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Original Articles

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**Belgian Strategy on Granting the “Independence” of the Congo and  
the Round Table Conference in 1960**

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**【Abstract】**

The Round Table Conference (RTC) in January 1960 was one of the turning points in the history of the Congo’s decolonization in the sense that the date of “independence” was finally decided. The decision was criticized as “precipitous,” as “independence” would be granted in less than half a year. The reason for this “precipitous” decolonization has been attributed to “weakness” of the Belgian government; the Belgian government did not have a choice but to yield to the Congolese demands as it could not suppress the Congolese emancipation movement. Even if so, the mere impossibility of the use of force cannot explain the Belgian government’s readiness to accept the demands without much negotiation at the Round Table.

This article analyzes the intentions and tactics of the Belgian government on the RTC and granting of “independence,” which have not been sufficiently clarified in previous research, by examining the US archival documents and the minutes of Belgian cabinet meetings. It clarifies that the Belgian government strategically conceded on the schedule of granting independence in order to make it easier for it to retain virtual control over the forthcoming Congo government. This article also reveals that the Belgian government continued to pursue its goal, namely the retention of control, although in a less visible way, even after it withdrew the outright endeavor of “reserving” executive powers of the Congolese government in its own hands. For this purpose, the government hastened the establishment of the Congo government and the ratification of a bilateral treaty with the forthcoming government before the “independence.”

**Key words:** Decolonization of Africa, Belgian-Congo relations, Diplomatic History

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研究論文

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**コンゴの「独立」付与をめぐるベルギーの戦略と 1960 年の円卓会議**

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**【要 旨】**

1960 年 1 月に開催された「円卓会議」は、「独立」の日が最終的に決定されたという意味においてコンゴの脱植民地化の歴史において一つの節目だったと言える。しかし、半年以内の独立付与の決定は、その性急さに疑問が呈されてきた。その原因について、先行研究は、ベルギーがコンゴ人の独立運動を武力で抑えられず、コンゴ人側の要求に屈さざるをえなかったからだと説明している。だがそうだとすると、その要因のみでは、なぜベルギー政府が円卓会議においてほとんどコンゴ側と交渉することなく、あっさり要求をのんだのかを説明できない。

本稿は、先行研究において十分に解明されてこなかった円卓会議と独立の期日の決定をめぐるベルギーの戦略を、アメリカの外交文書やベルギーの閣議録を用いて分析し、ベルギー政府が、設立されるコンゴ政府に対する実質的影響力の保持という一貫した目的を持ち、そのために期日については戦略的に譲歩したことを解明した。そして、あからさまな権限留保を断念した後も、ベルギー政府がより見えにくい形での目的達成を目指し、その目的のためにコンゴ政府の設立とその政府との「独立」前の技術協力条約の締結を急いだことを明らかにした。

**キーワード：**脱植民地化史、ベルギー・コンゴ関係、政治外交史

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## 1. Introduction

The representatives of the Belgian government, Parliament, and the Belgian Congo gathered at the Round Table Conference (RTC) held in Brussels from January 20 to February 20, 1960 in order to discuss the “independence” of its colony and its future relation with the metropole. It was certainly a turning point in the history of decolonization of the Congo<sup>1)</sup> in the sense that the time frame for the transfer of the sovereignty was finally decided. It is worthy of remark that the conference was the first official negotiation between the representatives of the Belgian government and the Congolese delegates. As Hoskyns (1965, p.40) described, “[t]he decision to grant independence in six months caused surprise not only in the world but in the Congo.” However, four days after the independence day, a conflict erupted in the Congo and soon turned into a major international conflict, known as the Congo Crisis.

For this reason, Belgian policy has been criticized as being “precipitous” and/or “inconsiderate” (Stengers, 1982; Vanderlinden, 1985). Stengers (1982, p.305) points out that this “precipitous decolonization” was caused both by initial “complete political stagnation” and a subsequent “emergency decolonization of such stupefying rapidity.” Indeed, the government finally started serious consideration of the decolonization of the Congo as late as 1958. After the Leopoldville riot in January 1959, it officially used the term “independence” for the first time without any reference to the time frame. Ten months later, the government announced the plan that indicated emancipation within four years. Finally, it was agreed in the RTC that sovereignty would be transferred to the Congo in less than six months. In other words, it took only about a year from the formal announcement by the Belgian government in January 1959 of its intention to accede to “independence” to the decision of the

independence day at the RTC in January 1960.

Stengers (1982, p.331) argues that “this puzzling shortening of the interim period, which transformed the march into a race,” could be explained by the pressure from the Congolese and the response of the Belgian government to such pressure. The Belgian government had no choice but to yield finally to the demand of the Congolese due to the lack of support by Belgian public opinion to resort to arms to impose its will on the Congolese. (Hoskyns, 1965; Stengers, 1982; Vanthemsche, 2012; Omasombo Tshonda & Vanthemsche, 2020). In Hoskyns’s words, “the promise of independence [at the RTC] is won by Belgian weakness rather than by Congolese strength and … this was by far the most risky grant of independence yet made in Africa” (p.41).

Another explanation for the government’s rapid “capitulation” to the Congolese demands, combined with the Congolese pressure and the inapplicability of military force, suggests that it was a “bet” or a “gamble” by the government (Stengers, 1982, p.331; Kwanten, 2001, p.541). Kwanten argues that the Belgian cabinet conducted a dangerous gamble, as the cabinet expected that the swift handover of the power would lead to the friendship with the Congolese which would bring about the Congolese reliance on Belgian funds and expertise<sup>2)</sup>.

What is puzzling to the author, however, is why Belgian ministers so readily conceded to the Congolese demands at the RTC without much negotiation. Indeed, they did not get into serious negotiation with the Congolese delegates during the RTC over the terms and conditions of transferring sovereignty. This question is all the more important when we consider what was at stake for the metropolitan power to grant independence to its colony. Generally speaking, it is unlikely that the metropole would so easily give up its interests in its colony. Although the ministers did expect that their apparent surrender would create a friendly

atmosphere, was not the stake too vital to bet on the friendship and the goodwill alone?

