

# The Challenge Ahead: The Politics of Food Security in China, India, Japan and South Korea

Edited by  
Noemi Lanna and Marisa Siddivò



Università di Napoli L'Orientale  
Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo

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## **Food, security, and the obstacles in between: the case of China, India, Japan, and South Korea**

Noemi Lanna

### **1. Food security: definitions and issues**

Among the definitions of food security available, one of the most accurate and well-established is that provided in 2001 by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) presenting food security as the condition met 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” (FAO, 2003). This definition, which provides the starting point for the reflections on food security in East Asia explored in this book, results from a decades-long debate on food security. In the 1974 World Food Summit discussing the volume and stability of food supplies, food security was defined as “availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices” (FAO, 2003). In 1983, FAO extended this concept to consider access by vulnerable people to available supplies. Emphasis was placed on the importance of demand and the supply side in the food security equation: “ensuring that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food that they need” (FAO, 2003). The 1986 World Bank “Poverty and Hunger” report (FAO, 2003), focusing on the temporal dynamics of food insecurity, moved one step further stressing the difference between chronic food insecurity, associated with problems of continuing or structural poverty and low incomes, and transitory food insecurity, which involves periods of intensified pressure caused by natural disasters, economic collapse or conflict. The resulting definition presented food security in more inclusive terms as “access of all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (FAO, 2003).

By the mid-1990s food security established itself as a significant issue both at the individual and global levels. Importantly, the focus was no longer only on quantity, but also on the quality of food, and most notably on the supply of protein and nutritional balance. Socially and culturally determined food preferences were included in the analysis in view of the impact they exert on an active and healthy life. Specific attention was also accorded to food safety as the contamination of food by harmful bacteria, viruses, parasites or chemical substances was recognized as an aspect inextricably linked to food security. The 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report marked a turning point in the approach to food security, linking its destiny to the concept of “human security”. Unlike national security, which stressed arms-based territorial security at the expense of people’s security, human security was conceived as a “new development paradigm” that “puts people at the centre of development, regards economic growth as a means and not an end, protects the life opportunities of future generations as well as the present generations and respects the natural systems on which all life depends”. The components of “human security” were identified as economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security (UNDP, 1994, 24-5).

All these developments concurred to refine the conceptualization of food security, as shown by the 1996 World Food Summit report stating that “Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] 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” (FAO, 2003). This definition was further enlarged in *The State of Food Insecurity 2001*, where food security was described as “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2003).

Starting from the early 1980s, the growing debate among UN agencies was paralleled by attempts to reconceptualize the notion of security in the field of International Relations (IR). A turning point was the release of Barry Buzan’s *People, States and Fear* (1983), raising the issue of the “underdeveloped” nature of the security question. In the bipolar context of the Cold War dominated by the security dilemma, security was mainly conceived in realistic terms, i.e. a “derivative of power” almost exclusively concerning military issues and the policy interests of specific actors. More

generally, in the field of IR there was a vast body of literature on the empirical implications of security (especially in the sub-field of Strategic Studies), but there was very limited research on conceptual aspects, despite the normative centrality of the category. As Buzan argued, many scholars tended to refer to a “simple-minded concept of security”, “an understanding of national security that is inadequately aware of the contradictions latent within the concept itself, and/or inadequately aware of the fact that the logic of security almost always involves high levels of interdependence among the actors trying to make themselves secure” (Buzan, 1991, 25). While this oversimplified view rested upon a security largely conceived in national and militarized terms, the reality of the international system showed that it was time to recast the concept in broader international terms, extending its components to political, economic, societal and environmental aspects. Furthermore, it was imperative to approach security in holistic terms, without thinking of its different objects and dimensions as being unrelated.

The structural changes to the political, economic, and normative environment resulting from the end of the Cold War brought into further question the understanding of security prevalent during the bipolar era. It would come to be referred to as “traditional security”. More specifically, it challenged the assumptions of Realism framing security as the priority obligation of States in an anarchic international system where uncertainty and lack of trust reign and self-help and the development of offensive military capabilities are the only means to survive (Mazzei, 2012, 73-9). Some scholars saw growing regional integration as a factor that would profoundly transform the political order based on nation-States as the universal standards of political legitimacy and the related idea that security, conceived in military terms, ought to be the primary concern of States. This scenario appeared at odds with increasing levels of interdependence, especially in Europe, where the establishment of the European Union inaugurated a new era of political interaction based on deeper supranational decision-making procedures. Other scholars drew attention to the risks and dangers associated with the process of globalization. Global warming, nuclear accidents and other threats were presented as elements beyond the control of nation-states, requiring a global level of coordination as well as a recasting of the very idea of security (Bailys, 2001, 254-5).

