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Arming Zambia in the “dark forest of international politics”: Kenneth Kaunda, Britain, and Arms Diplomacy, 1963-1971

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From the breakup of the Central African Federation in 1963 until the departure of British officers and trainers in the early 1970s, Kenneth Kaunda led the Zambian government in negotiating arms purchases from British arms manufacturers, with the assistance of the British government. These transactions were intimately connected to security guarantees against Rhodesian aggression that Kaunda negotiated with the former colonial power, and British attempts to foster Zambian foreign policy and technological dependency. While this decade of negotiations had its origins in the contentious local distribution of military resources at the end of Federation, by the time it ended, it provided a stepping stone to a much broader global economic and security network, one which reflected the international-minded rhetoric associated with Kaunda in the arena of international affairs.

As the Zambian government’s negotiations with the British government and arms manufacturers came to involve sophisticated technology and weaponry, the politics of Britain’s own arms sales and the framing of national security in Zambia provoked considerable debate. Young Zambian officers believed the conditions and technology of the arms purchases limited Zambian sovereignty, while Kaunda and his government appear to have believed that those limitations came with substantial benefits because of the guarantees they implicitly drew from British authorities.

Correspondence around these transactions offers a window into Zambian calculations about national security in the context of a fraught regional context and concerns about British neocolonialism. Far from merely constituting bilateral negotiations, Kaunda undertook arms diplomacy with Britain amidst a growing diversity of potential global weapons and security suppliers, reflecting the weight of Zambia’s colonial history and its national-era global orientation.

Keywords

Zambia; British Empire; Decolonisation; Kenneth Kaunda; Neocolonialism: Security; Technology

In the second half of the 1960s, Zambian officials negotiated the purchase of weapons from British arms manufacturers, an exchange mediated by representatives of the British government. Then fresh from training at Britain's Sandhurst military academy, a young Zambian officer who later commanded the country's armed forces, bemoaned what he and other young officers regarded in the 1960s as an arms deal gone wrong. There were "terrible limitations" to the viability of arms purchased from Britain, and the purchases themselves, Francis Sibamba believed, locked Zambia into a neocolonial relationship with Britain that made a mockery of the young nation's sovereignty in the realm of national security (Sibamba, 2010: 97). Such a diplomatic error on the part of Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, Sibamba suggested in his memoirs, was particularly perilous because of Zambia's outspokenness against powerful and antagonistic regional powers (Sibamba, 2010: 52-53, 97). South Africa and Rhodesia viewed Zambia with considerable hostility because of its decisions to host liberation movements and their armies, and to pursue policies aimed at the diplomatic isolation and political destruction of the two settler states. Relying on arms deals with the former colonial power left the country militarily vulnerable.

I propose, however, that Kaunda and Zambia undertook negotiations with British arms manufacturers and the British government—to purchase missiles, aircraft, and vehicles—as part of a broader, more clear-eyed political and military strategy. A close reading of official archives from the UK and Zambia suggests that this strategy used a carefully negotiated neocolonial relationship to elicit security guarantees from Britain that temporarily shielded Zambia against Rhodesian aggression. Vocal diplomacy on the one hand, and the purchase of weapons that were never intended to be used on the other, were a set of tools through which Kaunda engaged with the same British authorities who sought to use Kaunda and Zambia as their own political pawn in Southern Africa, all the while directing funds toward the British arms industry. For British authorities, arms sales to Zambia allowed the state to combine diplomatic and commercial objectives. The British state worked to ensure that as Zambia armed itself, it did so with weapons from British firms rather than arms produced by other states. This was not just a boon to a domestic British arms industry; it allowed British policymakers to structure and constrain the capabilities of the Zambian military. However, the existence of a global arms market, and Kaunda's vacillation, gave Zambia leverage in its negotiations with Britain. Purchasing arms from a ready supplier like Britain was a political act which signalled to domestic audiences the government's ability to defend the nation, and which committed Britain to Zambia's defence.

Such neocolonial military entanglements left the British government confident that it could continue to exert domineering influence over Zambia's national security apparatus. However, Kaunda's calculated unravelling of arms deals with Britain at the end of the 1960s was similarly a part of a wider reorientation away from entanglement with Britain—something that had served its purpose for the first five years after independence—toward a wider constellation of political and military relationships. Exploring Zambian negotiations with Britain over the purchase of arms is, in this context, not simply a story of the two countries' militaries and the relationship between them. Rather, it is a window through which to think about the politics of neocolonialism, and the manner in which Kaunda's and Zambia's diplomacy sought to make the conditions of neocolonial relationships manageable, useful, and impermanent in a world very much in motion.

Arms, Nations, Empires, and Late-Colonial Security

Weapons played a variety of roles in colonial conquest and the anti-colonial movements that ended some European empires. Industrialisation and gun manufacture were essential to the eighteenth and nineteenth century expansion of the British Empire, and gun manufacture, modification, and ownership reflected trajectories of people's social and political lives in Central Africa (Safia, 2018; Macola, 2016). Service in colonial militaries, to which firearms and violence were central, also shaped lives and possibilities, reflecting and altering relationships and claims between people and colonial states (Tembo, 2021; Moyd, 2014; Mann, 2006; Costello, 2015). During the 1960s and 1970s, the acquisition of arms became central to the emergence of national states in Africa. The ability to purchase and wield weapons and other forms of military machinery and expertise was a marker of sovereignty, a source of national pride, and a mechanism for self-defense on a continent shaped in part by its own cold—and sometimes very hot—war between remaining European colonies, settler states, and nations dedicated to a fuller version of decolonisation. Trading weapons and training soldiers in their use was an avenue for renegotiating commercial relations, and through them, for situating new states within global orders and alliances, affirming ideological affinity, utilitarian alignment, or commercial dependence (Mavhunga, 2011). Arms sales were but one part of the connections that emerged between decolonisation and security (Wyss, 2021; Clune, 2017; Parsons, 2003; Douek, 2020; Shishuwa, 2019). For former colonial powers like Britain, the sale of weapons, training in their use, and influence over who wielded them became a part of the post-imperial economy, an instrument

in diplomats' toolkits, and a marker of expansive influence even after formal rule from London unravelled, part of a broader British institutional approach to decolonisation (Stockwell, 2018). For settler states in Southern Africa, fighting within and across boundaries, and evading patchy global sanctions to equip themselves to do so, was essential to security (White, 2021; Van Vuuren, 2018).

