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East and West of Suez

THE seizure of the Suez Canal by President Nasser has provoked a crisis which, in spite of immediate tensions and dangers, may still have good results. If the event is studied purely as a question of international law, there is no difficulty in showing that Egypt has a legal right to control a waterway within her own territory. She has no moral right to break an agreement, but morality in international affairs is a subject about which it may be better to remain silent. Expropriation is always a drastic measure. It is an assertion of sovereignty which will continue to be made while countries owe much of their development to foreign capital. In Egypt, however, the situation goes further than that.

If a country expropriates oil wells or any other asset built up by foreign enterprise, the loss is confined to the company whose money is invested in the project. The seizure of the Suez Canal affects every maritime nation in the world. This channel across the isthmus between Asia and Africa looks from the air like a long and narrow ditch, with a sprinkling of toy ships precariously afloat on the sand; but it links the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and opens the historic gateway between Europe and Asia. If a ship is unable to steam 100 miles through Egyptian territory, it must make a voyage of thousands of miles around the continent of Africa. To deny access to the canal, is in effect to deny access to the Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean; and this power is too great to be in the hands of a single government—especially the government of a weak country already committed to doubtful policies among the tensions of the Middle East.

Colonel Nasser has given the usual assurances. The canal will be open to every nation (except Israel?), and there is nothing to fear: such words as "honour" and

"obligation" come smoothly from his tongue. But assurances are a weariness and waste of time when they are given by a man whose use of power has the too-familiar trend of dictatorship. The circumstances of the take-over make it impossible to have any confidence in the President's methods and intentions. Colonel Nasser made his announcement immediately after the United States and Britain had decided not to help Egypt to build the Aswan High Dam. It is unlikely that a shrewd and ruthless politician would seize the canal simply as an act of retaliation. A dictator in a poor country needs money, and must take risks to get it. His action has precipitated a crisis which might have been postponed by British-American financial aid for Aswan, but which had to come eventually.

In the last century the world was a long way from adopting ideas that are now embodied in the Charter of United Nations; but even then it was recognised that the Suez Canal must be subject to international agreement. The nine nations who signed a convention at Constantinople in 1888 declared that the canal should be free and open "to every vessel of commerce or war, without distinction of flag." Since then the peace-time value of the canal has grown with trade, and especially with the flow of oil from Arabian wells. Something has been said of counter-measures—larger tankers for the Cape route, for instance, and even a new canal through Israel and Jordan. But there can be no security in world trade while this central waterway is at the mercy of power politics. A new canal, apart from the cost and delay, would be an expedient which might merely transfer the difficulties to a different area. Sooner or later it has to be decided how rights and facilities that belong to the world (and in particular the Suez Canal) can best be controlled for the common good.

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