astaldi, and FIAT were eager to invest in the region and required Italian authorities to establish the political conditions necessary for their operations. In the military sector, this synergy was evident in the struggle to maintain the training program for the Congolese Air Force while Léopoldville hesitated to finalise the sale of AerMacchi aircrafts. Negotiations between Italy and the Congo over this sale were deemed fundamental for Rome to continue its training mission; indeed, when the Congolese government appeared unwilling to confirm the purchase, Italy threatened to withdraw from the country entirely. This purchase highlighted the competitive tensions within Western alliances, specifically regarding US-Italy military cooperation in the Congo. The US was prepared to provide its own aircraft to the Congolese authorities free of charge, while simultaneously using the Conte-Long Amendment to obstruct the AerMacchi deal. It

⁵¹ Secret Telegram 693, from US Embassy in the Congo to US Secretary of State, 4 December 1968, in NARA, RG 59, A1 1613-C, b. 1560,

was only after realizing that Mobutu firmly preferred the Italian jets and that Italy was prepared to terminate its entire assistance programme that the US finally provided its endorsement. This diplomatic shift proved to be the decisive factor in securing the commercial success of the deal.

The intertwining of domestic necessities, specifically the drive to expand exports, with international obligations was clearly evident in the Italy-Congo partnership. This relationship tested Italy's willingness to leverage its dual identity as a sympathetic partner to a newly independent Africa and a reliable ally within the Western bloc. By navigating these often conflicting roles, Rome demonstrated that its neo-Atlanticist strategy was not merely theoretical, but a concrete path where multiple and diverse goals would be pursued by the Italian authorities at the same time.

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