President Nasser's announcement\(^1\) of 26 July 1956 nationalising the Suez Canal Company caused world-wide repercussions and demonstrably violent reactions in Britain and France. The vehemence of the Anglo-French reactions could be understood in terms of their vested interests in the Canal Company. The Company itself was an Egyptian Company, but its shares were largely held by foreign Governments or nationals, the British Government holding 44 per cent of the shares. Out of 32 Directors of the Company, 9 were British, and 16 Frenchmen. While British shipping predominated the Canal right from the beginning, the UK obtained about 70 per cent of its total crude oil imports by the Canal route and France about 40 per cent.\(^2\) The nationalisation decree provided for compensation to the share-holders at the market value.

Further the Egyptian Government expressed their determination to honour all their international obligations, and both the Convention of 1888 and the assurance concerning freedom of navigation as given in the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1954.\(^3\) However, Britain, France, and the United States challenged the whole basis of Egypt's right to nationalise the Canal Company,\(^4\) and the train of events set in motion led directly to Britain's military action against Egypt in the company of France. If ever any climacteric in post-war international politics caused a serious deterioration in Indo-British relations, it was the Suez crisis of 1956.

Backed by a united nation\(^5\) in the immediate post-nationalisation period, the British Government developed a bellicose attitude to Nasser's nationalisation of the Canal Company and all that it implied. The Opposition in the House of Commons charac-
terised the nationalisation as a *high-handed and totally unjustifiable step*, and as if to preach to the converted, suggested the blocking of the Sterling balances of the Egyptian Government. The British Government was convinced that even the maximum economic and political pressures might not succeed in 'checking' Nasser and re-establishing international control over the Suez Canal. Therefore, as Anthony Eden acknowledged in his memoirs, 'we had to prepare to back our remonstrances with military action'. Thus, the Chiefs of Staff were instructed on 27 July 1956 'to get ready a plan and a time-table for an operation designed to occupy and secure the Canal, should other methods fail'. Britain was prepared to go it alone in this venture even if no assistance from anywhere were forthcoming. Prime Minister Eden informed the President of the United States about this fateful decision on the same evening. The President was told that if firm action were not taken, 'our influence and yours throughout the Middle East will, we are convinced, be finally destroyed'. Further, Eden said that they ought not to be involved 'in legal quibbles about the rights of the Egyptian Government to nationalise what is technically an Egyptian Company', and that the British Cabinet was convinced that 'we must be ready, in the last resort, to use force to bring Nasser to his senses'.

On 30 July 1956 Prime Minister Eden informed the House of Commons that the Governments of the Commonwealth countries were given early information of the situation as it affected Britain and the Commonwealth, 'and close touch is being maintained with them'. It is not certain whether the Commonwealth Prime Ministers were as intimately apprised of the situation as was the case with British communications to the US President at least till the invasion of Suez. Be that as it might be, the Prime Minister
made the attitude of the British Government sufficiently clear in the following oft-quoted declaration: 'No arrangements for the future of this great international waterway could be acceptable to Her Majesty's Government which would leave it in the \textit{unfettered} unfettered control of a single Power which could, as recent events have shown, exploit it purely for purposes of national policy'.\footnote{9}

The debate in the House of Commons on 2 August had many revealing features. First, the House was told about the actual adoption of 'certain precautionary measures of a military nature'.\footnote{10} Secondly, there was surprising identity of views, indeed as never later, between the Government and the Opposition in regard to seeing the situation in terms of the individual Nasser. What is more, the Leader of the Opposition appeared to steal a march on the views of the Prime Minister about the nature of Nasserism. Said Hugh Gaitskell: 'It is all very familiar. It is \textit{exactly} the same that we encountered from Mussolini and Hitler in those years before the war ....'.\footnote{11} Thirdly, on the issue of possible use of force, the Opposition revealed much understanding of the official position. They had no objection to the 'precautionary steps' announced by the Government. Although advising the Government to be mindful of the UN Charter and to avoid \textit{unnecessary} landing themselves in a situation where they might be denounced in the Security Council as aggressors, the Leader of the Opposition recognized that there were circumstances in which Britain might be compelled to use force, 'in self-defence or as part of some collective defence measures'.\footnote{12} And a former Foreign Secretary, Herbert Morrison, went to the extent of giving advance notice of support to any use of force by Britain and France with the possible participation of the United States. He asked the British Government 'not to be too much afraid'.\footnote{13} Throughout the
course of the debate, much emphasis had been laid on the personal role of President Nasser and on the necessity to 'react sharply' to his 'seizure' of the Canal Company with the implied use of force.14