Overall, reconceptualization after the Cold War stressed the multidimensional nature of security. This resulted in a shift from an agenda focused on inter-State conflicts to a set of “non-traditional” issues encompassing individual and group security and economics and the

environment (Hughes, Yew Meng, 2011, 19-20). Awareness of the growing importance of non-military threats had already arisen in the 1970s, when the food crisis and two oil crises (1973, 1979) showed the dramatic impact of economic and energy-related issues on national security. The Japanese case was rather enlightening in this respect. Contractions of food production caused by weather and crude oil price shocks and the oil prices restrictions adopted by Arab countries against pro-Israeli governments exposed the country to an unprecedented vulnerability, worsened by the strategic anxieties caused by the Sino-American rapprochement, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, Sino-Soviet rivalry and the US defeat in the Vietnam War. One of the enduring legacies of the shocks Japan experienced in the 1970s was the “comprehensive security” policy (*sōgō anzen hoshō*). As explained in a 1978 report of the National Institute for the Advancement of Research (NIRA) and the Nomura Research Institute, the policy was based on the understanding that Japan should put in place comprehensive and varied responses to national security threats according to the political, economic, or military nature of those threats (Akaha, 1991, 324-5). In the 1980s, the idea that security should be framed in more comprehensive and holistic terms was further on expanded by Buzan, as shown above. Yet, it was only after the collapse of the bipolar system that security came to be largely conceived as a versatile and genuinely multidimensional category encompassing aspects related to energy, resources, the environment, and public health.

Not surprisingly, the very term “comprehensive security” (*zongti guojia anquan guan*) has been more recently used by Xi Jinping at the first meeting of the National Security Commission in April 2014, as detailed in Siddivò’s paper. In line with this reference, as the author points out, since the 2000s the concern for “non-traditional security” has been persistently evoked in Chinese official documents. It is interesting to note that attention to non-military aspects of security coexisted with a growing military budget. Chinese military expenditure progressively expanded in the 2000s. In the 2010-2019 period, the official defense budget increased from 533.3 to 1213 billion yuan (at current prices). On the other hand, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimates, considering ten possible additional components outside China’s official national defense budget, suggest that the actual figures should be set at 714.4 and 1660 billion yuan, for 2010 and 2019 respectively. Whatever the calculation method adopted, in 2019 China had the second highest military spending in the world, behind only the United States (SIPRI, 2021).

Another important result of the post-Cold War debate was the redefinition of the object of security. The idea that the State is the only “referent object” as far as security is concerned has been reconsidered in the light of the growing importance of cross-border transnational relations and non-State actors. The diffusion of power, as Nye framed it, namely diffusion from State to non-State actors multiplied the number of factors beyond the control of even the most powerful States. Accordingly, it was no longer enough to “think in terms of power *over* the others”, but it was increasingly necessary to “think in terms of power to accomplish goals that involve power *with* others” (Nye, 2011, XVii; Nye’s emphasis). Behind this profound transformation was the information revolution which lowered the barriers to entering world politics, giving greater prominence to the transnational dimension of interactions within the international system. While revealing new opportunities, this change brought with it the emergence of new threats such as those associated with cybercrimes or transnational terrorism. In such a new environment, according to Nye, the distribution of power in the world came to resemble a complex three-dimensional chess game. On the top chessboard, largely unipolar and dominated by the United States, lies military power. The middle chessboard, on the other hand, is multipolar, characterized by the coexistence of major players such as the United States, Europe, Japan and China, plus other emerging ones. Finally, the bottom chessboard is the realm of “transnational relations that cross borders outside of government control and it includes nonstate actors as diverse as bankers electronically transferring sums larger than most national budgets at one extreme and terrorists transferring weapons or hackers threatening cybersecurity at the other” (Nye, 2011, XV).

Against the background of the post-Cold War debate on security and the promotion of the above-mentioned concept of “human security”, food security gained greater prominence in international politics. World food price inflation (2007-2008) further confirmed the crucial importance of a constant and affordable food supply. In contrast to the prolonged slump in commodity prices from 1995 to 2002, the FAO food price index rose by 7% in 2006 and 27% in 2007. The increase continued in the first half of 2008, when the FAO food price index averaged 24% above that of 2007 and 57% above 2006. Food price increases, accompanied by higher price volatility, varied significantly from one commodity to another. While almost all agricultural product prices increased in nominal terms, international prices of cereals, oilseeds or dairy products increased far more dramatically than the

prices of products such as coffee or cocoa and raw materials such as cotton or rubber (FAO, 2009, 3-8).

