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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

# The Cost of Hubris: American Overreach and a More Dangerous World

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# The Cost of Hubris: American Overreach and a More Dangerous World

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## THE LIFT LINE

Overwhelming power that keeps failing to deliver its promised outcomes does not reassure the world; it teaches every other state that the old order is negotiable, and disorder is the tuition.

## WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

A recurring pattern in recent American statecraft, confidence in military and economic coercion (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/coercion/>) to bend adversaries to its will, has produced outcomes that unsettle the global order more than they secure Washington's aims. The reliance on force and pressure, including toward **Iran**, has demonstrated the limits of coercion rather than its **efficacy** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/efficacy/>), and has accelerated the drift from a **unipolar** to a genuinely **multipolar** world in which no single power sets the rules. For India this is not an abstraction. A more disordered world raises the premium on **strategic autonomy** (<https://ujiyari.com/terms/strategic-autonomy/>), on **issue-based coalitions** and on **self-reliance**, which is precisely the analytical terrain a GS2 answer on India and the world is expected to command.

**GS Paper 2:** India and its relations with major powers; **bilateral** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/bilateral/>), regional and global groupings and agreements involving India; important international institutions and the changing global order; the effect of policies of developed countries on India's interests.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **unipolar moment** describes the post-Cold-War period after 1991 when the United States was the sole superpower, now giving way to **multipolarity** (<https://ujiyari.com/terms/multipolarity/>) with several centres of power; the **rules-based order** refers to the norms, institutions and law that have governed post-1945 international relations; India practises **strategic autonomy** and **multi-alignment** (<https://ujiyari.com/terms/multi-alignment/>), engaging multiple powers through overlapping partnerships; India participates in **minilaterals** including the **Quad** (India, US, Japan, Australia), **I2U2** (India, Israel, UAE, US), **BRICS** and the **SCO** (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation); the debate on **United**

**Nations Security Council reform** concerns expanding the permanent membership to reflect contemporary realities, a cause India champions; and India balances its ties among the **United States, Russia and the Global South**.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

For roughly three decades after the Cold War, the international system operated under an American security guarantee and a broadly Western-authored set of rules. That order was never as universal as its advocates claimed, but it did supply a degree of predictability. The unravelling of that predictability owes much to a strategic overconfidence in Washington, a belief that superior military power and the **leverage** (<https://ujjayari.com/vocab/leverage/>) of the world's largest economy could reliably produce political outcomes. Repeatedly, the outcomes have not followed. Coercion has hardened adversaries, alienated partners and, most consequentially, signalled to every ambitious state that the rules are contingent on power rather than principle.

The effect is cumulative. When the guarantor of an order is seen to wield it selectively and to fail even where it applies maximum pressure, other powers hedge, arm and build alternatives. The result is not a neat transfer of leadership from one hegemon to another but a diffusion of power into a more contested, less rules-bound system in which multiple centres pursue their interests with fewer restraints. That is the world India must now navigate.

## THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

### The limits of coercion

The central analytical claim is that overwhelming capability is not the same as effective power. Military and economic coercion can destroy and disrupt, but it struggles to build durable political settlements, and its repeated failure to do so erodes the coercer's own authority. Pressure on **Iran** and elsewhere has illustrated the pattern: the instrument is powerful, the outcome elusive, and the demonstration effect corrosive, because it teaches the watching world that the order it underwrote can be defied.

## From unipolarity to a contested multipolarity

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| FEATURE            | THE UNIPOLAR MOMENT                       | THE EMERGING ORDER                      |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Power distribution | One dominant pole                         | Several competing centres               |
| Rules              | Broadly Western-authored, widely observed | Contested, selectively applied          |
| Predictability     | Relatively high                           | Low; more hedging and arming            |
| Institutions       | Central to legitimacy                     | Bypassed by minilaterals and coalitions |
| India's room       | Constrained by bloc logic                 | Wider, if autonomy is preserved         |

The table captures the shift. A less rules-bound world is more dangerous, but for a rising power that refuses to be locked into any single camp, it also widens the room for independent manoeuvre, provided that room is used with discipline rather than drift.

### What this means for India

India's response cannot be nostalgia for a unipolar order that constrained it, nor alignment with any single pole in a contest that is not its own. The Indian posture is **multi-aligned and interest-first**: deepen the partnership with the United States where interests converge, sustain the long relationship with Russia, invest in ties across the **Global South**, and use **minilaterals** such as the Quad, I2U2, BRICS and the SCO as issue-based instruments rather than as blocs demanding exclusive loyalty. In a disordered world, the ability to say yes to different partners on different issues is not opportunism; it is the essence of strategic autonomy.

### HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Test the argument through three lenses. First, **capability versus outcome**: measure a strategy not by the force it can project but by the political results it delivers, because coercion that fails repeatedly is weakness dressed as strength. Second, **order versus disorder**: recognise that the erosion of predictable rules raises risk for everyone, so India's interest lies in stabilising elements of the order it values, not in celebrating its collapse. Third, **autonomy versus alignment**: in a multipolar world the winning position is the one that keeps the most doors open, which is why India's premium on **strategic autonomy, issue-based coalitions and self-reliance** rises exactly as the old certainties fall. The transferable insight is that a disordered world does not reward the loudest or the most heavily armed; it rewards the state that keeps its options, its capabilities and its judgement independent.

## THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

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Post-1991 unipolar moment -> US confidence in military and economic coercion -> coercion delivers disruption but not durable outcomes (including toward Iran) -> demonstration effect: rules seen as contingent on power -> other states hedge, arm, build alternatives -> diffusion into contested multipolarity, weaker rules-based order -> higher premium on India's strategic autonomy -> response: multi-alignment, issue-based minilaterals (Quad, I2U2, BRICS, SCO), self-reliance, push for UNSC reform

## WAY FORWARD

- ① **Double down on strategic autonomy.** India should treat autonomy as an asset to be actively managed, deepening partnerships where interests align while refusing exclusive alignment, so that no single power's **overreach** (<https://ujjayanti.com/vocab/overreach/>) can dictate India's choices.
- ② **Use minilaterals as instruments, not identities.** Engage the **Quad, I2U2, BRICS and the SCO** as issue-based coalitions, drawing security, technology and economic benefit from each without being captured by the rivalry between the camps they represent.
- ③ **Invest in self-reliance where it counts.** Reduce strategic **vulnerability** (<https://ujjayanti.com/vocab/vulnerability/>) by building capacity in **defence, energy, technology and critical supply chains**, because in a coercive world the surest guarantee of autonomy is the ability to withstand pressure without buckling.
- ④ **Champion a reformed, workable order.** India should press for **United Nations Security Council reform** and for norms that reflect a multipolar reality, positioning itself as a builder of a more representative order rather than a passenger in someone else's, and as a bridge between the West, Russia and the Global South.

## PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly examined the shift to multipolarity, India's strategic autonomy, and the relevance of minilateral groupings. This editorial ties the decline of the rules-based order to India's foreign-policy choices, an integration that rewards candidates able to reason about the global system and India's place in it together.

**Practice question:** "A more disordered world raises rather than lowers the value of strategic autonomy." In the light of recent great-power overreach, examine how India can secure its interests in an increasingly multipolar and less rules-bound order. (250 words, 15 marks)

**Sources:** *The Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com/>), *Ministry of External Affairs* (<https://www.mea.gov.in/>)

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