

THE MIDDLE EAST

Lessons from the Past and Prospects for the Future

By DONALD J. HEASMAN

SO much has been written and spoken about the Middle East in recent months, and so many things have happened in that troubled part of the world, that it is not always easy to see the wood for the trees. It is my view that the sequence of events since the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt has vindicated those of us who opposed that unfortunate enterprise; and my purpose in considering these errors of the recent past is to find out how they can be avoided in the near future.

I must say at the outset that there are dangers in looking to the past for guidance in the future. Too often have men learned their lesson late, and having applied that lesson to another situation, found that they have learned another. One can cite in this connection the spirit of optimism of 1919 when national self-determination had dissolved the polyglot empires of the nineteenth century; or again, the widespread condemnation of secret diplomacy and the simple faith in disarmament and collective security of that same period. But perhaps the best example is the preoccupation with the dangers of appeasement which characterizes our own day. It appears that Sir Anthony Eden's appraisal of the Middle East crisis was dominated by his own false analogy between 1938 and 1956—by his determination not to repeat the errors of Neville Chamberlain's Munich ploy. Sir Anthony Eden planned to uphold the principle which had led to his own resignation as Foreign Secretary eighteen years earlier. But in order not to pose the problem exclusively in terms of personalities we must remember that just as a policy of appeasement was acceptable to the British Conservative party in 1938, so a policy of "strength" was backed—and, indeed, called for—by the Conservative party in 1956. Likewise, the Edens and Duff-Coopers of 1938 were paralleled by the Nuttings and Boyles of 1956. If the conduct of foreign policy is not to be like the oscillation of the trade cycle one can only hope and pray that a "lesson-learning Nutting" will not be Prime Minister in 1974.

Now let me make my position clear. I am not suggesting that we should not draw morals from past experience. We must consider what has happened before we can deal intelligently with what is happening or is likely to happen. A know-

ledge of the past, both recent and remote, is an essential prerequisite for the formulation of policy, but we must always try to attach the proper weight to the uniqueness of any given situation. We might well form tentative, general theories from experience and we will no doubt regard particular crises in terms of global forces and movements but we act dangerously if we allow such caricatures, indispensable as they are, to dominate our thinking completely. Our assumptions and conclusions will serve us best when questioned, and if necessary adapted, frequently.

With these considerations in mind, let us consider the events of the last few months.

Following the Israeli invasion of Egypt at the end of October, the British and French Governments issued an ultimatum which clearly indicated their preoccupation with a distinct issue—that of the Suez Canal—a preoccupation which had not come to the fore in the preceding five years of Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping. Britain hardly possessed sufficient sense of detachment to justify her use of the term “police action”. Egypt, even less able or willing to take a “detached view,” did not see the matter in the same light as the Western powers and rejected the ultimatum. Britain and France thereupon moved into the Suez area, i.e. not into the territory of the attacking power nor into the area of the fighting. One cannot say for certain whether or not there was collusion in the matter. A special correspondent of *The Times*, however, had this to say:

“The Israeli Government, or whatever forces have made this decision, have chosen what must seem to them an unusually favourable moment to force the issue. Russia, they can say, has her hands full in Eastern Europe. The United States is on the eve of an election, in which the Jewish vote counts for much. Britain has for months been at loggerheads with Egypt, and French opinion in the past few days has been particularly affronted by Arab demonstrations against France after the arrest of the Algerian leaders on their way to Tunis. The French Government has, indeed, recently released *Mystère* jet fighters to Israel and has other arms contracts with Israel in process of fulfilment.”

Russia indeed had her hands full in Eastern Europe and the rest of the world should have had their eyes full of events there instead of being diverted by what could so easily be interpreted as “another upsurge of imperialism.” But after an initial period of confusion, the Soviet Union found sufficient

time to issue what amounted to an ultimatum to Britain and France. Although he later changed his mind, the French Foreign Minister, M. Pineau, stated that this had been instrumental in bringing about a cease-fire. But more important is the fact that the Russian threat led to an American counter-warning to the Soviet Union. It is surely this chain reaction which largely explains the U.S. attitude to the failure of Britain and France to consult her. Any British action which could lead to the use of Soviet military power inevitably involves the United States, whereas an ill-advised American move, for example in the Far East, should not necessarily evoke meek support from Britain, particularly if there is no consultation. We in the West do not subscribe to any doctrine of "my ally right or wrong." That the United States has begun to realize the enormous dangers of the Middle East problem very belatedly no one, I think will deny. But last fall was hardly "an unusually favourable moment" to expect strong and positive American action. Moreover, the Anglo-French decision can hardly be justified *ex post facto* because it has apparently precipitated American heartsearching: even British governments are not so altruistic that they will consider self-destruction a reasonable price to pay for getting their friends to "see the light."

