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Review essay

Observing War, Interpreting Strategy:
Russian Strategic Culture and the Politics of Learning Meaningful Lessons

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Abstract

This essay reviews Dimitri Minic's *Pensée et culture stratégiques russe. Du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine* and situates it within debates on strategic culture, expertise, and lesson-drawing. Minic's analysis of over 1,200 Russian-language sources reconstructs the revisionist–traditionalist divide that has reshaped Russian conceptions of war and highlights how non-material factors—worldviews, myths, and doctrinal reinterpretations—contribute to strategic thinking. The book's strengths lie in its systematic engagement with domestic debates and the empirical breadth of its evidence, though its dialogue with wider political science literature and treatment of civil–military relations remain limited. Extending the discussion, the essay links Minic's findings to current debates on battlefield transparency, analogical reasoning, and the extraction of lessons from conflict. It argues that in-depth contextual expertise on ideational factors is indispensable for avoiding misinterpretation, making strategic culture analysis a critical resource for both scholars and policymakers.

Keywords: Strategic Culture; Lesson Learned; Change; Russia

Introduction

"Don't do Russia policy without consulting people who know far more about Russia than you do. Don't rely on people who have been trained as diplomats but have no real understanding of patterns of Russian behavior."

Toomas Hendrik Ilves, former Estonian president, reported by Politico 9 March 2022.

Ilves's warning points to a broader dispute over Western interpretations of Russian conduct. For many of Russia's European neighbours, the problem was not simply that Washington, Berlin, or Brussels underestimated Moscow's coercive intentions, but that they repeatedly interpreted Russian behaviour through assumptions of eventual convergence, accommodation, or mutual interest (Lau 2022; Kuzio 2024). Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 formally ended the language of "reset" in relations with Moscow (Rachwald 2011); yet it did not fully displace the expectation that selective engagement with the Russian leadership remained possible. By 2021, Chatham House could still list the notions that Russia and the West ultimately wanted the same things, that they were not in conflict, and that a new European security architecture must include Russia as widely held myths (Allan et al., 2021). Even after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, although from a minority position, some analysts continue to argue that Russia poses only a limited threat and is merely reacting defensively to Western policies (Chau & Wang, 2023; Evans, 2025).

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This debate concerns not only the scale of the Russian threat but, more fundamentally, the frameworks through which the West interprets it. Much Western threat assessment (Hackett et al., 2022; Shultz & Brimelow, 2022) has privileged observable indicators of power — force size, spending levels, equipment, and readiness — while giving less systematic attention to the interpretive frameworks through which Russian elites define threats, opportunities, and acceptable instruments of coercion (Renz, 2024). Yet, as scholars from Fuller (2008) to Gray (2014) have argued, such factors are central to understanding why leaders make the choices they do. This is the terrain of what political science calls strategic culture: "a system of symbols [that] embodies assumptions about what the security *problematique* is, and therefore about how to best deal with it" (Johnston, 1998, p. 39).

Studies of strategic culture have long been criticised for being overly vague and all-encompassing, thereby failing to meet the methodological standards of political science (Anand, 2020; Lantis & Howlett, 2016; Uz Zaman, 2009). Yet a growing body of literature has begun to adopt this concept in heuristically fruitful ways to strengthen and complement explanations about change within the armed forces (Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2025; Dian et al., 2023; Schmitt, 2024), differences in force postures (Angstrom & Honig, 2012; Harig et al., 2022; Ruffa, 2017), failures in critical decision-making (Göransson, 2024; Renz, 2024), use and development of technology (Farrell, 2010; Schwarz, 2025) and alliance making (Becker & Malesky, 2017; Borozna, 2022; Gasparyan & Duarte, 2024). In these works, strategic culture is essentially treated as a set of historically sedimented assumptions, institutionalised habits, threat narratives, and professional repertoires that contribute to shaping how actors interpret the security *problématique* and select plausible instruments of action.

Along these lines, scholarship on Russian strategic culture has linked Moscow's threat perception to narratives of vulnerability, strategic depth, and Western hostility (Götz & Staun, 2022; Rumer & Sokolosky, 2020); examined how fears of "colour revolutions" shaped Russian understandings of non-military destabilisation and regime security (German, 2020); traced the development of cross-domain coercion and deterrence (Adamsky, 2018, 2023; Fasola & Averre, 2026); analysed cyber and information threats through ideas of besiegement, technological inferiority, and vulnerability to foreign interference (Kari & Kuusisto, 2017; Kari & Pynnöniemi, 2023); and studied the relationship between Russian military thought, indirect action, and the changing character of war in Ukraine (Fasola, 2024; Göransson, 2024; Kukkola, 2023). Other works have stressed the imperial, civilisational, and status-based dimensions of Russian strategic culture, including the role of great-power entitlement, conservative ideology, and Putin's operational code (Dagi, 2026; Engström, 2014; Kanet, 2019; Østbø, 2026). Read in conjunction, this literature suggests that Russian strategic culture should be understood as a contested and evolving interpretive environment through which Russian elites define threats, justify coercion, and learn from war. This interpretive environment is what gives operational meaning to material power. In short, without the non-material grammar of Russian strategy, the visible "heavy metal" (Adamsky, 2025, p. 5) of military power tells us what Russia possesses, but not how, why, or to what ends it is likely to fight.

Unlike "heavy metal", analysis of immaterial elements requires specialised subject knowledge. This is precisely where the policy problem begins. Western governments and expert communities have repeatedly been criticised for lacking the area knowledge, linguistic competence, and conceptual familiarity needed to interpret Russian strategic behaviour on its own terms (ECA, 2024; GAO, 2025; IfG, 2024; Vagle & Brooks, 2025). Recent work on expertise and public administration supports these concerns, suggesting that specialist knowledge often has limited influence on policy outcomes (Haunschild et al., 2025). In the Russian case, the issue lies chiefly in the difficulty of interpreting military language, threat narratives, and coercive signalling without filtering them through Western strategic categories. As Adamsky argues (2023, p. 5), Western scholarship has often lagged behind the evolution of Russian deterrence theory and has insufficiently engaged Russian-language primary sources, especially when those sources illuminate the intangible dimensions of strategy.

The marginalisation of specialised expertise leaves greater room for impressionistic geopolitical commentary to fill the interpretive gap. "Popular geopolitics" (Tuathail, 1999, p. 110) circulating through media and public debate often accounts for non-material factors but recasts them as civilisational constants, innate instincts, or national mentalities. In doing so, these commentaries offer apparently clear answers about "how the world is" and "what must be done." They impose narrative closure by turning contingent developments into seemingly timeless geopolitical patterns (Sharp, 1993), rationalise strategy retrospectively in ways that resemble analytical pareidolia (Recordati-Koen, 2024), and derive much of their persuasive force from emotionally compelling political myths (Laketa, 2019; Schmitt, 2018). In more recent work, Welker (2025) shows how this geopolitical mythmaking has structured far-right interpretations of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The problem, then, is not that public geopolitical commentaries do not take immaterial factors seriously, but that they often do so without the evidentiary discipline needed to distinguish strategic culture from deterministic storytelling.

Accordingly, the recent publication of Dimitri Minic's *Pensée et culture stratégiques russe. Du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine* offers the opportunity to discuss more in depth the policy benefits of expertise, shedding light on how the process of planning for possible, probable, and preferable futures requires intensive learning. By providing a detailed analysis of Russian strategic thought, Minic's book constructs a rich ideational context that enables a more grounded interpretation of Russia's behaviour. At the same time, the book raises a broader analytical problem: how far can Russian military-scientific discourse explain the actual conduct of war, and where must it be confronted with the empirical record of Russia's warfighting in Ukraine? Drawing on these insights, this review essay examines Minic's contribution along two connected axes: first, what it reveals about Russian strategic thought and culture; and second, how the relationship between strategic discourse and wartime practice should inform the extraction of lessons from contemporary war. The essay proceeds in three stages. The first section summarises the book's key findings. The second assesses its strengths and limitations by examining Minic's evidentiary strategy, situating the book within wider debates on Russian strategic culture and military thought, and evaluating how far military-scientific discourse can illuminate decision-making and wartime practice. The third broadens the discussion to consider the importance of expert judgement in formulating lessons to guide policymaking, especially when the object of analysis is an adversary whose doctrinal language, threat perceptions, and practices of coercion do not map neatly onto Western analytical categories.

Book summary

Minic's *Pensée et culture stratégiques russe. Du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine* reconstructs the intellectual evolution through which Russian military thinkers came to expand the meaning of war beyond armed confrontation alone. The book situates contemporary Russian strategy within the broader cognitive and doctrinal evolution since the post-Soviet period, highlighting a shift from the Soviet emphasis on armed struggle toward a conception of warfare that encompasses information operations, asymmetry, and indirect approaches.

The organising concept is the "bypassing of armed struggle": the idea that strategic objectives may be pursued by circumventing direct armed confrontation through political, informational, technological, and other indirect instruments. Minic traces how this idea evolved amid a long-standing divide between traditionalist and revisionist military thinkers: traditionalists defended the primacy of armed struggle, while revisionists argued for the integration of indirect methods and information-centric strategies. Over time, revisionist approaches increasingly contributed to shaping official discourse, ultimately becoming the dominant interpretive lens within Russian military doctrine. These developments were also informed by partisan or outright misinterpretations of Western strategic thought and doctrines. Russian theorists frequently reframed selected ideas (from operational concepts to the writings of Western strategists and geopolitical thinkers) as either evidence of hostile intent or as templates to be adapted, often with little regard for their original meaning.

The book further reconstructs the worldview underpinning Russian strategic culture: a persistent sense of encirclement, a perception of malevolent Western intent, and the belief in Russia's unique civilisational role. These ideas contribute to shaping both the theoretical embrace of indirect methods and operational approaches, including hybrid tactics, information warfare, and the use of irregular or proxy actors. Lastly, Minic illustrates how these cultural and ideational factors contribute to shaping Russian behaviour in Ukraine, including the partial success of Crimea and Donbass operations as well as the miscalculations that led to a protracted war of attrition.

Overall, Minic combines doctrinal analysis with a cognitive and cultural lens, demonstrating that Russian military behaviour cannot be understood solely through conventional or material indicators. Its main contribution is therefore to show how inherited assumptions, ideological narratives, and selective appropriations of foreign strategic thought structure the ways Russian military elites imagine war, identify threats, and connect political goals to instruments of action.

