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Q3(a)

"During the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement tried to become a Third force in World Politics, but failed because it was too large and unwieldy." Discuss

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · PSIR GS 2 · 20 marks · Changing International Political Order

Changing International Political Order: Rise of super powers; strategic and ideological Bipolarity, arms race and Cold War; Nuclear threat; Non-aligned movement; Collapse of the Soviet Union; Unipolarity and American hegemony; relevance of non-alignment in the contemporary world.

Core demand of the question

- Comment on the statement that NAM was a third force in the Cold War but became too large and unwieldy
- Write at 20-mark length

Revision summary

NAM was a third diplomatic force, not a third army, during the Cold War.

Decolonisation expanded membership and prestige.

Consensus among unlike States produced communiqués more than enforcement.

Intra-member wars and Cuba's Soviet ties exposed the stretch of the label.

The movement remains a South forum; unwieldy is a fair description of its method, not a reason to deny its early role.

Introduction

NAM presented itself as a third diplomatic force beside NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The comment is largely right: the identity was real in the 1960s, and size plus disagreement later reduced operational unity. Unwieldy does not mean useless.

Body**Third force in the Cold War**

- A third force meant a caucus of States that refused formal alliance with Washington or Moscow and that bargained in the UN and in economic talks as a group.
- After **Belgrade 1961**, NAM coordinated positions on decolonisation, apartheid, and superpower bases.
- It was a force in diplomacy and in numbers at the General Assembly, not a third military pole. It had no joint command and no common nuclear deterrent.
- India, Yugoslavia, and Egypt gave it early prestige. The 1973 oil politics and the **New International Economic Order** debate showed South bargaining power, even when OPEC was not NAM as such.

Why it grew

- Decolonisation multiplied members. Newly independent States wanted a seat in a club that was not a pact.
- Membership rules were political and loose. States with quite different alignments still claimed the label.
- **Havana 1979** and later summits showed a wider ideological range, including Cuba's close Soviet ties, which older members read as a strain on non-alignment.

Large and unwieldy

- Consensus decision-making among 100-plus members produced long communiqués and few binding outcomes.
- Conflicts among members, including India-Pakistan, Iran-Iraq, and later Gulf wars, could not be settled by NAM.
- Economic diversity from oil exporters to least-developed countries split interests on trade and debt.
- After 1991 the bipolar map that had made a "third" identity simple disappeared. The movement remained, with a weaker contrast object.

Comment that stays fair

- Size was a success of anti-colonial politics and a failure of tight coordination. Both are true.
- Robert Cox would say NAM was a counter-hegemonic language inside a still US-centred world order, not a new order of its own.
- India still uses NAM meetings and the related Global South vocabulary, which shows residual political value.
- The accurate comment is that NAM was a diplomatic third force, never a third superpower, and that expansion without a secretariat of power made it unwieldy.

Flow diagram

US USSR blocs -> NAM third diplomatic force
 NAM third diplomatic force -> Membership growth
 Membership growth -> Consensus unwieldy
 Consensus unwieldy -> Residual Global South forum

Conclusion

NAM was a third force in the sense of a non-bloc diplomatic coalition during the Cold War. It became too large for consensus to equal action. The comment holds if third force is not confused with a third military camp.

Facts & figures

Belgrade 1961

Founding summit that defined non-alignment as a group practice.

Havana 1979

Summit that highlighted tension between strict non-alignment and members close to the USSR.

New International Economic Order

1970s G77 and NAM-linked demand for reformed trade, commodities, and finance rules.

Consensus rule

NAM decisions by consensus, which protects sovereignty and slows collective action.

Post-1991

End of the USSR removed the bipolar frame that had made a third identity easy to explain.

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