The 2007-8 food crisis produced several negative consequences exacerbated by the concomitant financial crisis and global recession. It affected consumers, contributed to rising inflation, and caused higher food import bills. High food prices had the greatest impact on consumers in developing countries, where food can account for 50% and up to 70-80% of the household budget. While in some cases adjusting the consumption pattern was the answer to soaring prices, in others, social unrest occurred and more often in urban areas where dependence on imported food and exposure to international food prices is greater. Riots in Burkina Faso in February 2008 were followed by those in Cameroon (March 5, 2008), Côte d'Ivoire (March 31, 2008), Haiti (April 1-20, 2008), Somalia (May 5, 2008) and Mauritania (August 9, 2008). Whereas poverty, social injustice, unemployment, and other factors concurred to foment protests — which in some cases also led to the overthrow of the government (Haiti, Mauritania) — spikes in food prices played a key role in setting the stage for the revolts (Holland, 2012). It was also in the developing countries that the effects of inflation were more tangible and damaging. In this case too, the greater share occupied by food in the household budget played an important part, as it heightened the risk of fueling general inflation. Lastly, higher food prices on world markets resulted in higher food import bills and problems in the balance of payments. In 2007, the total cost of food imports for developing countries was 33% higher than in 2006, and annual food import bills for low-income food-deficit countries subsequently doubled their 2000 level (FAO, 2009, 25-9).

In addition to the specific consequences for the food system briefly presented above, the 2007-8 food crisis had a dramatic impact on the global perception of food security and the way it was addressed in the States' agendas. Firstly, the crisis abruptly swept away well-established expectations concerning the availability of cheap food. Until the crisis broke out, real prices of food had been spiraling downward for decades, as a result of technological advances and widespread subsidies in OECD countries. Indeed, up until 2006, the real cost of the global food basket had fallen by almost half over the previous thirty years, with prices of many products falling on average by 2 to 3% per annum in real terms (FAO, 2009, 7). Secondly, the political effects of the crisis dramatically showed the costs of food security failure. The 2008 riots were replicated on a larger scale in 2010-2011, when peaks in global food prices were recorded once again.

Protests and changes of government took place in North Africa and the Middle East, spreading social disruption and instability. Just as in 2008, the protests were followed by “land grabs”, large-scale acquisitions of land to grow food for export to foreign markets – particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. While it would be inappropriate to deterministically seek causal links between food prices and sociopolitical instability (Barrett, 2013), the 2007-8 food crisis and the so-called Arab spring of 2011 unequivocally showed the relation between food security and political volatility.

Thirdly, the crises brought to the forefront the issue of policy response to food insecurity. Against this background, “sovereignty” came to be regarded as the solution to the uncertainties deriving from the availability, production and supply of food. On the one hand, States called for greater determination in managing resources affecting food security often matching these efforts with attempts to promote “gastronomicalism”. Food production, distribution, and consumption were exploited to create and sustain the emotive power of national attachment, as the chapters about the case of Japan and South Korea in this book show. On the other hand, workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs, and human rights activists invoked food sovereignty in the name of “the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory” (Shattuck, Schiavoni, VanGelder, 2018). At the same time, the vast impulse given to mega Free Trade Agreements (FTA) such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, suggested that market liberalization would play an increasing role in the global food system. The very fact that these cross-regional trade deals of unprecedented scope proliferated and established themselves as a significant trend in the international trade system exposed the limits of the “sovereignty” option, while strengthening the idea that international trade could be an ally in making the food system stabler and efficient, bringing greater absolute gains for all.

More recently, the Covid pandemic and the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine have put food security at the center of the debate once again. After Covid-19 food insecurity became an issue in many countries across the globe (Martina, 2020). The pessimist outlook for global food production and supply worsened still further after Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine, when millions of Ukrainians became internally displaced, and many others

fled to neighboring countries and elsewhere. This had severe repercussions on the agricultural sector both at the national and international levels. Food shortages and lack of access to water were followed by disruptions to local and global food value chains in which both Ukraine and the Russian Federation play an important role. Both are among the most important producers and net exporters of agricultural products of cereal grains, oil seeds and fertilizers in the world. More importantly, among the countries that are highly dependent on Ukrainian and Russian staple food supplies many are particularly vulnerable since they belong to the Least Developed Country and Low-Income Food-Deficit Country groups, according to FAO (FAO, 2022).