Analysis

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its solid empirical foundation. Minic demonstrates that strategic culture can be reconstructed through rigorous research without resorting to either reductionism or determinism. Drawing on the work of more than 260 authors published in major Russian military-scientific outlets (such as *Voennaia Mysl'*[1], *Voenno-promyshlennyi kur'er*[2] and *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*[3]), on doctrine documents, public addresses by the senior leadership and military dictionaries, he examines a corpus of over 1,200 articles from 1999 to 2021. This extensive survey allows him to trace the evolution of Russia's post-Soviet strategic thought and culture in unusual breadth and detail. Minic's specificity does not lie in being the only scholar to engage Russian-language sources, but in focusing so systematically on Russian military-scientific discourse itself. Whereas much of the literature spans doctrinal documents, official statements, elite speeches, operational behaviour, and broader political narratives (Adamsky, 2023; Fasola & Averre, 2026; Götz & Staun, 2022), Minic works with a more restricted but finer-grained evidentiary base. This choice gives the book particular analytical leverage: it enables him to reconstruct the internal structure of professional military debate, identify competing schools of thought, and trace how certain concepts gradually gained prominence within Russia's strategic vocabulary. Equally convincing is the (implicit) logic of validation underpinning his approach, whereby professional military debate is read alongside official military dictionaries, doctrinal documents, and public statements. If strategic culture is understood as a negotiated reality among elites (Berger, 1998), then juxtaposing the debates in

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[1] *Military Thought.*
[2] *Military-Industrial Courier.*
[3] *International Affairs.*

professional literature with official sources is a valuable way to trace the dynamic interplay between ideas and official codification—at least insofar as such sources codify state objectives and identify the means to achieve them (Choi, 1996). As a corollary, the book's extensive appendices not only attest to the thoroughness of Minic's research but also provide essential background on the military theorists themselves, including their ranks, experience, and ages. This enables readers to identify the basic profiles of the authors contributing to Russia's military-strategic literature.

While the book constitutes a valuable source for scholars and analysts, its structure as well as its core claims could benefit from additional clarity. The density of references and empirical detail can overwhelm readers, making it difficult to discern the book's central analytical thread. Although each chapter is empirically rich, the book does not always make explicit the causal mechanisms linking Soviet intellectual legacies or entrenched perceptions of Russia's strategic environment to the redefinition of war. As a result, the central research question occasionally recedes from view, leaving readers to reconstruct the causal linkages themselves rather than being guided by a clear analytical framework.

A related limitation concerns the treatment of civil–military relations. Because strategic culture emerges from the interaction of political authorities, military institutions, broader elite networks, and society, a fuller discussion of this dimension would have clarified how military-scientific debates relate to decision-making structures and resonate beyond specialist circles (Brooks, 2019; Feaver, 2003, 2017; Kohn, 1997; Pion-Berlin & Dudley, 2020). The book convincingly reconstructs the evolution of professional military discourse, yet it remains less clear how these debates are received, filtered, or instrumentalised by political leaders. This matters because analyses of Russian strategic behaviour have often stressed the role of Putin's inner circle, elite perceptions, and personalist decision-making in shaping policy (Herd, 2022; Zygar, 2016). Nor is it fully clear whether military elites derive legitimacy from wider public narratives, impose their own interpretive frames upon them, or operate within a more insulated professional sphere. This issue is especially relevant in a system where official narratives about Ukraine, the West, and Russia's great-power status circulate across political, military, and public registers rather than remaining confined to one institutional arena (Dagi, 2026; Götz & Staun, 2022). In this respect, the relationship between the military-scientific community, the Kremlin's inner decision-making circles, and broader mechanisms of legitimation remains under-specified. Addressing this issue would have linked the study more directly to comparative research on how strategic cultures are formed, transmitted, and transformed (Snyder, 2023).

This limitation becomes especially consequential when the analysis moves from strategic discourse to wartime practice. Minic's reconstruction of Russian strategic thought offers a detailed account of how Russian elites conceptualise indirect action, information confrontation, and the evolving character of war. Yet the extent to which these conceptual frameworks are borne out in Russia's conduct of war in Ukraine is not fully addressed. This matters because Russia's conduct of the war cannot be reduced to indirect or hybrid methods alone. Its campaign has also involved grinding attrition and exhaustion (Jones & McCabe, 2026), the persistence of inherited operational habits and firepower-centred approaches (Noorman, 2023), and the destructive targeting of urban space as a method of domination (Coward, 2025). At the same time, the war has generated important debates in the West on adaptation, multidomain operations and nuclear signalling (Chadwick et al., 2024; Henke et al., 2026; Michel et al., 2024). The empirical record of warfighting, therefore, presents a more ambiguous empirical record than a discourse-centred reading alone might suggest: Russian practice combines elements of indirect confrontation and information warfare with older, often brutal, patterns of destruction, exhaustion, and coercive escalation. This is not to suggest that Minic ignores the war in Ukraine. His interpretation of the full-scale invasion as revealing the limits, and ultimately the failure, of Russia's indirect approach is persuasive. The point is rather that this argument would have been strengthened by a deeper engagement, especially in the final chapter, with the operational conduct of the war itself. Doctrines, narratives, and professional debates do not translate mechanically into battlefield behaviour. Assessing how far they illuminate Russian practice therefore requires closer attention to military operations, including instances of adaptation, inconsistency, escalation, and failure. Without such confrontation, there is a risk of treating strategic culture as a self-contained system of meaning rather than as a set of interpretive resources whose relevance ultimately depends on how they are enacted, modified, or disregarded in practice.

Discussion

While modern sensors and information technologies may have rendered the battlefield more "transparent" than ever, the fog of war has hardly lifted. Greater visibility does not necessarily translate into cognitive clarity—that is, the ability to interpret intentions, anticipate deception, and grasp the adversary's strategic logic (Kunertova & Herzog, 2024). Two factors explain this gap. First, an abundance of data can foster overconfidence and a misplaced sense of omniscience (Néron-Bancel & Garnier, 2024). Second, military adaptation within the hider–finder dynamic (Calcara et al., 2022, 2023) is likely to produce instruments that deny transparency to the adversary (Oelrich et al., 2024), or prompt the adjustment of strategies precisely to exploit or mitigate the effects of transparency (Fox, 2024). Against this backdrop, I argue that in-depth knowledge of ideational factors is as relevant as the capacity to observe material ones, especially if the ultimate aim of observation is to derive actionable lessons.

As Fuller (2008) aptly notes, what is referred to as a "lesson learned" contains two elements: reflection and action. To put it simply, the endeavour of extracting lessons requires analysis of relevant events that have already occurred (the reflection) and the selection (action) of one course out of a larger pool of possible policy options. This second element is tied to a 'prophecy' about how the future (in terms of military engagements, responses to threats, etc.) might unfold (Ibid., p. 45). Both aspects pose significant challenges from a theoretical and practical standpoint. The fragmented and sometimes incoherent character of Russian strategic culture, as documented by Minic, shows that reflection is itself contested and that the lessons drawn are shaped as much by entrenched narratives as by empirical events. In general terms, the risks of planning for an inherently uncertain and unknowable future are manifold. Planning thus requires policymakers to exercise the utmost prudence and ground their decision in as much context as possible, since forethought cannot 'navigate itself' (Gray, 2014)

This raises the question of how decision-makers actually inform their choices. Zelikow's (2015) dissects decision-making into value judgments (what do I care about), reality judgments (what is going on), and action judgments (what can I do), which constantly interact. To inform their reality judgments (answering "what is going on?"), decision-makers extensively use analogies, comparing present or possible future situations to historical precedents (Khong, 2022). Such analogical reasoning is not far from counterfactuals, which Lebow (Lebow, 2000, p. 551) defines as "what if" statements about the past that vary contextual attributes or variables to assess how outcomes might have differed. Analogies, by contrast, can be seen as "what if" statements about the present or future: what if today's or tomorrow's policy choices resembled those taken in the past? Minic's reconstruction of Russian debates reveals how analogies to the Cold War are repeatedly mobilised, providing both a justificatory framework and a predictive model that channels current policy choices into familiar but misleading patterns.

In both counterfactuals and analogies, as Fearon (1991) notes, the exercise is essentially one of causal reasoning. Thus, if policymakers seek to identify causal mechanisms that are portable across contexts, attention should be given not only to the mechanisms themselves, but also to the (ideational, institutional etc.) context and its attributes (Carlsnaes, 2008; Falleti & Lynch, 2009). Returning to Zelikow's framework, this means that reality and action judgments are closely linked: extracting lessons from the past amounts to identifying causal mechanisms expected to recur in the future. In the Russian case, Minic demonstrates how reality judgements are conditioned by deep-seated narratives of encirclement and Western hostility, which in turn narrow the menu of action judgements available to decision-makers. Crucially, expertise is required to ensure that such judgements are not superficial. Only in-depth contextual knowledge enables observers to grasp the interaction between mechanisms presumed to operate and the specific environment in which they unfold.

The process of drawing lessons is, of course, unavoidably subjective and riddled with causal ambiguity, as it is shaped by competing perspectives, partial understandings and interpretations (Laugen Haaland, 2016). Yet, it is indispensable, precisely because it enables adaptation and transformation: without attempts to extract lessons, even imperfectly, states would lack the "chain of transmissions" of change (Dyson, 2019; Farrell, 2010; Van der Vorm, 2021). This makes clear that lesson-drawing cannot be divorced from the ideational environment in which it occurs: as Minic shows, even contradictory or conspiratorial beliefs can exert causal force by structuring how elites perceive options and risks. While there is no guarantee that lessons will generate positive transformation, careful attention to contextual and ideational factors offers the best safeguard against distortion and, crucially, the most reliable basis for meaningful change. For scholars, this underscores the need to study not only the workings of causal mechanisms but also the interpretive frameworks through which policymakers perceive and act upon them. For practitioners, it highlights that contextual expertise is not a luxury but a prerequisite for sound political decision-making. While there is no guarantee that the lessons of experience will lead to positive transformation, in-depth knowledge of contextual factors is one of the few safeguards against gross misinterpretation.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Power and Convergent Institutional Change

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Abstract

This article advances a mechanism-based framework for episodes of institutional change that are abrupt yet convergent across cases. Building on the idea that institutions are embedded in power relations, the article distinguishes two logics linking shifts in power to rapid change and clarifies why institutional trajectories may sometimes align or diverge across cases. The first is the familiar disruption logic of critical junctures, where loosened constraints raise contingency. The second, focal junctures, captures moments when power asymmetries and interdependence compress the feasible set, steering actors toward similar institutional choices. Two empirical cases of focal junctures—Latin American structural reforms during the debt-crisis era and global tax-structure convergence under financial globalization—illustrate this argument. Together, they show how particular configurations of power can generate rapid convergence across cases in key policy domains.

Keywords: Institutional Change; Abrupt Change; Convergence; Power Relations; Structural Power; Focal Junctures; Mechanisms of Change

Introduction

Over the last half century, neo-institutionalist perspectives have underscored how institutions shape social and political life (Hall & Taylor 1996; Immergut 1998; Peters 2019). Across neo-institutionalist traditions, institutions are commonly understood as relatively stable patterns of rules and practices that shape behavior by providing a "logic of appropriateness" (March & Olsen, 2011). In this vein, the stability of institutions—and the shared knowledge surrounding them—indicates their degree of institutionalization and their capacity to frame social relations effectively.

Institutional stability has also been closely linked to power. Authors from diverse traditions and approaches have recognized the distributive character of institutions: they allocate advantages and protect interests. This link between stability and power appears even within institutionalist traditions that emphasize collective gains or solutions to coordination problems. Particularly illustrative is Douglass North's (1990) claim that institutions are not typically designed for social efficiency; rather, they reflect the preferences of actors with bargaining power.

