Tata Communications dives deep into containers, adds managed services for Azure

AGATHA POON

28 AUG 2017

It's been a busy few months for the company as it looks to deliver on its promise of a globally available open cloud platform with manageability, agility and security in mind. On the product front, Tata has extended its support for enterprise users with Container as a Service and end-to-end multi-cloud deployments with Microsoft Azure Managed Services.

451 Research®

Keeping pace with enterprise requirements for shortened deployment cycles, Tata Communications recently unveiled Container as a Service (CaaS). As an enhancement of its hybrid IT capabilities, the uniqueness of CaaS lies in its ability to integrate with the company's flagship IZO Private Cloud and managed hosting offerings for hybrid deployment scenarios. Additionally, the company has bolstered its managed service capabilities with the introduction of Microsoft Azure Managed Services. It has also expanded its footprint with new cloud nodes in Malaysia, Germany and Dubai. Given its wider focus on delivering a unified experience with an open framework, Tata is poised to increase its profile with a balanced approach between IT controls and business agility.

THE 451 TAKE

Tata Communications has demonstrated a commitment to enabling hybrid deployments with a unified management portal, an open framework, and a process-driven approach to workload and application development and migration. The addition of CaaS seems to be a prudent move and should make it attractive to enterprise IT opting for an infrastructure that can deliver agility without compromising controls and security. Investing in developing repeatable use cases to address vertical- or segment-specific requirements will be crucial to accelerate broader enterprise adoption.

CONTEXT

It's been a busy few months for Tata Communications as it looks to deliver on its promise of a globally available open cloud platform with manageability, agility and security in mind. First and foremost, the company has been awarded Multi-Tier Cloud Security (MTCS) Level 3 certification for IZO Private Cloud and Cloud Storage, which means it will now be able to host high-impact information systems for organizations with stringent security requirements. Accordingly, the MTCS certification is a security management standard built on international standards ISO 27001/02 under the direction of the Information Technology Standards Committee of the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore.

In terms of platform capability, the cloud team seems to have a fairly aggressive release schedule – every 15 days – with enhanced features and functionality, and is adding new services and capabilities every quarter. Working alongside OpenStack, Tata's proprietary cloud management platform provides proactive management and monitoring on the back end, while exposing a set of capabilities to customers via a unified management portal.

The company has updated its self-service portal with new features, including an app catalog (with which customers can download commonly used templates/images for service provisioning) and custom widgets to enable ease of use and role-based access control. Aside from integrating with third-party IT service management platforms (e.g., ServiceNow, Zoho and Remedy) and customers' Active Directory (AD) with single sign-on, the cloud portal has also been updated to integrate with incident management modules for monitoring the entire infrastructure health across disparate IT environments. On the product front, Tata has extended its support for enterprise users, DevOps teams in particular, with Container as a Service and end-to-end multi-cloud deployments with Microsoft Azure Managed Services .

IZO Private Cloud, which is configured as a virtual private cloud offering, has been available in nine geographically distributed datacenters (four in India, two in Singapore, one in Hong Kong and two in the UK) and has recently been extended to include three additional locations in Malaysia (two), Germany and Dubai. Organizations opting for fully dedicated private cloud can select from 15 geographically distributed datacenters across the globe. Building on its success in the region, the company is now assessing the commercial and operational feasibility of new datacenter locations in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia.

Tata reported $2.69bn (180.3bn rupees) in revenue for fiscal year 2017 ended in March, down by 3.3% year over year (YoY). The company's IZO-branded offerings are grouped under its data business, including traditional and growth services, which posted $239.2m in sales for FY 2017, up by 18.4% YoY. The company reports that it has a customer base of more than 100 enterprises for its IZO cloud offering, growing at a rate of 66% since April.