In this regard, Vanthemsche points out that the Belgians attempted, after the RTC, to retain their influence by providing pro-Belgian Congolese leaders with “technicians, propaganda, and funds” to prevail over anti-Belgian leaders in election campaigns (Omasombo Tshonda & Vanthemsche, 2020, p.89). Then why did they not even try to negotiate with the Congolese more seriously at the RTC in order to retain their interests? This gap between the government’s seeming readiness at the RTC and its subsequent persistence for retaining the influence over the Congo has yet to be explained.

This article tries to find these missing pieces of the puzzle by examining declassified documents of the US Department of State and of the Belgian Cabinet meetings in 1960. By consulting these documents, this article unveils agreements and disagreements within the cabinet. It argues that the Belgian ministers avoided earnest negotiation with the Congolese delegates at the RTC as they believed they could better retain their interests in this way. On the RTC, there is a pioneering work by Georges-Henri Dumont (1961). However, owing to the recent declassification of confidential governmental documents, we now understand what we could not at that time.

While it is well known that the Belgian government withdrew the outright attempt to retain control over the Congo after being criticized by the Congolese at the RTC, it has not been thoroughly clarified how the Belgian government pursued its goal after such opposition by the Congolese. This article reveals that although the Belgian government did agree to transfer the full executive power to the Congolese, it tried to control the exercise of such power. In other words, the government continued to pursue its goal, although it changed its strategy. For this purpose, it managed to insert clauses in the treaty on the use of

military bases and on the provision of the Belgian diplomatic mission acting for the Congolese government. Hence, the Belgian government hastened to ensure that the bilateral treaty was concluded before the day of “independence.”

To more deeply explore intentions and tactics of the Belgian government in the decolonization process, this study is divided into three parts. In the next section, I briefly outline, as background information, the Belgian decolonization policy up to 1958. I explain that the Belgian government envisaged “Belgian-Congolese community” as its future goal, which implied its ambition to preserve its influence on the Congo. In the third section, I demonstrate how the “march” of the decolonization turned into a “race,” which culminated in the RTC. Finally, in the fourth section, I develop my argument to show the consistency of the Belgian government’s goals and the shift in its strategy.

## 2. The “Belgian–Congolese Community” as a Key Concept

After World War II, decolonization proceeded worldwide, and colonial powers were increasingly put under international pressure. In this section, I give a rough sketch of the Belgians’ consideration of the future of their colony as background for their decolonization policy, focusing on their notion of the “Belgian-Congolese community.” This notion basically implies the Belgian ambition to maintain political, economic, and social ties with its colony, as well as influence over it.

First of all, I briefly explain the difficulty of defining the term “decolonization.” It often indicates a process of emancipation of people in a colony, ending with the transfer of the sovereignty from the metropole to its colony, i.e. the “independence” in the legal sense. However, it becomes evident from previous research that “independence” does not necessarily mean a rupture from the colonial era as

there is also an aspect of continuation in the sense that the former ruler maintains political and/or economic influence over the former colony even after the transfer of the sovereignty (Nugent, 2004, pp.56-57; Le Sueur, 2003, pp.2-4). As the former Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah emphasized, even if an African state has legal sovereignty and is theoretically independent, its policy and economic system could be directed from outside through methods such as continuous stationing of military forces of a former metropole, assuming administrative expenses, retaining civilian officers in crucial posts, and financial control over national banks and foreign exchanges (Nkrumah, 1965, p.ix-x).

This thesis has not necessarily been fully proved in previous research in the case of the Belgian Congo. This is one of the reasons why this article focuses on the transition period shortly before “independence.”

In this article, I basically use the term “independence” with double quotation marks because the legal transfer of sovereignty does not necessarily entail political and economic emancipation from the former metropole. The “decolonization” in this article refers to the process in which people in a colony gradually gain control over their own matters, while the process continues even after the legal transfer of the sovereignty.

As previous research has clarified, “Belgian-Congolese community” was a key concept in the Belgium’s decolonization policy. This notion was held in the Belgian circle as early as the beginning of 1950s. The Catholic Democratic Party (PSC-CVP), the ruling party in Belgium from 1884 to 1945, established the colonial commission in 1946 to reconsider the party’s colonial policy. At that time Belgium began to come under international pressure to prepare itself for the eventual independence of its colony, especially from the United Nations. The party retook office in 1947, and the commission became very active in 1952 when it was presided

over by Pierre Wigny, the former colonial minister. The commission elaborated on the plan for the political reform in the Congo, which, in their eyes, should have guaranteed the tie between Belgium and the Congo. While the commission rejected the idea of giving autonomy to the white minority “which could be oppressive” against the black majority, it would also be premature, in its view, to give voting rights to blacks. The change should have been gradual and controlled. At the same time, Leo Pétillon, the Governor-General in the colonial government, also mentioned the notion of a “Belgian-Congolese community” in his address at the government council. This notion eventually reached King Baudouin when he gave a speech after he visited the Congo in 1955. Belgium was, of course, not alone in attempting to tie the metropole and the colony, as was seen in the cases of the British Commonwealth, the Union française, and the Netherlands-Indonesian Union (Verhaegen, 2003, p.151; Vanthemsche, 2007, pp.79-87, 2012, pp.84-89).

The wave of decolonization also rose higher on the African continent in the latter half of the 1950s, and public discussion of the “emancipation” of the Congo began to emerge in 1956. Jef Van Bilsen, a professor at the Institut Universitaire des Territoires d’Ourte-Mer in Antwerp, made public his plan for the “emancipation” of the Congo. His thirty-year plan for emancipation caused unrest among the political circle in Belgium (de Schrevel, 1970, pp.320-322; Vanthemsche, 2007, p.82). Rather, it had an impact on the Congo. Inspired by this plan, Joseph Ileo and Joseph Ngalula, who received western education in the Congo, published their “manifesto” in a journal, of which they were the editors. In addition, the Kongo ethnic group<sup>2)</sup>, who lived near the capital city, announced its own “manifesto” for immediate emancipation.