This link between power and stability also helps explain why institutional change is often difficult to account for (Pierson 2000). This dual emphasis—on stability and on the embeddedness of institutions in power relations—poses a familiar puzzle: if institutions, in some sense, reflect a configuration of power relations, how should we explain episodes of abrupt institutional change? Moreover, as Acemoglu and Egorov (p. 366) note, "the groups that are empowered by current institutions benefit from these institutions and thus use their power to maintain them." How, then, can we explore the dynamics of institutional

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change without treating institutions as either fully autonomous from power or merely epiphenomenal to it?

Understanding large, rapid institutional change in relation to power can be particularly difficult. Political science relies on the main dedicated concept for studying such change: critical junctures. In this framework, short periods arise in which, due to some disruption, structural constraints relax, contingency becomes salient, and divergent paths may be selected and subsequently reinforced (Capoccia & Kelemen 2007). In this sense, if institutions are typically embedded in power relations that sustain them, their abrupt change should be linked to a loosening or disruption of those very power relations.

In this vein, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, 106–7, 110, 332) argue that critical junctures are commonly understood as periods in which “a major event or confluence of factors disrupts the existing balance of political or economic power.” However, generic references to such “relaxation” can leave the power problem under-specified within the framework, sidestepping rather than directly analyzing how power reconfigures during these windows.

Building on prior clarifications, this article argues that what remains less developed is an explicit theorization of how distinct configurations of power, and shifts within them, generate distinct forms of institutional change.

At a methodological and conceptual level, a central limitation of the literature lies in the way critical junctures have been characterized. Rather than being grounded in explicit causal mechanisms, they are often defined through the enumeration of associated attributes—such as contingency, the relaxation of structural constraints, and the emergence of divergent legacies. As Capoccia (2016) notes different authors use the term in different ways; this variation reflects the absence of a shared mechanism-based foundation. Consequently, abrupt change is commonly portrayed as a context in which constraints weaken, contingency becomes decisive, and institutional trajectories diverge across cases, leaving convergent outcomes largely outside the framework’s core analytical expectations (Collier & Munck 2022).

The contribution is to shift conceptualization from trait-listing to mechanisms. Substantively, treating institutions as embedded in power relations broadens how we think about abrupt change. Classic work on embeddedness and the distributive character of institutions (Polanyi 2001 [1944]; Granovetter 1985; Hall & Taylor 1996; Moe 2005) suggests that stability reflects underlying power configurations that allocate advantages and protect interests. From this vantage point, rapid change need not be understood only as a relaxation of constraints that elevates contingency; it also invites attention to how shifts in power—including moves toward greater asymmetry—can restructure institutional alternatives within a short window.

While existing accounts often refer to power in the analysis of institutional change, they tend to leave underspecified the mechanisms through which configurations of power generate distinct patterns of constraint. In particular, the literature has not systematically theorized how these configurations can produce not only divergence but also rapid cross-case convergence. This article seeks to address this by linking configurations of power to the production of structural constraints and, through them, to distinct patterns of institutional change.

Against this backdrop, we distinguish two mechanisms linking shifts in power to abrupt institutional change. The first is the well-established destabilization path associated with critical-junctures research. As Acemoglu and Robinson emphasize, major shocks can upset the prevailing balance of political and economic power, destabilizing structural constraints and loosening the parameters that had previously channeled behavior. These conditions raise uncertainty and widen the scope for contingent agency, making divergent institutional trajectories and differentiated legacies more likely.

The second—less theorized in the literature—captures episodes in which power reconfigures to tighten and align constraints across units. As available institutional options narrows, a small subset becomes focal, and rapid cross-case alignment becomes a plausible outcome. We specify scope conditions and observable implications for both mechanisms, treating divergence and convergence as outcomes rooted in shifts within the power relations that embed institutions.

Focusing on the second logic brings into view a form of abrupt change that has been underexplored; in the corpus compiled by Collier and Munck (2022), only two influential studies even consider convergent legacies, and the most recent dates back nearly forty years. Absent an explicit, power-centered account of how shifting configurations tighten and align constraints across units, such convergence is often classified as diffusion or treated as anomalous, leaving unexplained why institutional change can converge quickly across cases.

Following the conceptual discussion, the article briefly illustrates two cases of this second logic—focal, convergent rapid change. First, an instrumental focal pathway: Latin American structural reforms in the 1980s–1990s, where crisis bargaining, external leverage, and conditionality reweighted payoffs and steered governments toward similar reform packages. Second, a structural focal pathway: tax-structure shifts under heightened capital mobility and integration, where tighter, aligned constraints and readily available templates made cross-country alignment the modal response.

The remainder proceeds as follows. The next section clarifies how critical junctures have been conceptualized in the literature and motivates a mechanism-based approach to abrupt change. The third section develops a baseline framework that links stability, constraints, and agency. The fourth section formalizes two logics—one organized by disruption, the other by focal alignment—with clear scope conditions and observable implications. We close with two short illustrations (Latin American structural reforms; tax-structure convergence under global capital mobility) and a brief conclusion.

Conceptualizing Abrupt Institutional Change: From Descriptive Usage to Mechanisms

Political science debate has tended to discuss different characteristics associated with the concept of critical junctures in isolation, rather than adopting a more theoretically encompassing view. Recently, Collier and Munck (2022) conducted a valuable meta-analysis reviewing the dimensions that many of the most renowned authors within this theoretical framework attribute to the concept of critical junctures.

The meta-analysis evaluates the importance that authors assign to contingency and to the production of enduring legacies—typically conceptualized as divergent across cases—and so forth. This review prompts the question of whether these studies share a sufficiently similar characterization to allow progress toward a more representative and common conceptualization of critical junctures.

For most authors, contingency and particularly the emergence of divergent legacies across various units of analysis, are viewed as intrinsic features of critical junctures. This emphasis is reflected in the empirical focus of the literature, where convergent trajectories are rarely theorized as central outcomes.

Accordingly, processes yielding convergent legacies and in which contingency plays a secondary role should not be classified as critical junctures. Those interested in analyzing such abrupt changes should therefore examine them outside the framework of critical junctures and potentially develop specific heuristic tools for this purpose.

However, David Collier (2022) addresses this issue by proposing a working definition of critical junctures. Yet even in this reformulation, convergence is not incorporated as a central analytical expectation, and the resulting conceptualization may introduce new uncertainties for the study of structurally convergent change processes. Collier's concise definition states that "a critical juncture is (1) a concentrated, macro episode of innovation that (2) generates an enduring legacy." The production of divergent legacies and the predominant role of contingency are treated as related properties of the concept.

This new conceptualization, on one hand, has the deliberate aim of being comprehensive, in the sense of accommodating various perspectives and issues within the framework of critical junctures. However, because contingency and the differentiation of legacies are still treated as related properties, it remains unclear how structurally convergent changes could fit within the framework. Since Collier categorizes his proposal as a "working definition," this suggests that it remains open to debate and to further theoretical refinement.

The study of abrupt political changes occurring in convergent waves thus faces a challenging situation even under Collier's definition. If we consider the two points of the general definition, such cases would appear to qualify as critical junctures. However, if we take into account the related properties and the perspective of the majority of contemporary authors, these processes do not clearly fall within this category.

As a result, processes of abrupt but convergent institutional change tend to remain theoretically under-specified and comparatively understudied within the dominant framework. Moreover, when faced with abrupt change, there may be a tendency to privilege contingent explanations in order to align it with the dominant understanding of critical junctures. This would be a case of the problem of the 'golden hammer' or the 'law of the tool', which states that "when I only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail" (Kaplan, 1964).

Leading definitions of critical junctures emphasize contingency, indeterminacy, and the potential for divergence across cases (Gerring 2012; Soifer 2012; Bernhard 2015; Capoccia 2016). The expectation of differentiation across cases becomes analytically central, as outcomes are understood to depend on small, often unpredictable events rather than on structured constraints (Mahoney 2000, 2001; Collier and Collier 2002). While this perspective has generated important insights, it narrows the analytical scope of the framework: processes in which strong structural asymmetries constrain the feasible set—producing convergent outcomes—are difficult to conceptualize within its terms.

We are thus confronted with a problem related to concept formation, which in the case of social sciences can be addressed through different methodological strategies and grounded in diverse epistemological perspectives. Without needing to take a stance on these underlying issues, this paper will attempt to explore a different approach to the problem of conceptualizing abrupt political changes with structurally convergent characteristics, as well as their relationship with the framework of critical junctures.

Concept formation in the study of abrupt institutional change has largely proceeded through the identification of recurring attributes and empirical similarities across cases. Yet this approach raises a familiar problem: without a clearer theoretical account of why particular attributes co-occur, it remains difficult to determine which characteristics are conceptually central and which are secondary or derivative. In this sense, debates surrounding critical junctures often risk remaining at the level of descriptive trait-listing rather than advancing toward a clearer specification of the mechanisms generating these observable patterns.

Experimental psychology research demonstrates that individuals' prior knowledge of a concept extends beyond its defining characteristics or attributes to include a representation of causal mechanisms that interconnect these attributes and explain their correlation or simultaneous occurrence (Rehder 2003ab). In a sense, this notion is trivially true and well-known, as exemplified by Murphy and Medin (1985:290): our prior causal knowledge allows us to group vapor, ice, and water under a single concept, despite their differing observable attributes.

Even more significant is the relationship between concepts and theory in the social sciences, where concepts have been regarded as the building blocks of all inferences, and the formation of concepts is clearly theory-driven (Gerring 1999). Along this line, the discussion on the study of abrupt political changes could progress from merely enumerating the characteristics and properties with which critical junctures have been characterized, to questioning the causal processes that explain the emergence of these observable attributes.

A theoretically oriented approach to concept formation contributes to coherence by providing criteria for associating attributes and contents with concepts (Murphy & Medin, 1985). In the case of abrupt political changes, in the next section, we pose a series of theoretical questions that may be relevant for the discussion surrounding their conceptualization: Why do contingency and diversity play such a prominent role in characterizing critical junctures for some authors? Are there reasons to expect that contingency and differentiation occur together? Are there other processes of change that occur in convergent waves, and do these processes seem to be explained by different underlying causal mechanisms?

Theoretical Foundations: Institutional Embeddness, Constraints, and Agency

One of the most significant reasons for studying institutions lies in their inherent tendency towards stability, characterized by enduring effects and evolutionary patterns that are contingent upon their historical trajectory (Moe 2005). For numerous scholars, the concept of "power begetting power" stands as the primary explanatory framework for institutional stability. This proposition posits that groups empowered by existing institutional arrangements, accrue benefits from these structures, subsequently leveraging their influence to perpetuate and uphold them. In doing so, these empowered groups perpetuate their dominance over future institutional configurations. (Acemoglu, Egorov & Sonin 2021).

The interplay between power dynamics and institutional change stands as a central focus within historical neo-institutionalism, particularly emphasizing the role of power asymmetries in shaping the functioning and evolution of institutions (Hall and Taylor, 1994). More recently, scholars such as Streeck and Thelen (2005b, p. 9) have posited institutions as distributional instruments imbued with inherent power implications. Consequently, institutions become arenas of tension, challenge, and ongoing negotiation, giving rise to various possibilities for gradual endogenous changes (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010b, p. 8).

