

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 20 marks

“Non-alignment was little more than a rational strategy on the part of a materially weak India to maximise its interests with a bipolar distribution of global power.” Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 not neutrality, not equidistance → independent policy = no alliances + freedom of judgment → the calculation is read correctly, “little more than” is the weak word

Body flow

R2 1947, little military or economic weight → alliance = obligation without adequate defence → autonomy of policy inside bipolarity, not distance from it

material weakness → alliance meant obligation without defence + quarrels serving no Indian purpose → **Nehru**: strategy, not dogma, ready to “join the side which is to our interest” → **V.P. Dutt**: idealism in appearance, pragmatism in substance → returns concrete: Bokaro, US Congress refuses, Soviet aid taken, policy unchanged → **Tharoor**: flexibility + influence beyond actual capability → **turn**: a weak state cannot buy influence, so moral standing becomes capability → agenda outruns Indian interest: decolonization, disarmament, apartheid, NIEO → “Trade Union of the Third World” → **Bandyopadhyaya**: universalized the international system, weaker states from objects into subjects

Counter-view

Morgenthau: neutrality as weakness where power politics governs → 1962: what diplomatic standing could not do against force

Conclusion routes

R1 calculation real, reduction false → a device fitted only to bipolarity would have ended with bipolarity → blocs gone, freedom of judgment still directs Indian diplomacy

R2 strategy and ethic were not rivals → for a weak state the norms were the instrument, and they outgrew the purpose they were built for

Non-alignment was neither neutrality nor equidistance between the blocs. It meant an independent foreign policy: no military alliances, and freedom to judge each question on its merits. The statement reads India's calculation correctly. Where it fails is in the words "little more than"

India in 1947 carried little military or economic weight. J.L. Nehru treated it as strategy, not dogma, and was ready to "join the side which is to our interest" if forced to choose. V.P. Dutt put it plainly: what appeared as idealism was in substance pragmatism.

The returns were concrete. When the US congress refused aid for the Bokaro steel plant, India took Soviet assistance & changed nothing in its foreign policy. According to Sashi Tharoon, non-alignment gave India diplomatic flexibility and an influence out of proportion to its actual capabilities.

Here the statement stops short. A materially weak state cannot buy influence, so its moral standing becomes its capability. India's did not stay confined to Indian interest: it pressed decolonization, disarmament, the end of apartheid and a new international economic order for the whole developing world, work that earned India the label "Trade Union of the Third World". For Jayantnuja Bandyopadhyay, the movement universalized the international system, turning weaker states from objects into subjects of international relations.

The realist objection goes further than the statement. **Hans Morgenthau** read neutrality as weakness in a world governed by power politics, and 1962 exposed how little diplomatic standing could do against force.

The calculation was real; the reduction is not. A device fitted only to bipolarity would have ended with bipolarity. The blocs are gone; the freedom to judge each issue on its merits still directs Indian diplomacy.