

UPSC & STATE PCS CURRENT AFFAIRS · [UJIYARI.COM](https://ujiyari.com)**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

Beyond National Interest: Ethics and Emotions in World Politics

 **THE HINDU**

29 July 2026

IR**GS2**

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

 linkedin.com/in/epicbharat**ALSO FROM THE CREATOR****BharatNotes**Free UPSC notes, MCQs, PYQ analysis. **100% Free.**bharatnotes.com → **ADVERTISE****Advertise with Ujiyari**

Reach thousands of UPSC aspirants daily.

 epicbharat@gmail.com

Beyond National Interest: Ethics and Emotions in World Politics

 The Hindu

29 July 2026

GS2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If moral legitimacy genuinely affects a state's ability to sustain power, why do realist strategies so often appear to work in the short term? Is the ethics-matters argument really about long-run consequences that are harder to see, or is it a normative claim dressed as an empirical one?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

Power without legitimacy can win a single round. It cannot win the next one on the same terms, because the next round is played among actors who remember how the last one was won.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The relationship between ethics and power in international relations is a recurring GS2 theme, and this editorial's application of the debate to live cases (rather than abstract theory alone) is exactly the kind of current, applied material that strengthens an IR-theory Mains answer.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood relations; [bilateral](#), regional and global groupings and agreements involving India; effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests; India's foreign policy philosophy.

For **Prelims**, fix the core distinction between realist and [normative](#)/ethical approaches to international relations, and be able to name India's civilisational diplomatic frameworks precisely.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY UPSC TESTS IT
Realism (IR theory)	Holds that states pursue power and security in an anarchic system, with ethics largely instrumental to interest	The dominant theoretical frame this editorial argues against
Moral legitimacy	The degree to which a state's actions are perceived as normatively justified by other states and populations, distinct from raw material capability	The editorial's central alternative variable to power alone
Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam	"The world is one family," a Sanskrit civilisational phrase India invokes as a diplomatic and normative framework	Frequently tested as India's stated philosophical basis for multilateral and South-South diplomacy
Soft power	The ability to shape outcomes through attraction and legitimacy rather than coercion or payment	Related but distinct concept; moral legitimacy is one input into soft power, not identical to it

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

CASE CITED	RELEVANCE TO THE ARGUMENT
Iran succession crisis	Cited as an instance where power-political manoeuvring generated resistance that constrained outcomes beyond what capability alone would predict
Israel-Gaza conflict	Cited as an instance where military superiority coexisted with, and arguably accelerated, eroding international moral standing
India's Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam framing	India's own diplomatic invocation of a civilisational, family-of-nations framework, offered as an alternative normative register

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The realist claim being challenged

Realist international relations theory does not deny that states make moral-sounding arguments; it holds that such arguments are typically deployed in service of interests already determined by power calculations, human rights language justifying an intervention decided on strategic grounds, for instance, rather than ethics genuinely constraining what a state does. On this view, moral legitimacy is largely a rhetorical resource, useful for building coalitions and easing domestic and international acceptance, but not an independent force shaping outcomes.

The editorial's counter-evidence

The editorial points to cases where the exercise of military or coercive superiority generated resistance, reputational erosion and diplomatic isolation that persisted and constrained the dominant actor's subsequent options, evidence, it argues, that moral legitimacy is not merely instrumental window-dressing but has independent causal weight in determining whether a strategic advantage translates into a durable outcome or merely a temporary one. The claim is not that ethics replaces power as the driver of state behaviour, but that treating them as fully separable variables misdescribes how international outcomes are actually produced.

The realist rejoinder, and why it does not fully dissolve the argument

A committed realist could respond that apparent "moral cost" is itself just another form of strategic cost, reputational damage that reduces future bargaining leverage, and that states factoring this in are still calculating interest, only over a longer time horizon and a wider set of variables (including how other states will react). This rejoinder narrows the gap between the two positions considerably, but it does not eliminate the editorial's practical point: if moral legitimacy functions as a strategic variable with real consequences, then foreign-policy design that ignores it, treating ethics as separate from or in tension with interest, is simply calculating interest badly, whether or not one wants to call the correction "ethics."

India's alternative framing

India's invocation of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, most visibly during its G20 presidency and in multilateral forums, is presented as an example of a diplomatic register that builds partnership through a shared normative frame rather than purely transactional interest-alignment, a soft-power asset distinct from, though related to, conventional strategic calculation.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Test whether a theory's predictions hold over the time horizon it is actually being applied to.

Realist predictions about power and interest often perform well over short, single-round interactions but weaken over longer, repeated ones where reputation, legitimacy and accumulated resistance compound. When an argument invokes realism to dismiss the relevance of ethics, ask explicitly over what time horizon the claim is being tested, because a theory that is descriptively accurate in the short run and descriptively incomplete in the long run is not simply "wrong", it is scope-limited, and good analysis names that scope rather than treating the theory as universally valid or universally false.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture a ledger with two columns: immediate strategic gain and accumulated legitimacy balance. Realist analysis tracks the first column closely and treats the second as, at most, a footnote. Each exercise of coercive or overwhelming power posts an entry in the first column, often a clear, immediate credit. But each such exercise also debits the second column, sometimes visibly, sometimes not, until the accumulated legitimacy

balance runs low enough that other states begin pricing in the debited trust, raising the cost of future cooperation, coalition-building and even basic diplomatic engagement. The editorial's argument is that any honest ledger must track both columns together, because a state that only watches the first column will be repeatedly surprised when the second column's low balance starts constraining outcomes the first column's numbers alone did not predict.