Nevertheless, even within historical institutionalism, the emerging perspectives of endogenous change have prompted some reservations regarding the enduring influence of institutions amidst power dynamics. The primary concern pertains to the emphasis placed by these theories on how social and political interactions drive institutional transformation, potentially overshadowing the pivotal role institutions play in structuring these interactions. This perspective risks portraying institutions as excessively malleable, thereby potentially undermining their substantive causal impact in political processes (Capoccia, 2016:2).

The theoretical quandary underlying this discourse is the endogeneity dilemma, as articulated by Przeworski: the notion that institutions serve as the ultimate explanatory framework for political dynamics appears to conflict with theories positing that institutional dynamics are fundamentally influenced or shaped by other factors, such as power. In Hall's (2010, 204) formulation “by their nature, analyses designed to explain why institutions have a persistent impact on behavior tend to overstate the solidity of institutions while acknowledging their plasticity raises questions about when institutions should be seen as determinants of behavior and when objects of strategic action themselves”.

However, there exists a distance between affirming the significance of institutions and their influence on behavior, and assuming that institutional theories should consistently strive to uphold this autonomy of the institutional dimension, irrespective of the specific problem or context under examination. In this regard, it is plausible to concur with Capoccia's assertion that despite the continuous evolution of actors and contexts "the constant stream of social change does not necessarily, automatically, and fully translate into institutional change"; although not necessarily agreeing when he posits that "ultimately, the primary task of any institutional theory is to theorize why this is the case".

Social change, shifts in power distribution, or the strategic calculations of actors do not invariably or completely manifest in the institutional realm. Hence, the aim of institutional theory should be to elucidate why and when these phenomena exert a significant impact, as well as the conditions under which they do not. Institutional theory ought to possess the flexibility to discern occasions and processes where power plays a minor role in institutional dynamics, as opposed to instances where it wields substantial influence.

Theory enables us to account for reality. In this regard, since Copernicus' time, we have known that it is not prudent to define ex ante the postulates that a theory should have in any field solely based on the consequences that may derive from these postulates. The ultimate role that institutions may have, does not constitute a valid argument to refute theories of gradual change or a perspective that argues that abrupt political changes can sometimes be strongly determined by power dynamics.

On the other hand, although power dynamics may lead to gradual endogenous changes or even steer major abrupt institutional transformations, as argued here, this does not imply abandoning the explanatory role of the institutional dimension in political life. In other words, theories of institutional change can demonstrate that it responds to certain initial conditions without necessarily being solely determined by these conditions (Przeworski, 2004). Moreover, a truly comprehensive theory can discern between processes that are more strongly determined and those that are not. available institutional options narrow.

In this regard, it is argued that institutions play a fundamental role in regulating the behavior of agents, but they do not exist in isolation. Instead, they are subject to influence from the very actors they govern and the interactions among them. Institutions are deeply entrenched within a framework of power dynamics, involving the agents whose behaviors they regulate. This embeddedness implies an arrangement between institutions and the prevailing power structure within which they operate. Groups and individuals, rather than being passive observers in the realm of political and institutional dynamics, actively navigate this intricate relationship between rules and power.

Hence, modifications in power dynamics are closely linked to the occurrence of sudden institutional changes. When power balances shift, it is reasonable to expect a subsequent evolution in institutions. Generally, there has been a predominant emphasis on a singular type of change in power dynamics and its correlation with abrupt political and institutional shifts. However, this theoretical exploration may have been incomplete. Theorizing has arguably been partial, because it has not fully established the connection between various shifts in power relations, the role of contingency or structure, and their subsequent connection with either divergent or convergent legacies.

Mechanisms of Abrupt Institutional Change

As noted above, concept formation should be articulated with theory—especially with explanations of why phenomena display particular attributes. The central issue here is why some episodes of abrupt change are divergent and highly contingent, whereas others are convergent and strongly shaped by structural conditions. We propose two complementary pathways linking shifts in power configurations and the constraints they generate to rapid institutional change.

Our point of departure is an embeddedness view: institutions and policies are lodged within configurations of power; by power configurations we refer to structured distributions of control over strategically valued resources, and the relations of dependence they generate, shaping the relative power or capacity of actors to impose costs, shape payoffs, or block alternatives in a given institutional setting (Emerson 1962).

These configurations capture not only who holds resources, but how actors exercise power by mobilizing those resources in practice to sustain cooperation, discipline other actors, or exclude competing courses of action. In this sense, power configurations do not determine institutional outcomes, but define the relative capacities through which institutional change is contested and produced.

What much of the literature refers to as structural constraints is understood here as the effect of a given configuration of power. If power configurations define who can act and with what leverage, structural constraints capture the extent to which that distribution restricts the feasible set of institutional alternatives. That is, constraints become observable when certain options are rendered too costly to sustain, cannot be credibly implemented, or are effectively excluded by the distribution of power.

Empirically, variation in power configurations can be assessed by examining how control over key resources translates into the capacity of actors to impose costs, generate dependence, sustain or resist pressures, and exclude alternatives within a given domain. What varies across configurations is not only the distribution of resources, but the extent to which these capacities can be effectively mobilized to constrain the range of feasible institutional options.

Structural constraints can be observed in turn through the degree to which institutional alternatives remain viable or are systematically ruled out, as considerations operating through resource dependence, interdependence among actors, and rule-based or conditional arrangements render certain options too costly, infeasible, or unsustainable in economic, strategic, or institutional terms. In this sense, power configurations and structural constraints are analytically distinct but tightly linked: the former define the distribution of capacities among actors, while the latter capture the extent to which those capacities are successfully translated into restrictions on available institutional alternatives.

The analytical link between power configurations and patterns of institutional change operates through the degree to which configurations of power generate structural constraints that expand or restrict institutional alternatives.

When control over key resources cannot be effectively converted into sustained constraints—whether due to fragmentation, balance, or disruption—no actor or coalition can reliably impose or exclude alternatives. Constraints remain weak, institutional alternatives remain open, and institutional outcomes are shaped by contingent sequences.

By contrast, when control over key resources is sufficiently concentrated or when shifts in payoffs generate parallel incentives across actors, constraints tighten and viable alternatives become progressively limited. In these contexts, agency becomes more structured, contingency declines, and institutional trajectories are more likely to converge.

Pressures for institutional change emerge when, given the prevailing configuration of power and the constraints it generates, existing institutional arrangements are no longer able to sustain or produce a viable set of outcomes. In this sense, episodes of accelerated political-institutional change can be understood as responses to a misalignment between institutional arrangements and the underlying configuration of power, expressed either as a breakdown in the capacity to sustain existing arrangements or as a systematic failure to generate desired outcomes. Such episodes can follow different trajectories depending on how power configurations shape institutional alternatives.

Table 1. Two Mechanisms of Abrupt Institutional Change

Disruption Logic (Critical Junctures)	Focal-Alignment Logic (Focal Junctures)
Power configuration	
Destabilized or indeterminate; no actor or coalition can reliably impose or exclude alternatives	Asymmetric and/or aligned; actors or parallel shifts in incentives across actors consistently restrict available options
Translation into constraints	
Control over resources cannot be effectively converted into sustained constraints on alternatives	Control over resources or structure of incentives is effectively translated into constraints that systematically restrict alternatives
Structural constraints	
Relaxed or weak; broad range of viable institutional options	Tightened and aligned; narrow range of viable institutional options
Core mechanism	
Abrupt change often follows from the disruption of existing power relations, which prevents the consolidation of constraints and expands the feasible set	Abrupt change often follows from the tightening and alignment of constraints, either through instrumental leverage or structural alignment of incentives
Role of agency and degree of contingency	
High. Actors operate under weak constraints and expanded margins of maneuver. Outcomes sensitive to timing, sequencing, and small events	More limited. Action is shaped by restricted and aligned constraints. Outcomes structured by aligned incentives and restricted options
Expected pattern of outcomes	
Divergence; branching trajectories across cases	Convergence; clustering of institutional responses across cases
Temporal pattern	
Event-sensitive sequences; reactive and path-dependent processes	Short windows of alignment; rapid clustering following constraint tightening
Anchoring in literature	
Acemoglu & Robinson (2012); Capoccia & Kelemen (2007); Mahoney (2000); Bernhard (2015)	Lindblom (1982); Jessop (1999, 2000); Bretschger & Hettich (2002); Devereux et al. (2008); Bachas et al. (2022)

In some cases, change emerges under conditions of indeterminacy in the configuration of power. This may occur when external shocks disrupt existing power relations, or when the distribution of power is relatively balanced, such that no actor or coalition can reliably impose or exclude institutional alternatives. Under these conditions, constraints remain weak, the feasible set remains open, and outcomes are shaped by contingency. Institutional trajectories are therefore more likely to diverge—this corresponds to the disruption logic typically associated with critical junctures.

In other cases, change emerges within configurations of power that remain relatively stable but generate strong pressures for institutional adjustment. This may occur either because dominant actors possess sufficient power to impose their preferred institutional arrangements, or because multiple actors face parallel shifts in incentives that make certain institutional responses mutually reinforcing across cases. In these contexts, constraints tighten, the feasible set narrows, and a limited set of institutional responses becomes focal. Institutional trajectories are therefore more likely to converge—this corresponds to what we conceptualize as focal alignment—.

These logics are conceived as analytical mechanisms linking configurations of power to patterns of institutional change. While elements of both may coexist empirically, the framework identifies the dominant mechanism in a given episode by examining whether the configuration of power expands or compresses alternatives, thereby generating divergent or convergent institutional trajectories.

To clarify the analytical distinctions between these two mechanisms, Table 1 summarizes their core features, specifying how different configurations of power translate into distinct patterns of structural constraints, agency, and institutional outcomes. In this sense, the table summarizes the argument and offers comparative criteria for identifying each mechanism in empirical analysis.

The table highlights that the contrast between divergence and convergence is not definitional but mechanism-based, emerging from how configurations of power expand or compress the range of institutional alternatives. In what follows, we develop both logics—critical junctures and focal alignment—and, for the latter, distinguish between its instrumental variant, driven by coordinated leverage by dominant actors, and its structural variant, driven by decentralized but aligned responses to changing incentives.

Disruption Logic: The Critical-Juncture logic

Abrupt transformations may arise when prevailing power arrangements are disrupted. This is the logic underlying what North describes as discontinuous change: radical changes in institutions usually associated with wars, revolutions, economic crises, natural disasters, or other major shocks (North 1990: 89; Capoccia & Kelemen 2007: 348). A similar intuition is central to Acemoglu and Robinson's formulation of critical junctures as moments in which "a major event or confluence of factors disrupts the existing balance of political or economic power" (2012: 106). In related terms, Collier and Collier treat periods of crisis and political realignment as moments in which new institutional arrangements may be created.

For the purposes of the present framework, however, the key point is how disruption operates as a mechanism. When prevailing power relations are unsettled, control over strategic resources is no longer easily converted into stable constraints over institutional alternatives. Previously dominant actors may lose the capacity to impose costs, sustain cooperation, or exclude rival options, while no new actor or coalition is yet able to close down the range of alternatives. In this sense, disruption loosens structural constraints and expands the feasible set.