When Pétillon became the Minister of Belgian

Congo and Ruanda-Urundi in 1958, he set up a “working group” to devise a Belgian colonial policy. Maurice Van Hemelrijck, the new minister, succeeded Pétillon as the head of the “working group” when Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens formed a coalition cabinet of PSC-CVP and a Liberal Party in November of the same year. It submitted a final report to Van Hemelrijck in December. The report recommended accelerating political reform toward Congo autonomy without referring to “independence” or its schedule.

That year was one of the turning points in the history of the decolonization of the Congo in the sense that “precipitous” decolonization started. Two significant events occurred in 1958, which generated pressure for the Belgian government.

On the one hand, French President Charles de Gaulle opened the way for the African territories to become independent during his speech at Brazzaville, located across the Congo River from Léopoldville, capital of the Belgian Congo. He announced his plan to create a “French Community,” and people in “overseas territories” could choose whether to become an independent country or be a part of the “French Community” as an “autonomous” domain without sovereignty. Decided by the referendum, all “overseas territories” except Guinea chose to participate in the “French Community,” mostly because the assistance they had received would be cut if they chose independence.

This development in French Africa made the Belgian government seriously consider the acceleration of the decolonization of its colony. Wigny, who became the foreign minister in the Eyskens cabinet, revealed in a conversation with the US Secretary of State, John Dulles, that the Belgian government had decided to “define a policy for the future of the Congo.” He explained to Dulles that “the decision had been taken not only because of internal Belgian reasons but also because of

developments in French Africa.” He further insisted that Belgium’s success in administering the Congo would prove to the Congolese that “a continuing association with Belgium” would be to their benefit. Wigny believed that the Congolese were satisfied with the Belgian efforts and that there was no political agitation (Memorandum of Conversation, October 8, 1958, *FRUS*, p.251).

On the other hand, Wigny’s optimism was betrayed by a second element, namely, the rise in demands from the Congolese leaders for liberation and independence. Patrice Lumumba, the future Prime Minister of the Congo, and other leaders protested the exclusion of the Congolese from the “working group.” These leaders decided to form a political party called Mouvement National Congolais (MNC), and Lumumba became its President (Omasombo & Verhaegen, 2005, pp.141-166). Lumumba attended the Pan-African Conference held in Ghana in December that year and it acquainted him with several African leaders who fought for the liberation of Africa. Impressed by these leaders, Lumumba became one of the leading figures in the Congolese independence movement (Willame, 1990, p.42).

Another prominent figure in the capital area was Joseph Kasavubu, leader of the Association des Bakongo (ABAKO), a cultural association based on the Kongo<sup>4</sup> ethnic group. In their “manifesto” in 1956, they criticized the Belgian plan as making the Congo the tenth province of Belgium and demanded an immediate “emancipation” instead. While the MNC fought for the independence of the colony as a whole, the main concern of the ABAKO members was the liberation of their own ethnic group. Kasavubu criticized the MNC’s policy to gradually attain independence and refused to participate in it. On the other hand, Lumumba accused the ABAKO leaders of being not only “anti-European” but also “anti-Congolese” in the sense that they did not care

about the Congo as a whole (Omasombo & Verhaegen, 2005, pp.177-179). While there was a difference in their views and purposes, these two parties became the leading parties in the liberation movement in the Congo.

In particular, ABAKO became very active throughout 1958 and eventually demanded immediate independence at the end of the year. Worried about their activities, the colonial government did not allow Kasavubu to attend the conference in Ghana. In addition, the provincial authority of Léopoldville did not permit the assembly planned by this association on January 4 of the following year. However, people refused to cancel the gathering, and riots eventually broke out. The colonial army suppressed the riots and arrested the leaders.

### 3. The Acceleration of Decolonization -The Way to the RTC-

As discussed, the international circumstances and the emergence of the emancipation movement in the Congo made the Belgian government start considering the decolonization of its colony. In this section, I explain how the government planned to proceed with decolonization and how and why it decided to hold the RTC.

#### 3. 1. Recognition of Granting “Independence”

Receiving a report of a “working group” mentioned above, the Belgian government was to announce its policy concerning the decolonization of the Congo on January 13, 1959. Also, King Baudouin made a speech on the same day without prior announcement. While his intention for this surprise has not yet been clarified, the King declared that Belgium’s “resolution today is to lead … the Congolese people to independence” (*Congo 1959*, p.44)

In the declaration, the Belgian government announced for the first time its intention to organize a democracy capable of exercising “sovereignty”

and deciding its “independence.” For that purpose, they would hold elections at the end of the year at the level of territories, communes, and small local administrative units. The declaration regarded these local elections as the “first step” toward the future “independence.” At the level of the province, “the Council of the Province” would be created in March of the following year to prepare for future national elections, although the declaration did not specify the national election date and eventual independence. Thus, the schedule remained vague after the establishment of the Council of the Province. The plan stressed the “independence for the Congo in the framework of the country’s unity,” checking the attempt of the Kongo ethnic group and others to secede from the entire Congo (*Congo 1959*, pp.45-49).

The Congolese were not satisfied with the plan. The MNC and other parties gathered in April at Luluabourg, an inland city, and demanded the establishment of a national government in January 1961, which would decide on the date of total independence (*Congo 1959*, p.156). In the Province of Léopoldville, ABAKO leaders reconstructed the group disbanded by the authority because of the riot. They formed the political party *Alliance des Bakongo* in late June, using the same abbreviation. Before that, Kasavubu and the ABAKO leaders had visited Brussels in March to discuss the plan’s implementation, but it did not work out. On June 20, Kasavubu revealed his opposition to this plan in a conversation with the US Assistant Secretary of State, Joseph Satterthwaite, visiting the Congo. Kasavubu criticized its lack of “practical details for implementation” and insisted that it was already outmoded. While he mentioned his desire for a federal rather than a centralized form of government in the Congo, he also told Satterthwaite that he would submit their document to Minister Van Hemelrijk to declare their intention to establish a “Republic of the Central Congo” replacing the

Province of Léopoldville by January 1, 1960 (Despatch 404 from Leopoldville, June 23, 1959, *FRUS*, pp.255-257)<sup>5</sup>.

