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Gulfâ??s Asian pantry: How food-security money from Middle East is reshaping Asian agribusiness

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Gulf sovereign funds and food companies are buying farmland stakes, processing plants and protein technology across Asia and Africa. We map the deals and ask what Asian partners gain and give up.



In May 2026, Saudi Arabiaâ??s agricultural investment arm SALIC paid USD 1.88 billion to lift its stake in Olam Agri to just over 80 per cent, taking control of one of the largest agricultural trading and processing networks in Asia and Africa. The announcement from the Public Investment Fund, SALICâ??s parent, was brief. Its meaning was not. A Gulf state now controls a business that originates, mills and ships grain, rice, edible oils and cotton across more than 30 countries.

That deal is the clearest marker of a shift that has been building for a decade. Gulf governments, which import most of what their populations eat, have moved from buying food to buying the systems that produce and move it. The capital is arriving through sovereign funds, state-linked food champions and trade agreements, and Asia, with its farmland, processing skills and shipping lanes to the Arabian Peninsula, is the obvious destination.

This year has given the strategy fresh urgency. Conflict involving Iran has unsettled input markets around the Persian Gulf, and analysts at the Global Shrimp Forum in September warned that restrictions in the region could push up fuel and fertiliser costs worldwide. For states that sit at the end of long food supply chains, owning a share of those chains looks less like diversification and more like insurance.

So who is buying, what are they buying, and what do Asian partners actually get in return?

The buyers: three models of Gulf food capital

Gulf food money tends to flow through three types of vehicle, and each behaves differently.

The first is the sovereign or state-linked holding company. SALIC is the archetype. Since first investing in Olam Agri in 2022, it has built a portfolio that, with the latest deal, now stands at 12 strategic assets worldwide. In the UAE, Abu Dhabiâ??s ADQ plays a similar role: it took a 50 per cent stake in Al Dahra, the Abu Dhabi agribusiness, in 2020, and struck a deal reported at about USD 800 million for a minority stake in Louis Dreyfus Company, the global grains merchant. These investors think in decades and value secure access to supply as much as financial return.

The second is the operating food champion. Abu Dhabiâ??s Agthia has pursued acquisitions across the region, including Al Foah dates and a stake in Pakistanâ??s Nabil Foods, and has publicly described Pakistan as a priority market. Qatarâ??s Baladna, which built a domestic dairy industry almost from scratch after the 2017 blockade, has signed a memorandum with Al Dahra on a global farming and feed supply partnership. Al Dahra itself has a long record in Asian rice, including an earlier tie-up with Indiaâ??s Kohinoor Foods in basmati. These companies need reliable feedstock for plants they already run.

The third is government-to-government frameworks: trade agreements, investment treaties and food corridors negotiated between states, inside which private and sovereign deals are then placed. The UAE has been the most active, with comprehensive economic partnership agreements now covering India, Indonesia and, since January 2026, the Philippines.

India: the corridor that is still being built

India is the Gulfâ??s most important Asian food partner by some distance, and the clearest test of whether big headline commitments turn into working assets.

The story starts with the I2U2 grouping of India, Israel, the UAE and the US, whose first summit in July 2022 produced a UAE pledge of USD 2 billion to develop integrated food parks across India. Progress was slower than the announcement suggested, and regional conflict after 2023 complicated the four-way format. The effort was revived bilaterally. In October 2024, Indiaâ??s Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal announced an India to UAE food corridor with an initial investment of about USD 2 billion in food processing and logistics, alongside a joint working group of the central government, participating states and the UAE. A bilateral investment treaty signed earlier that year was meant to give investors more predictable protection.

Reported plans under the corridor have since grown more ambitious, with figures of up to USD 7 billion cited. Named projects include mega food parks in Kutch in Gujarat, Aurangabad in Maharashtra and Pawarkheda in Madhya Pradesh, a fruit and vegetable hub in Nashik, and logistics and warehousing hubs at Itarsi and Bhiwandi. Emaar and DP World have been named among the developers, and the Lulu Group, which supplies Gulf supermarkets, has planned cold storage and sorting facilities in Jammu and Kashmir to move apples and saffron to the UAE. Most of these projects are still described as planned or under development rather than operating.

