

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 20 marks

Do you think that India's capacity building role in Afghanistan has shrunk the strategic space for Pakistan there? Discuss.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 strategic depth = Pakistan's doctrine of a pliant Kabul as leverage vs India → India replied with capacity building, not arms → space narrowed but conditional | **R2** can soft/development power deny a rival strategic space? → yes, partly, but bounded by hard power

Body flow

\$3 bn footprint (Parliament, Salma Dam, 433 HICDP/34 provinces, ICCR students) → **Pant:** investment ties India to Afghan stability, goodwill Pakistan can't match → connectivity (Chabahar, Delaram-Zaranj, air corridors) bypasses Pakistan, cuts transit chokehold → **Sikri's** Kautilyan Mandal logic (friend of neighbour's neighbour) = structural check → [counter enters] → post-2021 reset resolves it: Pakistan's depth never arrived — Taliban reject Durand Line / shelter TTP / lean Iran-China → Islamabad fears encirclement, Kabul drifts to India → India's capacity-building capital → Muttaqi Oct-2025 visit + Kabul embassy upgrade → **Pant:** pragmatism not endorsement

Counter-view

soft/development power vs hard power — can goodwill deny strategic space when the rival holds ISI-Taliban links, the Haqqani nexus and geography? (**Jacob:** no Plan B; the 2021 fall shrank India's own space too)

Conclusion routes

R1 capacity building did shrink Pakistan's space, by denying it a monopoly and building goodwill that outlived regime change — not by displacing proxies | **R2** the decisive collapse of "strategic depth" came from the Taliban's own nationalism; India's development legacy is what let it profit

For decades Pakistan treated a pliant Kabul as "strategic depth" i.e. a friendly western frontier that would keep India out of Afghan affairs & give it leverage.

India answered not with arms but with capacity building, and that choice did narrow Pakistan's room. Though the gain rested on the security environment. India's footprint was large & non-military. Nearly \$3 billion built the Afghan Parliament, the Salma Dam and 433 High impact community development projects across all 34 provinces, with 14000 Afghan students studying in India through the ICCR.

According to Harsh V. Pant, this investment tied India to Afghan stability & won goodwill Pakistan could not match.

Rajiv Sikri calls this through Kautilya's Mandal logic, the friend of one's neighbour's neighbour making India-Afghan ties a structural check on Pakistan.

Happyman Jacob cautions that goodwill alone cannot protect Indian interests & lacked a backup plan. Pakistan kept the harder levers, ISI links with the Taliban, the Haqqani network & geography. When Kabul fell in 2021, India's own space shrank.

The Taliban reject the Durand Line, shelter the TTP & lean toward Iran & China, leaving Islamabad fearful of strategic encirclement as Kabul drifts toward India. Two decades of capacity building gave India durable re-entry.

Muttagi's October 2025 visit and the upgrade of the Kabul mission to an embassy, framed around development and capacity-building. As Pant argues, this is pragmatism, not endorsement.

India's capacity building thus did shrink Pakistan's strategic space not by displacing its proxies, but by denying it a monopoly and building goodwill that outlived regime change.

The decisive collapse of that depth, though, came from Taliban's own nationalism, which its development legacy let India exploit.