

THE PHILIPPINES

BUSINESS FEATURE

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Philippines-UAE ties reach new heights

In 2024, the Philippines and the United Arab Emirates marked 50 years of diplomatic relations, an anniversary both governments used to launch a new phase of strategic co-operation. On a visit to Abu Dhabi in November—the first by a Philippine leader in more than 15 years—President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. met with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, commenting after: “I reaffirmed the Philippines’ commitment to further strengthen our bilateral ties.”

At the centre of the growing bond between the two nations is the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) that is currently being finalised. The deal will be the Philippines’ first free trade pact with a Middle Eastern country and affirms the strength of the existing relationship while unlocking new potential in trade and investment. “This will be a historic milestone for Philippine trade policy,” said Special Envoy to the UAE for Trade and Investment Kathryn Yu-Pimentel.

The deal seeks to build on trade flows that already show momentum. According to the Philippines’ Department of Trade and Industry, in 2023, the latest year for which figures are available, total trade reached \$1.88 billion—more than double the 2021 number. The UAE is now the Philippines’ largest trading partner in the Gulf and a key market for Filipino exports, from electronics to

processed food. The CEPA is expected to reduce tariffs, enhance investor protections, and foster further exchanges.

“I REAFFIRMED THE PHILIPPINES’ COMMITMENT TO FURTHER STRENGTHEN OUR BILATERAL TIES.”

PRESIDENT FERDINAND MARCOS JR.

Capital flows are expected to accelerate as a result. In the last four years, the UAE committed more than \$193 million in foreign direct investment to the Philippines, according to the Dubai Chamber of Commerce. On a landmark visit to Manila in February 2025, UAE Investment Minister Mohamed Hassan Al Suwaidi noted: “We really don’t understand why we haven’t historically invested more, and given the number of opportunities we see, whether it’s in infrastructure, industrial mining, telecommunication, data centres or renewables—the size of opportunities is tremendous.” This aligns with the Marcos administration’s Build Better More initiative, which targets key infrastructure projects across sectors from public transport to health.

Energy is already a flagship sector. A \$15 billion agreement signed with

Masdar in 2024—across solar, wind and battery storage systems—will deliver up to one gigawatt of clean power, supporting the Philippines’ goal of increasing the share of renewables to 50% by 2040. Other Gulf-linked initiatives in grid resilience and green hydrogen are also in discussion.

Healthcare collaboration is also expanding, with initiatives ranging from professional training to telemedicine, building upon the contributions of over 30,000 Filipino medical workers in the UAE. That figure highlights the people-to-people connections that underpin the enduring bond between the two nations. UAE statistics estimate 700,000 Filipinos are based in the country as overseas workers, making it the second largest such diaspora in the Middle East.

Across numerous sectors, the bilateral agenda is broad. In 2024, the two nations signed agreements covering artificial intelligence, digital economy, energy transition, legal cooperation, and cultural exchange. Notably, a memorandum of understanding was signed to facilitate the development of data centre projects in the Philippines with a capacity of up to 500 megawatts, aiming to bolster digital infrastructure and economic growth. As Yu-Pimentel told a delegation from the Dubai Chambers: “The Philippines is open, ready and eager for stronger trade and business ties with the UAE.”

INSIGHTS



ENRIQUE MANALO,
SECRETARY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

“THE UAE HAS BECOME A TRUSTED FRIEND AND PARTNER THROUGH THE YEARS.”



CRISTINA A. ROQUE,
SECRETARY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF
TRADE AND INDUSTRY

“WE HAVE OPENED OUR DOORS TO FOREIGN INVESTORS.”



CEFERINO S. RODOLFO,
UNDERSECRETARY AT
THE DEPARTMENT OF
TRADE AND INDUSTRY

“THE CEPA WILL ALLOW THE COUNTRY TO TAP THE SOVEREIGN WEALTH FUNDS OF THE UAE.”

Government voices

Trade and health leaders outline reforms shaping the Philippines' future economy



“WE ARE FOCUSED ON FOREIGN TRADE, INTERNATIONAL TRADE, AND FOREIGN INVESTMENTS—WE ARE READY TO GO.”

CRISTINA A. ROQUE,
SECRETARY OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Since her appointment in August 2024, Secretary Cristina Aldeguer-Roque has led the Philippines' Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) with a clear directive: “We are focused on foreign trade, international trade, and foreign investments—we are ready to go.”