Many responses from the Congolese were generated from the vagueness of the schedule for the final “independence.” From June to July, several parties announced their schedule propositions one after another. While some leaders called for “a symposium (*colloque*)” for a place of negotiations, the others proposed “a round table.” Having received many correspondences, André Schöller, a Vice-Governor-General of the colonial government, announced on August 5 his aim to hold a symposium to have a dialog between the Belgian authority and the Congolese (*Congo 1959*, pp.205-208).

However, this attempt did not go well because of local incidents. In the meantime, ethnic clashes had broken out in the Kasai Province, and the provincial authority arrested the leaders. This caused protest and boycott of the symposium by other Congolese leaders. On August 13, they refused the dialog with the administration and boycotted the forthcoming election. In addition, ABAKO sent a letter to the Governor-General to announce their non-participation in the symposium. Schöller reported to Van Hemelrijk that the situation in Léopoldville Province was rapidly deteriorating and contact with the local population had been blocked (*Congo 1959*, pp.128-130, 209, 214-215). Some other parties initially had attended the symposium but ended up boycotting it.

Faced with the refusal of dialog by the Congolese, the colonial administration recommended that the Belgian government change its course. Schöller sent a report to Van Hemelrijk on August 14 in which he proposed the acceleration of the schedule. He suggested that establishing a national institution should be presented to the Council of Province in April 1960 and that these institutions would be established in May 1961. This plan would give them about two years for implementation, and he

considered that would be the maximum length for the process, taking the impatience and mistrust of the local people into account (*Congo 1959*, pp.173-174).

Upon receiving this report, Premier Eyskens sent Harold d’Aspremont Lynden, an assistant secretary of his cabinet office, to the Congo at the end of August for consultation with Schöller and Alain Stenmans, Secretary of the Government of the colonial government. While there could be two ways to form a future constituent assembly, Schöller and Stenmans insisted that a shorter schedule would be preferable. It was because the shorter one could remove the cause of agitation resulting from the election and shorten the period when “time works against” them.

According to their plan, the main role of the national government and national assemblies should be to draft a constitution and a treaty with Belgium. The national government would exercise “*compétence*,” or executive functions, over domestic matters except for matters that should fall under the authority of the Belgian-Congolese community. The latter included such domains as national defense, external diplomatic relations, and monetary and financial matters, which are basically foreign relations of the country. In their view, Belgium should control the entire process until Belgium and the future Congo country would conclude such a treaty.

After d’Aspremont Lynden returned to Brussels, Schöller sent a telex to Van Hemelrijk to repeat his assertion. In his telex, he concluded that the reason for his proposal was his conviction that “we can save at maximum the chance to create a Belgium-Congo political community; otherwise, we have a risk of being involved in a power struggle in diverse regions which could definitely compromise these chances” (*Congo 1959*, pp.176-184). In short, the main purpose of his proposal was the realization of the Belgian-Congolese community.

How did the Belgian government react to this situation? The Eyskens cabinet refused to change its policy, which was already determined in January, and did not accept this proposal. However, this caused disagreement inside the cabinet.

It is known that Van Hemelrijck resigned because of the opposition inside the cabinet. Consulting the meeting minutes, Vanthemsche pointed out that Van Hemelrijck supported the proposition of the colonial authority to adopt a federal structure and accelerate the process toward independence, although his colleagues disagreed with him (Vanthemsche, 2007, p.90, 2012, p.91). While Vanthemsche had a point, it still remains vague what exactly the ministers were opposing and why Van Hemelrijck chose to resign.

Actually, there was another point of opposition among ministers, which finally led to Van Hemelrijck's resignation. It was whether or not the government should announce its intention to convoke a national assembly and form a national government in the Congo in 1960. The cabinet had been discussing the reports from Schöller and Stenmans since late August. It resumed the discussion on September 2 upon receiving the memorandum of conversation among d'Aspremont Lynden, Schöller, and Stenmans.

While Van Hemelrijck agreed with the colonial authority's proposal, the majority of cabinet members opposed it. Van Hemelrijck insisted that Belgium should "go further" than the proposal expressed in the government declaration in January. He pushed the idea of creating national assemblies and establishing the government in the Congo by the end of 1960. Eyskens and Lilar, Vice-President of the Council of Cabinet, and Foreign Minister Wigny opposed the deviation from the January declaration, which did not specify the deadline for creating these national institutions. Moreover, Eyskens argued against renouncing Belgian duty to "lead the Congolese people to maturity." Also, De

Vleeschauwer, the Minister of Agriculture, insisted that they should not hasten when, in his eyes, "the Congolese population were not mature enough ... to permit an immediate establishment of a democratic regime which we imagine." Lilar opposed Schöller's idea of announcing convocation of a constituent assembly that would adopt the constitution. Before Van Hemelrijck gave in, he once again insisted upon the convocation of a national assembly and a national government in 1960. However, in the end, the cabinet agreed to be "faithful" to its declaration in January. A "General Council" and a "Council of Legislation," which were supposed to be different from national assemblies, would be created in 1960 after the creation of the "Council of Province." (AGR, September 2, 1959)

In other words, they decided to keep the course set in January. Compared to the January declaration, they had progressed in deciding on a date to establish these national "councils." The two national councils were supposed to elaborate a plan to set up two national assemblies, i.e. the House of Representatives and the Senate, and a draft of the Congolese constitution. However, the eventual deadline to establish the national assemblies, and a constitution draft that was supposed to be submitted to the Belgian Parliament, were not instituted. Unsatisfied with this result, Van Hemelrijck resigned his post as the Minister of the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi (*Lettre de Démission du Ministre du Congo, Congo 1959*, pp.185-186).

### 3.2. Acceleration Without Changing the Course

Auguste De Schryver succeeded Van Hemelrijck on September 4. He was a veteran politician who had experienced several minister posts before and during World War II and was also a member of a "working group" mentioned above.

On the day De Schryver assumed his position, he made a radio speech. The cabinet agreed beforehand

that his speech should be based on the January declaration. It had to stress their intention to establish a “General Council” and a “Council of Legislation” in 1960, although their “*compétence*” (executive power) was limited (AGR, September 4, 1959). A new element in terms of the schedule in De Schryver’s speech was his reference to “*le pouvoir exécutif* (the executive authority),” whatever that is, which would be created simultaneously with two national councils, although he did not give any further explanation (*Congo 1959*, pp.186-187).