This is why contingency and divergence are commonly associated with critical junctures. When constraints weaken, actors operate with wider margins of maneuver, and outcomes become more sensitive to timing, sequencing, leadership, and relatively small events. Bernhard (2015: 976–91) captures this logic when he describes critical junctures as periods in which "the constraints of structure have weakened," enabling actors to "restructure, overthrow, and replace" key systems. Swidler (1986) similarly describes unsettled moments as periods in which choices become freer and more consequential than in settled times.

Thus, in this framework, divergence is better understood not as a definitional attribute of critical junctures, but as the result of a mechanism. The disruption of a prevailing configuration of power weakens structural constraints, expands the feasible set, increases the role of agency and contingency, and makes institutional trajectories more likely to branch across cases.

Focal Alignment: The Focal-Juncture Path

This pathway operates through two mechanisms: an instrumental one, in which coordinated leverage narrows the range of institutional options; and a structural one, in which institutional alternatives become restricted through decentralized adjustments across actors facing similar changes in incentive structures, thereby inducing parallel responses without prior coordination In empirical settings, both may coexist, but one typically plays the leading role in restricting institutional alternatives.

a) Instrumental focal juncture

In the instrumental mechanism, abrupt change can follow from an external shock that increases power asymmetries among actors. The prevailing balance in the control of resources is transformed, asymmetries deepen, and actors in relatively stronger positions within this configuration acquire the capacity to impose costs, shape incentives, and restrict the range of actions available to others, using leverage to steer outcomes toward similar institutional solutions. Within this instrumental dynamic, they enforce a limited set of options, thereby inducing convergence within a constrained range of institutional responses.

The Latin American structural reforms following the 1980s debt crisis exemplify this pattern. The sharp increase in international interest rates, combined with high external indebtedness and limited access to alternative sources of finance, reconfigured power asymmetries between debtor governments and external creditors. Large private banks, international financial institutions, and governments of central economies were thus able to exert coordinated leverage that induced convergent reform packages across multiple countries.

In this context, access to external finance and debt renegotiation was tied to time-bounded policy milestones. Governments internalized these constraints, which compressed domestic choice sets and raised the costs of delay. In practice, this produced synchronized policy bundles—stabilization, trade liberalization, financial opening, and privatization—with sequencing organized around negotiation calendars. Convergence reflected credible penalties for deviation embedded in financing arrangements, rather than imitation.

b) Structural focal juncture

In the structural pathway, abrupt change follows from a reconfiguration of power that alters the broader structure of incentives faced by a wide range of actors, without relying primarily on coordinated enforcement. Changes in the control, mobility, or relative scarcity of key resources reshape the constraints under which actors operate across multiple contexts. Rather than being driven by coordinated leverage, the restriction of the feasible set emerges from the way these constraints act across actors facing similar incentive structures.

In this mechanism, the compression of alternatives results from a generalized reweighting of incentives. As similar constraints operate across contexts, certain policy options become increasingly costly or difficult to sustain; actors adjust in parallel, narrowing the range of viable institutional responses. Convergence thus emerges not through coordinated pressure, but through decentralized adaptation to a shared structure of constraints. Under these conditions, some institutional designs become comparatively safer and more sustainable across cases, and are therefore more likely to be adopted.

A paradigmatic case is the transformation of the international monetary and financial system following the breakdown of the Bretton Woods order and the progressive liberalization of capital flows. As capital mobility increased and cross-border financial integration deepened, the relative power of mobile capital expanded, altering the strategic environment in which national policies were formulated.

The worldwide diffusion of modern VAT systems, the spread of base-broadening corporate tax reforms, and subsequent coordination efforts to curb tax avoidance illustrate this dynamic. These developments did not centrally impose convergence, but rather codified and reinforced adjustments already induced by the underlying structure of incentives, with policy diffusion and international influence shaping their adoption.

Empirically, the predominance of one mechanism over the other can be assessed by examining whether the restriction of alternatives is primarily driven by coordinated leverage and conditionality, or by parallel adjustments to a shared structure of incentives. In both pathways, elements of the alternative mechanism may be present; however, the distinction identifies the dominant process through which institutional alternatives become restricted.

Reading Change Through Mechanisms

The preceding discussion conceptualizes disruption and focal alignment as mechanisms linking configurations of power to patterns of institutional change, specifying how constraints shape institutional alternatives. This perspective also accounts for episodes of abrupt but convergent change, understood as instances of focal alignment, where convergence emerges from the restriction of alternatives—either through coordinated leverage and conditionality or through parallel adjustments to shared incentive structures, with the analysis focused on identifying the dominant process at work. Taken together, this framework allows institutional change to be conceptualized not in terms of isolated attributes, but as the outcome of underlying causal mechanisms.

Illustrative Cases Of Focal, Convergent Rapid Change

As discussed above, when units are embedded in a shared structure of power asymmetries and interdependence, markedly divergent outcomes are unlikely, and minor contingent events have limited influence. If power relations shift in similar ways across multiple units, abrupt change with convergent results is to be expected. In what follows, this logic of focal, convergent rapid change is illustrated through two cases. The first is an instrumental focal juncture and the second, addressed in the next subsection, is a predominantly structural focal juncture

Instrumental Focal Pathway: First-Generation Structural Reforms in Latin America (1980s–mid-1990s)

Throughout the 1980s, Latin America underwent an accelerated and far-reaching transformation of its economic–institutional framework across multiple arenas. Rarely had the region experienced changes of such depth and scope simultaneously across many countries. Trade regimes opened and non-tariff barriers were dismantled; financial systems were liberalized and domestic markets deregulated; tax systems were reconfigured—with VAT adoption/expansion and base broadening—while state-owned enterprises were privatized and labor-market rules revised.

To capture the magnitude of these changes in a comparable way, this article uses the Structural Reform Index (Morley, Machado, & Pettinato, 1999), which measures the extent of market-oriented reforms across five policy domains—trade, finance, taxation, privatization, and labor regulation—on a 0–1 scale (0 = extensive state intervention; 1 = full liberalization). The country-year value is the mean across domains and summarizes changes such as tariff reductions and the dismantling of quotas, financial and capital-market opening, VAT adoption and tax-base broadening, the privatization of state-owned enterprises, and the deregulation of labor markets.

To avoid overstating the uniformity of a longer and more complex process, the analysis is restricted here to the first generation of reforms triggered by the debt crisis, that is, to the phase in which external constraints were most sharply compressed and policy alternatives most tightly restricted.

Figure 1. Structural Reform in Latin America, 1982–1994: Levels and Cross-Country Convergence (17 countries)

Notes: Boxes show the interquartile range (IQR); whiskers show the full cross-country range. The Structural Reform Index ranges from 0 (extensive state intervention) to 1 (full liberalization). See Appendix for components and country coverage. Source: Own elaboration based on Morley, Machado, and Pettinato (1999).

The extent and convergence of change can be appreciated in Figure 1, which plots the annual distribution of the index for seventeen countries between 1982 and 1994. Boxes represent the interquartile range and whiskers the full cross-country span. The regional average rises from about 0.55 in 1982 to above 0.80 in 1994, while dispersion narrows markedly—especially after 1989. Read as a whole, Figure 1 shows both intensification and convergence: reforms deepen and become increasingly uniform across countries.

This pattern is especially significant because it emerges despite substantial cross-national variation in initial conditions, including differences in indebtedness, inflation, political regimes, and timing of crisis exposure. Such variation makes a purely contingent or domestically specific account less convincing, and instead suggests the operation of external constraints that systematically narrowed policy alternatives across cases.

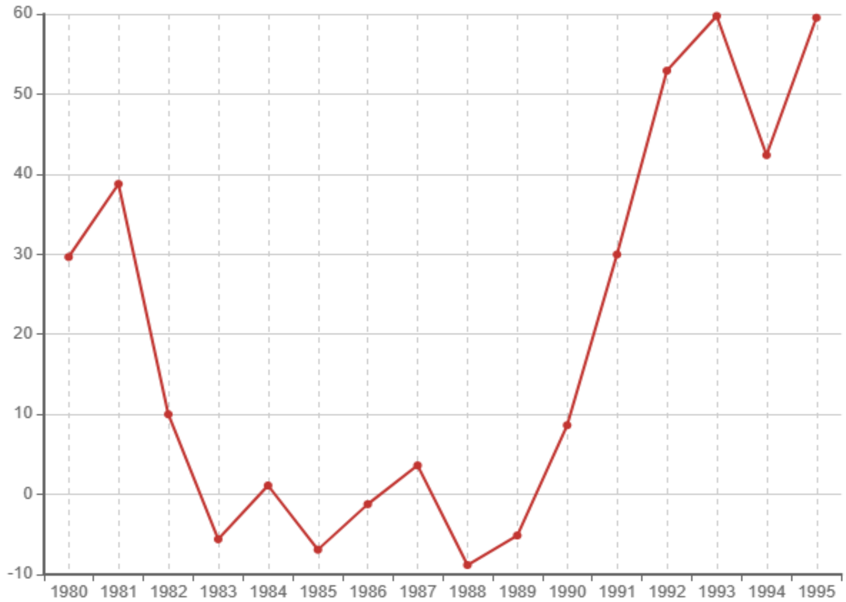
The path to this outcome began in the 1970s and exhibits the hallmarks of an instrumental focal juncture. Oil-price shocks generated large international liquidity concentrated in Northern banks (Bárcena, 2012; Traversa 2021); many Latin American governments—often authoritarian by the late 1970s—borrowed heavily at floating interest rates (Helleiner, 1996).

When the United States shifted to an anti-inflation strategy in 1979, global rates rose sharply and debt burdens became unsustainable (Ocampo, 2014).

In 1982, Mexico declared a moratorium; private capital inflows collapsed across the region, and the solvency of major creditor banks in advanced economies came under question—over a thousand institutions in the North were exposed to potential losses (Altimir & Devlin, 1994). As solvency concerns spread, a focal power configuration emerged: actors with concentrated leverage—private banks, creditor governments, and international financial institutions—were able to narrow the policy options available to debtor governments, effectively reducing domestic margins of action and thereby restricting the range of viable policy responses (Figure 3 summarizes this asymmetric constellation).

The external financing squeeze is visible in Figure 2, which reports net capital flows to Latin America between 1980 and 1995: inflows recede around the crisis years and remain weak for much of the decade, tightening domestic constraints and raising the political costs of delay (Ocampo, 2014). Initial attempts at debtor coordination in 1984 did not yield better terms (Tussie, 2013). As risks of systemic contagion mounted, private banks, creditor governments, and the IMF/World Bank moved toward conditional financing—new money and rollovers tied to policy reforms aimed at restoring external balance and debt service (Stallings, 2014).

Figure 2. The debt crisis: net capital flows to Latin America (USD billions), 1980–1995.



