



CHINA'S FOOD SECURITY STRATEGY IN THE NEW ERA: POLICIES AND CHALLENGES

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Chinese President Xi Jinping recently stressed the importance of independence in seed sources and emphasised the need for sustained efforts to achieve China's food security. Furthermore, in April 2021, Xi Jinping declared that "food security is an important foundation for national security." Food security has always been of utmost importance to the Chinese leaders and remains a central priority at present in state governance. However, China's transformation into a growing superpower, complemented by rapid urbanisation, increasing purchasing power, and changing dietary habits has resulted in the expansion of Chinese consumption rates. As Beijing has found itself unable to keep up with demands, it has been forced to look outwards for food exports to sustain its population and ensure Chinese people have their 'rice bowl'. With China moving toward self-reliance and self-sufficiency as part of its food security strategy, achieving the standards of food security China has imposed on itself seems difficult; China faces several challenges in the effective implementation of its food security policies.

Keywords: *China, food, grain, food security, policy, challenges*

Introduction

Chinese President Xi Jinping recently stressed the importance of independence in seed sources and emphasised the need for sustained efforts to achieve China's food security. He added that China's seed sources must be independent, self-supporting and controllable, with self-reliant technologies being utilised, and claimed this matter as strategically significant. Furthermore, in April 2021, Xi Jinping declared that "food security is an important foundation for national security."¹ This was further reiterated in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25)² which elucidates the country's economic and social goals by linking food security with national security.

Food security has always been of utmost importance to the Chinese leaders and remains a central priority at present in state governance. For Xi as well, food security has been a major focus area since the beginning of his presidency. Since its inception, China has been self-sufficient in its domestic food production and supply. However, China's transformation into a growing superpower, complemented by rapid urbanisation, increasing purchasing power, and changing dietary habits has resulted in the expansion of Chinese consumption rates. This has been aggravated by the added challenges of climate change, loss of land, and water resources.

As Beijing has found itself unable to keep up with demands, it has been forced to look outwards for food exports to sustain its population and ensure Chinese people have their ‘rice bowl’.³ China is now the world’s largest agricultural exporter⁴ and the fourth-largest buyer of overseas agricultural land. Nonetheless, given the current COVID-19 pandemic, China’s dependence on global markets has suffered adversely. With China moving towards self-reliance and self-sufficiency as part of its food security strategy, achieving the standards of food security China has imposed on itself seems difficult and arguably unrealistic. This issue brief seeks to explain China’s new era of food security strategy and the challenges it faces in attaining its food security.

The Notion of Food Security

The concept of food security emerged in the 1970s in the backdrop of the growing international food crisis. In the 1974 World Food Summit, food security was defined as the “availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic grains to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices”⁵. This definition was later fine-tuned by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1983, by adding that food security must also include secure access to available supplies by vulnerable people and suggested that further consideration should be balanced between the demand and supply sides of the food security equation.⁶ Later, in 1986, the World Bank report entitled “Poverty and Hunger,” broadened the concept by requiring the definition of food security to include “access of all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life”⁷.

As a consequence of growing food security concerns, the 1996 World Food Summit presented a comprehensive definition of the term as “Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional, and global levels is when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”⁸. This holds that the main quantifiers for food security according to the FAO are food availability, food access, utilisation, and stability for all people.

In China, the concept of food security emerged in the 1970s and was expressed as “grain security”. This was due to the fact that the food consumption of the Chinese people is predominantly grain-based. As a result, achieving grain security came to be an essential requirement in the realisation

of food security in China. The combination of grain, vegetables, meats, and other food product supplies together came to be known as the guarantee of “food security”⁹.

In 2004, the Department of Regulation, State Administration of Grain¹⁰ proposed that grain security is the responsibility of a country to meet its grain requirement while resisting varied, unexpected events related to national economic development and foreign trade. Expanding on the definition of food security presented by the FAO, the notion of food security has been constantly revamped and developed, given that food security now also includes quantity and quality standards, production, supply chain, and consumption questions, as well as short and long-term planning.

An Overview of China’s Food Policies

Despite China suffering from a weak agricultural foundation and extreme poverty, since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has campaigned to make China self-sufficient in food and grain supplies and steadily increase grain production. Grain production and supply are influenced by several factors such as policy, technology, and natural conditions. Grain and food security in China aims to attain a balance between demand and supply chains with self-sufficiency for its people. According to Zhang¹¹, the Chinese grain security must cover aspects such as agricultural production, supply chain, transportation, grain reserves, regulation of grain surplus and deficit through import and export, and grain price.

