EEC Newsletter

EASTERN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR OFFICE (EECO)



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Aviation Hub

Co-Creating Thailand's MRO Hub: More Than an Airport Project

In 2026, the Eastern Economic Corridor Office (EECO) convened a series of EEC Sectoral Deep Dive Forums, bringing together industry experts, policymakers, regulators, investors, and academic institutions to shape the future of Thailand's strategic industries. One of them, "EEC Sectoral Deep Dive Forum Aviation: Co-Creating Thailand's MRO Hub," examined how Thailand can strengthen its position in the regional maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) industry and unlock the potential of U-Tapao as a strategic aviation hub. This article draws together the key insights from that discussion, and what stakeholders believe it will take to build a competitive, sustainable MRO hub.



For years, Thailand's aviation ambitions have been framed around infrastructure — runways, terminals, logistics, transport links. Yet the strongest message from the forum was that infrastructure alone will not determine success. The country's aviation future will depend on whether it can build a complete ecosystem: demand, talent, supply chains, technology, regulatory readiness, and long-term collaboration.



Thailand's Opportunity: Capturing More Value from Aviation Growth

A central theme was where Thailand should begin. While perspectives varied on the optimal entry point, participants largely agreed that U-Tapao should start with work that is commercially viable, easier to certify, and able to establish credibility before moving to more sophisticated capabilities — narrow-body and airframe maintenance, component repair, line maintenance, and selected business aviation services.

This was reflected in an observation by Mr. Rahul Shah, President & GM of AAR Aircraft Component Services (Thailand): "Component MRO is the low hanging fruit when you have a parallel activities for revenue generation waiting on building HMV hangars/ activities. Then you say lower investment, faster certification and revenue stream without aircraft on site."

The larger prize lies beyond new capacity. A great deal of aviation value still leaves the country when aircraft are sent abroad for maintenance; retaining that work at home would not only generate economic value but also build local capability and create opportunities for Thai engineers and technicians. As Mr. Chai Eamsiri, CEO of Thai Airways International, noted, "Every year we send 30–40 airframes abroad for heavy maintenance — U-Tapao lets us keep that value at home."

There is also room in the niches. Rather than replicating existing regional hubs, U-Tapao can build expertise in emerging segments where regional capacity is still thin, particularly for newer aircraft platforms and specialized support services. Mr. Bert Porteman, Chief Representative to Thailand of Airbus, pointed to the next generation of aircraft: "The A220 is open white space — little regional capacity today, and a clear chance for U-Tapao to lead."

Building an Ecosystem, Not Just an MRO Facility

Infrastructure matters, but partnerships are equally critical. Airlines, OEMs, MRO operators, educational institutions, regulators, and investors all play interconnected roles in a competitive aviation ecosystem. The forum revealed growing industry appetite to help build one — support for strengthening U-Tapao's capabilities, networks, and human capital — a sign that it is increasingly seen not as a future concept but as a project moving toward implementation

Why Long-Term Thinking Matters

Aviation investment is fundamentally long-term. Investors weigh not only today's market but future demand, infrastructure readiness, policy stability, workforce, customs efficiency, and regulatory certainty.

Mr. Natthapatr Sibunruang, CEO of MJets Limited, captured it: "We build for the next 20–30 years, not yesterday's demand — and the 50-year lease gives us that horizon." Aviation developments, in other words, are planned in decades, not years.



Successful aviation ecosystems share common ingredients: clear strategic vision, policy continuity, government support, talent development, and sustained investment. As Mr. Pierre Jaffre, President of TEBA, observed, “Every successful aerospace ecosystem gives investors clear direction from the top — a PM-level committee provides exactly that.”

Operational efficiency matters too. Mr. Rahul Shah put it directly: “In MRO, turnaround time is everything — fast customs and a real free-trade zone are how U-Tapao wins.”



