Britain, the United Nations and the Iranian Crisis of 1946

Zulkarnain Abdul Rahman, Amer Saifude Ghazali, Rosmadi Faazi and Norazlan Hadi Yaacob

Abstract: This article discusses the Iranian crisis from British perspectives in the period from July 1945 to May 1946. The Iranian crisis of 1946 was an Anglo-Soviet dispute over the Near East. It was the first international crisis referred to the Security Council of the United Nations (UN) for investigation. The three world powers, namely the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom, were deeply involved in this crisis. It was significant not only in shaping the future of world politics at the time; it also determined the fate and prestige of the United Nations in the context of the early phase of the Cold War. This was because the Iranian crisis reflected an open split between the three permanent members of the Security Council, rather than unity in settling international disputes. It is contended that the Iranian crisis of 1946 forced Britain to regard the UN not more than a political instrument to achieve their ultimate aim as a key player in international politics. The Iranian crisis was important to Britain because it was the first real test of the intentions of the former Soviet Union and it occurred in a region that had been of strategic and economic importance to the British since the nineteenth century. It mattered, too, because it was the first real test of the new organisation set up in San Francisco less than a year before—the UN.

Key words: United Nations • Iranian Crisis • Bevin • Cold War • Britain

INTRODUCTION

The main issue in the 1946 Iranian crisis was the refusal of the Soviet government to withdraw its troops from Iranian territory as it had agreed in the Triparite Treaty of 1942. The British and Soviet armies jointly occupied Iran during the Second World War in order to assist the Soviet Union in defeating Germany. The Trans-Iranian railway and the road inland from the Persian Gulf via Azerbaijan were used to supply material and labour support to Soviet Union. In addition, the presence of the Allied troops was vital in protecting Iran's oil reserves from falling into the hands of the Allied enemies. The northern part of Iran was a Soviet zone of occupation with approximately 40,000 troops. The British, with 19,000 troops controlled the Southern part of Iran [1]. Both the British and the Soviets had agreed to withdraw their troops six months after the Second World War was over.

Meanwhile, the presence of the American Army in Iran was based on an Anglo-American agreement of September 1942. Under this agreement, the American Army was charged with operating the southern section of the Trans-Iranian Railway to handle the delivery of war supplies to the Soviet Union. The presence of the American Army was approved by both the Soviet and the Iranian governments. When the war was over, the United States agreed to withdraw its army from Iranian territory in June 1945 and left Iran in January 1946, while British troops left on 2 March of the same year. However, the Soviets refused to evacuate the northern parts of Iran when the allotted time arrived.

The Iranian government was keen to see foreign troops evacuating their country immediately as the Second World War was over. If the Allied powers left their country immediately, the potential for the intervention of foreign powers in the internal affairs...