A brief rundown of Chinese grain and food policies and production helps better contextualise the current food and grain policies being undertaken in mainland China. Before 1949, before the birth of the PRC, land reforms had slowly started taking place and by 1952, the feudal system, which had been in place for centuries, finally ended. At the time, grain production was in a dismal state, most of which had been destroyed by the long-running war in China. There was a large disparity between demand and supply and severe grain price fluctuations. To allay grain scarcity pressures, the government created a policy under Mao Zedong's slogan, "Take grain as the key link" which prioritised grain production and focused on guaranteeing a steady and sufficient supply of grain, and stabilising the grain market prices.

Between the years 1958 and 1978, China suffered from the Great Chinese Famine for three consecutive years (1959-61), and also had to endure political campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), the People's Commune Movement, and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which destroyed the economy as a whole. As a direct consequence of these natural and man-made disasters, the country faced major setbacks in realising food security objectives. The period between 1979 and 1984 is generally referred to as the golden period of Chinese agricultural production¹² as it witnessed a marked increase in grain production and supply. This was largely possible due to the abandonment of large collective farming and the reintroduction of family farming, revised pricing policies, technological advancements, and increased agricultural inputs. In 1985, the Chinese authorities ushered in the grain market reforms and decided to have a completely free grain market until 1993. In 1996, grain policies on supply regulation and market management were implemented and the government released a white paper¹³ pledging to maintain the country's food self-sufficiency at 95 per cent and above. The government sought to purchase all excess grain production as surplus to protect against unanticipated events with the establishment of the National Grain Stockpile¹⁴.

Starting from the new millennium, however, the policy of buying surplus stock for protection started to become a financial burden on the government. As a result, the prices of grains were lowered and the government authorities adjusted the agricultural structure through the implementation of policies such as the Grain-for-Green program also known as the 'Conversion of Cropland to Forest Program' (CCFP)¹⁵. 'Red lines'¹⁶ have been established by the central government according to which China's total arable land cannot be any lesser than 120 million hectares to ensure that the target of 95 per cent self-sufficiency in grains is met. The Chinese No. 1 Documents of the Central Committee, stretching from 2004 to 2016 highlight China's commitment to agro-based policies given that issues such as agriculture, rural areas, and farmers were termed as three of the most important issues to be addressed by the government. The policies under these projects paid attention to increasing crop production, prices, and farmer incomes, along with an attempt to curb undernutrition in rural areas. Policies and guidelines on reducing food waste, improving ecological sustainability and focusing on agro-technological advancements have all been implemented to complement China's food security objective.

A New Era of China's Food Security Strategy

In a 2019 white paper, termed “Food Security in China”¹⁷ China's strategy on food security was characterised as self-sufficiency in domestic grain production and supply, guaranteed food production capability, agricultural imports, and technological support. Furthermore, achievements in ensuring food security such as increased grain productivity, modernised grain circulation, improved food-supply structures, and steady development in the grain industry, through supply-side structural reform and institutional innovation in agriculture have been elaborated upon. For the new era of China's food security strategy, China's policies can be seen to focus on aspects such as steadily increasing grain production capacity and supply, securing improvements in the modes of production and operation, and constantly developing the food market structures. Improving macroeconomic regulation, transforming the grain industry, strengthening agro-technological support, reducing domestic demand, and consumption rates and strengthening legal mechanisms and operations also make up a significant portion of the strategy.

Grain security for the first time was included in the Chinese government's draft 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025)¹⁸. Under this plan, Beijing set itself the target of achieving grain production higher than 650 million tons annually¹⁹, besides other social and economic objectives. Keeping in mind Xi Jinping's remarks linking food and national security, the prioritisation of food security in the National Security Strategy (2021-2025) announced by the Politburo is emphasised. The centrality of food security can also be seen in China's new “dual circulation”²⁰ model which aims to highlight both increasing exports and domestic demands, driven by rising consumption, with the two reinforcing each other. As a result, it would bring about greater self-reliance and strengthen China's manufacturing industry. The Chinese government released the “Soil Pollution Control Plan of Action” in 2016 under which policies on curbing soil pollution, improving soil quality and mitigating soil degradation have been implemented. Beijing has also amended the China Seed Law²¹, and revised it to further strengthen technological research on the seed industry, and improve the commercialisation and standardisation of genetically modified (GM) food products. In this view, Beijing has also made attempts at creating water pricing mechanisms, though the successful implementation of these policies remains to be seen.