It was in this background that India was invited by the UK on 3 August to attend the 24-nation London Conference on the Suez Canal question. In his statement in the Lok Sabha on 8 August, Nehru spoke at length on the Indian attitude to the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. While not appreciating the modus operandi of the nationalisation decision, he categorically stated that the Canal being in Egypt and forming an integral part thereof, the sovereignty of Egypt was beyond all question. There was no question of expropriation as the share-holders were to be compensated at market value. Further, the Egyptian Government had reiterated that they would honour all their obligations arising from international agreements. Referring to the three-Power communique, Nehru said that although it recognised the sovereign rights of Egypt, it appeared to limit these rights to nationalise only assets which were 'not impressed with an international interest'. If this were the point at issue, 'the violence of the reactions and the warlike gestures' were unnecessary. Referring to the Anglo-French military and naval movements, Nehru made the point that threats to settle the dispute through display or use of force did not 'belong to this age'. As a principal user of the Canal, India was not a 'disinterested party'. What she wanted was a peaceful, negotiated settlement. Being in friendly and close relations with Egypt and the principal Western countries involved, India, Nehru said, was 'passionately interested in averting a conflict'.

Therefore, India decided to attend the London Conference.18
Before that she sought and received necessary clarifications and assurances from the British Government to the effect that participation in the Conference in no way implied adherence to the approach and principles of the three-Power communique. At the London Conference, India, in line with her declared policy on the nationalisation issue, found herself naturally in opposition to the '18-Nations Proposals' which called for an international operating Suez Canal Board. The majority included India's four Commonwealth partners, i.e., the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Pakistan. The Indian proposal was based on her recognition of Egypt's right to nationalise the Canal Company and it called for an international consultative body of user interests 'charged with advisory, consultative and liaison functions'. Thus, Britain and India took up diametrically opposite attitudes to the character and status of the international body. Britain was for an international board with powers of control whereas India stood for a purely advisory and consultative body with no powers of control whatever. Anthony Eden recorded in his memoirs that Britain was sorry that India was 'out of step with the majority of the conference'. He also revealed that in an attempt to persuade India to come nearer to Britain, the latter asked the Indian delegation whether they could endorse the principles upon which the eighteen Powers had agreed, even though they reserved their position as to the methods of implementing them. In view of the different approaches and principles embodied in the two proposals before the London Conference, obviously India could not agree.

In this connection, two retrospective comments deserve attention. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, then India's High Commissioner in the UK, later said in a speech to the Lok Sabha that Britain
asked India to intercede with President Nasser and request him to accept internationalisation of the Canal and certain international guarantees. India's reply was 'straight, unhesitating and given immediately'. It said she could not possibly do that; because, President Nasser, 'who had so recently thrown off the colonial yoke himself, was entitled to take any steps he liked in the interest of his country and we could not be parties to again making Egypt or rather the Canal a playground for international politics'. And Anthony Eden, who had sincerely convinced himself that Nasser had put on the toga of Hitler or Mussolini, recorded in his memoirs that India's policy of bringing about a compromise 'really meant that Nasser must be appeased'; therefore, it seems Eden 'found no substance' in 'Mr Menon's ideas in London'.