The global arms trade that took shape in the postwar years was similarly complex and multifaceted (Drohan, 2003; Feinstein, 2012). Timothy Mitchell observed how the geopolitics of arms sales saw Britain and the U.S. arm oil rich states in the Middle East as a form of "financial recycling," a way of returning currency flows to the West that had been imbalanced by resource dependency after decolonisation (Mitchell, 2011: 155). British arms sales to Zambia recycled political power rather than currency, using what was ostensibly British "aid" to Zambia to subsidise British industry and political capital in Africa. Mitchell argues that the growing acquisition of arms by states in the Middle East became a form of "insitutionalised uselessness," because the arms in question were important less for their potential use than for the relationships and counter-dependencies, they forged (Mitchell, 2011: 155). As we shall see, this is not a bad analogy for what Zambia sought from arms purchase from Britain. Zambia sought to deploy this arms diplomacy in the context of a wider attempt "to assert African agency" in the context of the Cold War and Southern African liberation struggles (DeRoche, 2019: 467).

The story of Kaunda's attempts to arm Zambia have more modest beginnings, in the contours of the Central African Federation that for a decade bound Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland in an ultimately-aborted experiment in imperial statecraft. Federation involved the centralisation of some policy areas and resources, among which was defence. At the end of Federation, resources were distributed between the three territories that went their separate ways—Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia to independence as Malawi and Zambia; Rhodesia to its own rogue decolonisation (White, 2015). Many of the resources associated with the federal—as opposed to the territorial—government were disproportionately allocated to Southern Rhodesia at the end of Federation in 1963. To the chagrin of Zambian officials and Zambian officers in the country's emerging military, the majority of serviceable weaponry fell into this category. In the words of Francis Sibamba, who later commanded Zambia's armed forces, this left the military at Kaunda's disposal "with a few transport aircraft only", bereft of the material required for either offensive or defensive action (Sibamba, 2010: 83; Lungu and Ngoma, 2005). Participants in the Victoria Falls Conference determined principles for the allocation of armed forces, and these departed from the premise that "units were to pass to [Southern Rhodesian

or Northern] commands according to their present dispositions.” Because the entire Rhodesian Royal Air Force (RRAF) was stationed in Southern Rhodesia, the government in Salisbury—and later the rogue settlers—secured almost the entirety of that service.¹

The more concrete division of military hardware was decided at a 1963 meeting in Salisbury.² British officials praised the “concessions” they extracted from both sides, but the handful of aircraft the Southern Rhodesians offered to their northern counterparts were the oldest and least operable. In the end, Northern Rhodesia secured a mere six aircraft from the RRAF’s 91-strong fleet. The agreement also dismantled several of the more effective army units in Northern Rhodesia.³ British mediators claimed that the meeting to settle the distribution of resources was characterized by “goodwill.” Moreover, Northern Rhodesia’s Executive Council, a body that included among its members Kenneth Kaunda, Simon Kapwepwe, and Reuben Kamanga (all of whom later inveighed against the deal), endorsed the outcome of the meeting.⁴ Agreement by such figures—who later regretted the trade-offs they sanctioned—was critical in allowing the British government to alleviate concern stemming from the international scrutiny of the Victoria Falls agreement, including from the United Nations Security Council. At the UN, the Ghanaian government offered the prescient claim that the well-armed Southern Rhodesian colony that emerged from the breakup of Federation would pose a threat to the region.⁵ Although out of power and so unable to affect government policy, left-leaning members of the British Labour Party’s National Executive Council offered a motion in 1963 that “the Southern Rhodesian government should not be left in eventual charge of the Federal Air Force, because that would give them considerable power in that part of the world,” while leaving Zambia and Malawi “bereft of the necessary force for self protection.” Party leader Harold Wilson, who would soon contend with the fallout from Rhodesia’s UDI, refused to take up the issue (Benn, 198:, 62-3). Dissatisfaction with the results of the dissolution of Federation, a dissatisfaction that deepened into the 1960s, generated the arms diplomacy of the decade that followed.

Kaunda and Britain

Kenneth Kaunda was the central figure in the political drama that followed. In the first decade of Zambian nationhood, British interlocutors variously described

the Zambian president as capricious, generous, wily, inscrutable, emotional, and janus-faced. On the one hand, they regarded him as a “corrective” to what they argued were the “racialist” views among UNIP’s “rank-and-file.” On the other hand, they grew frustrated by the consistency and vigour with which Kaunda and members of his government used the Rhodesian issue as an excuse to flay the British government publicly. Rhodesia, they believed, was a “useful issue transcending internal [Zambian] political differences,” and the British High Commissioner ‘explained’ that “extravagant words are the African substitute for disagreeable deeds.” British officials feared that more radical—in their criticism of British Southern African policy—voices were rising to prominence in Zambia in a way that threatened to turn Kaunda into a “cypher.” At one point, fury over an incoming Zambian High Commissioner’s undiplomatic remarks relating to Britain’s Rhodesian policy—Alinan Simbule referred to Britain as a “humbled, toothless bulldog”—held up his appointment in London. In a sign of the contempt with which senior Zambian politicians held Britain, Foreign Minister Simon Kapwepwe defended Simbule by doubling down on the critique, calling British politicians “cowardly, toothless hyenas.” Harold Wilson, meanwhile, referred derisively to Simbule as “this youth” in correspondence. This particular flashpoint was representative of the strength of feeling against Britain in Zambia over the Rhodesian issue, and indicative of British fears of the tenor of other voices in UNIP.