## **2. China, India, Japan, and South Korea: four key-countries in the global food security debate**

The multidimensional nature of food security — most notably, its intertwining with demographic, environmental, energy and economic issues — emerges conspicuously in South and East Asia, where the countries discussed in this miscellaneous volume are located: China, India, Japan, and South Korea. The aim of the book is to analyze how food security has been addressed, with an emphasis on the post-bipolar period. The focus is on policy responses rather than on the analysis of economic and social drivers of food insecurity. How did the four countries approach food security? What policies did they put in place? How were food security related issues framed in the national security policy? What implications did this have for discourses on national identity? The authors answer these questions combining social science methodologies with extensive use of first-hand sources in the original language. The choice of considering the cases of China, India, Japan, and South Korea is driven by two sets of reasons. First, the four countries play a decisive role in the global food security debate because of their geoeconomic and geopolitical weight. Second, they share two distinctive characteristics: assigning a central role to the State in the food security sphere, and using the “securitization” of issues related to the production and availability of food as a discursive practice for self-legitimation purposes.

China, India, Japan, and South Korea represent different aspects of the food security environments characterizing East and Southeast Asia. Japan and South Korea, along with Taiwan and Singapore, belong to an area boasting a consolidated economic development, where availability of, and

access to, food is not a critical issue. On the contrary in “emerging Asia”, which contains Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, food security still ranks as a priority in the welfare and political agenda. Policy actions and investments in the large-scale development of plantation-based food production improved food security in these countries, but much remains to be done. Even worse is the situation in “least developed Asia,” including Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Papua New Guinea, and East Timor. In this area, the success of economic modernization and growing productivity in rice cultivation coexist with important challenges to food security, which makes access to food a serious concern for a significant portion of the urban and rural population. Since the world rice economy centers in the region, the group of countries mentioned above is crucial to the global food security debate. Suffice it to recall that it includes the two largest rice exporters, Thailand and Vietnam, and the two largest rice importers, Indonesia and the Philippines (Timmer, 2013, 453).

China and India, home to the two oldest Asian civilizations, occupy a distinctive position in this regional setting. Despite the persistence of pockets of poverty, the two countries boast considerable economic development with a rapid pace of growth. This noticeably affects resource demands, giving China and India a central role in the global food commodity demand and supply dynamics. In India, food security has been a priority since the country gained independence in the wake of the Bengali famine. The economic precarity of a very large number of Indians and an extremely low level of human development formed the background of the policy actions put in place to tackle food insecurity over the last few decades. More recently, environmental challenges have added a further complication to the scenario. As ably explained in Maiorano’s contribution, the progress made so far in ensuring production, supply and access to food is exemplified by “two extremes”: the major achievement of preventing famines and the major failure to ensure minimum adequate nutrition. In other words, over the last few decades Indian food security policies have focused on preventing hunger, while less attention has been paid to preventing malnourishment.

In China concern for food security surged in the early 2000s, when “non-traditional security” issues rose in importance in the agenda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As stressed in Siddivò’s contribution, the reasons behind the “securitization” of the matters regarding production, supply and access to food go beyond the dynamics of trade and economics, touching on domestic and foreign politics and, ultimately, the legitimation of the CCP. What is remarkable, as the author points out, is the fact that the

Chinese leadership anticipated anxieties about a probable food crisis well before the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian War brought food security to the center of global attention. The far-sightedness of this approach as well as the idea that it is up to the State to ensure an adequate food supply are neither a distinctive characteristic of the Xi Jinping administration neither of Communist China, as a *longue-durée* perspective on the history of the Middle Kingdom suggests. In Imperial China — where the emperor was considered the Son of Heaven and the father of the people ruling under the Mandate of Heaven — the State played a major role in ensuring famine control and managing factors affecting food insecurity, such as flood and droughts. The State determined water rights and encouraged the cultivation and storage of rice and other grains. Whenever he failed in fulfilling his duty to ensure adequate production and availability of food, the ruler was sanctioned in accordance with the Mandate of Heaven doctrine, which entitled subjects to rebel against a ruler who does not guarantee a good government that brings about prosperity, peace, and social stability. It is no coincidence that the succession of dynasties was punctuated with droughts, flood and other calamities causing severe food shortages (Vogelsang, 2014, 27-362).

In ancient and premodern Korea and Japan, where China's centralized bureaucratic State was adopted as the model, there was a similar concern for susceptibility to risks affecting food security. Indeed, the physical and historical setting was rather different, because of the smaller scale of the two countries and the way they both adapted Chinese institutions to the local environment. Yet, the notion that the State was to be extensively involved in natural-resource management and put in place long-term policies to ensure an adequate supply of food was as important as in China. With a capacity for maintaining and improving natural resources in a way that today we would not hesitate to define as “sustainable”, Japan was a case in point. Japanese rulers were acutely conscious of the limited size of their island nation and the scarcity of resources. Accordingly, they conceived development in a way that would ensure their best use, while limiting dependence on countries abroad. This is true of the Edo period (1603-1868), when the use of natural resources reached a degree rarely seen in the world at that time (Hayami, 2004, 7), but also of the more remote Nara period (710-784), when regional chronicles (*fudōki*) describing the natural features of an area were compiled in compliance with a decree of the Imperial court issued in 713 C.E. (Manieri, 2022, 21-31). The accurate survey of the morphology of the territory, the extant resources and the food products contained in *fudōki* were

instrumental in territorial control. What is more important here, it was also fundamental in allowing the government to gain important information about the production of food and its availability throughout the national territory.

