

SNIFFING OUT PARTNERSThaicom says foreign firms that can operate ground stations are being vetted ahead of the satellite industry's liberalisation. **B3****EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW**

Thaicom sniffs out partners

Foreign firms that can operate ground stations are being vetted ahead of the satellite industry's liberalisation, writes **Komsan Tortermvasana**

SET-listed satellite service provider Thaicom is in talks with three foreign companies on partnership deals to operate ground stations for satellite data transmission as the government works towards opening the satellite industry to private operators through a licensing regime.

The ground stations, known as satellite gateways, are responsible for transmitting data to and from the satellite to the local area network. The antennas and equipment for converting the radio frequency signal to an internet protocol signal for terrestrial connectivity are already installed.

The deals are expected to be concluded this year, with operations kicking off next year, according to Thaicom chief executive Anant Kaewruamgongs.

The move is part of the company's strategic operations in the face of satellite business liberalisation, he said. The deals will also create new revenue for the company in the era of digital disruption.

"Thaicom could be an interesting option for foreign satellite operators that plan to operate satellite gateway businesses in Thailand," Mr Anant said.

Thaicom is open to potential partners sounding out a proper cooperation model that benefits all parties, he said.

The foreign partners would have to spend at least seven months installing the satellite gateway and related infrastructure before starting operations.

The National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) has finished three regulatory drafts to govern the satellite business.



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ANANT KAEWRUAMGONGS
Chief executive, Thaicom

They were approved by the NBTC board and pushed through a public hearing in 2019.

The drafts are expected to be published in the *Royal Gazette* this year. They consist of a master plan for the right of use for satellite orbital slots, rules of licensing to use slots and rules for using satellites owned and operated

by foreigners.

Those who want to use satellites owned and operated by foreigners must be registered as juristic persons in Thailand, Mr Anant said. The gateway business also requires licences for landing rights to be awarded by the telecom operator.

SPACE-AIR-GROUND SOLUTIONS

"In 2020, Thaicom will operate through a strategic move geared towards what is called 'space-air-ground smart solutions provider,'" Mr Anant said.

He said a consortium, jointly established by Thaicom and four other satellite operators, is negotiating with a satellite maker to build a new broadband internet satellite that meets the most modern model specifications, called a software-defined satellite (SDS).

The SDS network can facilitate flexible and fine-grained network management, reduce systems costs and improve collaboration between satellites.

The budget for the new satellite has yet to be determined, as studies on how Thaicom would provide the service for end-users in the market need to be completed, Mr Anant said.

He said Thaicom needs to become a space-air-ground smart solutions provider within the next few years. The move would offer seamless innovation and tech applications for business, consumers and public service.

Satellites should not only be used for TV and telecom businesses, he said, but also for aerial photography, through synchronising with unmanned aerial



Satellite dishes at Thaicom's headquarters in Nonthaburi. TAWATCHAI KEMGUMNERD

vehicles and the Internet of Things.

"Thaicom will study these projects with state agencies and bid on projects aimed at serving the public's benefit," Mr Anant said.

DIVERSIFICATION

Thaicom has been diversifying its business portfolio into digital solutions for two years to stay competitive and add new revenue streams.

Diversified businesses include innovative tech, robotics, artificial intelligence and a greater focus on retail.

Additionally, Thaicom will maximise the transponder capacity of existing satellites to ensure higher revenue, Mr Anant said.

"Satellite is not a basic telecom busi-

ness anymore," he said. "The players have to gear up for tech development and new business models to cash in on varied businesses driven by innovative tech and over-the-top operations."

Thaicom operates three satellites under a revenue-sharing concession regime: Thaicom 4 or iPSTAR, a broadband satellite; and Thaicom 5 and Thaicom 6, both of which are broadcasting satellites.

The three satellites are under a Digital Economy and Society Ministry concession, which expires in 2021.

Thaicom also operates Thaicom 7 and Thaicom 8 under a single licence from the NBTC.