The Suez Crisis marked the beginning of a new era in international politics. The European colonial powers and Gamal Abdel Nasser clashed the moment when a brief chink occurred in the iron curtain. The United States distanced itself from its allies but its policy towards the Middle East was already changing bringing the inter-regional rivalries and conflicts into the context of the Cold War and fundamentally altering the regional balance of power. The Soviet Union after Suez entered a new brash and confident phase and its leader Nikita Khrushchev was able to consolidate his hold on power.

The impact of the crisis in Britain ended the career of Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan succeeded him. The new era was a shock, Eden was the last Prime Minister to believe that Britain was a world power it was an equal trauma for its people who believed that Britain led an Empire. Kissinger commented that Macmillan had to confront the ‘painful reality that his country was no longer a world power.’

The fallout from Suez threatened the existence of the Commonwealth, with only Australia and New Zealand prepared to publicly support Britain. Debate continues over the winds of change to which decolonization took hold after Suez. Peter Lyon argues that it was certainly ‘a major psychological watershed’ and the end of Empire. One significant disagreement was with Canada who not only voted against Britain but were pivotal in establishing the first ever United Nations Peacekeeping Force that replaced the Anglo-French troops.

The British claimed that they were not acting as an imperial power over Suez but even the United States did not believe their protestations of innocence. Anglo-American relations were irrevocably damaged. Britain learned that it could not be insubordinate to the United States and could no longer pretend to be an equal but would have to exploit its ‘special relationship’ to obtain influence. The entente between Britain and France ended together with Britain’s flirtation with the idea of western European integration leaving it on the margin for the next four decades.
French colonial rule was in turmoil in the 1950s, believing that Nasser was fermenting Arab nationalism throughout North Africa the Anglo-French expedition offered the possibility of his removal. Following in the wake of Dien Bien Phu the Suez debacle was a ‘moment of national humiliation’ irretrievably altering France. The outcome was realisation of its post-war weakness and recognition that its colonial past was now part of history. How far the political return of Charles de Gaulle to power can be attributed to Suez is uncertain but it was significant. De Gaulle blamed the ‘Anglo-Saxons,’ Britain and the United States, henceforth France would seek to distance itself from NATO and pursue an independent policy that included its own nuclear weapon programme. The German Chancellor, Adenauer suggested to France and Britain that ‘Europe will be your revenge’. France would accelerate its decolonization programme and increasingly turn its attention to Europe. The Treaty of Rome was signed by France in March 1957, from which time France looked to the Bonn-Paris axis as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Britain pursued a different route, according to Henry Kissinger, ‘permanent subordination to American policy.’

America humiliated Britain and France over Suez and Soviet diplomacy attempted to divide the allies by favouring rapport with the United States. A number of commentators suggest the policy may have had some success with France. Henry Kissinger accedes and suggests that after Suez the United States disassociation from its allies not only forced it to take on the burden of global defence against communism but also ended up fighting the Vietnam War alone.

One of the main challenges to American foreign policy was the growing number of nations joining the non-aligned movement. Neutrality was one step towards communism according to one of the basic tenets of American policy, NSC 68. The Suez Crisis provided a vehicle on which to secure from Congress the funds that would be required to counter Soviet influence in the Arab and Third Worlds not just militarily but economically. The Eisenhower Doctrine justified...
American intervention in the Middle East, it mirrored the Truman Doctrine. John Foster Dulles equated the ‘collapse of British power and influence’ after Suez to the events of 1947 that led to the Truman Doctrine. President Eisenhower called for Congress to support $200 million in emergency aid to assist pro-western regimes in the region. Allowed to authorise the use of force to defend any Middle East state ‘menaced by Communist inspired aggression’ and secretly be allowed to mount covert actions against any pro-Soviet elements in the region. The Soviet Foreign Secretary responded with the ‘Shepilov Doctrine’ proposing the neutralisation of the Middle East with an end to the Baghdad Pact and the removal of all Western bases.

Jordan was one of the first recipients of aid under the Eisenhower Doctrine and King Hussein obliged and denounced Egypt and Syria as Soviet stalking horses. Unlike the Truman Doctrine, Eisenhower’s was not universally acclaimed in the West. Another beneficiary was the Lebanese President, Camille Chamoun, who used the communist threat to secure the services of 14,000 US Marines to assist with his own domestic political struggle. John Gaddis described the affair as the ‘logical conclusion’ of the Eisenhower Doctrine when the Marines astonished the sunbathers on the beaches of Beirut. The Eisenhower Doctrine was a ‘policy fiasco’ that was totally ineffective and the debacle was only acknowledged by the Eisenhower administration at the end of 1958 in NSC 5820/1. The United States in their efforts to contain the perceived spread of communism in the post-Suez Middle East misunderstood the politics of Arab nationalism.