Notes: *Net capital flows for Latin America; values by year. Lower inflows coincide with crisis years and conditionality leverage.* ***Source:*** *Own elaboration based on ECLAC data*

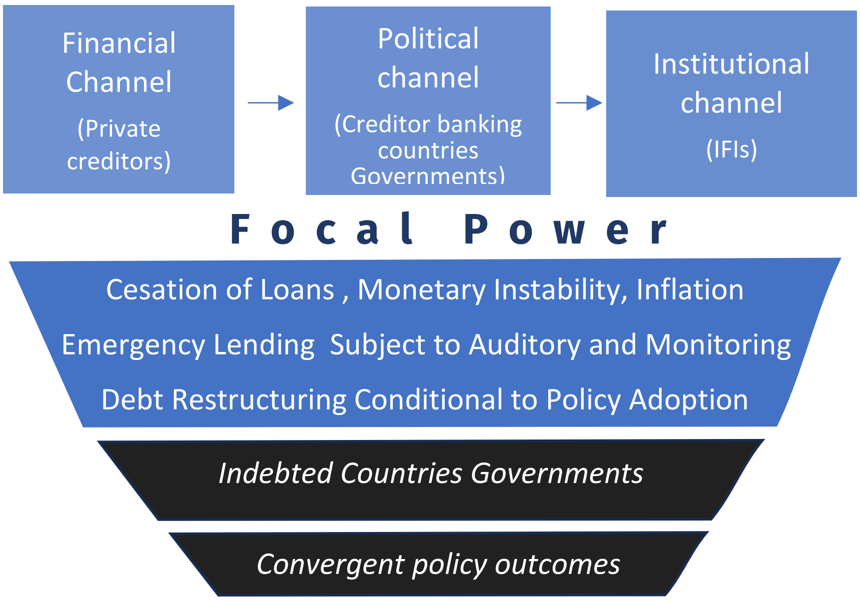
In practice, funds were withheld from countries in moratorium; currency pressures and shortages of foreign exchange fueled devaluations, and the pass-through to prices heightened domestic political strain in a region navigating democratic reopening (Ocampo, 2014). Contemporary observers noted the breadth of policy change, highlighting the widespread adoption of free-market policies across virtually all countries and regimes under structural adjustment programs promoted and imposed by the IMF and the World Bank (Veltmeyer, Petras, & Vieux, 1997, p. 123).

Within this context, crisis management was organized into an institutional pathway. The Baker Plan (1985) sought to avert a wave of defaults by offering limited new lending in exchange for structural-adjustment commitments; when debt stocks remained excessive and fresh credit scarce, the Brady Plan (1989) introduced debt-reduction exchanges (Brady bonds) conditional on reform programs and IMF oversight (Machinea, 2002).

A contemporaneous codification of both policy content and instrumental pressure was the Washington Consensus (Williamson, 1990), which explicitly linked access to lending and debt operations to macroeconomic adjustment and a package of structural measures—trade and financial opening, tax reform with VAT adoption/expansion, privatization, and deregulation—under strong conditionality. These initiatives did not create the crisis; they structured its resolution in a way that made reform convergence the only viable route to external finance.

The argument advanced here therefore differs from accounts that explain this regional similarity mainly in terms of policy diffusion or ideational persuasion. The central mechanism was not imitation as such, but the restriction of policy alternatives under conditions of asymmetric leverage, where deviation became increasingly costly. Consistent with this reading, the troughs in Figure 2 cluster around the years when leverage to enforce conditionality was strongest.

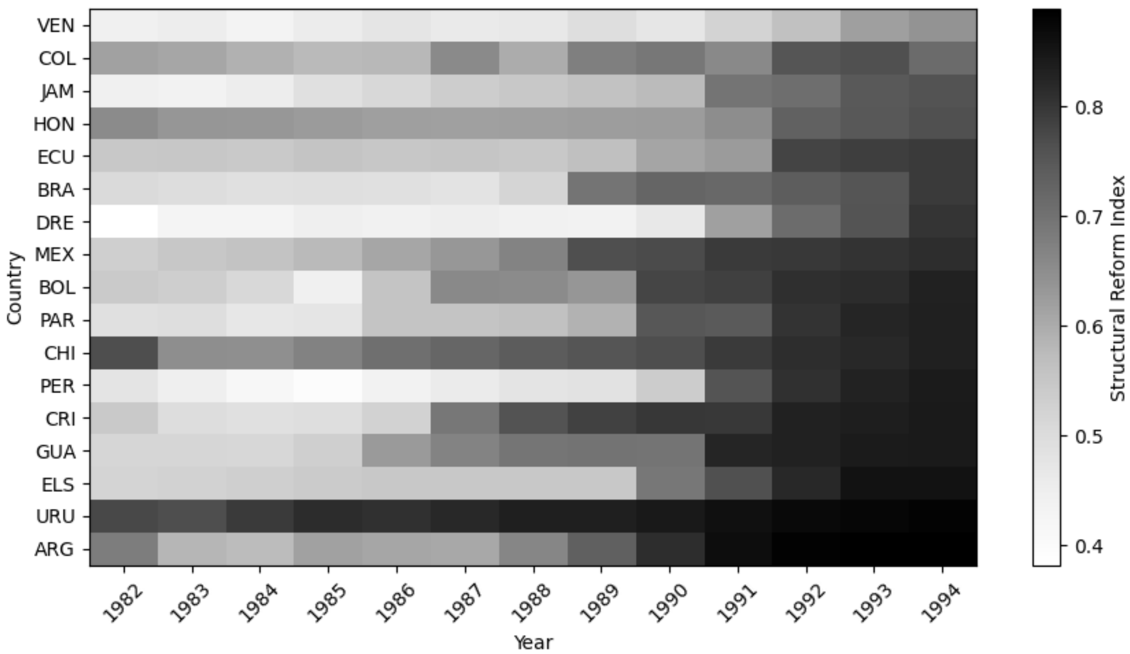
Figure 3. Asymmetric Power in Debt Negotiations: From Crisis to Conditionality



Notes: Conceptual map of the creditor banks–creditor governments–IFIs constellation that narrowed debtor governments' feasible sets. Own elaboration.

While these processes clearly exhibit the features of an instrumental focal juncture—namely, coordinated leverage and conditionality—they also unfolded within a broader transformation of the international financial environment that reinforced these pressures. In this sense, structural elements linked to global financial integration and shifting creditor–debtor relations operated alongside instrumental mechanisms, even if the latter played the predominant role in restricting available policy options.

Figure 4. First-Generation Structural Reforms after the Debt Crisis: Country-Year Heatmap of the Structural Reform Index, 1982–1994 (17 countries)



Notes: Lighter tones=lower liberalization; Darker tones=higher liberalization.
Source: Own elaboration based on Morley, Machado, and Pettinato (1999).

Figure 4 displays a country-year heatmap of the Structural Reform Index, now allowing the trajectories of individual countries to be observed over time. It shows how early heterogeneity gives way to a broad and largely generalized movement toward higher levels of liberalization. Along most country rows, lower values in the early period are gradually replaced by higher values later on, indicating that convergence was not confined to a subset of cases but extended across the region as a whole.

This configuration also implies a set of observable expectations: reforms should cluster temporally around key financing and renegotiation episodes—such as the Baker and Brady Plans—policy changes should appear in bundled form rather than as isolated decisions, and cross-country variation should decline as alternatives are progressively ruled out. The evidence presented in Figures 1 and 4 is consistent with these expectations.

Taken together, the financing constraint, conditionality, and coordinated leverage operated as a configuration that systematically narrowed policy alternatives, making convergence the path of least resistance—consistent with an instrumental focal juncture. The observed regional alignment is thus not merely a descriptive regularity, but the expected outcome of a context in which policy alternatives were systematically narrowed across cases.

Structural Focal Pathway: Tax-Structure Convergence under Global Capital Mobility

As shown above, instrumental pressure triggers focal junctures from a central locus. Structural power, by contrast, operates through dispersed incentives and interdependent expectations that converge policy movement toward a limited set of focal institutional choices; worldwide tax reforms in the post-1970s period offer a clear illustration of this dynamic.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the gradual dismantling of Bretton Woods capital controls and the liberalization of financial markets altered the strategic environment in which national tax policy is made. Cross-border finance expanded, foreign direct investment surged, and both profits and real activity became easier to shift across jurisdictions. In Lindblom's terms, the structural power of business—the capacity to discipline governments through exit threats and confidence effects—became more salient as investment decisions could be redirected rapidly across borders (Lindblom, 1982). In such a setting, the viable tax choices narrows: policies that visibly burden mobile capital invite swift economic sanctions, while designs that are more robust to mobility become relatively attractive.

This broader transformation has been widely interpreted as a structural shift in the relationship between states and mobile capital. Increasing capital mobility exposes governments to a competitive environment in which capital taxation becomes progressively harder to sustain, generating systematic pressure to reduce the tax burden on mobile bases and to reallocate part of that burden toward less mobile ones. Swank and Steinmo (2002, p. 642) similarly argue that internationalization, domestic economic change, and budgetary pressures together "create a system of constraints on altering the level and distribution of tax burdens."

In line with this pattern, Bachas, Fisher-Post, Jensen, and Zucman (2022) show that, across a large set of countries, effective taxation has shifted over time, with higher burdens on labor and declining effective taxation of capital. Similarly, Bretschger and Hettich (2002) show that greater economic integration is associated with lower corporate taxation and a relative shift toward labor in OECD countries. From this perspective, tax competition is not merely a sequence of independent policy choices, but the expression of a shared structure of constraints generated by capital mobility and interdependence (Hines, 2005; Sørensen, 2007; Zodrow, 2010).

A significant body of comparative research reads the ensuing tax changes as structurally induced interdependence rather than idiosyncratic drift. Empirically, these structural constraints become visible through strategic interaction among states, as tax-policy choices turn increasingly interdependent under conditions of high capital mobility. Econometric studies detect strategic interaction in corporate tax settings: countries adjust statutory rates in response to one another, while evidence also points to competition over effective marginal tax rates (Devereux, Lockwood, & Redoano, 2008; Overesch & Rincke, 2011).