However, the MNC opposed this decision. An MNC branch in the Province of Kasai adopted a resolution at their assembly on September 6, presided by Lumumba as the President of the national MNC party. The resolution demanded the transfer of power to the Congolese. It also criticized, among other matters, that Van Hemelrijk resigned because “the Belgian government rejected his proposal regarding the fixation of precise timing for the constitution of national assemblies and the Congolese government in 1960.” In addition, the national MNC party declared its intention to boycott the election unless the forthcoming election would become a national election for national assemblies in 1960, and the national government would be formed immediately thereafter (*Congo 1959*, pp. 188-189).

At that moment, the Belgian cabinet finally started discussing the precise timing for setting up national assemblies and the constitution. On October 7, the cabinet decided to create “two legislative assemblies.” However, initially, there would be a restriction of their “*compétence*”; the Belgium Parliament or the King would retain control over national defense, telecommunications, the national force, economics, transportation, money, and foreign affairs. The assemblies would work out the draft for a constitution for at least two years and then, could “exercise the powers of true constituent assembly”

after one more year. The Congolese government would have a “Secretary of State,” an “Under-Secretary of State,” and a “Governor-General,” one or all of whom were presumably Belgian or Belgians. All the powers of nominations for these posts as well as for ministers were “reserved” for the Belgian King. Here, one can discern that they started to make the transfer of power a nominal one (AGR, October 7, 1959).

De Schryver gave a detailed account of this plan in his radio speech on October 16. He emphasized that the Congolese would be responsible not just at the local and provincial levels but also at the national level. He mentioned August or September 1960 as the timing for establishing two legislative assemblies and a “central government,” whose members would be nominated by the Belgian King.

He explained this process in three steps. First, an election would be held at the community level in December of that year. Second, the creation of provincial institutions would begin soon thereafter. Finally, national institutions would be set up. National assemblies should work out a final draft of the constitution during their maximum term of four years. The minister explained that the “*compétence*” of two national assemblies would be “substantial in the domain of internal legislation.” However, he did not clarify the authority that would not be considered as “internal” but be “reserved” for Belgians. As explained in the next section, this attempt to hold power in certain matters was harshly criticized by the Congolese attending the Round Table.

In the Congo, the situation continued to deteriorate. A riot erupted in Stanleyville in the Eastern Province at the end of October, where Lumumba held an assembly. Lumumba was arrested for this reason. In the Province of Léopoldville, people adopted a disobedience strategy, refusing tax payment, obligatory work, authority of tribunals, convocation by medical authorities, etc. They also decided to

boycott the election in December (Verhaegen, 1992, pp.579-581).

De Schryver tried to negotiate with the Congolese by holding a symposium in the Congo. On November 3, he announced his plan to hold and attend the “national symposium” (*colloque général*) and provincial ones that were taking place, inviting Belgian assembly members to attend. The Belgian Socialist Party (PSB), the main opposition party in the parliament at the time, refrained from participating and proposed to hold a RTC in Brussels instead (*Congo 1959*, p.243; Dumont, 1961, p.15). The idea of the Round Table had been suggested by several Congolese parties. While some Congolese parties attended the provincial symposiums, the national symposium was cancelled.

In the meantime, there were groupings and regroupings of political parties in the Congo. Opposed to Lumumba, some MNC leaders broke away from him, created their own faction, and invited Albert Kalonji to become the head of their faction. Then, they sought alignment with “Cartel” which ABAKO had formed with *Parti Solidaire Africain* (PSA) in July. *Parti du Peuple* joined this cartel. The Cartel decided to adopt the policy of demanding the Round Table, a policy that was already endorsed by the MNC-Kalonji faction in early November. On the other hand, the Congolese parties that were more or less pro-Belgian gathered in Coquilhatville in mid-November. Supported by Belgians, they formed a political party called *the Parti National du Progrès* (PNP).

While visiting the Congo in late November, De Schryver called for a “grand conference” in Brussels next January. According to him, the purpose of this conference was to discuss how to build a “second construction” at the provincial level and a “third construction” at the national level. These would be built on a “first construction” that would arise from the local elections in December.

It was then that the Belgian government shifted its policy. In the cabinet meeting on December 14, ministers agreed to shorten the transition period as much as possible in order to decrease the period of turbulence, which is inevitable in a period of electoral campaigns. The cabinet decided to review the measures already decided and “accelerate the establishment of different organs” (AGR, December 14, 1959). De Schryver announced this plan at the House of Representatives the following day. He explained that the transition period should be shortened, and the RTC would be held in mid-January to hasten the establishment of the Congo’s political structure. He concluded that “in 1960, the independence will be acquired” (*Congo 1959*, pp. 256-258). Thus, the transition period for “independence,” which was considered to be four years in October, became a year.

Did De Schryver mean that Belgium would permit the independence in 1960? The answers are both affirmative and negative. While the Belgians did decide to accelerate the process, they did not abandon the policy goal of retaining a part of “*compétences*” of the Congo government in Belgian hands. In other words, they were going to provide “independence” without giving full authority. I discuss their strategy in the next section.

#### 4. The Round Table Conference

It was agreed in the RTC that the Congo would acquire “independence” in less than six months. Why did the Belgian government concede to such a short transition period? Although its options were limited, why did it not attempt to prolong the negotiation, especially if it did not give up its interests in the Congo? What was its motivation behind apparent readiness to accept the Congolese demands? I will clarify in this chapter how the Belgian government consistently pursued its goal despite the shift in its strategy.

#### 4.1. The Initial Plan for the RTC

As we have seen, faced with disobedience and boycotts, Belgium accepted the acceleration of the process and, finally, also “independence” in 1960. Its repeated concession has been explained in terms of its weaknesses, as explained above. Indeed, the Belgian Constitution did not allow the government to use the Belgian metropolitan troops<sup>6)</sup> stationed in the Congo for colonial matters. The cabinet once considered utilizing conscripts for this purpose without their consent but eventually gave up on such ideas. There was still an option to use colonial force in the Congo, but Belgian citizens were not ready to be involved in another Algerian War (Vanthemische, 2007, pp.90-91). Jean Van den Bosch, the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explained in March the reason for the non-use of force to the Belgian diplomatic missions in other countries. According to him, Belgium avoided using force because of the experience of other countries such as France in Algeria, lack of military capability, and domestic opinion (AMAE, Exposé de M. J. Van den Bosch, Secrétaire Général, sur les grandes lignes de la politique belge en Afrique, Conférence diplomatique réuni à Elisabethville du 8 au 11 mars 1960, AF I-1 Congo 1960 mars).

