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India's infra ambitions to get a new X factor: The military

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India's infrastructure strategy is set to get an unexpected twist: integrating military needs into civilian projects involving roads, ports, and airports. But it's not only India's defence preparedness that will benefit.

India's infrastructure planning is set to get more extensive with the government preparing to include the military's requirement to ensure civilian projects can also be made available to the armed forces if necessary.

The initiative—planned under Prime Minister Gati Shakti, also known as the National Master Plan for Multi-modal Connectivity—will focus on building dual-use projects across all segments of infrastructure such as roads, ports, power and airports, two officials told Mint.

"The planning of infrastructure along with the ministry of defence will become part of the process now, which means their requirements will be taken into account for every project," said a senior government official. "Increasingly, more and more projects will be dual-use infrastructure."

The official, who did not want to be identified, added that India may see more civilian airports be built so they can also be used for the military if needed.

India has seen partial success in building dual-use infrastructure in the roads sector, with a few expressways having stretches that can be used by the Air Force if needed. But India remains much behind its neighbours in building such dual-use infrastructure.

Pakistan has roads that can be used for landing fighter jets. And China is building military-ready infrastructure in other countries where it is funding and building infrastructure—a plan it reportedly started planning in 2015, according to reports.

"We will have a standard operating procedure for airports that are civil airports but can be used by the military when needed," said the official quoted above. Also, "ports will be built in a manner—like a deeper port—to ensure navy can use them freely for its war ships, aircraft carriers, submarines when needed".

The roads and shipping, railways and commerce ministries did not immediately reply to emailed queries.

The China factor

In July 2023, AidData, a US-based international development research lab, identified eight ports outside China where Beijing was likely to establish naval bases in five years. Its report also mentioned that China was building projects worth an estimated \$29.9 billion, funding the development or expansion of 78 ports in 46 countries.

China is also building dual-use villages alongside borders with India, according to the report.

India's plan to develop dual-use infrastructure would account for the additional cost of construction through government budgetary support or an extended period of concession that would allow a developer to recover its investments incrementally.

"The proposed identification and framework creation can drive sectoral development, enhancing the quality, reliability, and efficient utilization of our critical assets and infrastructure," said Shailesh Agarwal, partner–risk consulting, EY India.

"Such an approach can indeed work at scale. But to ensure its efficacy, we must craft these policies with a balanced emphasis on security, flexibility, and agility. Continuous monitoring and iterative enhancements will be essential to sustain the effective dual-use of critical infrastructure," he added.

"By pooling resources from both civil and defense sectors, India stands poised to develop world-class infrastructure and optimize resource utilization—marking a transformative step forward for the nation."

Advantage: private developers

The government's capital expenditure budget of ₹11.11 trillion for 2024-25 is expected to be utilised for such infrastructure development.

India intends to build over 60,000 km of access-controlled highways with an investment of over ₹20 trillion in the next decade-and-half. It is also building two mega ports and transshipment hubs at Vadhavan in Maharashtra and Galatea Bay in Great Nicobar. Also, six major ports are proposed to be scaled up the status of mega ports.

Besides, the government has also proposed the development of large inland waterways and coastal shipping terminals.

Indian Railways also proposes to add capacity both for the movement of passengers and cargo. The Railways already has a system for building certain projects keeping in mind defence use.

Indian airports are also being planned in smaller towns and cities while existing infrastructure is being modernised. Several of the new projects would be developed for dual-use, said the government officials.

"Mapping dual-use infrastructure to nationwide passenger and cargo movements will ensure optimal asset utilisation, enhance project viability, and deliver higher throughput with lesser capex. There are large privately owned assets in the port, rail, and road sectors that will benefit from enhanced traffic flows on existing systems with dual-use methodology," said Davinder Sandhu, co-founder and chairman, Primus Partners Project Pvt. Ltd, a business consultancy.

"The government is also planning to selectively allow the private sector to leverage the Gati Shakti platform," he said. "Since this system is central to dual-use planning, the advantage of coordinated asset development is an added plus for private developers."