India has also become a corporate battleground through deals made elsewhere. When SALIC moved to take majority control of Olam Agri, the transaction required clearance from the Competition Commission of India, which approved it in September 2025, a reflection of Olam Agriâ??s sizeable Indian sourcing and processing operations.

The Indian model has a distinctive feature: New Delhi has been careful to frame Gulf money as investment in Indian food processing and export logistics, not as foreign ownership of farmland. Contract farming, sourcing and processing are on the table. Large land transfers are not. That keeps the politics manageable, but it also means the Gulfâ??s security rests on commercial contracts and on Indiaâ??s willingness not to restrict exports, something India has done repeatedly for rice, wheat and sugar when domestic prices rise.

Pakistan: land, water and resistance

If India shows the cautious model, Pakistan shows the high-stakes one.

Islamabad has actively courted Gulf money for agriculture through the Green Pakistan Initiative and the Special Investment Facilitation Council, created in 2023 to fast-track foreign investment. State land has been identified for corporate farming, and Arab News reported that Pakistan was seeking around USD 6 billion for corporate farming from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states by 2028. Gulf partners have also invested in the logistics that would carry output, with Abu Dhabiâ??s AD Ports Group taking long-term concessions on terminals at Karachi port.

The terms have been controversial at home. Farmer organisations and critics argue that long leases on state land risk displacing smallholders and diverting water for export crops. The issue came to a head in early 2025 over plans for new canals to irrigate corporate farms in the Cholistan desert, which triggered protests in Sindh. Pakistanâ??s federal

government halted the canal construction in April 2025, with domestic opposition among the reasons it gave.

The lesson for Gulf investors is that land-based food security deals in water-stressed countries carry political risk that a sovereign balance sheet cannot hedge. Water allocation, not capital, is the binding constraint.

Southeast Asia: trade deals first, assets second

In Southeast Asia, Gulf food capital is arriving more slowly and mostly through trade frameworks.

Indonesia offers the clearest example. In June 2026, Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Airlangga Hartarto said Indonesia wanted more UAE investment in downstream processing, food security and supply chains, after meeting the UAE ambassador in Jakarta. Abu Dhabi Exports Office, ADEX, has committed to projects aimed at strengthening food security, according to Indonesiaâ??s state news agency Antara, and Jakarta pledged support for the expansion of Louis Dreyfus Company, which has operated in Indonesia for 25 years. The Indonesia to UAE CEPA provides the legal framework.

The Philippines signed its own CEPA with the UAE in January 2026. Malaysia, meanwhile, has discussed food-security investment facilitation with the UAE linked to development of a marine terminal at Bagan Datuk, according to the UAEâ??s official news agency WAM.

Vietnam is less advanced in formal frameworks but is an obvious target: it is one of the worldâ??s largest rice exporters and a major seafood processor, and its producers are actively seeking markets beyond the United States and China. For Southeast Asian governments, the Gulf is attractive less as a source of farmland investment than as a buyer with long-term demand, a financier for processing and ports, and a halal market that rewards certification.

Building the pantry at home: protein and aquaculture in the Gulf

Not all Gulf food money leaves the region. A growing share is going into producing protein inside the Gulf itself, often using Asian or Western technology.

Abu Dhabiâ??s AGWA agri-food cluster, launched by the Abu Dhabi Investment Office in 2024, is the flagship. ADIO expects the cluster to attract about AED 128 billion of investment and add AED 90 billion to GDP, with 60,000 jobs, by 2045. In October 2025, ADIO announced it was exploring an industrial precision fermentation facility of four million litres with Dutch whey-protein producer Vivici and US egg-protein company The Every Company. Abu Dhabi has also set out a regulatory framework for approving cultivated meat and other novel proteins and has opened pre-approval tasting arrangements, positioning itself as a testing ground that Asian alternative-protein companies may find easier to enter than their home markets.

Aquaculture is the other home-grown bet. Saudi Arabiaâ??s National Aquaculture Group has long farmed shrimp and barramundi on the Red Sea coast. In Oman, Singapore-based Blue Aqua International, backed by Omani investors, has been building a shrimp farm, hatchery and broodstock centre at Shinas targeting about 1,800 tonnes a year. That is a revealing pattern: Asian aquaculture expertise is becoming an export, and Asian firms are partners in Gulf food production rather than only suppliers to it.

