

The Suez Crisis and the Politics of the Anglo-American Special Relationship

By Michael Dunne*

Introduction

Today the Anglo-American Special Relationship flourishes in the aftermath of 11 September - the now familiar shorthand for the immense loss of life and physical destruction brought about by the dive-bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, those famous symbols of American economic and military might. No ally stands “shoulder to shoulder” more closely with President George W Bush, Jr., and the American people than the government and people of British Prime Minister Tony Blair - even more so than in the (Second) Gulf War of 1990-1991 during the terms of Prime Minister John Major and President George Bush, Sr. And before this pair of British and American leaders there were the Thatcher and Reagan years, when (with the exception of Grenada in 1983) these two conservative kindred spirits fought their own good fight against common enemies within and without: Sandinistas in Nicaragua; coal-miners in the North and Midlands of England; Argentinean claimants to what they knew as the Malvinas and what anglophones called the Falkland islands; the Libya of Col. Muammar al-Qadhafi; the Soviet Union of Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko - before Mikhail Gorbachev came on the scene and was ready “to do business” with these two vigorous Cold Warriors.

Before we examine US-UK relations in the context of the 1956 Suez Crisis we need to remember that the United States of America was born in and out of war with the British from 1776-1783. The Americans’ next war (sometimes called the *second* War of Independence), the War of 1812, was also fought against the British. Their third war, the Mexican War of 1846-1848, was partly induced by fears of what the British might do to foster Texan independence and Mexican dependence; while the next and fourth war, the Civil War, showed the British divided along class and political lines in their support for the Union and the Confederacy. A

comparable though less intense British reaction greeted the Spanish-American war of 1898 - to match the divisions in American society over the South African (Boer) War. In Whitehall it was only at the turn of the twentieth century that the geopolitical lessons of the Napoleonic era returned more clearly in the official determination never to have a hostile United States behind the British maritime back as it faced its real and immediate threats across the North Sea. In the lingering resentment in some British quarters at the “late arrival” of the Americans in the First and Second World Wars was the irksome realization that the United Kingdom had twice emerged on the winning side against Germany thanks mainly to full-scale American intervention - a result even more true in the case of the defeat of Japan.¹

The United Kingdom and Egypt to the eve of the Suez Crisis When during World War II Prime Minister Winston Churchill spoke of “the end of the beginning” he referred to British successes in the North African campaign and the consequent safety of Egypt, the land route between Africa and the Middle East and, even more importantly, the maritime link between the Mediterranean and the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and thus the route for commerce and the Royal Navy to the British Empire in Asia and the Pacific. These seas had been connected in pharaonic times north and south by the river Nile and east and west by canals; but it remained until the nineteenth century for the French, first in the imperial schemes and military surveying of Buonaparte and then in the engineering and commercial genius of Ferdinand de Lesseps, to undertake the cutting of an interoceanic waterway from just east of the Nile delta due south to the Gulf of Suez at the north-west arm of the Red Sea.² From its opening in 1869 (celebrated in Verdi’s *Aida*) la Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez, whose major shareholders were

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initially French and then later British with an admixture of governmental interests, operated all aspects of the Suez Canal within an Egypt which though formally independent (1923) after the break-up of the Ottoman Empire was effectively a British protectorate. The international legal regime of the Canal was set by the Constantinople Convention of 1888, which provided for free passage of ships in peace and war. No terminal date was prescribed for the Convention; but the 99-year title of the Suez Canal Company granted by the khedive Ismail Pasha would revert in 1968 to the juridical sovereign, Egypt, just like a commercial leasehold passing back to a freeholding landlord.³

The Egyptian revolution of 1952 had seen the ousting of the pro-British King Farouk by army officers under Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser and the proclamation of a republic a year later. Central to Nasser's political programme was the removal of British armed forces from their Egyptian bases: 80,000 foreign military personnel were in the Suez Canal Zone flanking the waterway. The UK-Egyptian agreement of October 1954 peacefully resolved this issue - yet marked the beginning of two years of crisis and eventual war whose wider origins lay not just in the ownership and control of the Suez Canal but in the uses of the Nile and the contemporary politics of the Middle East, including above all the Arab-Israeli conflict. Beyond these local factors was the superpower struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union: the political and ideological conflict which contemporaries had come to call the Cold War.