In view of realising the objectives of its food security strategy, China has doubled down on increasing domestic grain production and increasing the amount of cultivable land—two key

elements of food security. Recently, China's Agriculture Minister Tang Renjian stated²² that seeds are the "semiconductor chips" for agricultural development and that "arable land is the 'lifeblood' of agriculture". Not only has Beijing set itself a target of higher grain production and protecting its "red line", but it is also taking steps toward protecting limited land resources by preventing arable land to be used for any other purpose besides agricultural use and impeding further soil degradation. Accordingly, a National High-Standard Farmland Construction Plan²³ (2021-2030) has been set up to increase the amount of arable land for farming and increase yields. The Chinese government has also planned a number of water conservancy projects and water-saving irrigation technologies.²⁴ From 2013 to 2019, more than 10,000 primary supply and marketing cooperatives (SMCs) were reconstructed by the Chinese government with the two-fold goal of rural poverty alleviation and increasing agricultural output.

China has sought to reduce the burdens faced by its agricultural population by guaranteeing farming incomes, abolishing various agricultural taxes, and improving the modes of production and operation. In this regard, in April 2021, China's State Council Information Office issued a white paper titled "Poverty Alleviation: China's Experience and Contribution" wherein it stated that the policy of "Two Assurances and Three Guarantees" has been realised. This is described as "assurances of adequate food and clothing, and guarantees of access to compulsory education, basic medical services and safe housing for impoverished rural residents." Beijing has made several attempts to diversify its food supply to escape having to rely on one or some countries. As such, the central government has aimed to diversify its food imports, not only by signing multiple agreements on agricultural cooperation with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partners but also by overseas acquisition of foreign farmlands.²⁵ Through its pursuit of food security for global food governance, under BRI, China has been building a 'Food Silk Road' through which it is attempting to reconfigure global food supply chains through overseas agricultural investment, investments in technology and infrastructure and policy formulations.²⁶ The procurement of multinational companies to acquire seed technology has also been adopted by China.

The central government has attempted to improve the food market system by making provisions for multiple market players and by improving services in the grain market as well. Moreover, Beijing also pushed to improve the seed industry in 2021, by urging biotechnological breakthroughs and advancements²⁷. The promotion of improved varieties of corn, soybeans, rice, and wheat has been promoted and efforts to popularise the best varieties have been undertaken by

the government. The Chinese government has also released a plan termed the Seed Revitalisation Plan in 2021, but has yet to make it public. Furthermore, China has sought to popularise scientific fertilisation, water-saving irrigation, and lessen the use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers. The application of science and technology has also been utilised for grain storage and transportation. China has made strides in efforts to decrease domestic food demand and consumption. On April 29, 2021, the Chinese government adopted the Anti-Food Waste Law with the purpose of “preventing food waste, safeguarding national food security, promoting the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation, practising the core socialist values, conserving resources, protecting the environment, and promoting sustainable economic and social development.”²⁸ According to this law, the governments at all levels are required to strengthen food waste reduction guidelines, define food waste reduction goals, establish sound anti-food waste work mechanisms and organise food waste monitoring. Furthermore, the law provides instructions for Chinese society to prevent and reduce food waste and make decisions which are economically and socially sound.

To emphasise food security as a key priority of the Chinese government, Beijing has revised and adopted several laws and regulations to drive food security legislation. Some of these laws are the Agricultural Law, Law on Soil and Water Conservation, Seed Law, Land Administration Law and Regulations on the Administration of Grain Circulation to name a few. China has also implemented the responsibility system of provincial governors in ensuring national food security. In 2014, the State Council issued the “Directives on Establishing and Improving the System of Provincial Governors’ Responsibility for Food Security” to ensure accountability at all levels of government by describing the powers of provincial and local governments in maintaining food security with regard to production, circulation, and consumption.

Beijing has called for reforms in simplifying administration, delegating power and optimising services in view of ensuring national food security goals and objectives are met. China has opened itself up to international markets and international cooperation to facilitate world food trade through active participation in global food security governance. Foreign-funded enterprises involved in China’s food market have become a key force in developing China’s food industry. China has signed more than 120 bilateral and multilateral agreements²⁹ on food and agriculture cooperation with over 60 countries and international organisations.

