INDIA'S NEW DRONE POLICY STRIKES ALL THE RIGHT NOTES

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We now have a lighter-touch regulatory regime that should encourage UAV usage for both commercial and state initiatives. For India to be a global drone hub, we'd need policy stability

India's civil aviation ministry last week notified its liberalized Drone Rules, 2021. These come less than six months after the release of its Unmanned Aircraft Systems Rules in March, which now stand replaced. For an untested sunrise sector, the easing of our regulatory regime has been bold, a shift away from bureaucratic controls to a lighter-touch approach that relaxes a set of stiff norms so that operations can begin at scale and a market for drone services can take off. At least a dozen approvals have been done away with, among them those related to unique authorization numbers, certificates of manufacturing and airworthiness, import clearances and operator permits; the number of forms has been slashed to 5 from 25; the types of fee have been reduced to 4 from 72; the fee itself has been dropped to a nominal level and delinked from drone size; no permission would be needed for flying in green zones, which stand expanded thanks to a reduction in the yellow zone around airports to a radius of 12km from 45km; drones can weigh up to half a tonne, a limit raised from 300kg earlier, a move that will let pilotless air-taxis operate. The Centre's Digital Sky platform is expected to lay out air corridors with green, yellow and red zones marked out. Other features of our drone policy have been revised as well.

Small aircraft run remotely by computer systems that can lift off from anywhere and land at exact spots, such as high-rise balconies and distant rural vaccine centres, have enormous potential for a vast array of services ranging from package delivery to air travel aboard two-seaters. As these services constitute a sub-sector of civil aviation and require the use of public airspace, they cannot be left loosely regulated. Our policymakers, however, have recognized that over-regulation would stifle operations at birth. Beyond the obvious commercial applications of drones, there are myriad benefits to be had, thanks to their reach and versatility. Hazardous industrial sites can safely be monitored by these, for example. Aerial scanners can conduct land surveys and so on, though their utility as surveillance tools by security forces ought to be restrained by provisions in a privacy law that we are yet to enact. Of popular interest would be the everyday wonders enabled by drones buzzing about urban skies. The government envisions India emerging as a 'global drone hub' by 2030 and expects their rapid adoption to create countless new jobs and aid economic growth. Given this aim, our policy seems to have struck all the right notes. It looks adequately market-friendly to let a buzzy one emerge as drone technology improves.

One aspect that investors would be concerned about is policy stability. Drone proliferation would raise security risks, be it the danger of lethal payloads or rogue eyes in the sky, and our rules must not vary by public threat perceptions, which could turn volatile in case of, say, a terror attack carried out by an aerial device. We should get our rulebook right from the get-go and not have to make reactive changes. Our liberalized rules suggest that Indian airspace will be kept under close watch for any suspicious movement. With hundreds of drones dotting our skies, we will need an alert air traffic police that can spot trouble in advance, perhaps even something like Israel's invisible 'dome' that was designed to shield its urban spaces from low-range missile strikes. India's security back-up needs to be outlined clearly to assure stakeholders in this field that safety checks are in place and our rules will largely hold firm.

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