A Syrian Ba’th Party leader, Michel Aflaq, declared in 1956 that, ‘communism is strange to Arabs just as the capitalist system is strange to them. They will not embrace communism just as they do not embrace capitalism.’

Israel was not important to the United States in Cold War terms and kept an arm’s length relationship until 1960 after which a patron-client relationship was established. Britain even at the time of Suez was quite prepared to bomb Israel if it struck its Jordanian ally. One of the long term impacts of Suez was that a rapprochement with Israel and the
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Arab states brokered by the United States under plan ALPHA was defeated by the breakdown of relations between Egypt and the West. The United States would never be seen as an independent broker. But much more important, according to David Kinsella, the Soviet arms traffic to Egypt and Syria exacerbated future Arab-Israeli conflict. The United States did not respond and supply major military equipment to Israel until the Johnson administration. Although the two superpowers kept out of the 1967 conflict, they became heavily embroiled by 1973 almost to the brink of nuclear war.

The United States involvement in precipitating the Suez Crisis is still the subject of some debate. Geoffrey Warner argues that America was warning Nasser not to co-operate with the Soviet Union. While Levering states that the cancellation of the finance for the Aswan Dam project was a determining factor. Other commentators have suggested that John Foster Dulles mishandled the affair. Geoffrey Aronson suggests, ‘Dulles failed to guide Egyptian nationalism into a path coincident with U.S. interests,’ the impact of which would see the United States ostracised by Egypt for almost two decades.

For Egyptians, Nasser was the undoubted hero of the Bandung Non-aligned Conference but after Suez his prestige was without rival as a leader of both the Arab and the Third World. Adeed Dawisha suggests that the success of Nasser was the product of the Cold War and the ineffectual actions of the West. Certainly, the pan-Arab nationalism and anti-western doctrine of Nasser would influence a whole Middle East generation.

Syria would become a ‘Soviet base of operations’ in the Middle East according to CIA Director, Allen Dulles. David Lesch argues that Syria and other Arab countries were forced into making a choice between East or West and the Anglo-French invasion made them choose the East. The United States response was the covert operation successfully used against the Mossadegh government of Iran in 1953. A British planned coup was halted when the Suez operation began and the plot...
discovered. The CIA sponsored ‘clandestine operations throughout 1957 in an effort to bring down the Syrian regime’ ending in another failed coup. The failure to bring down the Syrian regime was compounded when in 1958 a nationalist coup led by Abdel Karim Qassim overthrew the pro-British King Feisal of Iraq increasing Soviet influence. The Baghdad Pact, sponsored by the West as part of Dulles’s policy of containment of Soviet expansion, had been formed before Suez and fermented regional rivalries. After Suez the Pact renamed CENTO became meaningless, Iraq withdrew after the revolution and Egyptian pressure on the pro-Western Lebanon and Jordan prevented them from joining.

The Suez Crisis was a double bonus for the Soviet Union diverting attention away from the Hungarian uprising and consolidating its credentials as an anti imperialist friend of the Third World. Stalin’s death heralded changes and prior to Suez ushered in a period of mini détente. In early 1956, the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party opened a twinkle of liberalism with the denouncing of the Stalinist excesses. The new regime in Moscow looked to Lenin’s anti-imperialist philosophy to reach out in its foreign policy beyond the Soviet satellites and communist parties to offer both economic and military aid to the newly emerging nations of the Third World. The Soviet Union was able to claim that Suez had given practical expression to their new policy and their stand had stopped the imperialist aggressors and demonstrated their support for all the newly emerging nations from colonialism.

Soviet policy at the United Nations changed from defensive to an offensive posture with its anti-imperialist appeal to the former ‘western’ colonies of Asia and Africa. It has been suggested that Castro was so impressed that three years later when Cuba needed support he turned to the Soviet Union.

The Suez Crisis drew world attention away from the Red Army’s crushing of the Hungarian uprising to the great relief of Khrushchev whose own position had been threatened by revolts in Eastern Europe. The debate still continues on the question did the United States
inadvertently acquiesce to the Soviet invasion of Hungary by focusing on Suez.\textsuperscript{64} Khrushchev termed Suez an ‘historic turning point’ for the Soviet Union, Kissinger described it as the start of ‘a roller-coaster ride through one confrontation after another starting with his Berlin ultimatum... and ending with... the Cuban missile crisis.’\textsuperscript{65} Khrushchev had halted the invasion of Egypt, humiliated the Americans but most importantly, he was able to capitalise on the Kremlin’s success to bolster his own political position.\textsuperscript{66}