After the failure of the Menzies Committee to secure Egypt's acceptance of the plan for international control of the Canal, Prime Minister Eden announced in the House of Commons on 12 September that the British Government, in consultation with their French and American allies, had decided to set up a provisional Canal users' association which would employ pilots, undertake responsibility for co-ordination of traffic through the Canal, and in general 'act as a voluntary association for the exercise of the rights of the Suez Canal users'. Amidst Opposition cries of 'resign' and 'deliberate provocation', the Prime Minister held out the threat that should Egypt seek to interfere with the operation of the users' association or refuse to 'extend to it the essential minimum of co-operation', Her Majesty's Government and others concerned would be free to take necessary steps either through the UN 'or by other means, for the assertion of their rights'. Further he declared that 'if
military precautions were justified a month age, they are justi­­fied today, and I must make it plain that the Government have no intention of relaxing them …! 25

In his speech26 in the Lok Sabha the very next day, Nehru said he had read the report of Anthony Eden’s speech with 'sur­prise and regret', for it seemed to close the door to further negotiations. The proposed users' association being the result of unilateral action was 'in the nature of an imposed decision' and would 'render peaceful settlement more difficult of realisa­tion'. Indeed, it carried with it 'the grave risk of conflict'. As there was no question of appeasement of one side or the other, Nehru appealed to both the United Kingdom and the United States to reopen negotiations with President Nasser for a peaceful nego­tiated settlement which should ensure the rights not only of Egypt but of all the user countries.

India was not invited to the second London Conference. 27 The ineffectiveness of the scheme of forcing a users' association on Egypt became clear enough in view of Dulles's public statement that if Egypt denied transit to ships of the users' association, the United States would not attempt to 'shoot its way through the Canal'. 28 In this context also the Indian stand on a nego­tiated settlement stood vindicated. However, in his memoirs, Anthony Eden thought otherwise. 29 This was not fortuitous for the simple reason that after the failure of the users' association plan, Britain under Eden decided that she was left with no alternative but to use force or 'acquiesce in Nasser's triumph'. 30

After the UN was seized of the Suez dispute and the Securi­ty Council approved of the six principles as a basis of settling the question, 31 India through her representative Krishna Menon continued the tireless efforts for a negotiated settlement of
the issue. With this end in view, on 24 October the Government of India released the text of her new proposals which were circulated earlier to Governments principally concerned. In the House of Commons, the Leader of the Opposition expressed the view that the Indian proposals seemed to offer 'a very reasonable half-way house solution to the whole problem'. Replying to a question on the issue, the Foreign Secretary, however, gave an evasive reply: the Government wanted to be satisfied whether the Indian proposals constituted the proposals of the Egyptian Government. The truth seems to be that at that time Britain was far removed from any idea of even a negotiated compromise, obsessed as she was with the idea of teaching Nasser a lesson. In any case, right from the beginning of the Suez dispute, Britain had been allergic to Indian suggestions for a peaceful settlement of the problem. Obviously piqued with India's approach to the question, Eden in his memoirs permitted himself to make the following uncharitable remark about India's efforts: 'The Government of that country looked to the West for repeated concessions and found no difficulty in urging this course, while refusing the slightest concession to Pakistan over Kashmir.' It is only fair to add that India was seeking no concession but a principled solution of the matter, and as far as Kashmir was concerned, the boot was on the other leg.

Ultimately, the most dreaded thing came. Following the Israeli attack on Egypt on 29 October, Britain and France, in a remarkably preconcerted action, subjected Egypt to a second invasion following the expiry of the deceptive ultimatum. The Canal was not blocked till the invasion and Israel was the first aggressor. The first broadcast of the Anglo-French Allied Command said: 'Oh Egyptians, why has this befallen you? First,
because Abdul Nasser went mad and seized the Canal. Leaflets were dropped depicting caricatures of a frightened Nasser and inciting the Egyptians to revolt. These, together with earlier pronouncements on the 'peril' of Nasser and his acts, should serve to indicate that the real motive of the Anglo-French attack was to overthrow Nasser and to secure control of the Canal zone in the name of international control.