However, such “weakness” alone does not explain why the government accelerated the decolonization process, as, generally speaking, one would delay or at least resist the process if one is reluctant to do so. The US declassified document reveals the reason for the acceleration of the decolonization process. As De Schryver explained Belgium’s strategy to US-Consul John Tomlinson when he visited Léopoldville in late December 1959, “Belgium aimed to gain the long-range benefits and friendship of the Congolese and to avoid being chased out of the Congo as the Dutch were in Indonesia. For that reason, the granting of

independence sooner, rather than later, was important – in 1960, rather than 1961” (Despatch 199 from Leopoldville, January 6, 1960, *LexisNexis*, reel 1). This indicates that the government not merely hastened because of the pressure from the Congolese. There was a calculation that this gesture would better serve its interests, as I explain below.

Therefore, this decision did not mean that the Belgian government gave up its influence over the Congo. As explained, they planned not to give complete “*compétence*” to the Congolese but to “reserve” some of its authority especially concerning foreign relations. We can confirm the Belgian government’s intention from another US document as Stenmans, the Secretary-General of the colonial government, explained to Tomlinson in frank terms:

The government to be established following the elections ... would be autonomous, but it would not have international personality or status. True independence and international status would be acquired only after the new Congolese government had adopted its own constitution.

At that time, adoption of the constitution was considered to be several years ahead. Stenmans believed that the primary concern of the Congolese was “for their own governmental institutions rather than for international recognition upon their establishment” (Despatch 201 from Leopoldville, January 7, 1960, *LexisNexis*, reel 1). It is evident from these documents that the government considered the “independence” that would be accorded to the Congo to be a rather nominal one.

In early January 1960, the Eyskens cabinet discussed how to run the RTC. The memorandum of the cabinet meetings allows us to understand how it conceived its strategy at the RTC. As De Schryver suggested in the meeting, the cabinet did not intend

to make a formal decision in the RTC. According to him, the conference's objective should be to obtain a valid recommendation on "how to lead the Congo to independence." Therefore, the RTC should not take votes but collect opinions only. Also, Vice-Premier Lilar insisted that the purpose of the RTC should be limited to making recommendations by the Congolese alone and the Belgians should not be engaged in it. De Schryver agreed that the Belgians would have to refrain from taking a stand. Given these circumstances, the cabinet agreed on the conference's objective being "the obtention of the simple recommendation." (AGR, January 5, 1960).

Then, there was a discussion on the scope of the conference's agenda. While there was a variety of opinions, the ministers generally agreed that it should be limited to political questions, excluding economic, social, and cultural matters. Consequently, the cabinet concluded that the recommendation of the RTC would be "limited to political questions but must be able to touch on all aspects, including the future ties with Belgium and the fundamental materials of the sovereignty" (AGR, January 5, 1960).

There was, however, disagreement over whether the conference should be divided into two sessions. Paul-Willem Segers, Minister of Communications, and Pierre Harmel, Minister of Cultural Affairs, pushed the idea of holding conferences twice, proposing to deal with economics and other issues in the second conference. De Schryver expressed his concern by suggesting that it was a serious problem. In his view, if the RTC recommended that the future Congolese Parliament would have only internal authority, there would be no problem. However, if the RTC recommended "a general power" for the Parliament, it was "dangerous to postpone these discussions" (AGR, January 5, 1960).

Although he did not explain the reason for this statement, one can infer from the discussion in the meeting that he was concerned that the problem of

retaining "*compétences*" would not be resolved before the "independence" of the Congo. De Schryver expressed his view that "it is difficult to accept the hypothesis that all power could be passed into the hands of the Congolese within a few months." Also, Jean Van Houtte, Minister of Finance, insisted that Belgium must defend itself "against blackmail from certain [Congolese] quarters that demand exorbitant guarantees from the country ... the guarantees must remain, however, within reasonable limits that do not compromise the interests of Belgium." Hence, the ministers considered it essential not to transfer all the "*compétences*" to the Congolese government but to "reserve" some of them in Belgian hands. In the words of Premier Eyskens, Belgium "must lead the Congo to independence ... by remaining a guardian for the matters that would be reserved." (AGR, January 7, 1960).

While ministers could not yet decide whether to hold the second conference on this day, it was later realized as the Economic, Social, and Cultural Conference from April to May. What they did confirm, however, was their policy of retaining a part of government authority in their hands. Following the meeting, De Schryver announced to the public that the RTC would only submit recommendations and opinions to the Belgian Parliament, and there would be no voting (Despatch 211 from Leopoldville, January 11, 1960, *LexisNexis*, reel 1).

#### 4.2. Failure to Implement the Initial Plan

This tactic was unsuccessful. After arriving around mid-January in Brussels, the Congolese delegates formed a "common front" a day before the RTC, putting their differences in opinion aside. Opposing De Schryver's explanation of the "the nature of the Round Table," they decided to discuss this issue first of all in the conference and demanded a "resolution" of the conference to signify "an

engagement of the government as a whole” (*Congo 1960*, p.22).

The conference was opened on January 20 and was presided over by Vice-Premier Lilar. The participants were the Congolese delegates, representatives of the government, representatives of the Belgian Parliament, and counselors of each party.

The discussion started the next day, and, according to the strategy above, Kasavubu demanded that the Belgian government be bound by the results of the conference. De Schryver countered that the conference and the government could not bind the Belgian Parliament *a priori*, as the recommendation should eventually be adopted by the Parliament. Delegates from the PSB opposed this position. After some discussion, the Congolese conceded to De Schryver’s proposal that a bill would be drafted according to the conference’s conclusion, and he would resign if it was not adopted by the Parliament.