Brzezinski argues that post-Suez a new phase of Soviet policy emerged that exaggerated its own strength combined with global expansion of its influence.\textsuperscript{67} Many observers have suggested that the Soviet Union gained from Suez by increased influence in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{68} The pace of the growth of Soviet support for the Arab nationalist governments of Egypt, Syria and later Iraq alarmed the West and altered the political map.\textsuperscript{69} The Soviet Union became a major arms supplier to the three Arab nationalist countries.\textsuperscript{70} Moscow found that although their military hardware was welcomed the Arab nationalists did not welcome communism. William Stivers suggests that they found themselves embroiled in a ‘house of mirrors’ aiding regimes who hated each other and repressed local communists.\textsuperscript{71} The Soviet Union wanted Arab allies for its own protection on its southern borders but was not interested in seriously threatening Israel and supporting a war.\textsuperscript{72} This was the policy dilemma it had to pursue after Suez balancing between ‘no peace, no war.’\textsuperscript{73} The Kremlin also had the uneasy task of mediating between its Arab friends with ‘more influence-more involvement-more headaches!’\textsuperscript{74}

The Cold War began in the Middle East over Azerbaijan in 1946.\textsuperscript{75} The strategic factor was ‘oil ranked as a crucial resource... it had to be denied to the Soviets.’\textsuperscript{76} The greatest impact of the Suez Crisis was that the United States took control of the world’s oil assuming responsibility for its defence and security.\textsuperscript{77} Oil was vital for the post-war economic reconstruction of Western Europe and Japan and American hegemony denied it to the Soviet Union while keeping control over its allies.\textsuperscript{78} Before Suez the United States was building up Saudi Arabia as a
rival to Egypt, Britain was a hindrance due to a dispute over Buraimi Oasis.\(^7\) Within days after Suez, British power in the region was in rapid decline, the importance of Saudi Arabia to America was revealed when Eisenhower approved a policy of building up King Saud ‘as a major figure in the Middle East’ as an anti-Soviet influence.\(^8\) The United States defined its policy as; access to oil, right of passage for pipelines and shipping, the preservation of Israel and independent Arab States and the exclusion of Soviet power.\(^9\) The new friend of America, King Saud paid a state visit to Washington on 30 January 1957 and more importantly the lease of the Dhahran airbase was renewed.\(^2\) Robert Divine argues, that Eisenhower may have been wrong about confusing Arab nationalism and communism, but he had ‘a clear sense of the strategic value of Persian Gulf oil.’\(^3\)

The impact of Suez spread the Cold War to nations previously untouched, mainly the new states emerging from colonial rule. By placing the strategic needs of the United States first, America failed to understand Arab nationalism. This factor led to a failure to resolve the Arab-Israeli problem before 1967 when the United States was neutral to the dispute but perceived by Arab nationalists as the new imperial power in the region. For the first time, the Soviet Union took on a distinctly global range added to by a new sense of success and gave rise to self-assertiveness in foreign policy. The Soviet Union was able to use Suez as a mask to cover the repression of Eastern Europe whose rebellions had been threatening the heart of the Kremlin’s power. The end of empire for Britain and France was accelerated by their submission to the political dominance of the United States and first France followed perhaps belatedly by Britain turned to European integration.
NOTES


8 Ibid., p.187.

9 Kissinger, Diplomacy, p.598.


Henry Kissinger suggests that France pursued its own independent nuclear programme due to the Khrushchev threat to use rockets against France. See Kissinger, Diplomacy, p.547.

For the unreliability of the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ see Freiberger, Dawn over Suez, p.215.

* NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation).


19 Kissinger, Diplomacy, p.548.


21 Ibid., pp.151-155.

22 Kissinger, Diplomacy, p.549.


* NSC (National Security Council).

24 Ibid., pp.614-616.


27 Ibid., p.523.


30 Dean Acheson described it as “vague, inadequate and not very helpful” quoted in Robert A. Divine, Eisenhower and the Cold War, (1981), p.92.


33 Ibid., pp.175-176.

34 Freiberger, Dawn over Suez, p.215. see also Gaddis, We Now Know, p.174.


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39 Kinsella, ‘Conflict in context’, p.578.


46 Behbehani, The Soviet Union, p.173. see also Aronson, From sideshow, p.120.


49 Lesch, Syria, p.96.

50 * CIA (Central Intelligence Agency).

51 Ibid., p.212.


54 Lesch, Syria, pp.xi-xii, and pp.104-105.


56 Lesch, Syria, pp.xi-xii, and pp.104-105.

57 Freiberger, Dawn over Suez, p.192.

58 Zbigniew Brzezinski, ‘How the Cold War was played,’ Foreign Affairs, 51(1), 1972, p.189. see also Wohlforth, The Elusive Balance, p.149.


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66 Nogee and Donaldson, Soviet Foreign Policy, pp.119-122. see also Gaddis, We Now Know, p.239.

67 Brzezinski, ‘How the Cold War was played,’ pp.189-190.


70 Kissinger, ‘Conflict in context’, p.560.


77 Stivers, America’s confrontation, p.3.


82 Freiberger, Dawn over Suez, p.207.

83 Divine, Eisenhower, p.104.
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