Under the Bagong Pilipinas framework, the DTI is driving growth through aggressive policy reforms and roadshows. The CREATE MORE Act, in particular, which came into effect in 2024, is a tax incentive scheme that the department is focusing on. “It is very attractive to foreign investors,” Aldeguer-Roque says. “We have received a lot of interest, and many industries that are already here are looking to expand into other sectors because of this act.” Renewable energy is also a top priority for the DTI. “We need power, and we need to reduce the cost of power,” the Secretary states. “Lowering the cost of power will directly impact our competitiveness in the market.” The arrival of UAE's clean energy leader, Masdar, in the Philippines' market has therefore been welcomed: “It is a good time for them to enter.” With CEPA negotiations in the final stages, UAE-Philippines trade is poised for expansion. Backed by a pro-foreign trade administration, Aldeguer-Roque's message to UAE investors is direct: “We are one of the best, if not the best, investment destinations in Asia now. We have everything to offer.”

Q&A | DR. TEODORO J. HERBOSA,
HEALTH SECRETARY, PHILIPPINES



Dr. Teodoro J. Herbosa, the Philippines' Health Secretary, outlines how targeted investments—from hospitals to AI-powered healthcare—can boost economic growth and modernise the country's medical system.

Q: How can investments in healthcare drive national economic growth?

Human capital development depends on investing in the workforce. In the UAE, for example, building homes and hospitals creates jobs. Healthy workers can keep earning, which sustains national income.

Healthcare still requires public investment. Health is already the third-largest budget item in the government. I aim for it to be the highest.

Q: What are your plans for a UAE-funded hospital?

I am planning a large general hospital with three specialty centres. My focus is on hypertension, diabetes and cancer. We can build one in Luzon while preparing more Muslim doctors who will stay in their communities. Scholarships are being offered, but building a nursing workforce takes time.

Q: What types of projects beyond hospitals would you like to see UAE investors support?

I am impressed by how the UAE uses data analytics and AI to improve population health. I would like to apply similar models in the Philippines. Support from UAE-based startups and innovators could help us expand digital health here.

JOLLIBEE

Jollibee goes global

Jollibee Foods Corporation is expanding its global presence through franchising, technology, and acquisitions, leveraging domestic market leadership for ambitious international growth.



“THE COMPANY'S VISION REFLECTS OUR BELIEF IN DREAMING BIG.”

ERNESTO TANMANTIONG,
PRESIDENT & CEO, JOLLIBEE FOODS CORP

Jollibee Foods Corporation (JFC) has become one of the world's fastest-growing restaurant groups. From its origins as an ice cream business in 1975, it now encompasses over 9,500 stores in 32 countries, including 20 in the

UAE. President and CEO Ernesto Tanmantiong has led the company through a period of sustained global expansion – with a clear success benchmark in mind. “After becoming number one in the Philippines, we aimed to be the top fast-food company in Asia. By 2014, we reached that goal,” he says. Now, the company is setting its sights even higher, with a long-term ambition to rank among the world's top five food service firms.

“To achieve our vision, we follow a two-pronged strategy: aggressive organic growth through existing brands and markets, and strategic acquisitions,” Tanmantiong explains. When identifying targets, JFC prioritises product quality, scalability, and the resources to support robust brand growth – with integration a key enabler. “For all acquisitions, we provide global support, leveraging our supply chain, systems, and functional expertise,” he adds. The company's diverse portfolio is made up of 19 brands, including international names such as Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf



Photo: Jollibee Group Solar Panels

and Smashburger, and the original Jollibee chain, which still makes up around 50% of the business.

While the Philippines continues to dominate as a revenue base, in the international arena, JFC benchmarks its ambitions against leading global players – with KFC providing the key comparison. “If KFC has 20,000 to 30,000 stores, reaching just one-third of that – 10,000 stores – is a realistic milestone. Today, we have about 1,800 international stores, so the growth potential is significant.”

Franchising remains central to this strategy, enabling the company to scale quickly by working with experienced local operators who bring market knowledge and established networks. At the same time, JFC offers the tools and systems to support consistent delivery across geographies – maintaining the

core appeal of the company. “The combination of product quality and warm, Filipino hospitality drives our global growth,” says Tanmantiong.

While JFC maintains focused discipline in execution, its outlook remains defined by ambition. “The company's vision reflects our belief in dreaming big,” Tanmantiong says. That vision continues to shape its international path – balancing cultural identity with operational discipline, and expansion with long-term brand strength.

Jollibee Group
www.jollibee-group.com

ASIAN HOSPITAL AND MEDICAL CENTER

Accessible world-class medical care

Asian Hospital first opened its doors to patients in 2002. In the years since, it has built a world-class reputation and become one of the most advanced healthcare institutions in the Philippines.



“WE ARE ABLE TO OFFER CUTTING-EDGE TREATMENTS WHILE ENSURING THAT EVERYONE, REGARDLESS OF BACKGROUND, RECEIVES THE HIGHEST STANDARD OF CARE.”

