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In the Southeast Asia (SEA) region, 5G is emerging as a key focus area for all stakeholders across the telecom value chain. It is expected to open up a plethora of opportunities in the areas of internet of things, smart cities, smart vehicles, smart grids, smart buildings and e-health, and drive the uptake of advanced technologies such as augmented reality and artificial intelligence. To tap these benefits, governments, operators and equipment vendors have been working to establish a comprehensive and conducive 5G ecosystem in their respective countries in the SEA region. Currently, equipment vendors like Huawei Technologies, Ericsson and Nokia are working in collaboration with operators in the region to conduct trials for 5G technology.

Regional market scenario

Singapore

Singapore has been a front runner in 5G adoption. It started laying the groundwork for 5G deployment in end-2014, a time when most countries were struggling to adopt 3G services, and aims to become 5G-ready by 2020. In August 2016, Singtel completed tests for 5G technology in collaboration with Ericsson. In the trial run, Ericsson's 5G radio prototypes were used and the pair achieved a peak throughput of 27.5 Gbps along with a latency of 2 milliseconds. Later, in November 2016, StarHub partnered with Nokia to conduct trials using centimetre wave frequencies, and achieved a latency of 1 millisecond. In January 2017, another operator M1 Limited (M1) conducted 5G trials in collaboration with Huawei. The trials utilised millimetre wave frequencies and were conducted over the 73 GHz spectrum band using an E-band to validate the performance of 5G on high frequency bands. The operator achieved a peak throughput of 35 Gbps, which is the highest 5G data speed witnessed in the country.

During the past one year, Singtel has increased its investments in the 5G space. In October 2017, it partnered with Ericsson to establish a centre of excellence (COE) in the country to facilitate 5G development and deployment. The COE will entail an initial investment of S$2 million over the next three years and will be co-funded by the two companies.

Besides operators, Singapore's telecom regulator, the Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA) has been making concerted efforts to provide appropriate policy impetus to operators. To this end, in March 2017, the IMDA asked operators to shut down their 2G business and re-deploy the freed up spectrum for offering advanced services like 4G and 5G. Later, in May 2017, it decided to waive frequency fees for 5G-ready spectrum until December 2019, in order to encourage industry trials in the country.

The Philippines

The Philippines is another country in the region to have recorded significant activity in the 5G space. PLDT Inc. has been at the forefront of this activity. Its mobile division, Smart Communications, completed 5G network trials in partnership with equipment vendor Nokia in December 2016. Under the partnership, PLDT and Nokia conducted trials on the 100 MHz spectrum band and achieved transmission speeds of 2.5 Gbps along with a latency of 1 millisecond. Later, in February 2017, PLDT signed an MoU with Huawei Technologies to jointly undertake research and development in the 5G space. Besides working on a strategy for the commercial development of 5G services, the companies have set up an innovation laboratory in the country.

Others

Other countries including Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Laos have also picked up pace over the past one year. Thailand's telecom regulator, the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), has been encouraging operators to prepare for the roll-out of the new technology. In January 2017, the NBTC enlisted Ericsson to perform the first live 5G end-to-end demonstration in Thailand, using its 5G test bed and 5G-ready core infrastructure. The trials achieved a peak throughput of 5.7 Gbps. Later, in April 2017, Thailand-based operator True Corp partnered with Ericsson to conduct 5G trials.

In Malaysia, Celcom Axiata conducted the country's first 5G trial on the 28 GHz spectrum band. Meanwhile, Indonesia-based operator Telkomsel conducted a 5G trial run in Jakarta, in collaboration with Huawei.

In August 2017, Laos became the latest entrant in the 5G space, when Lao Telecommunications Company signed an MoU with Nokia Shanghai Bell for jointly working on 5G technology.

In sum

Operators and equipment/network vendors across SEA's telecom markets seem extremely optimistic about the 5G opportunity. They are making concerted efforts to keep pace with global developments in the 5G space. Going forward, appropriate government policies will play a key role in the creation of a favourable 5G ecosystem in the region.

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