Cold War Politics in the Middle East Until the mid-fifties the Cold War was not a determining factor in the Arab Middle East - unlike Muslim Iran and Turkey, sites of American-Soviet contention in the closing stages of World War II. Rather *the* issue for the Arabs was the division of the former British mandate of Palestine and the creation of the state of Israel in a bloody war (1948-49). While the British sought to retain influence in Iraq and Jordan, the French legacy in Syria and Lebanon was less important to Paris than preserving French power in the Maghreb, Algeria first and foremost. The Arab successor-states of the pre-war British and French mandates, plus Libya, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, had formed the Arab League in 1945, with Egypt *primus inter pares*; and the Nasser-led Army *coup* had been partly aimed at making Egypt the unquestioned leader of the Arab nation. But in the course of 1955 the forging of a series of alliances linking Iraq with Turkey, Iran and Pakistan to the United Kingdom in the Baghdad Pact split the Arab League, with Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia particularly hostile to this perceived mixture of old-fashioned European imperialism and irrelevant Cold

War manipulation of indigenous issues. (Authoritative though unofficial British sources acknowledged the lack of popular support in Iraq and Iran for the Baghdad Pact; and the pro-British Jordanian monarchy was compromised.) Contemporaneously Egypt negotiated an arms deal with Czechoslovakia, which the American, British and French governments denounced, allegedly for upsetting the Israeli-Arab military balance but primarily for bringing the Soviet Union, whose *imprimatur* was detected in the Czech initiative, into the Middle East equation. (The Western powers overlooked 1) the geographical propinquity of the USSR to the region called in Russian the "Near Abroad", and 2) that the US government had made their own offer of arms dependent upon Egypt signing a military alliance and receiving US forces - these demands conflicting with Egypt's role as one of the leaders of the non-aligned movement.) Shortly thereafter the Soviet government itself made an open bid for Egyptian support by offering to part-fund the Aswan Dam project on the Upper Nile⁴. With this competitive response to similar American and British offers coming towards the end of a year marked by serious border clashes between Israel and Egypt, the penultimate stages towards the Suez Crisis were marked out.

Countdown to the Suez Crisis: Egypt and the United States 1956 opened well for Egypt with 1) the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (the World Bank) offering further financial aid for the Aswan Dam project and 2) expanding markets for Egyptian rice and cotton, particularly to the "Sino-Soviet bloc" (one-third of exports) - though controls on domestic Communists and unlikely "fellow-travellers" such as the Muslim Brotherhood were maintained by Nasser's government. The planned Aswan High Dam (i.e. at the First Cataract) promised massively increased hydro-electric power and so further industrialization; regulation of the seasonal Nile flooding to lessen the perennial social costs; and enlarging arable land to produce more export crops. Thus the scheme was less the jewel in Nasser's modernization programme than its very dynamo to power the socio-economic development which would also raise the international prestige of Egypt in the Arab nation and the Afro-Asian world. (The Bandung conference of April 1955 was an epochal moment, which saw Egypt standing alongside India, Indonesia and Yugoslavia in the leadership of the non-aligned movement, which Americans often short-handed to the "Afro-Asian bloc".) But in the United States events were viewed differently: Soviet-bloc arms were bad enough; but 1) these were designed to be used against Israel - anathema to the emergent "Jewish lobby", whose leverage on

Congress was growing; and 2) such arms were traded for crops that could be exported from Southern states, whose political power had always been over-represented in Congress. The Republican President Dwight D Eisenhower (along with his appointee, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles) was likely to be returned to office handsomely in the November elections; equally the Democrats looked likely to hold narrowly on to Congress; but neither could risk creating new political opponents, either in the urban North or the rural South. In mid July Dulles announced that the United States would not fund the Aswan Dam; and foreign observers interpreted the decision as inspired by anti-Soviet and pro-Israeli motives. Immediately the British government and the World Bank, both of which had made their commitments dependent upon American funding, also withdrew their support. These political decisions, presented in economic terms, now moved the Egyptians to respond in kind. On 26 July 1956 Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company so that its income could finance the Aswan Dam project.

