



23 OCT, 2025

Towards a secure regional grid

The Star, Malaysia



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UTILITIES

By KIRENNESH NAIR
kirennesh@thestar.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR: Asean's shared vision of power transition begins with one crucial step – a unified system plan.

Tenaga Nasional Bhd (TNB) said coordination through the Heads of Asean Power Utilities/Authorities (Hapua) is key to building a secure and sustainable regional grid.

Its president and chief executive officer Datuk Megat Jalaluddin Megat Hassan said the first step towards regional progress is a shared system plan through Hapua, enabling countries to plan not just individually but collectively for the region.

"With this platform, Asean can achieve the energy trilemma – ensuring supply security, addressing affordability, and meeting sustainability objectives," he told *StarBiz* at the sidelines of Asean Energy Business Forum.

Furthermore, Megat said regional cooperation can also extend to modernising the power grid, particularly through technology.

"We can adopt an Asean approach to technology, which provides economies of scale and consistency across the region."

"For example, we can start thinking about how to use artificial intelligence (AI) for the power industry, and these AI-driven tools can be developed and shared within Asean," he added.

Another area of collaboration, he said, is capability building.

He said TNB, through its institutions –

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Datuk Megat Jalaluddin Megat Hassan

Universiti Tenaga Nasional (Uniten) and its corporate academy, TNB Integrated Learning Solution – is opening its programmes to regional utilities providers.

"We welcome Asean utilities to send their talent to learn in new areas such as AI. To that respect, Uniten launched a Bachelor of AI last September, and," he said.

"We are also inviting employees from other power utilities to gain the capability through updated and relevant courses offered."

Megat said long-term investment in capability development will support Asean's growth and help the region achieve its energy transition and net-zero ambitions.

Megat said Asean's energy agenda rests on two key goals – to drive the energy transition while ensuring continued economic growth, and to achieve that growth sustainably.

He noted that all Asean member states have made firm commitments to the energy transition, including Malaysia through its National Energy Transition Roadmap (NETR), with TNB playing a central role as the industry's main driver.

"TNB, as the main player in the industry, will fully support NETR as a national objective, and we believe it provides clarity on how we want to move forward," he said.

Megat said several challenges must also be addressed through five key lenses to advance regional collaboration.

"First, we need to harmonise regulations among Asean countries. Each member state has its own framework, but these need to be aligned – not identical, but harmonised – so that regional collaboration can work," he said.

Second, he said Asean nations must identify and agree on projects of common interest, such as the Asean Power Grid (APG), to ensure mutual benefits and sustained momentum.

The APG, first proposed in 1997, aims to link the national electricity grids of all 10 member states to enable cross-border power trade – allowing countries with surplus energy to export to those with higher demand.

The plan outlines 18 priority interconnection projects, of which nine have been completed, providing about 7,720 megawatts (MW) in existing capacity.

Asean is targeting full grid integration by 2045, with another 625MW under development and up to 25 gigawatts of potential capacity identified.

With regional electricity demand expected to grow about 4% annually, greater grid integration has become increasingly urgent.

Megat said another priority is creating a conducive investment climate where funders are confident of returns, regardless of which Asean country the project is based in.

He added that financing should not be a barrier as the energy transition agenda is widely shared among Asean members.

"We are not seeing scarcity in funding, but we must ensure that this remains a just energy transition – one that gives all Asean citizens equitable access and benefits," he said.

The fourth challenge, he said, is to establish a single commercial hub for regional power trading, which would streamline cross-border electricity exchange and improve market efficiency.

Finally, Megat stressed the importance of capacity building across Asean.

"Each country has its own pace and strength. Building capabilities is crucial to ensure that no member state is left behind," he said.

"We understand that the Asean country has its own pace and has its own strength, and this is where capability building is important."

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Fadillah Yusof said Asean's fast-growing population and economy will see energy

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demand rise 2.6 times of 2022 level by mid-century, making regional cooperation critical to achieving sustainable growth.

He said the region faces a dual challenge of sustaining growth while ensuring a just energy transition.

“The outlook is a call to action for all of us to work together toward a secure, affordable and sustainable energy future,” he said, add-

ing that renewables such as solar, wind, hydro, biomass, and emerging technologies like green hydrogen must be scaled up alongside energy efficiency improvements.

He added that the APG and Trans-Asean Gas Pipeline are key enablers of energy security and sustainability, supported by stronger financing and governance.

Echoing this, economist Jeffrey D Sachs, who is also the president of the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions

Network, said Asean has the opportunity to lead the global energy transition by developing an integrated, zero-carbon energy system.

“The idea of the APG has been with us for more than 20 years. It’s time for a thorough implementation,” he said, urging governments to take the lead in planning and securing financing for a regional green grid.

“With a clear roadmap, the financing will be easier.”