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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Just War, Power Balance, and Modern Conflict

THE HINDU

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Can a rising power articulate moral authority in security policy -- or is restraint always read as weakness in a coercive multipolar order?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Hindu argues that the classical doctrine of “just war” – the inheritance of Augustine, Aquinas and the modern UN Charter – is being tested by contemporary conflicts where conventional military force, economic chokepoints and narrative legitimacy converge. Traditional ideas of proportionality, last resort and discrimination between combatants and civilians are eroding in a multipolar order. The editorial argues that India must recalibrate its strategic doctrine around restraint, deterrence and credible moral authority rather than emulating great-power coercion – and that the post-Operation Sindoor “zero-tolerance deterrence” framework adopted since 2025 must be reconciled with India’s longer tradition of normative restraint.

A DOCTRINE UNDER STRAIN

The just-war tradition, developed by Augustine in the 4th century and systematised by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th, set six tests for the legitimacy of war: just cause, right intention, proper authority, last resort, probability of success and proportionality. International law absorbed this vocabulary into the twin pillars of jus ad bellum (the right to wage war) and jus in bello (right conduct within war). The UN Charter, signed in 1945, codified the modern restraint: Article 2(4) prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity of any state, with two narrow exceptions – Article 51 self-defence and Security Council authorisation under Chapter VII.

The architecture has been under strain for decades, but the conflicts since 2025 have stretched it to a breaking point. The US-Iran-Israel exchanges since 2025, the prolonged war in Ukraine, and the unresolved tensions across the Taiwan Strait have shown that contemporary great powers are increasingly willing to act outside Security Council authorisation, invoking expansive readings of self-defence, pre-emption and even “anticipatory” pre-emption.

WHEN ECONOMICS BECOMES COERCION

The novelty of contemporary conflict is that kinetic force is only one instrument among several. Economic chokepoints – the Strait of Hormuz through which roughly a fifth of global oil transits, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Malacca Strait – have become weapons in their own right. Sanctions regimes, secondary sanctions, SWIFT exclusions and export controls on advanced semiconductors function as economic coercion that, while not formally war, can be more destructive to civilian populations than limited strikes. The jus in bello principle of discriminating between combatants and civilians has no straightforward application when the weapon is a payments system.

CYBER, INFORMATION AND THE THRESHOLD QUESTION

Cyber operations and information warfare blur the threshold at which jus ad bellum is triggered. Is a state-sponsored ransomware attack that paralyses a hospital network an “armed attack” under Article 51 of the Charter? The 2017 Tallinn Manual on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Operations attempts to apply traditional rules to the cyber domain, but state practice has been inconsistent. The Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols, drafted for kinetic war, struggle when the front line is a software supply chain.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC RECALIBRATION

India's own doctrine has shifted within this terrain. Since the Pulwama-Balakot exchanges of 2019, and more decisively since Operation Sindoor in 2025, India has moved from strategic restraint to what officials have described as “zero-tolerance deterrence” – the willingness to retaliate kinetically across the Line of Control and even into Pakistani heartland in response to cross-border terror. This new posture is defensible under Article 51 self-defence and the established doctrine of necessity. But it also carries doctrinal risks. Deterrence requires escalation dominance, and escalation dominance in a nuclearised dyad invites miscalculation. The nuclear thresholds on the subcontinent – never officially codified beyond India's no-first-use posture – become more fragile when both sides commit publicly to “decisive” retaliation.

THE AUTHORITY QUESTION

Just-war theory's “proper authority” test was historically about **sovereignty**. In the multipolar 21st century, it has expanded into a question of moral authority – which states can credibly invoke universal principles without appearing hypocritical. A rising India that wishes to lead the Global South, advance reform of the UN Security Council and present itself as a Vishwamitra cannot adopt the same coercive vocabulary as the great powers it criticises. Restraint becomes a strategic asset, not a weakness, when it accumulates moral capital that can be cashed in during international crises.

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 2 – International institutions, India’s foreign policy / GS Paper 3 – Internal and external security, doctrines of force

Key arguments:

- The just-war tradition (Augustinian and Thomistic), codified in UN Charter Articles 2(4) and 51 and in the Geneva Conventions, is the **normative** architecture restraining the modern use of force.
- Economic **coercion** (sanctions, payment-system exclusions, chokepoint manipulation at the Strait of Hormuz) and cyber operations have blurred the jus ad bellum threshold.
- India’s “zero-tolerance deterrence” doctrine since Operation Sindoor 2025 is consistent with Article 51 self-defence but carries escalation risks in a nuclearised dyad.
- Moral authority is itself a strategic asset; a rising power that seeks UNSC reform and Global South leadership cannot mirror great-power coercion without losing legitimacy.

Counterarguments:

- Strict adherence to last-resort and proportionality tests can leave democracies vulnerable to sub-conventional and grey-zone attacks.
- The UN Charter’s collective-security architecture has functionally failed; states cannot wait for Security Council authorisation that the P5 veto blocks.
- Deterrence requires credible willingness to escalate; visible restraint may invite, not deter, adversary action.

Keywords: just war, jus ad bellum, jus in bello, Augustine, Aquinas, UN Charter Article 2(4), Article 51 self-defence, Geneva Conventions, Tallinn Manual, Strait of Hormuz, Operation Sindoor (since 2025), zero-tolerance deterrence, nuclear thresholds, IHL.

The Hindu’s view is that India’s strategic future will not be secured by copying the playbooks of great powers whose conduct the country has long criticised. Just-war thinking is not a relic of medieval theology; it is a continuing standard against which every use of force is measured by allies, adversaries and the Global South alike. India’s doctrine must keep deterrence credible while preserving the moral capital that distinguishes its rise from the coercive ascents of others. That balance – restraint disciplined by deterrence, deterrence disciplined by restraint – is the most demanding security policy a democracy can ask of itself, and the only one worth pursuing.

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