As shown in Farina's contribution, the provision of a stable and sufficient supply of food is still an important theme in the Japanese political agenda. Far from being left to the regulatory hand of competition and the market, this task has been considered a chief prerogative of the State both in modern and contemporary Japan. Strong reliance on food imports reinforced this trend, prompting the State to improve food security by focusing on self-sufficiency and raising high trade barriers. After 2013 this approach was redefined in view of the "Japan is back" strategy providing for an increase in agri-food exports and a promotion of *washoku* (the traditional cuisine of Japan). Despite these efforts, as the author points out, Japan's food self-sufficiency rate barely reached 37 percent in 2020, the lowest among the most industrialized countries.

South Korea is apparently on the safe side, when it comes to food self-sufficiency, at least if one considers the indicators of "The Global Food Security Index" (2021 edition) Milano mentions in her contribution. However, as the author argues, many factors strip this honorable ranking of meaning, such as import dependency, the increasing rate of population poverty, and the scarcity of local labor in rural areas. As happened in Japan, the State played a major role in addressing food security, with an eye to the nationalist potential of the issue. Since the late 1980s, food security has been addressed in two distinct ways. On the one hand, it has been perceived as an imminent threat to national sovereignty and identity. The proposed solution was a strategy aimed at food self-sufficiency by controlling consumption choices. On the other hand, especially since the 1990s, food security was framed as a potential risk to national security. In this respect, the case of South Korea presents interesting similarities with that of Japan, where the structural factors affecting food security are perceived as menaces threatening the nation and its people.

As emerges from the analysis carried out above, China, India, Japan, and South Korea are four key-countries in the global food security debate. Because of their rapid pace of growth, China and India play a central role in the global food commodity market. China, along with Japan and South Korea, is also one of the three largest East Asian economies contributing to making Asia and Pacific the fastest growing region in the world, accounting for around a third of the global economy's GDP. Despite its high rate of inequality and vulnerabilities, India is a key player in the regional and global economy. In terms of population, an indicator that is not at all marginal in

food security issues, the group includes two demographic giants, China and India, with a population over one billion people, and two smaller countries, Japan and South Korea, with populations above 125 million and 50 million people respectively.

Material factors aside, the four countries form a rather homogeneous object of analysis due to two more aspects mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph. First, China, Japan and South Korea share a common understanding of the role of the State as a major actor in the sphere of food security. Despite the different patterns of State-market interactions they represent, these three countries consider market competition and free trade to be ancillary components of the State response to food insecurity. Moreover, what is specific about the approach of China, Japan and South Korea to food security is the long-term orientation of their policies. In India, as shown in Maiorano's contribution, State commitment has been much more sensitive to political and economic contingencies, not necessarily associated with a focus on long-term targets. Comparing India's case with the others helps clarify the specificities of the four countries' paths to food security.

A second shared characteristic is the distinctive way issues regarding food production and supply were "securitized". The concept of "securitization" was introduced by Ole Wæver and developed by the Copenhagen School, as Siddivò explains. According to Wæver's argument, policy-makers place issues within the category of security through the "speech act". "By definition, something is a security problem when the élites declare it to be so" (Wæver 2010, 185). In turn, securitization empowers policy-makers to mobilize necessary resources in pursuit of their objectives (Hughes, Lai, 2011, 22-3). While this process is not specific to China, Japan, South Korea and India, the way policy-makers included food security in the realm of policy discussion reveals a shared attitude, a similar attempt to exploit the issue for self-legitimizing purposes.

