Suez Marks End of Era
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Projected British Exodus From Base To Leave Defense Vacuum in Region

By HANSON W. BALDWIN

Another retreat of the thin red line of Empire was forecast last week as the British resumed discussions with Egypt about the future of the Suez Canal military bases.

For the past three-quarters of a century Suez and Egypt have been a military, political and psychological cornerstone of the British Empire tradition. Kipling, the spokesman of this tradition, and many others of his time, voiced in song and story the meaning of Suez to that empire upon which the sun never set.

The impending British evacuation of the Suez bases has, therefore, not only great strategic significance but also political and psychological importance. It heralds the end of a vanishing era.

But it is a profound mistake to assume that the lowering of the Union Jack at Suez represents a net gain for the West. Superficial relations between Britain and Egypt, which have been at times exceedingly strained, and between Egypt and the United States, will improve. But the basic strategic fact about the impending withdrawal of British power is that it will create another vacuum of power in an area—the Middle East—already distinguished for its lack of power.

Turkey and Pakistan

The defense of the Middle East has been predicated in the past upon a strong Turkey and a strong Pakistan on the flanks and the availability of a large Egyptian air-sea-land base and depot covering the Suez Canal and backing up all forward bases in the area, such as the British facilities in Iraq. The central position, with the best base facilities of the whole area, and airfields and depots that will be hard to duplicate, is now to be abandoned.

It is, of course, true that not all of the 80,000 British troops that have been stationed at Suez will be returned to Britain. Some will be transferred to Libya, where the British still maintain bases; some will go to Cyprus, which is to be the headquarters of the British Middle East land forces. Much of the $700,000,000 worth of supplies would be redistributed or returned to Britain; the remaining installations would be cared for by some 4,000 civilian technicians and supply personnel under Egyptian administrative control.

This proposed redeployment is a doubtful substitute, indeed, for what had been a cornerstone of the whole British power position in the Middle East. The atomic bomb and long-range bombers, as well as minelaying aircraft, had, indeed, reduced the usefulness of the Suez Canal in wartime and had emphasized dispersion of supply and base facilities rather than concentration. Nevertheless, Suez is the geographic hub—the land link between Africa and the Middle East, the sea link between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, a psychological and political cornerstone—a kingpin of strategy.

Bases in Libya Useful

The British bases in Libya are useful, particularly to North Africa and to Mediterranean operations, but of little direct influence in the Middle East. And Cyprus is an island—an ironic headquarters for British land forces in the Middle East—all the more so since the Greeks are already pressing in the United Nations and elsewhere for complete autonomy for Cyprus, a development that would certainly be viewed with disfavor by Turkey.

And finally, the withdrawal of British power from Suez cannot be compensated for by the Egyptians, whose 50,000-man army is in no sense strong enough qualitatively or quantitatively, to fill the vacuum of power left by Britain.

All this is clearly recognized by a projected provision in the British - Egyptian agreement which would permit the return of British troops to the canal zone area in case of war—clearly dangerous military extemporization and a poor substitute for a permanent base. It is clear, therefore, that the impending withdrawal is an undesirable military expedient, undertaken partly because of the decline of British power, partly because of our own equivocal policies in the area, partly in the hopes of political and psychological gains in the Arab world. The last named is likely to be an evanescent hope; retreat, particularly under pressure, does not breed respect but more pressure.

The "solution" in Egypt may indeed breed more problems than it solves. With Egyptians in sole control at Suez, undeterred by the moderating presence of British troops, the Israeli-Arab friction, already at fever point, may even burst the bounds of the past.

The thin red line of Empire may have outlived its day but it will not be replaced in Suez without a long period of Middle Eastern instability and convulsions.

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