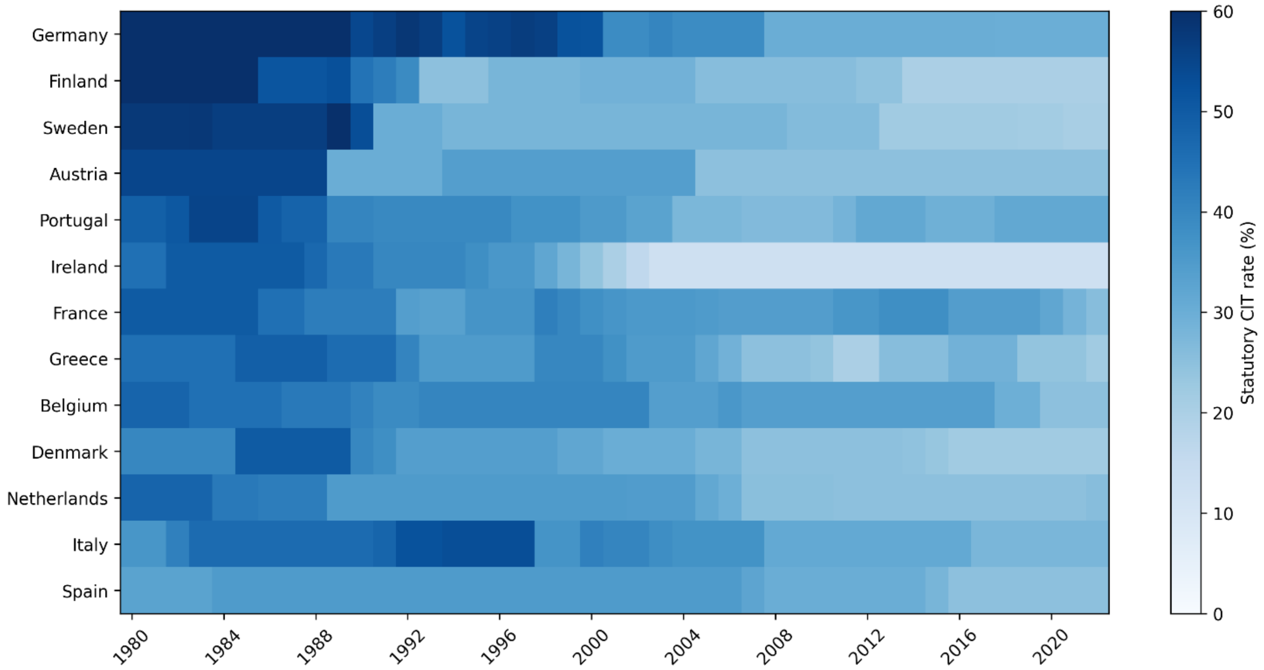
Timing and form are consistent with a structural focal juncture rather than contingent drift. The United Kingdom began large CIT cuts in 1984 and cross-sectional dispersion in headline rates begins to shrink around the mid-1980s. The U.S. Tax Reform Act of 1986 (TRA-86), which combined substantial statutory rate cuts with base broadening, reinforced a broader pattern already emerging across advanced economies under increasing capital mobility and tax competition (Hines, 2005; Swank & Steinmo, 2002).

These developments suggest a predominantly structural pattern in which increased capital mobility generated a shared structure of incentives across countries, prompting parallel and interdependent policy responses. This pattern is reflected in the sharp and widespread decline of statutory corporate tax rates since the early 1980s, a process for which tax competition has been identified as a central driver (Hines, 2005). As integration deepened, the effects of tax competition became increasingly differentiated across countries (Genschel & Schwarz, 2012).

In this context, smaller economies—better able to exploit capital mobility—often moved more aggressively in reducing corporate tax rates, thereby altering the broader competitive environment (Genschel & Schwarz, 2012). . This pattern may be read as less consistent with accounts that emphasize policy diffusion as the primary driver, insofar as lower tax rates appear to be more closely associated with smaller economies than with jurisdictions typically linked to policy leadership. In this sense, these adjustments did not simply diffuse as models to be imitated; rather, they contributed to redefining the set of viable responses available to other jurisdictions, fostering increasing interdependence among them. As these responses unfolded, they translated into constraints that restricted policy alternatives, narrowing the range of viable options and fostering convergence across cases.

While these developments are broadly consistent with the operation of structural incentives, they do not exclude the role of instrumental and coordinative mechanisms. Common anti-avoidance rules and shared standards for protecting the corporate tax base have introduced a degree of harmonization in key dimensions (Spengel et al., 2026), constraining opportunities for arbitrage and reducing the scope for divergence. Such developments suggest a configuration in which competitive adjustments and processes of policy diffusion and coordination evolved in tandem. In this view, coordination helped organize and stabilize patterns already underway, while structural interdependence remained the predominant source of convergence. Convergence thus appears to emerge from increasingly binding constraints operating within an integrated and interdependent policy environment, progressively narrowing the range of viable institutional alternatives.

Figure 5. Statutory CIT — EU-15 (1980–2022)

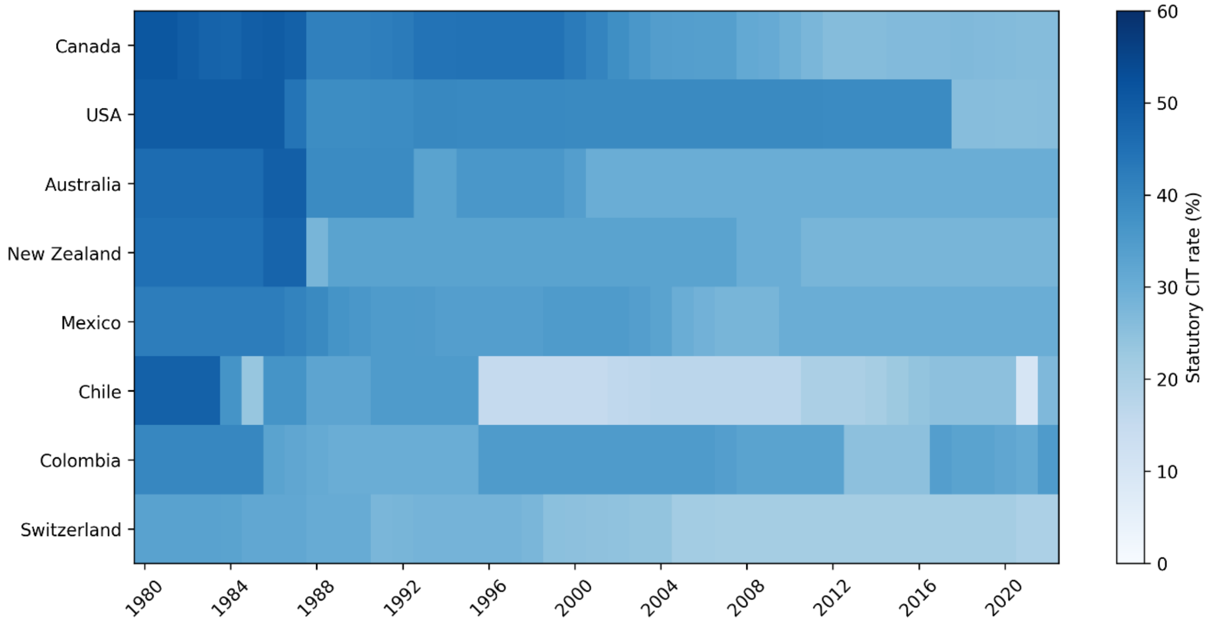


Notes: Headline statutory CIT rates (%). Source: Own elaboration based on Tax Foundation (2025), Worldwide Corporate Tax Rates dataset.

To make these dynamics concrete, this article uses long-run series of statutory corporate income tax rates as a transparent headline indicator. While statutory rates do not exhaust the effective tax burden, they are the prices governments advertise to mobile capital. Read in conjunction with the preceding evidence, the figures trace how a shared structure of constraints translated into downward adjustment and cross-country clustering, the empirical profile one would expect under a structural focal juncture.

In the EU-15, headline CIT rates start the 1980s in the high 40s or low 50s in several cases and then step down in waves. The mid-1980s mark an initial acceleration, followed by further compression in the early 1990s. By the 2000s, most countries cluster in the mid-20s to low-30s, and the cross-sectional spread narrows.

Figure 6. Statutory CIT— non-EU OECD (1980–2022)

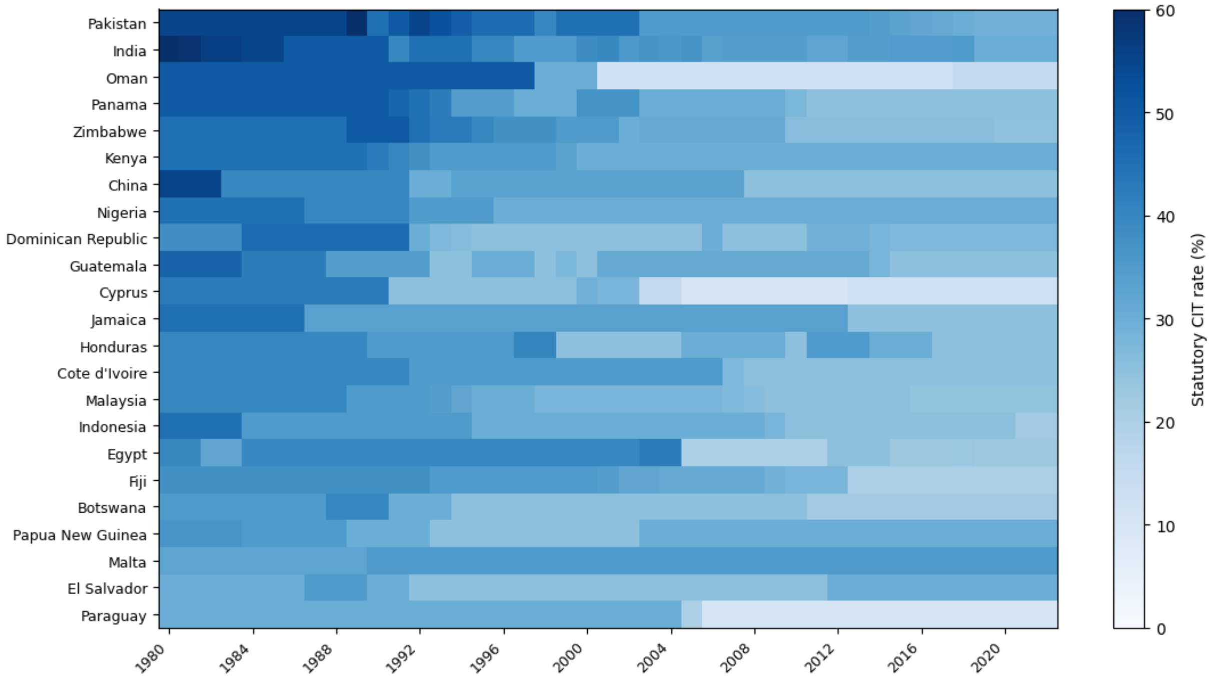


Notes: Headline statutory CIT rates (%). Source: Own elaboration based on Tax Foundation (2025), Worldwide Corporate Tax Rates dataset.

A parallel descent unfolds across the non-EU OECD. The United States implemented TRA-86, combining a substantial statutory rate cut with base broadening, while other countries followed distinct but broadly parallel downward trajectories. Convergence here was not driven by European integration; it is consistent with strategic interaction under capital mobility, as countries adjusted their statutory rates in response to one another (Hines, 2005; Devereux et al., 2008; Overesch & Rincke, 2011).