As British politicians and diplomats sought to engage Kaunda over the Rhodesian issue, and to prime the pump for weapons sales, they solicited opinions of Kaunda’s character, security in office, and style from diplomats, expatriates, and others, all of whom drew diametrically opposed conclusions, solidifying the narrative of Kaunda as an enigma. The High Commissioner in Lusaka reassured London that Kaunda was “impressionable,” with a “third rate brain,” and likely to be influenced by the last figure in the room with him. Colin Morris, who collaborated with Kaunda on a number of books, contended that Kaunda was “not influenced at all by the many opinions that are pressed upon him,” but simply adept at suggesting that he was, and in fact made “his own devious and calculated decisions.” Some thought that Foreign Minister Simon Kapwepwe called the shots. Morris maintained that “Kaunda wants to run his own foreign policy” and that Kapwepwe was merely situated in the Foreign Office to “fire Kaunda’s bullets for him.” Reflecting centralized decision-making under Kaunda, British officials bemoaned what they saw as the habit of lower ranking Zambian officials of “pushing [political and military matters] straight up onto President-PM level. It is a strange way of doing business.” Narratives like

these appear to have also shaped scholarly conventional wisdom about Kaunda as the dominating force in Zambian foreign policy, making decisions in a vacuum of advice from foreign policy experts (Chan, 1992: 3-4).

Zambian archives make clear, however, that Zambian missions abroad fed Kaunda a regular stream of information from diplomats. The Zambian High Commission in London—which with independence moved from the Northern Rhodesian commissioner’s office in Haymarket to Cavendish Place—sent regular reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Lusaka. Often, substantial portions of those reports were devoted to evaluating the approach of the British government and its press to UDI, and forecasting how other events and trends in the UK might affect its officials’ and the public’s evolving views of the Southern African crisis. Although the High Commissioner acknowledged the impossibility of submitting “a report on Rhodesia which will not be out of date by the time it is read”, due to the fast moving nature of events, Kaunda received a steady and detailed flow of broad information and concrete analysis from his diplomatic personnel in London. Indeed, one of the reasons Kaunda and other Zambian figures advocated so widely for the British use of force to curb Rhodesian UDI—both before and after UDI actually occurred—was the High Commission’s accurate forecasts about the extent to which Rhodesians, with tutoring from Pretoria, had prepared to circumvent sanctions. With considerable prescience, Zambian diplomats in London described how Rhodesia was likely to evade sanctions with ease. Zambia’s diplomatic mission in London also took on a broader role in diplomacy across Europe, one which saw its High Commissioner and other personnel charged with building relations across Europe, including with France and Germany, and travelling widely to explain how the Rhodesian crisis—in its various stages—was affecting Zambia, and what supportive action European governments could take. The High Commission also shared intelligence on potential threats to Zambia, leading to at least one figure being listed as a “prohibited immigrant” in the country. In the early stages of the post-UDI era, the High Commission also actively recruited white officers—British, Canadian, and Irish—on a contract basis to the Zambian military. During election season, the High Commission sent profiles of leading political figures in Britain back to Lusaka, along with diagrams of British political parties’ stances on issues of interest to Zambia. These included receptiveness to talks with the Smith government absent preconditions; use of force in Rhodesia; immigration to Britain; the Common Market; defence spending, and the role of the Ministry of Overseas Development.

The broader diplomatic and political context in which arms sales occurred were very much shaped by these factors. The personality of Kaunda—or rather,

perceptions of that personality—proved central to British calculations about his value as a potential ally or agent for the conduct of British policy. And the indeterminate and contradictory conclusions British policymakers sought to draw about that personality, as demonstrated above, ensured that they were unaware about the degree to which Zambian foreign policy as it related to arms purchases was not conducted in a personalised, British-managed vacuum, but shaped by flows of information from Zambian diplomats in London and, as we shall see, keen attention to the range of alternative interlocutors for the arming of the new nation. This is borne out by substantial scholarship on the relationship between Zambia and the United States during this period (De Roche, 2016, 2007).

Arms for Zambia

It was in light of the unequal distribution of federal military forces, and the security risks arising from Rhodesia's 1965 Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain, that Kaunda led the Zambian government in seeking to arm itself. Francis Sibamba, among the higher ranking Zambians in the military at the time, recalled that Zambia had "inherited a pocket-sized army, only good enough, and meant, for counter-insurgency operations." Such operations were designed to focus on ending labour disputes and intervening to separate combatants in feared racial violence on the Copperbelt (Sibamba, 2010: 96). For the next several years, Britain was the primary source from which the Zambian government sought to purchase arms.

On the same date as Rhodesia's UDI, Kenneth Kaunda wrote to British Prime Minister Harold Wilson seeking aid from a British firm—and a recommendation from Wilson as to how to approach such a firm—In opening an "ammunition and small arms" factory in Zambia. This appears to represent the beginning, albeit a modest one, of exchanges that would grow in complexity over the coming five years in linking the Zambian government and military to British arms manufacturers, with the British government playing a key intermediary role. In this case, British officials responded promptly, suggesting that Kaunda or military experts should visit the Royal Small Arms Factory at Enfield, or the Royal Ordnance Factory at Radway Green to examine models and discuss Zambian needs with experts. In fact, the Controller of the Royal Ordnance Factories was practised at undertaking such work in relation to newly-decolonised nations, having built up commercial and security relations through exchanges in expertise and material with Australia, Pakistan, India, and other Commonwealth nations. Another early stratagem that Kaunda attempted to pursue in relation

to arms, was to better animate the claim that Rhodesia unfairly benefited from the distribution of military resources at the end of Federation by claiming that Rhodesians “withheld” weapons and supplies from Zambia. However, the government misfired when the Secretary to the Cabinet suggested that Britain help Zambia to replace this “withheld” material by giving to Zambia any arms and supplies on order in Britain from Rhodesia, allowing the Lusaka High Commission to point out that Rhodesia had no equipment on order from British arms manufacturers, dodging the central point of the original claim.