In the RTC, the Belgian government conceded to the Congolese demands one after another. The Congolese delegates demanded the immediate release of Lumumba, as they received the news that he was sentenced to six months in prison for his involvement in the Stanleyville riot. The government agreed to this demand, and Lumumba was able to attend the conference on January 27.

Then, the Congolese turned to the topic on the exact date of “independence.” On January 26, they demanded to fix the date of “independence” on June 1, 1960. The next day, the Belgian government suggested two schedules, one with “independence” on June 31 and another on July 15. The participants agreed to the former schedule.

Probably, these concessions were acceptable to the Belgian government if it could retain a plan of partial retention of government authority which I explained in the last sub-section. However, even that plan was opposed by the Congolese. On January 27, De Schryver explained that the forthcoming

national assemblies would compose a constituent assembly to devise a constitution in two years. The Congo government would not gain overall “*compétences*”, but the Belgian government would intervene only in exceptional cases that were not anticipated. According to him, the Belgian King or his representative would be the head of the state until the final adoption of the constitution. Even the moderate Congolese, however, opposed such an idea when De Schryver pointed out that some problems could not be solved by June 30, such as finance, economy, defense, and external relations. Cyrille Adoula, the future prime minister, criticized the government’s intention, citing the cabinet meeting minutes of October 7 of the year before, which I mentioned in the Section 3.2, describing the domains “reserved” for Belgian hands. This was the moment that Socialist Senator Henri Rolan criticized the government with his famous phrase that all the keys should be given to the new house.

Eventually, the RTC set up several commissions inside the conference, and this matter was discussed in the commission concerning the structure of the future state. Based on this discussion, De Schryver accepted the transfer of all the “*compétences*” to the Congo on February 10.

#### 4.3. Shift of a Strategy to a Low-profile Style

Did the Belgian government abandon its zeal to control over the Congo? Did it hope for a friendship with the Congolese, instead? As I argue in this sub-section, there was a shift in the strategy rather than the goal itself.

As explained, the Belgian ministers did not consider it realistic to transfer all executive powers to the Congolese in a short period of time. However, they opted to accept the Congolese demands, although they considered them excessive, in the calculation that it would better serve their interests. Hence, they endeavored to make “independence” as

nominal as possible in order to retain control. We can find a hint of its strategy from the US archival documents and the minutes of cabinet meetings.

From a conversation between William Ugeux, an officer of the information branch of the colonial authority, and the US embassy officer we can understand that the Belgian government did not intend to transfer real authority to the Congolese. Ugeux explained the Belgian strategy at the US embassy just a couple of days before the conference's opening.

[G]enerally speaking, the ministers were now prepared to accept as the basis of their action the thesis that words were not of great importance –that concepts like independence, sovereignty, and the right to give out ministerial and other titles were something which should be taken at a rather cheap value, and therefore granted in exchange for concessions on important things … the title of minister should be considered about equivalent to an assistant bureau chief, with ambassador perhaps as a bureau chief (Despatch 748 from Brussels, January 18, 1960, *LexisNexis*, reel 1).

De Schryver himself explained his thought to the US Ambassador in Brussels that “once promise of independence had been made by Belgium, the date of the proclamation was not a matter of great importance.” Therefore, he thought the more that could be given to the Congolese, the better was the chance of creating an atmosphere which “would permit the maintenance of good relations … and the retention of certain essential problems in Belgian hands at least for a certain period” (Depatch 817 from Brussels, February 2, 1960, 755A.03/2-260, *LexisNexis*, reel 2). In other words, he conceded to the Congolese demands for immediate independence, expecting that such concession would give them a

better chance to retain control over actual policy of the forthcoming Congolese government.

Of course, the Belgian government had to reconsider its strategy after being criticized for its intention of retaining a part of executive powers. The cabinet did recognize that “it is impossible to reserve the powers” (AGR, February 12, 1960). In a sense, Kwanten (2001, p.534) might be right about the government's “strategic retreat.” However, we should not overlook that the Belgian goal was not just to avoid confrontation or count on the friendship but to retain influence over the Congo<sup>8)</sup>. Although it gave up outright attempts for such a policy, it still strived to pursue this policy in a low-profile style.

In the cabinet meeting on January 29, De Schryver explained that there was a strong reaction from the Congolese against “reservation of certain powers.” He proposed that they would present instead an introduction of a “common policy” for the Congolese economics, external relations, defense, etc. Eyskens agreed that they should pursue “*compétence commune*” (common executive power) instead of “*compétences réservées* [sic]” (reserved executive powers). In this context, Harmel proposed that the problem on the essential powers, as well as on the future links with Belgium, should be settled by the bilateral treaty (AGR, January 29, 1960).

In the next meeting on February 1, De Schryver maintained that he had “never promised unconditional independence” in the RTC and that “the Belgian interests [should] be protected and the recommendation [of the RTC should] be compatible with obligations and responsibility of Belgium.” Belgium must exercise certain powers as a “trustee (*mandataire*)” as, according to him, the Congolese cannot solve everything themselves from July 1. In his words, the Congolese would “have the full power but not the full exercise of powers” (AGR, February 1, 1960). It is to say that they do give all keys of a house but that the use of the keys is controlled by them. It is,

therefore, obvious that the Belgian government still intended to retain control over the Congolese government even after “independence.”

The French also hinted that the Belgians should combine “independence” and their assistance to the Congo. At the meeting in Paris on February 1, French diplomats told their Belgian counterparts that they could not understand why Belgium did not combine these two. They recommended that Belgium demand formal and juridical guarantees from Congolese leaders concerning organic ties, binding two countries as they did in Mali (AMAE, TPC 181 from Paris, February 1, 1960).

The timing for the conclusion of the treaty was important in order to bind the forthcoming government by the treaty. Eyskens insisted that powers could only be transferred to the Congo if “Belgium had substantial guarantees concerning the future ties between the two countries and the protection of the rights of persons and assets”. However, there was not yet the Congolese government that can conclude a treaty. De Schryver proposed to conclude it with a new government in July after “independence.” By contrast, Eyskens insisted on establishing the Congolese assemblies and the government in the first half of June and letting them sign and ratify the treaty before the day of independence. Also, Raymond Scheyven, the Minister in charge of economic and financial affairs of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, suggested to form a government around June 15, i.e., after the elections but before the “independence” (AGR, February 12, 1960). For this reason, they hastened the establishment of the government and assemblies as well as the conclusion of the treaty<sup>9</sup>).