Countdown to the Suez Crisis: Egypt and the United Kingdom British power in Egypt had been in retreat since the ousting of King Farouk; while its alliance-building in the Middle East displeased not just Egypt but also the United States and France (the latter particularly hostile to Egypt for supporting Algerian independence-fighters). At the head of Her Majesty's Government at Westminster was Anthony Eden, who had succeeded Winston Churchill as the Conservative Prime Minister in April 1955.⁵ Eden had made his reputation during the 1930s as an opponent of British appeasement: *Facing the Dictators* he entitled a volume of memoirs. (*Making Faces* at dictators, his detractors retorted!) And the experience undoubtedly clouded Eden's attitude towards Nasser, whom he called a "Moslem Mussolini". But while plans were secretly made for military action (including the overthrow of Nasser), the initial official response in public was diplomatic: two conferences were held in London in August and September, though each was designed by the British (supported by the French) to wrest control of the Suez Canal from the Egyptians rather than seek compensation for the Company shareholders. (The British thought that to redress financial losses would be to accept the legality of the Company's take-over. The American position, following the precedents in the Mexican and Iranian oil expropriations, was to accept the expropriation of foreign-owned assets but require adequate compensation.) The Egyptians for their part insisted upon their sovereign right to own, control and manage a waterway wholly within Egyptian

territory. The London conferences showed the British increasingly divided from their Commonwealth partners (except notably Australia and New Zealand); while the Americans were perceived to vacillate - "oscillation" which annoyed Government supporters more than outright opposition. It was a similar story at the United Nations, where the British and French delegations could protect themselves in the Security Council by use of the veto - but only to shift the debate to the General Assembly, where the negative votes were that much more numerous yet dismissed as *parti pris*. Yet in London the Conservatives were also divided; while the leadership of the Labour Opposition feared that Eden (spurred by the more belligerent and united French) would use armed force to try to recover the Suez Canal.

The Suez War Any military operation would be that much more difficult, following the evacuation of British troops in June from the Canal Zone to Cyprus - itself the site of ethnic conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, each side backed by Athens and Ankara respectively.⁶ But contemporaneously those events known as the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 escalated. On 29 October, with international attention focused on Central Europe, the Israelis launched an attack upon Egypt across the Sinai, ostensibly to root out the *fedayeen* (suicide guerrillas) and open up the Gulf of Aqaba.⁷ Under the terms of the 1950 Tripartite Declaration, the UK, France and the United States should have come to Egypt's defence by preserving the armistice lines. Instead London and Paris used the invasion as a pretext to attack Egypt, issuing an ultimatum demanding 1) both sides withdraw 10 miles (16 km.) either side of the Canal and 2) that Egypt cede military bases at the northern, mid-point and southern end of the Canal. The Israelis, nowhere near the Canal militarily, readily accepted the *de facto* invitation to occupy the Sinai; the Egyptians equally understandably refused and faced the British and French air-raids and ground-attacks - and for the first time deliberately blocked the Canal to shipping (helped by the destruction wrought by the European invaders).

Eden always maintained that there had been no British collusion with the Israelis - a defence accepted neither then nor later, least of all by Washington. Such a claim by the French was *prima facie* even less credible, because the French had been supplying fighter-planes to the Israelis with the blessing of the United States. (Contemporaries rightly inferred that the French and Israelis did co-ordinate, as did the British and French - a political chain which only thus distanced Eden's government from that of the Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion.) In the House of Commons Eden argued

that the Anglo-French operation had halted the Egyptian-Israeli war and led to the intervention of the United Nations - two positive outcomes; but his parliamentary critics retorted that the undeclared war had actually flouted the authority of the UN, split the Commonwealth, alienated the United States, and risked World War III - for the Soviet Union had threatened to use nuclear weapons on behalf of Egypt. (The CIA and the US Joint Chiefs of Staff discounted such threats.) Finally and most prosaically, the military action had been a shambles. Psychologically, physically and politically damaged by the military failure, Eden resigned early in 1957, never sure in his own mind why his contemporaries, let alone his compatriots, did not equate his armed response to Nasser and Egypt as comparable to his pre-war stand against the European dictators. As he stated his ultimate defence in the House of Commons: "You best avoid great wars by taking ...action against small ones."