As early as 1965, the British government provided funds for “minor items of Zambia’s military hardware,” but Kaunda steadily agitated for British support for more significant arms purchases. He agitated in parallel with his efforts to prod Britain to offer Zambia security guarantees against Rhodesian aggression. Kaunda’s insistence that Britain intervene militarily against Rhodesian UDI is better documented—in scholarship and archives—but he was equally concerned that Britain commit to military intervention in defence of Zambia’s borders, should the need arise. Along with Kenya and Malawi, Kaunda won loosely-worded guarantees of support against external threats and internal security problems from the British government, concessions Britain was loathe to provide during the 1960s, but that were successfully weaponised in East Africa during the 1960s when governments there faced security challenges, perhaps signalling their potential utility to Kaunda.

As Zambia shifted gears to seeking more significant weaponry, the British government responded enthusiastically to these overtures. The close relationship between the British state and industry—animated in the late-1960s by the Labour government’s call to embrace the “white heat” of technology and its corporatist ambitions—meant that the British government positioned itself as an intermediary between arms manufacturers and their prospective Zambian clients. A considerable proportion of the funds that Zambia deployed to purchase British arms actually came from Britain itself. The Commonwealth Relations Office deployed millions of pounds across Africa on “military technical assistance expenditure.” The funds declined as the ‘60s wore on due to economic retrenchment, but the Ministry of Defence (MOD) also provided funds.

British personnel in Zambia—in high ranking civil service posts, at the head of the armed forces, and in intelligence work ostensibly on behalf of Kaunda’s government—were a clear part of Britain’s strategy to exert influence in the former colony. In discussing the pace of Zambianisation, which threatened to push many of these individuals out of their posts, British High Commission officials in Lusaka were frank in assessing how British personnel shared information about what should have been internal Zambian deliberations, and

ensured that in those deliberations British objectives were “not lost sight of.” The British High Commissioner in Lusaka also advised that maintaining British command of the Zambian Air Force—the most technical of the armed forces, and the one from which major defence expenditures were most likely to emanate—could yield “some commercial advantage to ourselves,” as British commanders and trainers could steer the Zambian government toward the purchase of British arms, a fillip to both British industry and British diplomacy. The Defence Advisor to the British High Commission was also extraordinarily well informed about the disposition of expatriate officers commanding the Zambian military. To facilitate both arms purchases and the recruitment of contract officers in London, the Zambian government assigned a Defence Liaison Officer (DLO) to the London High Commission. Lieutenant Colonel F. D. Slater had served in the Northern Rhodesia Regiment before independence, and occupied the DLO role, with assistance from two other expatriate officers. Slater played a role in arms procurement by examining equipment at British military and industrial facilities and sending information and recommendations about equipment—especially that “suitable for Zambian conditions”—to the Zambian Army in Lusaka. Therefore, by the time civil servants and politicians in the Zambian government made decisions about arms procurement, British military personnel, former colonial officers posted to the Zambian High Commission, and the British leadership of the Zambian Army and Air Force had all shaped the parameters of advice and decision-making.

Civil servants and military officers also shared details about potential rivals for arms sales with the British government. Details about a rumored Italian offer to sell Marconi aircraft and provide the ground crews and training personnel for their use spurred the British government into action in support of its domestic industries. Another leak—also likely from British personnel embedded in the Zambian civil service—in January 1968 warned that in Kaunda’s speech to open the year’s parliamentary session, the Zambian president would mention a programme of armament. Acting on the leak, the MOD signalled to British arms manufacturers that they should submit proposals for packages to the Zambian government, to get ahead of any competition. The MOD also set up a sales team to assist companies. As British companies without previous interests in Southern Africa contemplated doing business in Zambia, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office also provided briefings and risk assessments. State intervention to facilitate profiteering from technology was not restricted to the arms industry during this period. Partly in sync with its attempts to modernise both Britain and its vision of social democracy, and partly to show itself to be a friend to new

African governments, the Labour government led by Harold Wilson also worked with industry when it came to the sale of computing equipment to a developing African market as a part of its techno-political agenda (Hicks, 2018: 120-21).

British anxieties about contracts with Italian or other unnamed firms were well-founded. Kaunda took advantage of a global arms industry that swelled as a result of the Cold War, and approached Italy, Yugoslavia, and other nations: “flirting with other air forces” as one frustrated British official put it. As the British state and arms industry manoeuvred for Zambian business, Kaunda held his cards close to his chest, declining to disclose the extent of his ministers’ conversations with other states. On the one hand, the connections Kaunda was building with other members of the Non-Aligned movement gave him leverage in working with the British. On the other hand, many of the Zambian officials who participated in the nation’s review of its defence needs were British contract officers or expatriates, who shared details with the British High Commission in Lusaka.

During the 1960s in Britain, multiple government departments promoted arms industries, also subsidising sales by providing loans or grants for defence purposes to former colonies under the assumption—sometimes unwritten, sometimes in writing—that those funds would be directed toward the purchase of weapons from British firms. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the newly-formed Ministry of Technology (Mintech), and the MOD were among the institutions continuing a longer historical tradition (Edgerton, 2012, 2013). Defence advisors in embassies and high commissions facilitated the negotiation of these contracts. In the Zambian case, the British High Commission in Lusaka coordinated with companies like British Aircraft Corporation (BAC) to maximize its impact at fairs in Lusaka and Ndola. When direct subsidies for arms sales were in short supply, the British government looked to use subsidised training opportunities for the weapons systems in question as an inducement for the Zambian government and armed forces.

The ministries and departments privy to these negotiations developed mechanisms and regulations to ensure that Britain’s own armed forces would always have access to a superior and more updated product than other purchasers. As a result, the MOD had to downgrade weapons before they could be sold to the armed forces of other states. The levels to which weapons had to be downgraded depended on the relationship between the British government and the state in question, and potential security risks. Zambia, for example, had a “restricted” rating that constrained sales, though less severely than for some other states. They also depended on assessments of how long the secrets associated with a particular technology were likely to remain secret. For example, when

it came to the P10 Rapier system Britain later sold to Zambia, British officials estimated it would take 12 months after initial testing in the Hebrides for the Soviets to break security screens. Assessments were generated by a Release of Military Information Policy Committee, made up of representatives from the aforementioned ministries, the army, navy, RAF and security services. In the context of these newly formalised procedures, the British government joined companies in lobbying the Zambian government and armed forces to promote British weapons. However, MOD regulations and British diplomatic objectives meant that any arms Zambia purchased from British firms had to be purely defensive in nature. This was among the constraints that made some figures in the Zambian government and military uncomfortable.