This way, the Belgian government managed to slip a policy to maintain Belgian military bases in the Congo into a treaty. The government created a working group to study this issue. The working group proposed in March that the issue should be

referred to in “the general treaty of friendship, assistance and technical cooperation” as “this method would have the advantage of being more discreet” than proposing a military alliance accord which could be rejected by the Congolese (AMAE, Groupe de travail pour l’étude des problèmes posés par l’assistance militaire et le maintien des bases métropolitaines au Congo, réuni les 14 et 15 mars 1960, sous la présidence de M. A. Holvoet, Directeur Général de la Politique).

By contrast, the colonial force of the colonial government was to be passed to the Congolese government. However, General Emile Janssens told William Burden, the US Ambassador to Belgium, that the only way for the new government to maintain order was to keep the colonial force intact (Airgram G-147 from Brussels, April 20, 1960, 755A.5., *LexisNexis*, reel 2). In addition, Schyven told Burden that the Belgian government hoped that Janssens would not follow orders if the orders from the president of the new Congolese republic were “of a destructive nature” (Despatch 864 from Brussels, February 12, 1960, *LexisNexis*, reel 1).

As for foreign relations, Schyven hoped that the Congo government would rely on Belgian diplomatic missions (Despatch 1029 from Brussels, March 22, 1960, *LexisNexis*, reel 1). In this way, Belgian ambassadors would also assume the role of representing Congolese interests in countries where there was no Congolese diplomatic mission (AMAE, Exposé de M. J. Van den Bosch, Secrétaire Général, sur les grandes lignes de la politique belge en Afrique). Theoretically, these Belgian diplomats were supposed to act for the Congo government when dealing with Congolese matters. However, one can imagine what would happen if there were conflicts of interest between the two countries.

In short, the Belgian government attempted to retain control over the Congo in a less visible way. In outward appearance, it looked as if the

administration would fall under the Congolese authority. However, in reality, the administration would be run by Belgian officers and technicians who would be “offered” through “technical assistance” under the treaty. This is why they hastened to complete everything before the independence day.

### Conclusion

On July 4, General Janssens tried to discipline disobeying soldiers by writing “Before independence = After independence.” A few hours later, the furious soldiers started rioting. While there were numerous causes of the Congo Crisis, one of the causes should have been the cognitive gap between the Belgians and the Congolese on what “independence” signified.

In this article, I explained the consistency of the Belgian government’s goal and shift in a strategy to pursue the goal, before, during, and after the RTC. Faced with the Congolese opposition against the outright attempt of a partial retention of executive powers, the Belgian government shifted its strategy. Behind the apparent surrender, there was a maneuver to maintain its policy with a less conspicuous method. This article clarified that the Belgian government strategically conceded to granting “independence” in a short transition period but continued to pursue virtual control, although in a less visible way. Indeed, it attempted to make the “independence” a nominal one.

As this article revealed, even after withdrawing the concept of “*compétences réservées*,” the Belgian government pursued “*compétence commune*” whereby the executive powers would be granted but the exercise of them would still be controlled by Belgium as a trustee. Therefore, it was rather a matter of a strategy than of a “bet,” as the government continued to have a plan to pursue its goal. In order to realize this plan, it hastened the establishment of

the Congolese government and signature of the treaty before the “independence.” The Belgians were aware that it was “more discreet” to insert a clause on military base in “the treaty of friendship, assistance, and technical cooperation.” Although the colonial army was transferred to the Congolese, it continued to be directed by the Belgian officers. The Belgian ministers hoped that the Belgian generals would disobey the government’s order when it was “destructive.”

Hence, the Belgians saw continuity in the “independence” and pretended that there would not be much change. For the Congolese, it signified a break from the colonial era, and they thought a paradise would await them. This gap was not bridged before the day of “independence.”

### Notes

- 1) Although both Belgium and France had a colony named the Congo, “the Congo” in this article refers to the Belgian Congo.
- 2) Kwanten (2001, p.542) explains the debate over whether De Schryver used the term “bet.” Whatever the fact is, the point is that the government had a hidden goal. It is, therefore, understandable that De Schryver did not consider his policy much of a gamble, even if he used the term publicly.
- 3) While the Congo with C refers to the colony as a whole, Kongo with K refers to the ethnic group living near the Congo River. This ethnic group was divided into two colonies by the colonial powers, namely the French Congo and the Belgian Congo. Kongo is one of the ethnic groups living in the Congo.
- 4) Ruanda-Urundi was a United Nations trust territory administered by Belgium separately from the Congo.
- 5) According to Biebuyck and Douglas (1961), in the Bantu language “ba-” signifies the group

and is put before the name of the ethnic group. So, Bakongo means Kongo ethnic group. To avoid redundancy, this article uses just Kongo except for citation or proper names. As for the difference between “Kongo” and the “Congo,” please see also note 2.

- 6) As their plan had been rejected by the minister, the ABAKO leaders sent a letter to the minister on July 2nd, which informed him of their intention to prepare the “application of their plan in the framework of a federal Congo” (*Congo 1959*, p.121).
- 7) Forces Métropolitaines d’Afrique was a military force under the authority of the Belgian Ministry of Defense. By contrast, Force Publique, which later became the Congolese army, was a colonial army under the authority of the colonial government (Hoskyns, pp.58-59).
- 8) In this regard, Etienne Davignon, who attended the RTC as a trainee of the Foreign Ministry, recalls in his memoirs that an optimistic approach was taken to avoid confrontation, although he does not offer further explanation. Nor does he mention the Belgian intention to retain the influence over the Congo (Davignon, 2019, p. 25).
- 9) Although the treaty was signed shortly before the day of independence, it was not then ratified. This fact created a problem after the Congo Crisis broke out, as Belgium ignored this treaty and sent troops without the consent of the Congolese government.

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