The deal map

The table below tracks the main verified Gulf food and agribusiness commitments touching Asia, with their stated status.

Table: Gulf food-security investment tracker, Asia-relevant deals

Investor (country)	Asset or programme	Asian geography	Type	Stated size	Status as reported
SALIC (Saudi Arabia)	Olam Agri, stake raised to 80.01%	India, wider Asia, Africa	Control acquisition	USD 1.88 bn	Completed, May 2026

ADQ (UAE)	Al Dahra, 50% stake	Rice and feed sourcing incl.Â South Asia	Equity stake	Not disclosed	Completed, 2020
ADQ (UAE)	Louis Dreyfus Company, minority stake	Indonesia and wider Asia	Equity stake	About USD 800 m	Completed
UAE government (I2U2)	Integrated food parks	India	Pledge	USD 2 bn	Announced July 2022; delivery slow
UAE and Indian governments	India to UAE food corridor	Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, J&K	Corridor and food parks	About USD 2 bn initial; up to USD 7 bn reported	Under development
Agthia (UAE)	Nabil Foods stake	Pakistan	Equity stake	Not disclosed	Completed
Gulf states via SIFC	Corporate farming on state land	Pakistan	Land and farming	About USD 6 bn sought by 2028	Sought; politically contested
AD Ports Group (UAE)	Karachi port terminals	Pakistan	Logistics concession	Not disclosed	Concession signed, 2023
ADEX (UAE)	Food-security projects	Indonesia	Financing commitment	Not disclosed	Committed, June 2026
UAE government	CEPA with the Philippines	Philippines	Trade agreement	Not applicable	Signed, January 2026
ADIO with Vivici and The Every Co	Precision fermentation plant, 4 m litres	Abu Dhabi (UAE)	Novel protein plant	Not disclosed	Being explored, October 2025
Blue Aqua International with Omani investors	Shinas shrimp farm, hatchery, broodstock	Oman, with Singapore operator	Aquaculture	1,800 t a year output	Under construction, 2025 to 2026

What Asian partners gain, and what they give up

For Asian companies and governments, Gulf capital has obvious attractions. It is patient. It often comes with a guaranteed buyer, which lowers market risk for processors. It frequently funds the unglamorous infrastructure, cold chains, warehouses and ports, that Asian agriculture underinvests in. And it opens doors to a high-income, import-dependent market where halal certification is a competitive asset.

The costs are less visible but real. The first is control over export decisions. A Gulf investor that funds a processing plant expects product to flow, and that expectation sits awkwardly with Asian governmentsâ?? habit of restricting staple exports when domestic prices spike. Investment treaties and corridor agreements create pressure, explicit or not, to treat Gulf-linked supply differently.

The second is local legitimacy. Pakistanâ??s canal protests showed how quickly food-security deals can become a fight over land and water, and how that fight can stall projects regardless of the money committed. Indiaâ??s preference for processing over land ownership is partly a response to that risk.

The third is bargaining power. When a sovereign fund controls a trading house such as Olam Agri, Asian farmers and processors are negotiating with a buyer whose priority is supply security for its own population. That can mean stable demand. It can also mean less pricing leverage in tight years.

The partnerships that look most durable share three features: they invest in processing and logistics rather than land, they leave room for the host countryâ??s own food-security policy, and they bring technology or market access that the Asian partner could not easily buy elsewhere.

What to watch in 2027

- How SALIC uses its control of Olam Agri, and whether it begins steering more Asian and African origination towards Saudi Arabia.
- Whether named India to UAE food corridor parks in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh move from plans into operation.
- Whether Pakistanâ??s corporate farming programme attracts actual Gulf capital at scale, or stalls on water and provincial politics.
- The first concrete agribusiness projects under the UAEâ??s CEPAs with Indonesia and the Philippines.
- Whether Abu Dhabiâ??s novel-food approvals and the planned precision fermentation plant draw Asian alternative-protein companies to the Gulf.
- How Asian governments handle staple export restrictions when Gulf-linked investors expect supply to keep flowing.