Decisions and negotiations around substantial arms purchases moved slowly. But by May 1968, discussions grew more serious when a Zambian mission toured BAC, Short Brothers, and Harland Ltd facilities in Britain to evaluate weapons systems and aircraft. The Ministry of Technology took the lead in facilitating the visit, and a ministry official guided the Zambian delegation. BAC recommended that the Zambian military acquire a Rapier missile package, pressuring the delegates to make a quick decision on the product by emphasizing that delay would mean slower delivery given the widespread interest from other nations' militaries in the weapons system. Short Brothers prepared a similar package deal for scrutiny for the Blowpipe missile system. The companies flew the Zambian delegation to demonstration sites on aircraft that they also sought to market as suitable for the Zambian military's transport needs. The delegation exhibited the most interest in the Rapier missiles, which brought the parties to a discussion of payment. British officials believed that the Zambian government had the ability to pay in cash for the BAC deal, which included a Rapier battery and supporting equipment, training provided by BAC for Zambians, and a guarantee of spare parts for two years, all at the cost of six million pounds. The cash payment model involved a two million pound payment up front, 20% more of the total cost after 12 months, and the remainder paid upon delivery. If the Zambian government sought a British government subsidy for the purchase, a similar down payment would be followed by payments spread over five years.

Soon after the visit, the Zambian government opened formal negotiations with BAC, facilitated by a defence advisor from the MOD. The Zambian government paid one third of the total cost for a delivery of 12 Rapier projectors and 360 missiles, with delivery scheduled for 1970. During negotiations, BAC pressured the British government to emulate the aggression of the Italian state in supporting bids by Italian firms. The British government also fielded inquiries from Portugal, whose officials in Portuguese East Africa feared that the Rapier

missiles would fall into the hands of guerrillas operating from Zambian territory. The British response had been to reassure the Portuguese, in part by noting that British control over the supply of replacement missiles would constrain the actions of the Zambian military. The limitations of the supposedly cutting edge weapons technology quickly became apparent. Downgrading the missiles for sale—done by Mintech—meant a year delay for delivery. Zambian officials were not originally informed that the product they purchased—while broadly similar to the missiles in use by the British military—would be modified, and this, along with delays, created mounting frustration with the deal. In fact, already in 1968, British experts knew of serious flaws in the product. The need to concentrate missiles to ensure their efficacy led to signal channels interfering with each other. Mintech was clear on the need for the technical issue to be resolved before British armed forces used the product, but suggested there was no reason that Rapier could not be sold, potentially-fatal flaws and all, to foreign customers. In contrast, the MOD insisted that whatever product was sold abroad, delivery could not take place until British forces had 18 months' access to the technology. Similar issues—faulty technology, the length of the downgrading process and prohibitive regulation—plagued British sales of Blowpipe missiles and Zambian access to the Camberley training college in the coming years, resulting in “embarrassment” to the British government and British industry.

Zambia had also considered purchasing arms from the U.S., although the U.S. Congress' 1968 deliberation on a Foreign Assistance Authorization Bill, which limited access by foreign states to U.S. weapons, made such a transaction unlikely. Nevertheless, a Zambian mission made its way to an arsenal at Huntsville, Alabama to see a demonstration of a Hawk missile. There, Zambian delegates unburdened themselves to U.S. military officials about their “continued reliance on British personnel.” The Zambian military, the mission told Americans, also considered purchasing Czech weaponry, but the British military advisors who dominated the Zambian security establishment had disparaged the quality of weapons. Among the delegation was Simon Kapwepwe, a harsh critic of Britain's Southern Africa policy (DeRoche, 2007: 233-4). He expressed open disbelief in British advice, suggesting that political concerns rather than the technical qualities cited by advisors informed the guidance from British military advisors. U.S. officials, who regarded the Zambians as unserious customers, gamely sought to talk up the value of British weapons and advice, and recommended that if dissatisfied, Zambia should seek a second opinion from Canadian, Swedish, or Swiss advisors. Detailed documentation of these interactions appears in British

archives because the U.S. military attaché in Zomba, Malawi, shared information with his British counterparts, also instructing the British government about the advantage it could win for its firms if it was willing to provide a subsidy.

Zambian frustration with British advice and British products was fuelled by broader communication about British orientation toward Zambia and British industrial capacity from the Zambian High Commission in London to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Lusaka. The High Commission reported that British media complained that “Zambia is determined not to give a major contract to British firms,” noting that in reality “a number of major projects have been carried out in Zambia by British firms [and] if they have failed to win other tenders they have themselves to blame.” “British industry,” the High Commissioner remarked acerbically, “is simply inefficient and is just now learning to abandon out of date ideas of dumping their products in their colonies. It is really in a sense a period of painful mental as well as technological adjustment for the British people.” Accusations in the British press continued into the early 1970s, to the point that Kaunda felt compelled to write to then-opposition leader Edward Heath (soon to be Prime Minister) to set the record straight.

The mistrust of British motives, contempt for British technology, and concern about being locked into neocolonial dependency in the security realm was shared by figures like Kapwepwe, at the top of government, and Sibamba, then a rising officer in a military still commanded by British officers. Sibamba regarded the transformation of the Rapier exchange from deal to debacle as anything but an accident. The British, he later recalled, “capitalizing on our inadequate knowledge and inexperience in defence matters...especially in tactical and strategic deployment of modern, sophisticated equipment, sold us the initial version of the Rapier SAM system” with all of its “terrible limitations” (Sibamba, 2010: 97). Examined narrowly, as an arms purchase, the archival evidence supports Sibamba’s interpretation. However, examined in its larger context, in which the weapons were less significant for their potential to ever be used than they were for the diplomatic relationship they sealed and the guarantees they helped to establish, the exchanges reflect considered politics rather than naive purchases.