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Integrate legitimacy assessment into strategic planning**, treating anticipated reputational and moral cost as a standing input into foreign-policy decisions, not an afterthought.
- ❷ **Invest in normative and civilisational diplomatic frameworks**, building on approaches like Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam that create durable partnership beyond narrow transactional alignment.
- ❸ **Distinguish short-term tactical wins from durable strategic position** in foreign-policy evaluation, explicitly tracking whether an apparent gain is eroding the legitimacy needed to sustain it.
- ❹ **Support multilateral forums and norms** that reward legitimacy-building behaviour, since a rules-based order gives moral legitimacy more concrete strategic payoff than a purely bilateral, power-based system does.
- ❺ **Communicate ethical positions consistently across contexts**, since selective moral invocation, applied in one case but not a comparable one, itself erodes the legitimacy the approach is meant to build.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has tested India's foreign-policy philosophy, the ethics-power relationship in international relations, and India's civilisational diplomatic frameworks as recurring GS2 themes; this editorial offers a current, case-linked vehicle for combining IR theory with applied foreign-policy analysis.

Practice question: "Moral legitimacy is not peripheral to state power but constitutive of its durability." Critically examine this claim with reference to recent international cases and India's own diplomatic philosophy. (250 words, 15 marks)

Interview angle: If moral legitimacy genuinely affects a state's ability to sustain power, why do realist strategies so often appear to work in the short term? Is the ethics-matters argument really about long-run consequences that are harder to see, or is it a normative claim dressed as an empirical one?

Sources: The Hindu, Ministry of External Affairs

Source: Beyond National Interest: Ethics and Emotions in World Politics — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Ethics, emotions and moral legitimacy are constitutive of, not peripheral to, how states exercise and sustain power, and recent cases where military or strategic superiority has eroded moral standing, and with it durable strategic advantage, challenge the realist orthodoxy that treats ethical considerations as, at best, a rhetorical add-on to material power calculations.



SUPPORTING

- Military and economic superiority can secure short-term strategic outcomes while simultaneously eroding the international legitimacy a state needs to sustain those outcomes over time.
- States and populations respond to perceived moral overreach with resistance, non-cooperation and reputational costs that materially constrain a dominant power's options, even when that power retains a clear capability advantage.
- Civilisational and normative frameworks, such as India's Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam ("the world is one family"), offer an alternative diplomatic register that can build durable partnership in ways purely transactional, interest-based diplomacy struggles to replicate.



COUNTER

Realist theory does not claim ethics is irrelevant, only that it is instrumentalised in service of interest, and states that appear to act on moral grounds are, on this reading, still ultimately calculating reputational or strategic advantage, meaning the ethics-versus-interest distinction may be less sharp than the editorial suggests.



WAY FORWARD

Treat ethical standing as a strategic asset to be actively cultivated and protected, not a constraint on strategy, integrating moral-legitimacy considerations into foreign-policy calculation rather than treating them as separate from it.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Realist international relations theory treats ethics and emotion as peripheral to the exercise of state power. Critically examine this claim with reference to recent instances where military or strategic superiority has not translated into sustained moral or diplomatic standing. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Realist international relations theory has long treated the pursuit of national interest, understood in terms of power and security, as largely separate from, and often in tension with, ethical considerations; recent cases, including the Iran succession crisis and the Israel-Gaza conflict, are cited as instances where military or strategic superiority has not translated into sustained moral or diplomatic standing.

BODY

The realist tradition, associated with theorists from Hans Morgenthau to contemporary structural realists, holds that in an anarchic international system without a global sovereign to enforce rules, states must prioritise power and security, and that moral or ethical postures, where they appear, typically function instrumentally, legitimising interests already determined by power calculations rather than genuinely constraining state behaviour. The editorial's counter-argument draws on cases where a materially dominant actor's continued use of overwhelming force or coercive leverage has generated resistance, reputational cost and diminished diplomatic standing that persisted beyond the immediate tactical outcome, suggesting that moral legitimacy is not merely a reputational afterthought but an input into a state's durable capacity to secure cooperation, alliances and consent.

India's own diplomatic tradition, invoking Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam as a normative frame alongside strategic calculation, is offered as an example of a non-purely-transactional diplomatic register that can build the kind of durable partnership a narrowly interest-based approach struggles to sustain.

CONCLUSION

Whether or not ethics and interest can be cleanly separated even in principle, the practical lesson for foreign-policy design is that moral legitimacy functions as a strategic asset with real consequences for a state's ability to sustain, not merely achieve, its objectives, which argues for integrating ethical and reputational considerations into strategic calculation rather than treating them as an external constraint upon it.

 RELATED DAILY ARTICLES

26 Jul **Safe and Unimpeded: India Presses Maritime Security at...**

26 Jul **No Gold Standard: The US-Saudi Civil Nuclear Deal and...**

25 Jul **Chandigarh Declaration: 16th BRICS Health Ministers'...**

24 Jul **The US-Saudi Civilian Nuclear Agreement and Its Ripples**



CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

 [linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat) [Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/editorials/2026/07/th-ethics-emotions-world-politics-2026/>

ALSO FROM THE CREATOR

BharatNotes

Free UPSC study platform — subject-wise notes across all 4 GS papers, Prelims MCQs, Mains answer frameworks, PYQ analysis & progress tracking. **100% Free • No Login Required.**

[Start Preparing → bharatnotes.com](#)

OPPORTUNITY

Advertise with Ujiyari

Reach **thousands of serious UPSC & State PCS aspirants** daily through our PDFs, website, and social channels.

Ideal for: Coaching institutes • EdTech platforms • Book publishers • Exam prep apps

 epicbharat@gmail.com

Write to us for rates & media kit

Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs · [ujiyari.com](#) · [bharatnotes.com](#)