

ASEAN Telecom

Starlink's direct-to-cell entry: implications for ASEAN telcos

SpaceX acquires spectrum to boost cellular service

SpaceX will acquire EchoStar's AWS-4 and H-block spectrum licences for USD17b. This can fast-track SpaceX's Direct-to-Cell (D2C) offering due to exclusive licensed spectrum, thus reducing its reliance on third-party mobile operators and accelerating independent deployment of satellite-to-smartphone connectivity. Unlike Starlink, which requires user terminals, D2C leverages terrestrial spectrum integrated with Starlink satellites to connect standard 4G/5G smartphones without additional hardware. This lowers adoption friction and opens a massive addressable market in rural and underserved areas.

Complements, not competitor to mobile operators

SpaceX's acquisition of EchoStar's spectrum could also accelerate D2C innovation, enabling standard 4G/5G smartphones to connect directly with Starlink's LEO satellites without specialized hardware. This opens the door to reliable voice, messaging, and eventually broadband-grade data. That said, D2C is unlikely to fully replace terrestrial networks, which remain essential for seamless in-building coverage and connectivity in tunnels or underground stations. With spectrum tightly regulated and licensed at the national level, we view D2C as a complementary solution, where partnerships with local operators represent the most viable global path.

Implications in ASEAN: smaller operators could gain

It's premature to view D2C as a standalone substitute for terrestrial mobile networks. However, as the technology matures and as unit economics, it offers a potential complement, particularly for smaller telcos looking to close network gaps in rural and remote areas – regions where larger incumbents have pricing power. Within ASEAN, Indonesia and the Philippines stand out given their archipelagic geography and uneven network reach. While Indonesia's 4G coverage extends to ~97% of the population, many outer islands remain underserved. In contrast, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia enjoy near-universal 4G coverage and more favourable topography, resulting in robust network quality and limited incremental value for D2C solutions.

Optus a potential beneficiary in Australia

In Australia, Optus continues to trail Telstra in regional and remote markets, a gap reflected in its mobile pricing, which is typically 15-20% lower than Telstra's premium rates. But as D2C technology evolves, Optus could leverage it as a complementary layer to its strong urban and suburban footprint, extending reliable coverage into underserved rural and remote areas where network economics are challenging. By bridging these blind spots, D2C could enhance Optus's value proposition, and narrow the perceived coverage gap with Telstra.

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Abbreviation

LEO - Low earth orbit

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Telstra (TLS AU, CP: AUD4.82, Not Rated)
EchoStar (SATS US, CP: USD80.63, Not Rated)
SpaceX – unlisted
Starlink – unlisted

Fig 1: ASEAN telco valuation comps

Company	BBG	MBIG	Price	MBIG TP	Mcap	P/E (x)		EV /EBITDA (x)		ROE		Dividend Yield (%)	
	Code	Rec	(LC)	(LC)		FY1	FY2	FY1	FY2	FY1	FY2	FY1	FY2
Singapore													
Singtel	ST SP	Buy	4.31	4.75	55,524	24.5	21.3	19.9	18.7	12.2%	12.3%	4.3%	4.6%
Starhub	STH SP	Buy	1.13	1.35	1,518	15.1	12.8	7.3	6.8	22.2%	26.3%	5.8%	6.5%
Thailand													
AIS	ADVANC TB	Buy	292.0	320.0	27,460	20.5	18.9	8.8	8.3	42.3%	43.5%	4.4%	4.9%
True Corp	TRUE TB	Buy	11.40	14.40	12,454	24.8	18.8	7.4	6.7	18.3%	22.6%	1.7%	2.7%
Malaysia													
Axiata	AXIATA MK	Buy	2.47	2.90	5,388	40.5	33.4	6.6	7.2	3.5%	4.2%	4.0%	4.2%
Maxis	MAXIS MK	Hold	3.56	3.70	6,625	18.7	17.7	8.6	8.3	24.6%	25.3%	4.8%	5.0%
Celcom Digi	CDB MK	Hold	3.68	3.80	10,253	24.2	21.4	9.4	9.0	10.9%	12.2%	4.0%	4.3%
Time dotCom	TDC MK	Hold	5.11	5.10	2,244	19.7	18.3	11.1	10.7	12.3%	13.7%	4.3%	4.7%
Telekom Malaysia	T MK	Buy	6.97	7.50	6,353	15.6	14.9	6.0	5.7	16.2%	15.8%	3.9%	4.1%
Indonesia													
PT Telkom	TLKM IJ	Buy	3,050	3,700	18,372	12.9	12.3	4.8	4.6	15.8%	16.1%	6.5%	6.5%
Indosat	ISAT IJ	Buy	1,850	2,900	3,628	12.0	10.4	3.9	3.6	13.5%	14.3%	4.8%	6.2%
XL Axiata	EXCL IJ	Hold	2,600	2,950	2,877	41.3	19.8	4.8	4.3	2.2%	5.8%	2.5%	2.4%
Philippines													
PLDT	TEL PM	Buy	1,129	2,070	4,297	6.9	6.6	4.6	4.3	28.3%	26.6%	8.6%	8.9%
Globe	GLO PM	Buy	1,524	2,000	3,878	10.5	9.5	5.5	5.3	13.2%	14.1%	6.7%	7.0%

Source: Maybank IBG Research, Bloomberg

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