The trade war with the US since 2018, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in

Ukraine have aggravated fears of a shortage in the global food supply, with several countries announcing export restrictions. In a conversation with Wendy Wu on the state of Chinese food security, Wu says that China is concerned that the external crises would impact its domestic crisis, drive up inflation and be detrimental to its national economic recovery. All of these factors have led Beijing to pursue the implementation of policies to ensure food security based on its model of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

In November 2021, officials from China's Ministry of Commerce released a statement urging citizens to stock up on daily necessities "in accordance with their needs to meet daily and emergency needs." This statement was soon followed up with a clarification from the Ministry of Agriculture which stressed that China has no food crisis concerns and that the national food reserves were well-stocked enough to weather any crises. At the Group of Twenty (G20) foreign ministers' meeting in 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed a Global Food Security initiative and support the United Nations' (UN) key role in ensuring global food supply. Domestically, in view of the upcoming 20th National Party Congress (NPC) in October 2022, stable domestic food prices and stable grain output is crucial for overall stability, both economically and socially. Accordingly, the Chinese leadership has implemented policies to improve food security.

In the new era, China's food strategy consists of ensuring food security through food self-sufficiency, pooling domestic resources to ensure key links in food security, and securing food supply as a foundation for national development.³⁰ These policy measures can be seen as a response to the several challenges China currently faces concerning self-sufficiency in grain production and food security. While China does not face any immediate risk in its grain supply and consumption, an official statement admitted that there were still many challenges and risks towards attaining national food security.³¹

Challenges Ahead

Like many other countries, China too has been facing challenges with respect to domestic food production and self-sufficiency due to several domestic factors. The COVID-19 pandemic has only resulted in exacerbating China's food insecurities and vulnerabilities as it has disrupted global food supply chains³² and intensified the rift between China and the West. Trade frictions³³ with countries like the United States of America, Australia, and Canada have also driven home the fact that China cannot depend on food and agricultural exports and must move inward and fall back on

self-reliance. China faces several challenges due to domestic concerns such as loss of cultivated land from degradation and urbanisation, limited water resources, frequent natural disasters, impacts of climate change, vulnerable ecosystems, increased demand from population growth and changing demographics, improved standard of living, a declining and ageing agricultural workforce, outdated agricultural infrastructure and technology, fuel-related demands, and market disruptions. With the outbreak of COVID-19, China has also witnessed panic buying and hoarding, increasing food and production costs and shortages of electricity. All these factors have led to China pushing its new era of food security strategy.

China has been unable to keep up with its domestic grain consumption, which has risen sharply due to population growth, improved living standards and higher purchasing power. This has been heightened by the deterioration of domestic crop yields, such as oil and soybeans. Given that soybeans make up a part of the staple diet in China, Beijing has had no choice but to depend on global markets for importing soybeans. To remedy this, China has sought to enthusiastically plant more soybeans and other crops to be able to achieve self-sufficiency in the coming years. Substituting key staples with other, more readily available, alternative food products could also help China possibly solve its food insecurity and reduce reliance on costly food imports³⁴. China's total arable land has shrunk by nearly 6 per cent in 2019, according to a survey³⁵ as a result of rapid urbanisation and increasing demands of its agricultural and industrial sectors. This accelerated loss of fertile land also puts pressure on China for feeding its population, which accounts for one-fifth of the world's population. In addition to increasing the quantity of cultivatable land, China also has to improve its soil fertility and prioritise ecological sustainability.

As a response to the sharp rise in Chinese consumption habits, China has attempted to implement regulations such as the Anti-Food Waste Law. However, reducing domestic consumption is not an easy task and requires active and vigilant participation by citizens. The search for a breakthrough in the seed industry is also an obstacle that China must tackle; while the commercial use of GM food products has been pushed, it has not been received as warmly by the Chinese public. Furthermore, China does not have a strong influence on global supply chains and isn't able to leverage its trade relations to gain influence. China must support overseas Chinese agricultural endeavours to secure its food security objectives but must manoeuvre foreign land acquisitions carefully as it has been viewed with a negative connotation, especially due to the growing diplomatic tensions between China and other countries in the West. China also has to tackle

corruption in the grain industry, properly manage its water resources, pay heed to climate change and disaster management in its journey towards self-sufficiency and safeguard global, regional, and domestic food security.

Conclusion

China's food security strategy is complex and involves various distinct variables, each of which requires proper consideration for an effective solution. Food security has always been a key focus and priority of China and the recent inclusion of food security as a dimension of national security only adds to that fact. In a broader context, China's food security is essential for President Xi Jinping's presidency.³⁶ To ensure long-term food security, several measures should be set in motion to improve food production capacity. While the Chinese government has revised many existing laws and adopted even newer ones, many of these policies aiming to achieve Chinese food security goals seem to be quite difficult, given that not all these policies are necessarily under the control of the government. Notwithstanding its success, these policy efforts do reflect several options for improvement in various areas of concern.

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