This becomes clearer when examining other transactions that unfolded—or failed to unfold—in the years after the Rapier debates. In 1970, a sale of Beagle Bulldog aircraft disintegrated when the British company went into receivership. These aircraft were part of the Zambian Air Force’s pilot training programme. British diplomats noted the personal attachment of Kaunda to the Zambianisation project this represented. In a missive to the Ministry of Technology asking for the state to intervene to prevent the manufacturer from going under, diplomats

noted that “President Kaunda himself attended the recent passing out parade of six Zambians who had qualified for their wings,” worrying that if the deal fell through with the company, it would likely “provoke a reappraisal of British ability to meet Zambian defence requirements.” The FCO advocated that the government inject capital into Beagle long enough to allow the company to deliver aircraft to Zambia and two other strategically significant nations—Kenya and Sweden—awaiting orders, but the Treasury rejected the suggestion. Ultimately the company Scottish Aviation took advantage of Beagle’s collapse and continued production of the aircraft for Sweden and Kenya. However, the Zambian government cancelled its order.

During the same year, the British government worked to shepherd two other arms purchases by the Zambian government to fruition. One involved the purchase of Skyvan transport aircraft from Short Brothers of Belfast, and the other the purchase of the 167 Strikemaster, an attack aircraft, from BAC. With Strikemaster as with Rapier, the British government kept abreast of meetings between BAC representatives and Zambian ministers and military commanders. British diplomats and manufacturers also worked to persuade Zambian authorities that Skyvan, a “short-range transport” aircraft with a “simple and rugged” design was well suited to Zambian needs. However, although the Zambian government signed a “letter of intent,” it withdrew from the deal in July 1970, also signalling its disinterest in Strikemaster. In the case of Skyvan, British authorities first learned of Zambian reticence when the High Commission in Lusaka shared internal Zambian memos with London. How the High Commission came by these memos is unclear, but the foregoing suggests a number of mechanisms through which sensitive Zambian information was shared with the British. Kaunda later told the British High Commissioner that the decision to abandon Skyvan had to do with “development in [Zambian] military thinking”, particularly in relation to the capacity to shift troops eastward to meet threats from Portuguese East Africa. However, the High Commissioner noted that Skyvan had already been modified to suit Zambian needs for expanded flight range. The British High Commissioner in Lusaka became convinced that the Minister of Defence, Grey Zulu, was hiding details of the exchange from Kaunda. While the British High Commission and UK Foreign Office officials scrambled to get Kaunda back on side (including the High Commissioner meeting Kaunda at State House in the midst of a thunderstorm that prevented the President from getting the Defence Minister on the phone), Grey Zulu instructed the Zambian Air Commander to order Canadian and German aircraft. While British officials saw Zambian duplicity in cancelling the Bulldog, Strikemaster, and Skyvan orders (and misjudged the extent of Grey Zulu’s authority), Kaunda’s decision—as with the successful if drawn-out Rapier

purchase—was likely about more than aircraft. Kaunda and his government were demonstrating broad discontent with British advisors and technology, and signalling ahead of an anticipated rupture with the British government in the summer of 1970 over the Conservative Party's victory in the June general election. Conservatives had indicated a desire to resume arms sales to South Africa, something Kaunda vocally opposed. Kaunda did instruct the military to use up the balance of the British Defence and Aid Grant funds, but they were spent on lower profile items like armoured cars.

Disappointment over the aborted arms deals with Zambia, and the British government's clear understanding that these represented a political response to its South African policy, provoked discussion in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Diplomats debated whether the British government should scale back South African arms sales, or restrict the range of products it was willing to sell to the *apartheid* state in order to repair relations with Zambia, recover the influence of expatriate military advisors on Kaunda, and regain the centrality of British weapons systems to the Zambian armed forces. But it was too late. Kaunda's pivot away from Britain was partly in response to the South African arms sales, and partly the product of a broader international and military policy reorientation. "Until 1969," British officials in Lusaka claimed, "British influence in shaping the future of the Zambian defence forces was almost total." The unravelling of this state of affairs had actually begun in 1968, when the Zambian government gave 12 months' notice that it intended to terminate the lifespan of a British military training team in the country. They were replaced by an Italian team, and during the coming years Italy also became a source of weapons for the Zambian military, along with Yugoslavia, as both countries successfully undercut bids by British firms. Yugoslav businesses became closely involved in Zambia's construction sector, and British officials regarded this beachhead, together with Yugoslavia's "comparatively developed" nature, and the friendship between Tito and Kaunda, as responsible for the Eastern European country's success in breaking into Zambia's hydroelectric, steel, and national security sectors (Sardanis, 2014: 91). Soon after earlier ruptures with Britain, Kaunda dismissed the British head of the Zambian Army, who initially survived the departure of the training team. Ten more British expatriates were fired in January 1971.

As the Zambian government barred British expatriates from the Ministry of Defence, it replaced them with at least one Senior Liaison Officer from the Yugoslav military. A Zambian military delegation also visited China during this period. With these moves, Kaunda not only replaced what had long been regarded as openly neocolonial British influence on Zambian defence affairs. The nature of the new relationships with Yugoslavia and Italy were different, continuing

to give Zambia access to technical expertise, but disentangling foreign trainers and advisors from roles that gave them policy influence in defence and national security realms. Unlike their British predecessors, Italian trainers lived off base and took no part in the administration of the airport or in military planning, and with the exception of the liaison officer, the same was true of Yugoslav influence in the army. British onlookers somewhat huffily believed Zambians would grow disenchanted with the “drop in standards” they were sure would result from this change in relationships, and return to the British fold. But such a prediction underestimated the extent to which military technology in general, rather than in the particular potential for its deployment, became an important benchmark for the development of new, modern-looking states in the postwar world. It also failed to account for what Mitchell describes as “institutionalised uselessness,” or the procurement of weapons and military know-how designed not to be deployed in any conventional fashion, but rather wielded as a display of network-power that generated reciprocal obligations and displayed political attachment to different constituencies in the international order, and the support and security such attachment brought with it.