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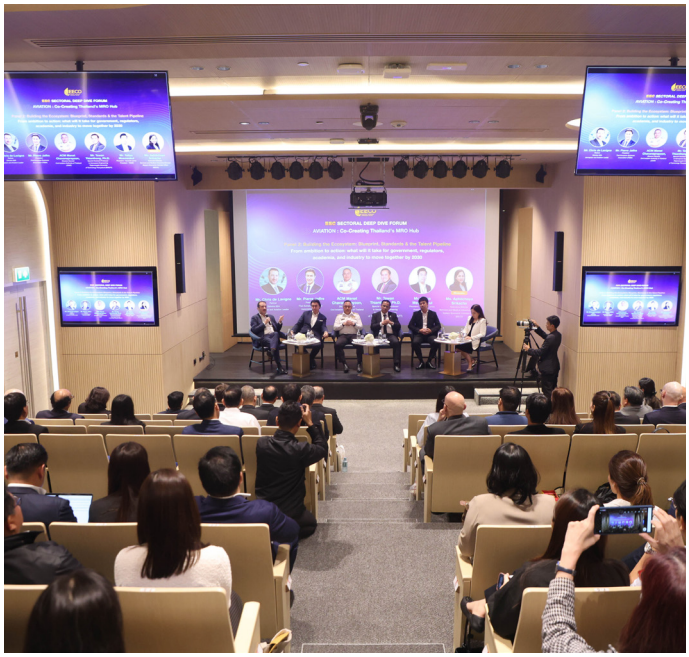
Talent and Supply Chains: Thailand’s Hidden Advantage

The strongest area of agreement concerned workforce. Participants repeatedly flagged growing shortages of aviation technicians, engineers, and specialists across the region. Hangars can be built in a few years; aviation talent takes long-term commitment and close collaboration between industry, regulators, and educators.

Mr. Chris de Lavigne, Partner & Aerospace/Aviation Leader of Deloitte SEA, put people at the center: “We can invest billions in hangars and technology — but the industry’s future depends on inspiring youth back into engineering.”

And it is not only technical. As Dr. Tawan Thianthong, Special Assistant Professor in Aerospace Engineering of RMUTT, explained, “Knowledge and skills can be trained — but attitude sets Thai technicians apart.”

Thailand’s established strengths — automotive manufacturing, precision engineering, electronics — offer a strong foundation for aerospace. As Mr. Tatiya Meemeskul, President of Summit Lenso, summarized, “Automotive is a million parts a year; aerospace is ten, made-to-order — the mindset shift is the key.”



From Vision to Execution

Perhaps the sharpest question of the forum came not from infrastructure or investment, but a simple challenge from CAAT:

Who will be the customer?

Physical infrastructure alone cannot create a hub. Scheduled traffic, cargo, business aviation, and domestic maintenance demand must grow alongside investment for U-Tapao to be commercially sustainable. As ACM Manat Chavanaprayoon, Director-General of CAAT, put it, “An airport without MRO is just a fuel stop — a real hub needs the full range of services.” Among the most concrete recommendations was Mr. Pierre Jaffre’s call for a dedicated fast-track: “My recommendation to the EEC: a U-Tapao aerospace fast track — one empowered authority, one digital investor journey.”

EECO’s closing message was simple: Thailand already has many of the ingredients; the challenge now is implementation, not vision. As Dr. Chula Sukmanop, Secretary-General of EECO, concluded, “The time has come to move from aspiration to commitment — and turn potential into bankable investment.”

The opportunity, then, is larger than an airport or a maintenance facility: it is a complete aviation ecosystem that attracts investment, supports innovation, strengthens domestic supply chains, and keeps more aviation value in the country. Realizing it will take coordinated action across government, regulators, airlines, OEMs, MRO providers, investors, and academia — aligning policy, infrastructure, market demand, and industrial development. Above all, it will take talent: facilities can be built and capital secured, but U-Tapao’s success will ultimately rest on Thailand’s ability to develop the people, capabilities, and partnerships a world-class aviation hub requires.