The sequence of events since the intervention is familiar to us all. After flouting the opinion of the overwhelming majority of the members of the United Nations; after freedom of transit through the Suez Canal had been, not guaranteed, but blocked for months; after Britain and France had been subjected to humiliating threats from the Soviet Union; after it had become apparent that public opinion at home was hopelessly divided; after all this, the belligerent powers agreed to a cease-fire on November 6. And the tragedy of the whole adventure was surely its amateurishness: the results of the action were all so clearly foreseeable and foreseen. Britain is no nearer a solution of the Suez Canal problem, France continues to wage a bitter war in Algeria, both have lost enormously in their relations with the Arab world. Israel has been cajoled into withdrawing behind the 1949 armistice lines. Faced with a return to the position as it was last October, Israel is now threatening fresh action; that unfortunate nation might well question the advantages of the Anglo-French decision; it has been clear from the outset that the military intervention in the Israeli-Egyptian dispute was unlikely to lead to the elimination of Nasser: Israel can perhaps be forgiven if she supposes that she could have done just that—unaided.

Should we then submit to the "will" of the United Nations when international disputes of this kind arise? Not necessarily. Such submission is no substitute for a positive foreign policy. We must remember that the "will" of the United Nations tends to be little more than the aggregate of the national policies of the majority of its members; and as we in Canada know so well, majority rule does not ensure justice for all. Moreover, the counting of heads as a means of arriving at a decision of the General Assembly pays no regard to the real meaning of the concept of equality. Equality involves not only the equal treatment of equals but also the unequal treatment of unequals. I am not only thinking in terms of the obvious inequality of nation-states; it is also important to bear in mind the fact that some countries are vitally affected and others are virtually unaffected by the decisions made. It is not surprising, in view of these and other considerations, that there isn't a country in the world which is prepared to surrender its sovereignty to the United Nations Organization.

Britain considers Cyprus, France considers Algeria, South Africa considers South West Africa and the colour question, and Egypt considers the Suez Canal and the rights and duties of the United Nations Emergency Force to be matters of exclusively domestic concern. It would be most imprudent to rely on the U.N. as if it were a world federation when that organization can be prevented so effectively from regulating these matters. The United Nations in its failure to prevent the Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping, to bring about a settlement in Kashmir, and to gain effective access to Hungary has demonstrated that its "will" cannot always be enforced. Mr. Nehru could not have made this clearer when he asserted that the proposal to dispatch a U.N. force to Kashmir was against international law and the U.N. Charter unless India accepted: India had made it clear that in no circumstances would she accept any foreign (sic) force on her territory. Now it is only in a state of anarchy that we can, in this way, judge our own disputes; and it is only in a state of such anarchy, that is, in the absence of legitimate authority, that the use of force by individual states is so likely not to be illegitimate.

Now I do not infer from this that the U.N. is a farce. It should be remembered that it is by no means alone in its failure to solve the problems arising from national sovereignty. Within the Cominform we saw the dramatic deterioration in Soviet-Jugoslav relations; within NATO we have a running sore between Britain and Turkey on the one hand and Greece on the

other; within the Commonwealth there is the unresolved dispute between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir question. Moreover, condemnation of the United Nations will only ensure its complete failure. If we do not wish nationalism to degenerate from the desire for liberty from foreign domination into anti-international selfishness, as Egyptian nationalism has done, then we must recognize that the U.N. is the only international authority likely to earn any respect in a large part of the world. The United Nations is a useful forum of world opinion, and that opinion should not be lightly disregarded by any country in the West. We should hesitate before flouting it and we should not assume that the U.N. can do nothing positive.

The principles of the United Nations are sometimes regarded as mythical or idealistic, but myths and ideals are important and powerful influences in politics and it would do us irreparable harm in Asia and Africa if we were ever to walk out of U.N.O. The West has a responsibility to give a moral lead to those countries which are becoming nationally self-conscious but which have not yet reached the stage of international-consciousness. In this connection, then, my conclusion is that flouting of United Nations "authority" may be as justifiable or unjustifiable as disobedience of a national government—it depends on the circumstances. But United Nations authority is too flimsy to withstand continuous defiance, and any such act of defiance should always be regarded as a grave step, requiring the most careful consideration.

Whatever the future of the United Nations might be and whatever attitudes its members might take to future crises, the fact is that the two problems of Arab-Israeli relations and the Suez Canal remain with us. No matter what our views are on the events of last fall, these same problems have, today, to be faced as dispassionately as possible, bearing in mind that what happened last year has altered the situation in certain respects. Since United Nations resolutions and United States pressure were instrumental in achieving Israeli withdrawal, there is clearly a moral obligation on both to ensure that Israel is not subjected to new threats. It seems unlikely at present that the majority of the members of the United Nations will be prepared to insist on the small limitations on Egyptian sovereignty entailed. Action by the Security Council is threatened as always by the Soviet veto. Even if it could be achieved, strong U.N. policing of the present Israeli-Egyptian frontier would help to maintain the *status quo* but would do nothing to

end the state of war except give time for passions to cool. And to be successful this would have to provide for non-Egyptian control of the Straits of Aqaba: Egypt would hardly agree to that; this was surely made clear in the attack of the *Egyptian Mail* on Mr. St. Laurent:

“The Prime Minister of Canada, who has apparently become the spokesman of resurgent anti-Egyptian belligerency, has declared the Canadian Government does not agree with Egypt’s stand that it can order out the emergency force whenever it wishes. This is a curious and illogical utterance made by one who obviously hungers after the old imperial bluster.”