Kaunda’s change in policy also coincided with his chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of African Unity. These posts gave Kaunda a wider platform from which to build alliances, allowed him to “[practise] a bolder non-alignment” (DeRoche, 2016, 4), and generated their own kind of pressure on his government to repudiate links with Britain over its South African and Rhodesian policies. These new (or newly important) relationships generated other reforms to the Zambian military. In 1970 Kaunda discussed cultivating “participatory democracy” in the military to infuse the decolonising armed forces with a more revolutionary political ethos. Figures from the Tanzanian People’s Defence Force quietly attended the officers’ seminar at which Kaunda raised this issue, and officers were later sent to what British officials derided as a TDPF “indoctrination course.” The numbers of Indian and Pakistani officers in and trainers attached to the Zambian military were also expanded. Zambia’s reorientation in a search for military expertise and personnel, in other words, both mirrored and facilitated broader changes in the nation’s international policy (DeRoche, 2019; Schler, 2018). It also occurred during a decade when—especially during its mid-point—relations with South Africa and Rhodesia stabilized, partly due to Kaunda’s role as a mediator, something that ironically eroded some of his moral authority (Miller, 2016; Chan, 1992: 137-8).

Conclusion

In June 1971, the British High Commissioner in Lusaka wrote to the Zambian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to call attention to an autumn Defence Communications Symposium in London, sponsored by the British National Export Council, to give armed service personnel “insight into defence communications for the next ten years and to show how the UK intends to meet this requirement.” The High Commissioner invited the Director of Signals in the Zambian army to attend on an all-expenses paid basis. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs passed the invitation to the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, who replied, icily, that the military could not spare a representative for the symposium. Perhaps there were real scheduling conflicts behind the spurned invitation. But the disinterest in British weapons systems and weapons training also reflected a dramatic reorientation of Zambian military procurement. The changes—in interlocutors and suppliers—seemed in some regards to occur in the space of about a year. But in reality, they had been building for a longer period of time; perhaps since Zambian independence, and certainly since Britain failed to halt Rhodesia’s UDI.

In leading Zambia to negotiate and then sometimes abandon arms purchases from British industry, guided, subsidized, and encouraged by the British government via its influence in Zambia’s security sector, Kenneth Kaunda was buying more than weapons. He was buying time—“temporising,” to borrow a term Thomas McDow deploys in another context. Writing about Indian Ocean social and economic exchanges and relationships, McDow notes that “to temporise is to adopt a course of action to conform to circumstances; to wait for a more favorable moment; or to negotiate to gain time” (McDow, 2018: 8-9). Arms purchases were both a means to pursue larger international policy goals, and a metric by which historians and others might evaluate the pursuit of that policy. And because of the long time scales on which the negotiations and sales operated in relation to the harried pace of diplomatic correspondence surrounding them, the economic stakes they involved (ultimately greater for Britain than for Zambia), and their entanglement with other debates and discussions around national and neocolonial security, they were a method of diplomacy that were well-suited to navigating the fraught first years of independence and UDI alike. They were but one thicket in the “dark forest of international politics” that Kaunda evoked when describing Zambia’s national-era wanderings on the first anniversary of the nation’s independence, but one that proved significant for setting the pace for the further decolonisation of institutions and relationships between Zambia and Britain.

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Endnotes

¹ UK National Archives (UKNA) DO 201/14, British High Commissioner (Federation) to Secretary of State, 10 October 1963.

² Ibid.

³ UKNA DO 201/14, J. B. Johnston memo, 10 October 1963.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ UKNA FCO 29/11 Confidential Memo, Kaunda’s Political Position, 13 June 1967.

⁷ UKNA FCO 29/11 D. A. Macleod, memo, 14 June 1967. See also UKNA FCO 29/11 memo from Saville Garner, 19 June 1967.

⁸ “Explanation From Zambia Sought.” *Times* (London), 3 May 1967. The fallout from these remarks occupies an entire file in UK national archives. UKNA FCO 29/29.

⁹ “British called ‘cowardly hyenas.’” *Times* (London), 5 June 1967.

¹⁰ UKNA FCO 29/29 Downing Street to Commonwealth Office, 17 April 1967.

¹¹ UKNA FCO 29/11 British High Commission (Lusaka) to London, 8 July 1967.

¹² UKNA FCO 29/11 Interview with The Rev. Colin Morris, August 1967.

¹³ UKNA FCO 45/586 British High Commission (Lusaka) to Ministry of Defence, 10 April 1970.

¹⁴ National Archives of Zambia (NAZ) FA 1/1/56; NAZ MFA 1/1/158—Zambian Missions—London Reports.

¹⁵ NAZ FA 1/1/56 Fortnightly report for period ending 13 October 1965.

¹⁶ This is a recurring theme, including from NAZ FA 1/1/56 Fortnightly Report for the period ending 13 October 1965. NAZ FA 1/1/56 Fortnightly report for 11-24 November 1965.

¹⁷ NAZ MFA 1/1/158 London High Commission to Kapwepwe, 12 March 1966.

¹⁸ NAZ MFA 1/1/158 Interview between Mr Childs and Zambian immigration officials, 26 January 1967.

¹⁹ NAZ FA 1/1/56 High Commission to MFA, 19 February 1965 and High Commission in London Annual Report for 1965.

²⁰ NAZ MFA 1/1/158 Acting High Commissioner in London to Kapwepwe, Fortnightly Report from London for the period 29 January to 11 March 1966.

²¹ UKNA FCO 45/906 High Commission (Lusaka) to Douglas-Home, 28 May 1971.

²² UKNA DO 183/837 Kaunda to Wilson, 11 November 1965.

²³ UKNA DO 183/837 MOD to Downing Street, 29 November 1965.

²⁴ UKNA DO 183/837 Draft, Wilson to Kaunda, 8 December 1965.

²⁵ NAZ CO 17/1/5 Deputy High Commissioner in Lusaka to Valentine Musakanya, 3 November 1965.