Inside Britain itself the Government failed to rally the Opposition and substantial sections of the press and public opinion behind their adventure in Suez. Many were shocked that due to the Government's folly Britain should be reduced to the level of a cynical aggressor. The Leader of the Opposition charged the Government in the House of Commons with having 'committed an act of disastrous folly whose tragic consequences we shall regret for years'. Further, he characterised the act as a 'positive assault' upon the three governing principles of British foreign policy — solidarity with the Commonwealth, the Anglo-American Alliance and adherence to the UN Charter.

The Anglo-French military operations in Egypt appeared to reduce India's efforts for a negotiated settlement of the Suez dispute to a mass of wreckage. India's complaint was really not that there had been no prior consultation or that information was received 'just about simultaneously with the ultimatum' although the British failure to consult was an important issue in intra-Commonwealth relations. What caused concern in India was the fact of aggression and invasion. A statement issued by the Government of India on 31 October mightily condemned the Anglo-French invasion of Egyptian territory as 'a flagrant violation of the United Nations Charter and opposed to all the principles laid down by the Bandung Conference'. In India's view
this aggression was bound to have far-reaching consequences in Asia and Africa and might even lead to war on an extended scale.\textsuperscript{42} In his message of the same date to the UN Secretary-General, Nehru repeated the Indian reactions in stronger terms and debunked the thesis that the invasion was meant to protect the Canal and to secure free traffic, for, the first result of the invasion was precisely the cessation of this traffic. He urged that 'the procedures of the UN must be swifter than those of invasion and aggression'.\textsuperscript{43} At the emergency special session of the UN General Assembly, India demanded that all military operations against Egypt must be stopped forthwith.\textsuperscript{44}

India was for smashing calling a spade a spade. In a speech\textsuperscript{45} on 1 November, Nehru felt compelled to say that 'after fairly considerable experience in foreign affairs', he could not think of a 'grosser case of naked aggression than what England and France are attempting to do'. In denouncing the aggression, India, however, was not moved by any feeling of hostility as such toward Britain. India's relationship with Britain had been 'close and friendly' ever since India attained independence. She acknowledged, Nehru said, the 'many liberal gestures' Britain had made to other countries and that she had been 'a force for peace' for the past few years. It was precisely for these reasons that India felt 'sorrow and distress' at this 'amazing adventure' of Britain and France. In the mid-20th century there was no sense in going back to the 'predatory method of the 18th and 19th centuries'. The self-respecting independent nations in Asia and Africa would not tolerate 'this kind of incursion by the colonial powers'. Therefore, Nehru declared, India's sympathies were entirely with Egypt. India also protested against the Anglo-French bombing of Egypt 'as being against all considerations of
These were the unanimous views of the Government and the people of India.

Nehru regarded the British Prime Minister's justification in the House of Commons for the Anglo-French military operations as 'totally unconvincing and unsatisfactory'. When Britain still refused to comply with the UN General Assembly's resolution of 2 November calling for an immediate cease-fire, a former Governor-General of India, Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, stating that 'more time has elapsed after the resolution was communicated to Britain than the British Government's ultimatum gave to Egypt before opening fire on her', publicly recommended that India should quit the Commonwealth. He said that it would be 'the very measure' of the value of India's protest against the principal Commonwealth partner's obstinate persistence in aggression and flouting a resolution of the UN 'passed with such unanimity and earnestness of purpose'.

Being unable to appreciate the rightness of India's stand on Britain's dangerous undertaking in Egypt, Eden in his memoirs had words of criticism for Nehru's apparently soft attitude to the events in Hungary as against the clear stand on Egypt. But as Kenneth Younger pointed out in the House of Commons, the question of any inter-connection between the two issues could not be of advantage to the British Government.

Another aspect of the Indian reaction to the invasion of Suez deserves attention. There was widespread suspicion in India (as also in the UK) about the Anglo-French-Israeli collusion in the attack on Egypt. Subsequent leakages of information as also certain authentic studies gave conclusive evidence that there was in fact collusion. At that time, however, Nehru had this to say on the point: he did not know whether there was
any 'previous consultation among the aggressor countries'. But it was obvious that 'their plans fitted in, and the Anglo-French attack helped Israel's aggression and was itself helped by it'.