DR. BEAVER R. TAMESIS,
PRESIDENT AND CEO,
ASIAN HOSPITAL AND MEDICAL CENTER

Asian Hospital and Medical Center (AHMC) is committed to providing the best in patient care

across a range of specialties. Ongoing investment in state-of-the-art technology, training and infrastructure underpins the hospital's mission, ensuring access to innovative treatments delivered by dedicated professionals. By combining internationally trained doctors, world-class medical technology and excellence in care that aligns with global standards, AHMC's focus is on providing a first-class patient experience and the best possible clinical outcomes. This is reflected in its accreditation by the Joint Commission International as one of the most advanced healthcare institutions in the Philippines.

“We are able to offer cutting-edge treatments while ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, receives the highest standard of care,” explains President and CEO Dr. Beaver R. Tamesis. “The hospital's cardiovascular and oncology departments remain a top priority, with molecular biology—particularly next-generation gene sequencing and liquid biopsy—an area of growing interest.” AHMC is currently upgrading its cancer care and radiation therapy capabilities with the implementation of the



Photo: Asian Hospital and Medical Center.

country's first “CyberKnife”. Designed to deliver pain-free and non-invasive cancer treatment with the highest levels of precision and efficacy, including for children, the technology is exclusively available at AHMC from July 2025.

Beyond investment, AHMC is exploring new ways to expand patient access to treatments, reinforcing its twin commitments to accessibility and value for money. This determination to provide the highest quality care at affordable costs has led to joint initiatives with the government and state-owned insurance corporation

PhilHealth. One example—no-balance billing—ensures that even those on low incomes can receive care. “Currently, about 55% of our radiotherapy patients benefit from this programme,” says Dr. Tamesis. “As a result, we are serving a broader base of patients who might not have previously considered Asian Hospital.” The hospital is also working directly with pharmaceutical companies to lower the costs of speciality drugs, enabling AHMC to provide critical medications at some of the lowest prices in Metro Manila.

AHMC's ultimate goal is to continue growing as a major oncology centre, delivering over 4,000 treatments monthly. Says Dr. Tamesis, “By working closely with experts, both locally and internationally, we are able to offer cutting-edge treatments while ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, receives the highest standard of care.”

ASIAN HOSPITAL AND MEDICAL CENTER
Global Expertise. Filipino Heart.
METRO PACIFIC HEALTH
asianhospital.com

CRUZ, MARCELO & TENEFRANCIA

The Philippines' legal powerhouse

Cruz, Marcelo & Tenefrancia has built a reputation for rigorous legal advocacy and ethical litigation, helping domestic and international clients navigate the Philippines' regulatory landscape.



“WE ARE KNOWN FOR BARE-KNUCKLE LITIGATION – AGGRESSIVELY BUT ETHICALLY PURSUING CASES.”

SIMEON MARCELO,
SENIOR PARTNER CRUZ, MARCELO &
TENEFRANCIA

“We are known for bare-knuckle litigation – aggressively but ethically pursuing cases.” That's how Senior Partner Simeon Marcelo summarises the approach of Cruz, Marcelo & Tenefrancia (CMT), one of the Philippines' preeminent law firms. Named “Law Firm of

the Year” by Asian Legal Business, CMT comprises 30 partners and more than 60 associates, offering deep expertise across litigation, arbitration, international compliance, public-private partnerships (PPP), intellectual property (IP) and more, all of which is underpinned by an unwavering commitment to the company's core values.

“Our work is grounded in professionalism, a passion for excellence and rigorous training,” Marcelo says. “Ethical practice is equally essential and has long been part of our identity. It has also become a key factor in attracting foreign clients, such as those from the USA, Canada, and the EU.” The firm's extensive experience with legislation such as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, UK Bribery Act and OECD standards has seen it develop a significant footprint in global markets, one it is now trying to expand through an increasing presence at international conventions.

One key market is the UAE, where CMT already serves multiple clients, in particular through its IP department. “Our IP group excels in licensing and commercialising IP rights,” says Senior Partner John JL Balisnomo, noting

the importance of this area of law for UAE companies involved in technology transfer. For UAE investors, CMT offers significant advantages when it comes to navigating the Philippines' regulatory frameworks. “Our former chairperson and Corporate Department head was

“OUR WORK IS GROUNDED IN PROFESSIONALISM, A PASSION FOR EXCELLENCE AND RIGOROUS TRAINING.”

part of the team that conceptualised and drafted foreign investment rules, and we are actively consulted on investment rules and changes, collaborating closely with the PPP Centre,” Balisnomo adds. “Investment success often depends on understanding and navigating the local environment, an area where we excel.”