²⁶ UKNA FCO 16/36 Commonwealth Office Memo on Zambian Defence Requirements, 18 May 1968; J. R. A. Bottomley to Peters, 20 May 1968.

²⁷ UKNA DO 195/318 Permanent Secretary to Secretary of State, 13 November 1964.

²⁸ UKNA FCO 16/148 Memo on military aid expenditure, forwarded by Commonwealth Office

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to British High Commissioner in Lusaka, 29 December 1967.

²⁹ UKNA DO 209/65 Lusaka High Commission to Ministry of Overseas Development, 4 May 1966.

³⁰ UKNA FCO 16/148 Lusaka High Commission to Commonwealth Office, 2 June 1967.

³¹ For example, UKNA FCO 45/586 Defence Advisor to MOD, 10 April 1970.

³² NAZ FA 1/1/56 High Commission to London, Annual Report for 1965.

³³ UKNA FCO 16/148 Peters to McNeill, 29 December 1967.

³⁴ UKNA FCO 16/36 Lusaka High Commission to Commonwealth Office, 4 January 1968.

³⁵ For example, UKNA 45/560: Political Risks to Contracts--United Kingdom Firms in Zambia. 1970.

³⁶ UKNA FCO 16/148 McNeill to Peters, 11 January 1968.

³⁷ UKNA FCO 16/36 Memo by Commonwealth Office on Zambia Defence Requirements, 18 May 1968.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ UKNA FCO 45/205 High Commission in Lusaka to FCO, 11 November 1969. UKNA FCO 16/36 High Commission in Lusaka to BAC, 31 December 1969 and 18 May 1968.

⁴⁰ UKNA FCO 45/205 Defence Advisor to FCO and BAC, 27 November 1969.

⁴¹ UKNA FCO 45/205 Memo, 19 September 1969.

⁴² UKNA FCO 45/583 FCO to Lusaka HC, Received 29 January 1970.

⁴³ UKNA FCO 45/205 Memo, 19 September 1969.

⁴⁴ UKNA FCO 45/205 MOD release of Military Information Policy Committee Meeting, 19 September 1969.

⁴⁵ UKNA FCO 16/36 Ministry of Overseas Development to Commonwealth Office, 3 January 1968.

⁴⁶ UKNA FCO 16/36 Memo by Commonwealth Office on Zambia Defence Requirements, 18 May 1968.

⁴⁷ UKNA FCO *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ UKNA FCO *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ UKNA FCO *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ UKNA FCO 45/205--1969, 47.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2, 11, 9.

⁵³ UKNA FCO 16/36 Cabinet Office Meeting paper, 20 May 1968.

⁵⁴ UKNA FCO 45/583 A F. Blake-Pauley, Central and Southern African Department FCO, memo, 23 December 1970.

⁵⁵ UKNA FCO 16/11 Mintech to W Peters (CO), 3 October 1968.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ UKNA FCO 45/583 FCO to Lusaka HC, received 29 January 1970.

⁵⁸ UKNA FCO 16/36 J. R. A. Bottomley to Peters, 20 May 1968.

⁵⁹ UKNA FCO 16/36 J. R. A. Bottomley to Peters, 20 May 1968.

⁶⁰ UKNA FCO 16/36 R. J. Owen, from UK Embassy in D.C., 5 January 1968.

⁶¹ NAZ MFA 1/1/188 High Commissioner to Kapwepwe for period ending 30 April 1967.

⁶² NAZ MFA 1/1/359 Kaunda to Heath, 18 February 1970.

⁶³ UKNA FCO 45/584 Lusaka High Commission to Mintech, 26 January 1970.

⁶⁴ UKNA FCO 45/584 FCO to Mintech, 2 February 1970.

⁶⁵ UKNA FCO 45/584 Defence Training and Supply Department Memo, 12 February 1970.

⁶⁶ UKNA FCO 45/584 FCO memo, 24 September 1970.

⁶⁷ UKNA FCO 45/583 Telegram, Lusaka to Mintech, 20 May 1970.

- ⁶⁸ UKNA FCO 45/577 High Commission Lusaka to FCO, 8 May 1970.
- ⁶⁹ UKNA FCO 45/577 High Commission Lusaka to Mintech, 28 July 1970.
- ⁷⁰ UKNA FCO 45/577 High Commission Lusaka to Mintech, 5 June 1970.
- ⁷¹ UKNA FCO 45/586 High Commission Lusaka to FCO, 13 April 1970. UKNA FCO 45/586 Kaunda to Wilson, 23 March 1970; UKNA FCO 45/586 Lusaka High Commission to FCO 7 April 1970.
- ⁷² UKNA FCO 45/586 FCO memo, William Wilson, 14 April 1970; Telegraph from Lusaka to FCO, 18 April 1970.
- ⁷³ UKNA FCO 45/906 High Commission, Lusaka, to Douglas-Home, 28 May 1971.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ UKNA FCO 45/582 Undated despatch from Lusaka to London, December 1969 or January 1970
- ⁷⁶ Ibid. UKNA FCO 45/906 High Commission, Lusaka, to Douglas-Home, 28 May 1971.
- ⁷⁷ UKNA FCO 45/906 High Commission, Lusaka, to Douglas-Home, 28 May 1971.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid.
- ⁸⁰ UKNA FCO 45/582 High Commission Lusaka to FCO, 6 January 1970.
- ⁸¹ UKNA FCO 45/906 High Commission, Lusaka, to Douglas-Home, 28 May 1971.
- ⁸² Ibid.
- ⁸³ NAZ CO 3/4/12 Permanent Secretary, Office of the President to Secretary of the Cabinet, 23 July 1968.
- ⁸⁴ NAZ MFA 1/1/359 British High Commission to MFA, 17 June 1971.
- ⁸⁵ NAZ MFA 1/1/359 Permanent Secretary Ministry of Defence to Permanent Secretary MFA, 5 August 1971.
- ⁸⁶ NAZ CO 17/1/5 Kaunda's address at the National Rally, Lusaka, 23 October 1965.

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