After the cease-fire on 6 November and the introduction of the UN Emergency Force into the Canal area, India vigorously pursued her efforts at the UN for the withdrawal of the Anglo-French-Israeli forces from Egypt. India did not want the UN force to become a sort of successor to the forces of the invaders as it appeared to be the British position. As late as 5 December, Nehru said that questions like re-opening the Canal could not be taken up effectively until the withdrawal of the Anglo-French-Israeli forces from Egypt had been settled 'not by declaration but actually by the fact of withdrawal'.

Although she had reasons to dislike it, India could not possibly sustain any grievance against the British failure to consult her on the Suez action in accordance with established Commonwealth practices. Not to speak of any Commonwealth country, Britain did not consult even her American ally. Motivated solely by national interest, and to that extent forgetting, although momentarily, the larger interests of the Commonwealth, Britain might have avoided seeking opinions that were known in advance to be fundamentally hostile to the intended action. None could possibly quarrel with such a position. What was surprising, however, was the astounding claim made in behalf of the British Government that 'consultation with the Commonwealth Governments has never been closer about any issue than it has been over the unfolding situation in the Middle East! It was further claimed that scarcely a day had passed since July 1956 'without some communication on the subject of Suez passing between London and the offices of the Commonwealth representa-
If this were really so, things ought to have turned out differently and contradictory statements about consultations or the failure to consult need not have been made. Further to that, there was possibly something wrong in the way Commonwealth consultation was conducted. This aspect of the matter was an issue in Indo-British relations of the time. Recalling her experiences as High Commissioner in the UK, Vijayalakshmi Pandit told the Lok Sabha that whenever Commonwealth consultation was arranged between the various High Commissioners and Whitehall, "it was always to be given a piece of paper announcing the decision already taken".

The Suez crisis left deep scars on relations between India and Britain. While at the official level the public attitudes of the two countries were expressed in a dignified albeit firm way, at the un-official level, at least in certain quarters, things descended to the depths. Thus, certain Members on the Government benches in the House of Commons allowed themselves the luxury of 'laughter and sneering at the very mention of the name of India, let alone that of Mr Nehru'. Happily, this was not the opinion of the most numerous majority of Members on both sides of the House.

Of greater import for the future of Indo-British relations during the aftermath of the Suez crisis was the question of the apprehended termination of India's membership of the Commonwealth. As suggested by a scholar, Rajagopalachari's advocacy for the severance of the Commonwealth connexion might have been the result of the anger of the moment, but in a somewhat calmer atmosphere as well the demand for India quitting the Commonwealth was raised oftentimes both inside and outside the Parliament. Nehru himself had acknowledged that the question of
the Commonwealth connexion had to be thought about afresh because of the 'new and important factor' introduced by the Anglo-French attack on Egypt. During the Lok Sabha debate on India's membership of the Commonwealth in November 1956, many Opposition MPs demanded severance of the Commonwealth connexion on grounds of Britain's aggressive behaviour in the Suez canal, her failure to consult the largest member of the Commonwealth, and on the ground that the Commonwealth link must not be allowed to 'furnish a moral alibi to Britain' in her attempts 'to deceive the world public opinion'. As usual, Nehru defended membership of the Commonwealth, this time on the additional ground that it was not a worthwhile proposition to leave the Commonwealth merely to express again the very strong views India had already expressed about recent events in Egypt. When memories of the Suez crisis were still fresh in 1957, the demand for leaving the Commonwealth was again raised. Nehru also acknowledged that he had felt, 'and for the first time I felt, the first time in these many years', that India's association with the Commonwealth 'may some time or other require further consideration'. But he suggested that the time had not come as 'we are not going to act in a huff or in a spirit of anger merely because we dislike something that has happened'. Thus, the undoubtedly vehement reactions of India to Britain's role in the Suez crisis were not carried to the extent of a violent breach with Britain. Certain circles regarded it as a tribute to the viability of the Commonwealth. Whatever be the actual reason, the continuance of Indo-British relations within the wider framework of the Commonwealth was a tribute to India's capacity for mature judgment.