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## EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

# The Vanishing Value of Conquest: Why Seizing Land No Longer Pays

 INDIAN EXPRESS

10 July 2026

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CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

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# The Vanishing Value of Conquest: Why Seizing Land No Longer Pays

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## THE LIFT LINE

The old prize of war, a redrawn map, has quietly become a trap, because in an interconnected world the country that grabs land often ends up holding a liability while its rivals win the future without firing a shot.

## WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The editorial argues that the character of power has shifted: conquering and holding territory, once the surest measure of strength, has become costly and self-defeating, while economic coercion (<https://ujjari.com/vocab/coercion/>), technological dominance and influence operations now do the work that armies once did. This reshapes how India should read threats and design its security doctrine, connecting GS2 international relations with GS3 security and emerging technologies.

**GS Paper 2:** important international institutions and groupings, effect of global developments on India, the international order and its norms.

**GS Paper 3:** security challenges and their management, the role of external and non-state actors, cyber and technological security.

For **Prelims**, hold the anchors: the United Nations Charter's prohibition on the acquisition of territory by force, the principle of sovereignty (<https://ujjari.com/vocab/sovereignty/>) and territorial integrity, and the concepts of grey-zone and hybrid warfare. For **Mains**, argue how India must guard both its physical borders and its economic, digital and informational sovereignty.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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For most of history, the seizure of territory was the definitive act of power. Land meant resources, population, taxes and strategic depth, and wars were fought to acquire it. The post-1945 order tried to outlaw conquest through the United Nations Charter, which forbids acquiring territory by force, yet the ambition to hold ground persisted.

The editorial's claim is that even where the norm is flouted, the economics have changed. Occupying hostile territory today invites prolonged **insurgency** (<https://ujjayi.com/vocab/insurgency/>), international sanctions, reputational damage and the drain of governing a resentful population, often for gains that modern economies no longer need in the form of land. Meanwhile the levers that actually shift the balance of power, control of supply chains, chokeholds on technology and semiconductors, financial sanctions, and the manipulation of information, operate without moving a single border. Power has migrated from the map to the network.

## THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

### Conquest has become a bad investment

Seizing and holding hostile territory now brings insurgency, sanctions and the burden of governing unwilling people, while the tangible returns are smaller than in an agrarian age. The cost-benefit ratio of conquest has inverted.

### Coercion has gone economic and digital

States now project power by controlling critical supply chains, restricting access to advanced technology, wielding financial sanctions and shaping narratives online. These tools achieve strategic aims that once required occupation, and they are harder to attribute and resist.

### Grey-zone conflict blurs war and peace

Much contemporary coercion sits below the **threshold** (<https://ujjayi.com/vocab/threshold/>) of open war: cyber intrusions, disinformation, economic pressure and proxy activity. This grey zone is designed to gain advantage without triggering the costs of formal conflict, and it demands defences quite different from border armies.

| OLD<br>CAB/PARADIGM/)    | ( <a href="https://ujiyari.com/vo">https://ujiyari.com/vo</a> )                         | EMERGING<br>PARADIGM                | IMPLICATION FOR<br>INDIA               |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Seize and hold territory | Ujiyari Current Affairs - ujiyari.com · Free Daily Current Affairs for UPSC & State PCS | Control supply chains and tech      | Secure critical inputs, build capacity |
| Armies at the border     |                                                                                         | Cyber, finance, information         | Invest in cyber and economic security  |
| Clear war and peace      |                                                                                         | Grey-zone, hybrid pressure          | Doctrine for below-threshold threats   |
| Land as the prize        |                                                                                         | Networks and standards as the prize | Shape rules, alliances, technology     |

## HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Separate the form of power from its function. The function of strategic power, to bend others to your will, is constant; the form through which it is exercised evolves with the economy and technology of the age. When wealth came from land, power took the form of conquest; when it comes from networks, supply chains and data, power takes the form of economic and informational coercion. The transferable rule: a country secures itself not by preparing for the last form of power but by defending the current sources of value, which today are as much digital and economic as territorial. For India this means the border still matters, but it is no longer the only frontier.

## THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Old order: power = seizing territory -> modern reality: conquest brings insurgency + sanctions + governing costs -> value shifts to supply chains, tech, finance, information -> coercion moves below the threshold of war (grey zone) -> India's response: defend physical borders + secure economic, cyber and informational sovereignty + shape international norms and alliances

## WAY FORWARD

- 1 Broaden the security doctrine.** Treat economic, technological and informational security as core national-security concerns alongside the land and maritime borders, not as afterthoughts.
- 2 Build resilience** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/resilience/>) **in critical sectors.** Reduce dependence in semiconductors, **critical minerals** (<https://ujiyari.com/terms/critical-minerals/>), energy and pharmaceuticals so that supply-chain coercion has less purchase on India.

- 3 **Invest in cyber and information defence.** Strengthen capabilities against cyber intrusion and organised disinformation, which are the new instruments of pressure.
- 4 **Defend the rules-based order.** Champion the United Nations Charter norms of sovereignty and non-acquisition of territory by force, while building coalitions that raise the cost of grey-zone coercion.

## PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about the changing nature of security threats, non-traditional and non-state challenges, and the role of the international order in protecting sovereignty. This editorial connects those to a shift in the very character of power.

**Practice question:** “In the contemporary international order, the seizure of territory has become strategically self-defeating.” Critically examine the changing character of power and its implications for India’s security doctrine. (250 words, 15 marks)

**Sources:** *The Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com/section/opinion/editorials/>)

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