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SYNOPSIS

This commentary recommends establishing a joint regional launchpad for ASEAN to advance space cooperation across Southeast Asia. By combining Singapore's technological strength with the launch ambitions of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, ASEAN can leverage its equatorial location to enhance climate monitoring, disaster response, and participation in the global space economy.

COMMENTARY

There is no better time for ASEAN to collaborate at the frontiers of space than now. For decades, many ASEAN member states have relied on foreign space services for satellite connectivity, Earth observation, and data analytics. As the global space economy races towards US$1.8 trillion by 2035, this region remains structurally fragmented in its space strategy.

With ASEAN countries such as Singapore, which established its national space agency on 1 April 2026, and Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia vying to build national launch capabilities, a coordinated ASEAN space strategy offers substantial benefits for the region, accelerating the ASEAN states' transition from passive space service consumers to valuable innovators in the space economy.

The Case for a Regional Launchpad

To strengthen ASEAN centrality in the field, institutions such as the ASEAN Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation (COSTI) should pioneer efforts to establish a concrete launch architecture. Institutionally, the regional launchpad

project responds to the ASEAN Plan of Action on Science, Technology and Innovation (APASTI) 2026-2035. Space technology is treated as a core cross-sectoral strategy in this policy document.

APASTI empowers COSTI and its space Sub-Committee on Space Technology and Applications (SCOSA) to facilitate cross-border public-private partnerships (PPPs) required to promote this initiative. The primary recommendation is to establish a joint launchpad to enhance ASEAN launch capabilities.

Rather than dispersing launch efforts, ASEAN should look towards establishing a single regional spaceport in the short term. This can then be expanded into a network of launch sites, as major ASEAN countries have set their sights on building their own national spaceports. An offshore or near-equatorial site, potentially within the regional belt between Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, would maximise the geographical advantages of launching NEqO (Near Equatorial Orbit) satellites.

Advancing a regional launchpad relies heavily on PPPs. COSTI, with its mandate to advance regional space technology, should spearhead collaborations with local startups (through the Startup ASEAN platform) and transnational space giants such as SpaceX and Virgin Galactic. To streamline integration with private partners, ASEAN should compile a comprehensive space industry directory that builds on existing information-sharing platforms, such as the ASEAN Science and Technology Network (ASTNET), and use it to engage stakeholders through rigorous expert consultancy and vetting processes.

Collaboration will bring together the emerging national policies of ASEAN states to capture the rapidly expanding space market. Southeast Asia can use its near-equatorial geographical location to lead the development of a Space-as-a-Service (SaaS) model. Additional to SaaS, shared data analytics will revolutionise climate change mitigation and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) across the region. The result is a regionally coordinated space agenda that integrates satellite production and data analytics, enhancing regional capacity for climate monitoring and disaster response.

Potential and Feasibility: Supply-Demand Complementarity and Institutional Basis

Singapore possesses a big upstream advantage in Southeast Asia's space economy. Singapore's Office for Space Technology and Industry (OSTin) has over S$210 million (US$164 million) in funding support from its Space Technology Development Programme (STDP) in frontier domains, including in-orbit edge computing and quantum telemetry.

Supported by a strong space ecosystem of over 70 space-tech enterprises and a specialised talent pool of roughly 2,000 professionals, Singapore has led the region in high-value payload and data processing capabilities. While Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines have formally tried to build domestic launchpads, these unilateral mega-projects suffer from chronic execution fatigue.

Thailand's THEOS02A mission failure and the stagnation of Indonesia's proposed Biak launch site project show that massive capital expenditure requirements and talent shortage constrain a single-state effort. However, far from being a regional failure, this stagnation opens a highly pragmatic window for synergy.

The aforementioned technological limitations constrain Southeast Asia's ability to meet growing demand for non-traditional security governance, particularly in disaster response and climate monitoring. Southeast Asian space policy is driven by climate and disaster situations. The Philippine Space Act mandates that the Philippine Space Agency (PhilSA) prioritise hazard management and climate studies. Similarly, Malaysia's Dasar Angkasa Negara 2030 and Indonesia rely on uninterrupted geospatial telemetry to monitor transboundary natural disasters. A joint regional spaceport directly satisfies this complementarity.

The operational feasibility of this joint launchpad is secured by ASEAN's increasingly mature multilateral scaffolding. Establishing a regional spaceport does not require drafting new, politically sensitive treaties from scratch. Instead, the initiative can be seamlessly integrated into the ASEAN SCOSA, using the policy parameters already established by the APASTI. SCOSA previously facilitated the conceptual framework for the ASEAN Earth Observation Satellite (ASEANSAT) and currently manages regional geospatial data-sharing protocols. By using established channels for funding, regulatory clearance, and standard-setting for a joint launchpad, ASEAN can effectively mitigate sovereign sensitivities and get the project off the ground.

Conclusion

The regional launchpad faces friction as well. Most ASEAN countries still prefer to prioritise national technological independence over shared infrastructure. This dilemma is complicated by Southeast Asian countries' diverse dependence on fragmented external space companies from different countries. Because individual states rely on diverging global space powers for hardware and funding, any joint regional facility must inevitably navigate complex geopolitical fault lines and competing external powers' interests.

Despite these hurdles, transitioning from isolated national efforts to a coordinated launchpad is a critical step in building tangible space capacity in the region. A joint launchpad shifts ASEAN from a passive consumer of foreign telemetry to a more autonomous node in the global space market. It also provides physical architecture to mitigate escalating NTS threats. Navigating these nationalistic constraints is not optional. A joint launchpad is a more pragmatic way to secure the region's long-term ecological and strategic resilience.

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