The "Anglo-French aggression" (as the Egyptians called the war) lasted just one week. With the US delegate in the Security Council and his Canadian counterpart in the General Assembly leading the way, the UN created a multilateral military brigade (the UNEF) from a dozen member-states to enforce a cease-fire. Just before Christmas British and French troops were finally withdrawn and Israeli troops returned to the 1949 armistice line. The operation had been an abject failure. All the initial criticisms of Eden's policy had been borne out; while the international prestige of his *bête noire*, President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Egypt reached their post-war acme.

The Suez Crisis and Anglo-American Relations: the Passage of Informal Empire In late 1946-early 1947 Washington prepared to assume the long-established British hegemony in Greece and the much more recent influence in Turkey - as it had just succeeded to the British role in Iran. The world would come to think of this transition in terms of the Truman Doctrine. During the same period, but without the dramatic *dénouement* until 1954, Washington began to take over from the French in Indo-China. From the Truman Doctrine *via* the Marshall Plan and the Berlin airlift came the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO); from Indo-China came the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). During the mid to late fifties the

Americans sought to mould both groupings together, first through the Baghdad Pact and then through the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), into a line of allies containing the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Thus the Cold War Eurasian geopolitics of the United States built upon the fading British and the French empires. And as their territorial and military power declined, so did their economic power as cause and effect of this weakening. Nowhere was this reciprocity shown more clearly than in the Suez Crisis, where the loss of some \$280m in the British reserves during November (equivalent to a whole year's export earnings), plus a warning from the US Treasury that there would be no support for the £ without a withdrawal from Egypt, undermined the British imperial fling. More than 100 Conservative MPs publicly censured the Eisenhower administration for threatening the "Atlantic Alliance", but Eisenhower had no intention, as he put it, of "invit[ing on the United States] all the Arab hostility to Israel" by supporting the two traditional allies. (In fact, Saudi Arabia and Iraq had another concern: the safe export of their oil to Europe.) These Conservative reproaches, flavoured by the late and desperate charge of Communist influences in Egypt justifying the attack, did hint at the next significant move by the US government- vindication, it seemed, of this bizarre allegation. In January 1957, President Eisenhower delivered a special message to Congress in which he called for American military and economic action to combat "international communism" in the "general area of the Middle East" - a request that was given statutory form in March through the Middle East Resolution (PL 85-7). Contemporaneously Eden's successor, Harold Macmillan, held a summit with Eisenhower in Bermuda, which confirmed that any "special relationship" was one of British *dependence* upon the United States, particularly in ultimate American control over the notionally independent British Thor nuclear missiles. In the vast area of the Middle East, defined *ad hoc* as ranging from Morocco east to Pakistan and Turkey south to Sudan, the British were to follow guidelines set by Washington: there would be no more "going it alone" by London. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

¹ These arguments are elaborated in Michael Dunne, "The Treaty of Gent: the British Perspective", *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 44 (1990), pp. 35-48.

² The Canal is some 160 km long, including intermediate lakes. Port Suez at the southern mouth is 130 km due east of Cairo.

³ The company, with its HQ in Paris, had 16 French directors, 9 British and 5 Egyptian, though the bulk of the shares were owned by British governmental and private interests.

⁴ Aswan is some 900 km. south of Cairo by rail and 220 km. due north of the Sudanese-Egyptian border.

⁵ Eden's second marriage was to a niece of Churchill's.

⁶ Greece and Turkey were, of course, both members of NATO.

⁷ For five years the Egyptians had prevented Israeli shipping from using the Canal, as well as blockading the Red Sea through the Gulf of Aqaba.