PRODUCTS

With Container as a Service, Tata Communications is aiming to shorten the application development cycle for enterprise developers yet provide controls, compliance, security and support that matter most to IT administrators. Using the self-service unified management portal, developers can deploy Docker containers and define their container clusters. For container cluster management and orchestration, the company employs Kubernetes as an orchestration engine.

With CaaS, porting workloads between development and production environments and across geographies in a secure manner seems to be a simple affair. To that end, developers can deploy multiple Docker containers from Red Hat-certified master image registry to facilitate application portability. Other security features include configurable role-based access control, LDAP/AD integration and a dedicated security gateway to access container clusters. Tata says the long-term goal is to develop and deploy its own image registry from a container security perspective.

For customers seeking ongoing container cluster performance management and support, the company has unveiled a fully managed container offering. Backed by more than 300 engineers, 25% of which are ITIL-certified, Tata says it provides customers with end-to-end container management for platform and engine, storage, network and registry. It also enables auto recovery of containers and provides up to three years of compliance audit logs.

Taking managed services to a new level, the company has become a global managed services partner for Microsoft Azure. Having invested in delivering full lifecycle support and management with several dozen Azure certified engineers, Tata has adopted a build, deploy and manage model for hybrid cloud deployment and integration with 24/7 monitoring services. It also resells Azure instances as part of the strategic partnership. The company says customers can spin up instances from Azure using the self-service cloud portal, yet the platform hasn't been integrated with the tools available on Azure cloud.

As mentioned in previous reports, Tata has already spent a great deal of effort on developing big-data analytics in the cloud and a commercial offering is likely to be released in the coming months. Extending the unified experience to mobile employees and remote workers, the company indicates that a mobile application is in the works to provide support for iOS and Android users.

GO-TO-MARKET STRATEGY

Tata Communications continues to adopt a high-touch approach when it comes to harnessing enterprise opportunities, yet it claims to have a healthy revenue stream (30%) coming from service-provider partners, including ISVs, SIs and OEM distributors. While investing in adding platform capabilities remains a strong value proposition for IZO Private Cloud, the company says it focuses on developing repeatable use cases to address vertical- or segment-specific requirements. For instance, it has several object storage use cases aimed at the media segment.

COMPETITION

The primary competition for Tata Communications in the cloud infrastructure services arena comes from managed cloud and datacenter providers like Sify Technologies, Netmagic (an NTT Communications company), Nxtra Data and HCL Infosystems. Niche vendors like CtrlS, ESDS and XcellHost are active players in the local business market. Cloud startup NxtGen struck a deal with telecom incumbent BSNL to acquire several datacenters and its existing customer base in the public sector and is pursuing enterprise opportunities with a hyperconverged infrastructure and cloud datacenter network, which the company calls an 'infinite datacenter' strategy.

For managed private cloud and hybrid cloud deployments, Tata is likely to vie with global technology providers and IT specialists for end-to-end service delivery. Companies like Accenture, HPE (for private and hybrid cloud offerings and consulting), IBM Cloud, CSC, Capgemini, TCS and Wipro are in this group. Having become a managed services partner for Microsoft Azure, Tata is looking to collaborate rather than compete. It's likely to adopt a similar strategy when approaching AWS and Google Cloud Platform. Other providers in the managed services arena include Rackspace, Datapipe, Dynatrace, Microland, and more.

SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS
Tata Communications has invested considerably in building domain expertise around cloud management and application migration. It has a formidable services lineup that combines business agility (e.g., Container as a Service) with IT controls (e.g., its unified management platform).

WEAKNESSES
While the company's growth services division continues to demonstrate a healthy double-digit expansion, it still accounts for a small fraction (approximately 10%) of Tata's total revenue.

OPPORTUNITIES
The rise of the DevOps model has encouraged IT executives to take a closer look at their application modernization strategies, which opens a window of opportunities for infrastructure providers trying to move up the value chain with new tools and platforms.

THREATS
There is no shortage of technology options and innovative business models, yet enterprises are seeking proven use cases by which they can quantify the business value of strategic investments.