In China, objective factors (trade frictions with some of China's top exporters of grain; humanitarian crises in some African and Latin American countries, and growing divergence between China and the EU) have challenged food supply, providing a factual justification for mobilization. However, as the chapter shows, the CCP has been instrumentalizing the issue for political ends since the 2000s, capitalizing on the advantages of an environment where the concept of "threat" dominates the public discourse and calls for exceptional measures, all of which is far easier than in well-established democracies. In South Korea, State management of food security-related issues has gone hand in hand with the process of building a

national identity and the legitimation of the economic and political establishment. Pak's campaigns discouraging the consumption of rice in favor of wheat and dairy products, the promotion of "tongil" (reunification) rice, the call to buy and eat Korean products in the name of the slogan "Korean is good" as a counterbalance to the liberalization policy in the primary sector, together with a constant appeal to "Koreanness" are proof of this, as documented by Milano. In Japan, food security remains a highly sensitive issue associated with notions of "threats" from outside and discourses on national identity. As Farina argues, concerns about reliance on food imports have been a constant theme in the political agenda of the Liberal Democratic Party throughout the postwar years. After the launch of the "Japan is back" strategy, food self-sufficiency began to be framed in different terms and emphasis was placed on liberalization through FTA. Yet, once again, food was understood to be a crucial component of a national discourse on "Japaneseness", which was supposed to legitimate and strengthen the party in power, as confirmed by the promotion of "washoku" as a tool of "gastrodiplomacy" in a way perfectly consistent with the tenets of Abe's rhetoric on Japan as a "beautiful country" (*utsukushii kuni*). In India, the link between national identity and food security policies was much more nuanced. On the one hand, the starting point for food policies (i.e. the economic and human development conditions of a large portion of the population) was so radically different that the margin for exploiting the nationalistic potential of food security issues was extremely limited. On the other hand, as Maiorano observes, at different times pressures from upper caste Hindus influenced access to food with considerable implications for the population.

The wealth of data collected and the authors' analyses provide precious insights into the approaches of China, Japan, South Korea, and India to food security. In a historical conjuncture marked by the complex implications of the Covid pandemic and the dramatic effects of the Ukraine war, looking at the experience of these four countries which play a decisive role in the global food security debate is not only a prerogative of area-studies specialists, but a compelling duty for all.

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## Chapter 1

### Self-sufficiency vs liberalization: the economic diplomacy of Japan's food security<sup>1</sup>

Felice Farina

#### Abstract

*In this chapter, we will explore and analyze the most recent changes in Japan's approach to food security and how they affected Tokyo's economic diplomacy. The Japanese authorities have traditionally tried to address the issue of food security through a twofold strategy that combines the increase in domestic production and consumption of local products, on the one hand, and the diversification of supply sources while protecting the domestic agri-food sector with high trade barriers, on the other. From the point of view of economic diplomacy, this approach hindered the negotiations of free trade agreements (FTA) with partner countries, causing delays in their conclusion and, in some cases, an abrupt end. Abe Shinzō's arrival in power brought about a decisive change of direction in the approach to food security and then to FTAs. In this chapter, we will argue that Abe's restructuring of Japan Agriculture Cooperatives (JA) and reform of the bureaucratic personnel inside the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries have led to a new narrative on food security, according to which the liberalization of the agricultural market is no longer perceived as a threat but as an opportunity to increase exports and the food self-sufficiency potential of Japan. Finally, we will also argue that this new approach to food security is the basis of Japan's new economic diplomacy, more favorable and inclined to the participation in FTAs.*

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**Abstract**

*In questo capitolo si esamineranno i cambiamenti più recenti nell'approccio del Giappone alla sicurezza alimentare e il modo in cui questi hanno influenzato la diplomazia economica di Tokyo. Tradizionalmente, le autorità giapponesi hanno cercato di affrontare il tema della sicurezza alimentare attraverso una duplice strategia basata, da un lato, sull'aumento della produzione e del consumo interno di prodotti locali, e, dall'altro, sulla diversificazione delle fonti di approvvigionamento, tutelando allo stesso tempo il settore agroalimentare nazionale con elevate barriere commerciali. Dal punto di vista della diplomazia economica, questo approccio ha ostacolato i negoziati degli accordi di libero scambio (FTA in inglese) con i paesi partner, generando spesso ritardi nella loro conclusione se non la completa interruzione. L'arrivo al potere di Abe Shinzō ha determinato un deciso cambio di rotta nell'approccio alla sicurezza alimentare del Giappone e, di conseguenza, agli FTA. In questo capitolo mostreremo come la ristrutturazione della Japan Agriculture Cooperatives (JA) e la riforma del personale burocratico all'interno del Ministero dell'agricoltura, delle foreste e della pesca attuate dall'amministrazione Abe hanno portato a una nuova retorica sulla sicurezza alimentare, secondo la quale la liberalizzazione del mercato agricolo non è più da considerarsi una minaccia ma un'opportunità per aumentare le esportazioni e l'autosufficienza alimentare del Giappone. Vedremo, infine, come questo nuovo approccio alla sicurezza alimentare è alla base della nuova diplomazia economica del Giappone, più favorevole alla partecipazione agli accordi di libero scambio.*