That this attack, couched in terms so reminiscent of the Soviet phrase book, was unnecessary is seen by considering Mr. St. Laurent’s statement in the House of Commons in March:

“Nasser has the last word just as we in Canada have the last word about the placing of any armed forces of other nations in our territory.”

When it was pointed out that Canada has not the Suez Canal, Mr. St. Laurent answered: “But Canada has a St. Lawrence Seaway.”

It seems that if the United Nations is unable or unwilling to control the situation, and if the nations concerned will accept no limitations on their sovereignty and show no willingness to compromise, then the result will be a resumption of the Arab-Israeli war, a war which in fact has never really ceased. And if these two fanatical religio-nationalistic movements are determined to resume their hostilities, there is something to be said for the proposal made in February by Mr. Shepilov, then Soviet Foreign Minister, that foreign bases be ended, foreign troops be withdrawn, and arms shipments be stopped. A system of inspection would of course be needed and there would have to be an agreed definition of “The Middle East.”

But we have not yet considered the attitude of the United States. Since the events of last fall there has been propounded the so-called “Eisenhower Doctrine.” This has had a mixed response, largely because the countries of the Middle East have no wish to substitute the influence of the United States for that of the United Kingdom. Concerned as it is with the dangers of Communist aggression, the doctrine does not come to grips with the basic problems of the Suez Canal and Arab-Israeli relations. U.S. action at the request of countries threatened by “overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by international Communism” is not, of course, applicable against Israel—the Arabs are therefore unlikely to be more than

lukewarm towards the proposals. American help might well be requested by Israel and the U.S. will then have to decide whether any particular state is or is not "controlled by international Communism." If the decision is that the state concerned is not Communist-controlled, then no action can be taken under the doctrine—whether the United States would in fact intervene remains problematical; if the aggressor is Communist-dominated then one must ask whether it has become so owing to a sin of omission on the part of the Eisenhower Doctrine. Now the scheme provides for a generous measure of economic assistance to the area, but it is doubtful whether this will be fully effective when linked with a view of the world which sees things in terms of black and white. The countries of the Middle East have very different historical backgrounds, social structures, economic standards, and political outlooks from those of the West. Those states not on the periphery of the Soviet Union do not regard Communism or Soviet Imperialism as the primary danger; and they have in consequence no wish to become too closely tied to one side or the other. This is a feeling which is not peculiar to the Middle East: Germany, for example, is now questioning the advantages of being the battleground of the next war.

Hitherto, the United States has been able to woo the Arab, African, and Asian members of the United Nations. What kind of change can be expected when Israel is no longer in the dock and Egypt resumes her anti-Israel activities? Can we look forward to American action when the blockade of the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba is resumed? If not, then what will be the outcome when Israel marches again? If the U.S. does act, then what will remain of the Eisenhower Doctrine?

Similar questions arise in the case of the Suez Canal. No compensation has yet been paid by Egypt for its act of nationalization. The retention by an international agency of a portion of the transit dues would go some way towards meeting this question, pending a final settlement. But Egypt has clearly stated that she expects dues to be paid to her; and she clearly envisages, as do Russia and India, that any final settlement must reaffirm Egyptian sovereignty over the Canal. There is no doubt that the West would have a strong case for the use of force if in these circumstances Egypt interfered with free navigation. What form the force would take is of course a matter of efficacy. Countries do not always use military force even when they have a good moral case: the inaction of the Western powers last year when Russia intervened in the Hungarian

dispute and their resort to the air lift when Berlin was blockaded in 1948 are good illustrations. It must be remembered that Egypt has much to gain financially from efficient operation of the Suez Canal; any prolonged interference with navigation would, assuming Western solidarity, be made possible only by Soviet economic aid to Egypt and a Soviet veto in the Security Council on the use of force by the United Nations: in those circumstances we should remember that the West controls the entrance to the Black Sea and there would be everything to be said for a blockade of that channel. The Russian position in the Baltic is also vulnerable.

I do not rule out military force; nor do I regard it as a universal panacea.

The troubles of the Middle East would be greatly ameliorated if the United Nations were more effective; and although it is dangerous to rely too much on that organization, it would be unfortunate if we did not explore the possibilities of making it a greater force for good in the world. In dealing with economic and social matters, the U.N. has already proved its worth: is it not possible that the United Nations Organization could by economic means settle many of the troubles arising from sensitive views of national sovereignty and at the same time enhance its own prestige? To demand users' control of the Suez Canal is to invoke that principle of consumers' cooperation which has been a striking success in the sphere of retail distribution but which is hardly a widely accepted tenet of international economic relations. Nations are in the habit of exploiting their individual monopolies and Egypt is no exception. But the control of all important routes by a U.N. agency might prove to be acceptable to all concerned, particularly if economic aid were channelled through the U.N., if feelings of suspicion towards Western oil interests were allayed by internationalization and if a U.N. Regional Development Plan for the Middle East could be implemented. In this way we could hope to harness the motive of self-interest to the goal of the common good.