From a strictly analytical point of view, America ought to have shared theBritish and French perception that Nasser's brand of militant nationalismrepresented an insuperable obstacle to a constructive Middle East policy. Ademonstration that reliance on Soviet arms served no positive purposemight have obviated decades of upheaval in the developing world. From thatpoint of view, it would have been desirable to face down Nasser. But, havingaccomplished his defeat, the United States could not participate in arestoration of British and French colonial dominance. Where America shouldhave separated from its allies-if it were absolutely necessary-was not at thebeginning of the Suez Crisis, but upon its successful conclusion. Ademonstration that reliance on Soviet support was disastrous for Egyptshould have been followed by support for the reasonable nationalistic aimsof a moderate successor to Nasser-much as America reacted to Sadat in the1970s. The democracies, however, were not ready for so complicated astrategy. Great Britain and France did not accept that the precondition foroverthrowing Nasser was their being prepared to grant many of hisdemands to a more moderate successor. America did not understand howimportant it was for its policy that two close NATO allies be permitted toadjust to the new circumstances without undermining their image ofthemselves as Great Powers. For once a nation's image of itself is destroyed,so is its willingness to play a major international role. This was why HaroldMacmillan, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, told Ambassador RobertMurphy, a Dulles emissary, that, if Great Britain did not confront Nassernow, "Britain would become another Netherlands."! America's leaders,however, opted for a chance to win over the radical nationalists, first bydissociating themselves from Great Britain and France diplomatically, laterby publicly opposing them and demonstrating the limits of their capacity toshape Middle East events-in other words, bringing home to them the end oftheir roles as Great Powers. Treating the Canal regime as a legal issue,Dulles focused on the potential disruption of the sea-lanes and was fertile in
coming up with legal formulae to get around possible obstacles to freetransit through the Canal. Eden and Mollet, however, were determined notto accept nationalization of the Suez Canal, they tried to turn it into apretext for bringing down Nasser or, at a minimum, for humiliating him.Nasser finally played for time, as revolutionaries often do after a faitaccompli. The longer their action stands, the more difficult it becomes toreverse it-especially by using force. Eisenhower was passionate in hisopposition to the use of force, even for the purpose of upholding theprinciple of free passage through the