**1. Introduction**

The provision of a stable and sufficient supply of food has always been a constant theme in the political agenda of Japan throughout all its modern and contemporary history, owing to the nation's heavy reliance on foreign markets to meet its food requirements. As of 2022, Japan's food self-sufficiency rate stood at a meager 38 percent, the lowest among industrialized countries, indicating that Japan needs to import over two-thirds of its total food consumption.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The data was taken from the website of the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries. See: [https://www.maff.go.jp/j/zyukyu/zikyu\\_ritu/012.html](https://www.maff.go.jp/j/zyukyu/zikyu_ritu/012.html)

Japan's historical dependence on imports for both food and essential raw materials for its industry led the government to consider its security in broader terms beyond the traditional definition of security, giving rise to the concept of "comprehensive security" in the 1970s. The idea behind comprehensive security was to expand the traditional definition of security to include economic aspects like the scarcity of raw materials, which were seen as potential threats to national security. Food security played a central role in this new vision. Despite Japan's high nutritional standards and its economic transformation into a producer of high-value exports after World War II, which helped to ensure foreign currency reserves for procuring essential raw materials, Japan's heavy dependence on imports have been considered a significant threat to its overall food security because it left the country vulnerable to external factors such as bad harvests or export restrictions. In this regard, it is possible to argue that the issue of food dependence has undergone a process of "securitization", understood as a discursive process by which a specific issue or topic is transformed into a matter of national security, thereby justifying extraordinary measures and policy responses in order to obtain a specific outcome (Buzan, Waever, de Wilde, 1998, 25).

In Japan, the interconnection between the notions of food self-sufficiency and food security has resulted in the development of a two-fold strategy, based on the increase of domestic production and the promotion of consumption of local and traditional food, on one hand, and the differentiation of its source of supply while protecting the agri-food sector with high trade barriers, on the other.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the concept of food security, as understood in Japan, has had a significant impact on the country's foreign policy and diplomacy, in particular during the negotiations of free trade agreements (FTA) or economic partnership agreements (EPA).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some scholars do not share MAFF's vision and contend that food security and self-sufficiency are not directly linked. They highlight examples like North Korea, which has a high self-sufficiency rate but still faces food insecurity. Alternatively, proponents of this viewpoint suggest that food security can be achieved through establishing positive international relations with food-exporting countries to ensure a reliable food supply system. See: Asakawa, 2010; Hayami, 2000; Honma, 2009 and 2010; Tashiro, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) are generally agreements aimed at eliminating tariffs, and liberalizing trade in goods and services among designated countries and regions. FTAs are recognized as exceptions to the WTO Agreement and most favored nation treatment. Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are generally based on the content of FTAs with a view to trade liberalization among designated countries and regions. EPAs aim to harmonize

Proposals relating to greater liberalization of the agri-food sector have consistently been a source of friction during the EPA negotiations with partner countries, leading to significant delays in their completion and, in certain cases, even resulting in an abrupt halt.

However, the results of this mixed strategy based on self-sufficiency and protectionism have been unsatisfactory. Japan's food self-sufficiency rate has continued to decline, necessitating continuous downward revisions of government targets.<sup>5</sup> This situation has prompted the Japanese government to reassess its approach and discourse concerning food security, consequently influencing foreign policy objectives in terms of agri-food trade. A change of course occurred during the administration of Abe Shinzō. In June 2013, the Abe administration launched its "Japan is back" strategy (*Nihon fukkō senryaku*) (Prime Minister's Office [Shushō kantei], 2013), where, for the first time, a notable emphasis was placed on increasing agri-food exports as a key driver of Japanese economic growth. Subsequently, in 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) defined "food export" as one of the main objectives of Japan's economic diplomacy, marking a distinctive shift in the way the government approached food security (MoFA, 2016, 264). Within this new context, the EPA signed with the European Union in July 2018 and entered into force in February 2019 has been presented as a tremendous opportunity for Japan to increase agri-food exports and, consequently, enhance national agricultural production. In this way, Japan has shown a new attitude and adopted a new narrative towards the liberalization of the agri-food market, which stands in sharp contrast to the previous apprehensions surrounding previously signed economic partnership agreements that were perceived as a threat for the

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various economic systems and reinforce economic relations in a broader range of fields by promoting investment and movement of persons, rule-making in government procurement, competition policy, intellectual property rights, etc. and cooperation in various fields. In Japan, the two terms are frequently used interchangeably and with confusion, even within official documentation. However, it is important to note that agreements related to free trade are exclusively referred to as Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). Hence, within the context of this study, the term FTA/EPA will be employed when discussing such agreements in a general sense. However, the term EPA alone will be used specifically to refer to agreements ratified by Japan.