In seeking to provide the highest quality service for its clients, CMT has embraced technology and innovation. The firm is developing an AI-powered legal research app, designed to improve

accuracy in case citations by utilising the Supreme Court's publicly available database, alongside an AI-based tool that will streamline drafting processes for legal documents, integrating the firm's best examples from prior cases. “This innovation aligns with our commitment to staying at the forefront of legal technology,” says Marcelo.

Equally important is the firm's dedication to training. Through mock trials, legal drafting workshops, and mentorship programs, CMT has built a pipeline of skilled lawyers, ready to uphold the firm's founding vision as it continues to grow. “Our dream has always been to become the best law firm, not necessarily the biggest,” says Marcelo, “while maintaining the highest ethical standards and delivering exceptional results for our clients.”

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MERALCO



Photos: Meralco

How Meralco is powering the future

Meralco is the Philippines' largest private sector electricity distributor. Tasked with providing affordable, reliable and sustainable power to 39 cities and 72 municipalities, the company is rising to the challenge through investment, innovation and digitalisation.

The Philippines' largest electricity distributor is preparing for an energy future that is smarter, cleaner and more resilient. For Meralco – the 122-year-old utility that powers over 30 million lives daily – this transformation involves a coordinated strategy of grid modernisation, clean energy investment and digital expansion. Its commitment to an AI-enabled future comes with a promise to maintain stability and affordability in the region's energy markets.

At the core of this strategy is a five-year, \$3.7 billion capital expenditure programme, which supports the upgrade of Meralco's distribution network to accommodate technologies such as rooftop solar, battery storage and electric vehicles, and provides the infrastructure to host tier three hyperscale data centres, which represent the future business engine of the Philippines. The centrepiece is a \$630 million rollout of advanced metering infrastructure, which will see over 11 million smart meters deployed by

2030, enabling real-time energy tracking, dynamic pricing and more efficient grid operation. "More than just wires and poles, we're talking about long-term energy independence and a future where our systems are smarter, more efficient, and more responsive to the people we serve," says Meralco Chairman and CEO Manuel V. Pangilinan.



"MORE THAN JUST WIRES AND POLES, WE'RE TALKING ABOUT LONG-TERM ENERGY INDEPENDENCE."

MANUEL V. PANGILINAN,
CHAIRMAN AND CEO, MERALCO

Clean energy is an equally strong pillar of Meralco's investment agenda. Through subsidiaries MSpectrum and MGREEN (MGREN Renewable Energy Inc.) – the renewable energy arm of the company – Meralco is growing its green energy capacity. By 2030, the

goal is to deliver 3,379 MW from solar and storage projects, enough to power 12 million Filipino homes.

While renewables are ramping up, Meralco remains grounded in operational reality. Natural gas and high-efficiency coal remain part of the generation mix to ensure uninterrupted power during demand spikes or severe weather. This strategy is designed to maintain a reliable flow of energy to hospitals, schools, homes and industries while the transition to renewables accelerates.

The company's forward-looking approach also extends to next-generation technologies. Meralco is evaluating the potential of nuclear power through its Nuclear Energy Strategic Transition programme, exploring greenfield conventional plants, rehabilitating legacy infrastructure such as the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant and small modular reactors. These efforts are in collaboration with global firms including Electricité de France, Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power Co. and institutions across Canada, China, South Korea, France, Japan and the United States.

Meralco's ecosystem extends beyond the grid. Subsidiaries such as MIESCOR, focusing on EPC services, MSERV, an energy efficiency solutions company, and Radius, a premium fibre provider for SMEs, are driving energy infrastructure development, distributed energy solutions, and enterprise-grade fibre connectivity. Bayad, pioneering outsourced payment collection services, processes millions of transac-

tions monthly across over 650 centres and through partnerships with major e-wallets. Meanwhile, Meralco's green mobility arm, Movem, is expanding its EV charging network in support of the national goal of 7,000 chargers by 2028.

CLEAN ENERGY IS AN EQUALLY STRONG PILLAR OF MERALCO'S INVESTMENT AGENDA.

For investors, Meralco's renewed 25-year franchise offers long-term visibility and stability. Core net income rose 11% in the first quarter of 2025, driven by rising energy demand and increased operational efficiency. With investment-grade ratings from Fitch, Moody's and S&P, a robust regulatory record and a strong governance structure, the company is well positioned to lead the industry through a transformative period. Meralco today stands as a strategic growth platform – meeting growing demand while powering the clean energy transition in the Philippines.



MERALCO

company.meralco.com.ph



Photo: Meralco