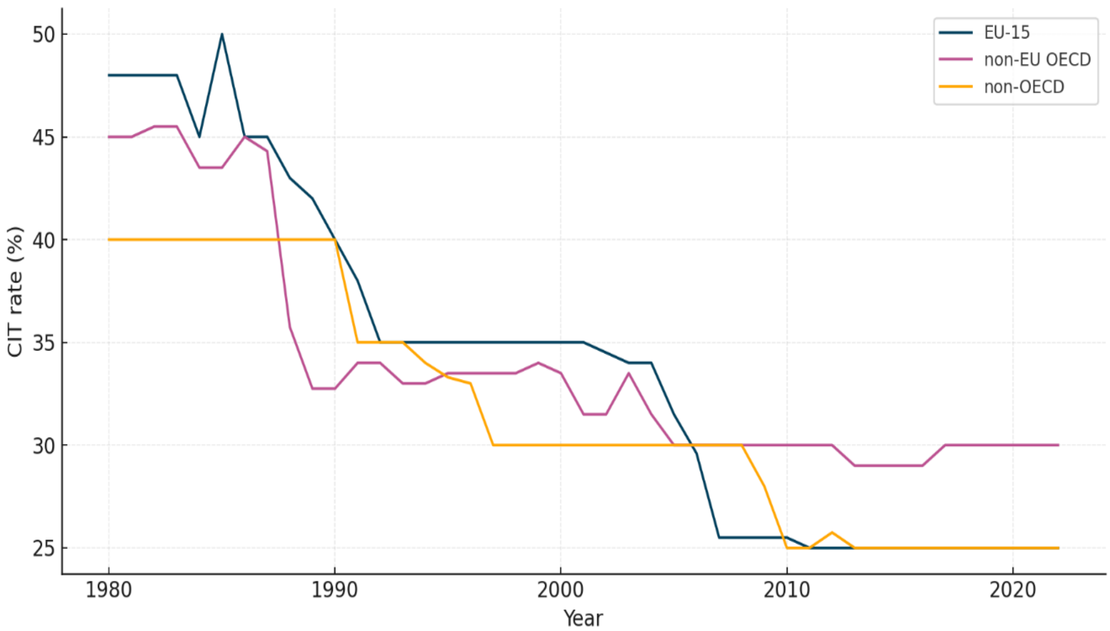
Beyond the OECD, starting levels were more heterogeneous and reform timing more staggered. Yet from the 1990s onward, many countries lowered headline rates and began to cluster. Outliers remained, but the median trend bent downward and latecomer alignment became increasingly visible. To summarize across groups, Figure 8 displays the median CIT for EU-15, non-EU OECD, and non-OECD: medians fall and begin to track each other more closely after the mid-1980s.

Figure 7. Statutory CIT — non-OECD (1980–2022)



Notes: Headline statutory CIT rates (%). Source: Own elaboration based on Tax Foundation (2025), Worldwide Corporate Tax Rates dataset.

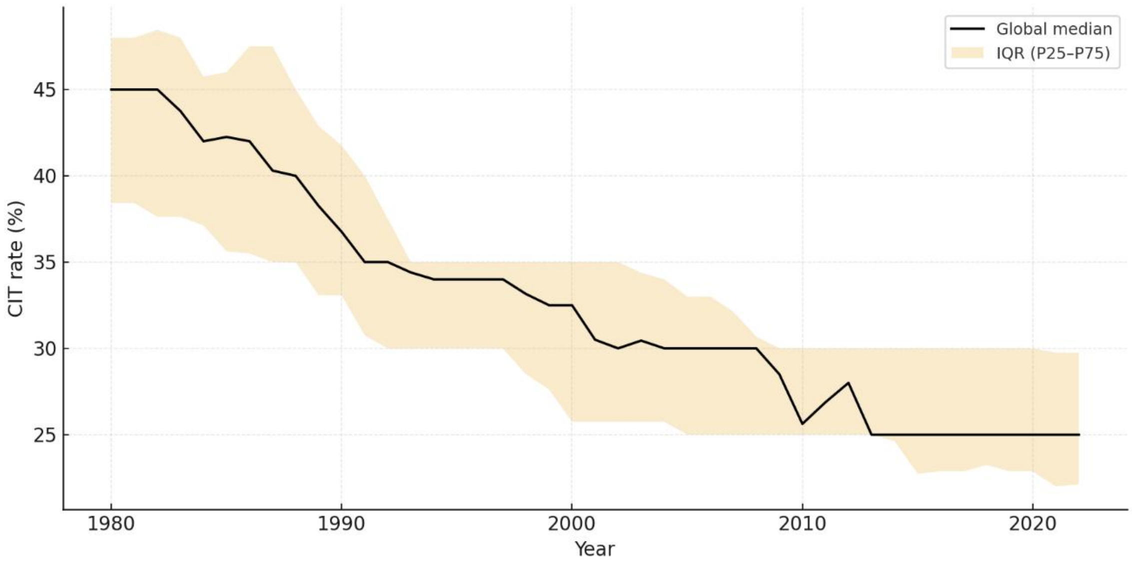
Figure 8. Median statutory CIT — EU-15 vs non-EU OECD vs non-OECD (1980–2022)



Notes: Series report group medians by year; group membership as in Figures 5–7. Source: Own elaboration based on Tax Foundation (2025), Worldwide Corporate Tax Rates dataset.

Plotted together, the group medians fall and begin to track one another more closely after the mid-1980s. The distance between medians shrinks, suggesting that different institutional families of states—EU-15, non-EU OECD, and a broad non-OECD set—gravitate toward a narrower band of headline rates. This is consistent with strategic interaction (best responses to others' cuts) layered on top of structural power (the credible exit option of mobile capital) (Lindblom, 1982; Devereux et al., 2008). Observed interaction effects should therefore be read less as evidence of coordinated policy-making than as the behavioral expression of underlying structural constraints, which reflects the operation of shared constraints across contexts.

Figure 9. Global statutory CIT — median and interquartile range (1980–2022)



Notes: *The median and IQR are computed across all available country-year observations each year; coverage varies over time. Values in percent. Source: Own elaboration based on Tax Foundation (2025), Worldwide Corporate Tax Rates dataset.*

At the system level, the global median displays a persistent decline, while the interquartile range contracts, indicating declining cross-country dispersion even without full harmonization. The combination of a downward median and a tightening interquartile range is consistent with governments facing increasingly similar competitive pressures and a narrowing range of viable tax-policy alternatives.

Taken together, the pattern is best understood as a predominantly structural focal juncture: global market integration and the structurally asymmetric bargaining position of mobile capital narrowed viable tax-policy alternatives, and diverse governments moved rapidly toward similar tax designs—

not by coincidence, but because the costs of divergence had become systematically higher across cases. At the same time, this process combined structural and instrumental elements: while structural interdependence provided the underlying driver of convergence, policy diffusion, institutional guidance, and visible reform episodes contributed to shaping and accelerating the observed alignment

Conclusions

This article set out to address a problem that remains only partially resolved within the literature on institutional change: how to account for episodes of abrupt institutional change that unfold in convergent waves across cases. While existing approaches within the framework of critical junctures have generated important insights into disruption, contingency, and divergence, they have offered less explicit tools for analyzing processes in which institutional alternatives become systematically restricted and trajectories align. At the same time, these dimensions often remain analytically disconnected, and we still lack a clearer explanation of why institutional trajectories diverge or converge, and how these outcomes relate to the problem of power and contingency in processes of institutional change.

The argument developed here proposes a shift from the enumeration of attributes toward a mechanism-based perspective. Rather than treating divergence or convergence as defining features of particular types of episodes, the analysis specifies how these outcomes emerge from the way configurations of power shape structural constraints. Power configurations, understood as structured distributions of control over strategically relevant resources and the relations of dependence they generate, define the capacities through which actors can impose costs, sustain cooperation, or exclude alternatives. Structural constraints, in turn, capture the extent to which these capacities are translated into effective restrictions on institutional alternatives

From this perspective, variation in institutional outcomes is linked to the degree to which configurations of power generate constraints that either expand or restrict the range of viable alternatives. In doing so, it provides a mechanism-based explanation for patterns of cross-case alignment that remain theoretically underdeveloped in existing accounts. When constraints remain weak or cannot be effectively enforced, institutional trajectories are more sensitive to contingency and are therefore more likely to diverge. By contrast, when constraints tighten—either through concentrated leverage or through parallel adjustments to a shared structure of incentives—the range of alternatives narrows, and convergence becomes a plausible outcome. In this way, divergence and convergence are treated not as separate phenomena, but as outcomes generated by the same underlying mechanism

On this basis, the article distinguishes two analytical logics linking shifts in power to abrupt institutional change. The disruption logic, associated with critical junctures, captures situations in which constraints loosen and contingency expands. The focal alignment logic, by contrast, captures episodes in which constraints tighten and align, restricting institutional alternatives and making a limited set of responses more likely across cases. Within this second pathway, the distinction between instrumental and structural variants provides a way to assess whether the restriction of alternatives is primarily driven by coordinated leverage and conditionality, or by decentralized but interdependent responses to shared constraints.

Institutional change processes frequently combine multiple causal elements and overlapping dynamics. The value of the framework lies instead in identifying the dominant process through which configurations of power shape patterns of constraint or indeterminacy that orient institutional trajectories toward convergence or divergence. Empirical analysis becomes crucial at this point, since these mechanisms are identified not through isolated attributes, but through the reconstruction of how different causal dynamics interact and how they shape observable institutional outcomes. In this sense, the analysis does not classify cases through static categories, but through the reconstruction of causal processes linking configurations of power, patterns of constraint, and institutional trajectories.

This mechanism-based perspective not only provides comparative leverage across different episodes of abrupt change, but also helps bring into focus forms of rapid and convergent institutional transformation that have received comparatively less systematic attention in existing accounts. More specifically, the distinction between instrumental and structural pathways of focal alignment contributes to identifying different mechanisms through which convergent outcomes may emerge, even when both elements coexist empirically within the same process.

The empirical illustrations were designed to show how these mechanisms can be observed in practice. In the case of Latin American structural reforms, convergence emerged through coordinated leverage, conditionality, and the compression of domestic policy alternatives under asymmetric power relations. In the case of tax-structure convergence, by contrast, convergence followed from decentralized adjustments to a shared structure of constraints generated by capital mobility and interdependence, with diffusion and international coordination contributing to codifying and accelerating patterns already underway. In both cases, convergence is not treated as a descriptive regularity, but as the expected outcome of processes in which institutional alternatives are progressively restricted.

Taken together, the framework contributes to the study of institutional change by providing a more explicit articulation of the relationship between power, constraints, and outcomes, and by offering criteria for identifying these mechanisms in empirical analysis. In doing so, it brings into focus a form of abrupt change—rapid and convergent across cases—that has received comparatively less systematic attention, while remaining continuous with the central concerns of historical institutionalism. More broadly, it suggests that the study of institutional change can benefit from treating convergence and divergence as analytically linked outcomes, rooted in the same underlying processes through which power configurations shape the structure of institutional possibilities.

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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

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cobalt, mostly extracted from the Katanga region[1]. 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 Congolese[2].

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 where 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 Moise 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 multi-faceted 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 unsatisfaction, 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 (DPII), 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 Congo[4], 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, Montecatini[5]. 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 Marzoli[6]. 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 partnerships[7].

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 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 government[10].

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.

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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 achieved[11]. 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 dollars[12]. 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 follow[13]. 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 extension[14]. 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 country[15]. 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 Congo[16]. 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 year[17].

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

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[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] Telespresso 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 Somalia[19].

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 clear[20]. 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 Moro[21]. 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 purposes[22]. 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*.

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deploy its own forces in the Congolese military scenario[24]. 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 assistance[25]. 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 1967[29]. 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 country[30].

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

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[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 aircrafts[32].

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 AerMacchi[35]. 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 Congo[36].

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 Italimpianti, 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 requests[37]. 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 allies[38].

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 highlighted[39]. 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 budget[41]. 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 support[42]. 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 training[43]. 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 cover[44]. 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 Force[45]. 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 unsatisfactory[47]. 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 decade[48]. 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 1969[49].

On the contrary, other US representatives where 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 quantity[50].

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 affairs 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 sough 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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