<sup>5</sup> In 2000, the government announced the Basic Plan for Agriculture and Rural Areas (*Shokuryō nōgyō nōson kihon keikan*), where it decided to raise the food self-sufficiency rate from 40 percent to 45 percent by 2010. In 2010, a new plan provided for an increase in the rate to 50 percent by 2020. The 2015 Plan provided a target of 45 percent by 2024. The most recent Plan (2020) set the goal at 45 percent by 2030 from 37 percent in 2020 (MAFF 2020).

Japanese agri-food sector and thus strongly contested not only by private producers but also within the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (MAFF) itself. As a result of this new approach, a novel indicator known as “food self-sufficiency potential (*shokuryō jikyū ryoku*)” has been devised to evaluate Japan’s capacity to meet growing international demand, following the liberalization of its market, and enhance domestic agri-food production in the absence of significant domestic demand growth.

This research aims to analyze the evolving conceptualization of “food security” in Japan, along with the underlying factors driving these changes. The study will primarily concentrate on elucidating the ramifications of this transformed understanding for Japan’s economic diplomacy and investigate its influence on Japan’s approach to free trade agreements (FTAs) and economic partnership agreements (EPAs)

## **2. Japan’s food security: an overview**

During the 1830s, the succession of particularly adverse weather conditions caused one of the most tragic famines that Japan has ever experienced in its history. According to some historical estimates, the Great Tenpō Famine (*Tenpō no daikikin*, 1833-37) caused the deaths of more than a hundred thousand people (Bolitho, 2008, 119-120). The Great Tenpō Famine was particularly severe and appalling, but periods of serious food shortages were quite common at those times. Historical records indicate that the Japanese population faced a major famine roughly once every decade throughout the nineteenth century (Saitō, 2010, 275). In the early twentieth century, until the end of the Pacific War in 1945, Japan tried to solve the persistent issue of insufficient food production by exploiting its colonial empire. Following the colonization of Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1910, the Japanese government implemented a strategy aimed at making the empire self-sufficient in raw materials, including food. Consequently, Korea, Taiwan and all the other occupied territories were transformed into Japan’s “agricultural appendages” (Ho, 1984, 350). However, the defeat in 1945 resulted in the loss of these colonial territories and the consequent end of this food supply system. What ensued was a major food crisis, still alive in the memories of many Japanese (Dower, 1999). During the period of the Allied Occupation from 1945 to 1952, Japan faced the necessity of importing notable amount of agricultural products from the United States through food aid programs. Even after regaining its independence in 1952, Japan continued to be a major market for American agricultural goods (Farina, 2018). As McCormack (2001, 124) has pointed out,

the postwar stagnation of Japan's domestic agricultural system "was matched by dependence on food imports, which had begun in the context of the postwar food crisis and continued as Japan became locked into place as the world's largest and most profitable market for U.S. agricultural surpluses (wheat, corn, soybeans, etc.)."

The great economic growth experienced during the 1950s and 1960s, coupled with the abundant availability of American agricultural surpluses, alleviated concerns about food availability. However, this situation underwent a significant change in the early 1970s. The world food crisis that emerged in this period and the subsequent US soybean embargo in the summer 1973 brought back to Japan memories of the food shortages of the 1940s. This sparked an intense political debate on the risks associated with excessive dependence on food imports, fueling concerns about national food security (Farina, 2020). This pivotal moment marked the beginning of Japan's strategic approach to addressing food security.<sup>6</sup> On one hand, it aimed to enhance national production capacity to bolster food self-sufficiency and, on the other hand, sought to diversify its sources of food supplies while safeguarding domestic agriculture from further liberalization (MAFF, 1975, 98). It is evident, therefore, that the Japanese approach to food security predominantly focuses on the "macro" dimension, wherein the emphasis lies on the capacity of the entire state to ensure domestic food production and procurement to meet its population's needs. This approach prioritizes the collective ability to achieve food self-sufficiency and maintain a stable food supply at the national level, rather than solely focusing on individual-level food access and consumption patterns. However, although Japan succeeded in reducing its reliance on the United States, it has struggled to diminish its overall dependence on foreign countries. Notably, Japan's food self-sufficiency rate, which stood at 73 percent in 1965, has steadily declined to 37 percent in 2020, reaching the lowest level ever recorded.<sup>7</sup>

There are many factors that affect Japan's food security and explain its heavy dependence on foreign markets. Firstly, the morphological nature of the Japanese territory, characterized by a scarcity of flat arable plains, a monsoon climate, and high population density represent some of the main obstacles to

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<sup>6</sup> The expression "food security" originated in the 1970s, during the World Food Conference held in Rome in 1974 to discuss the issues related to the world food crisis. Before it was common to use the expression "food problem" (in Japanese "shokuryō mondai").

<sup>7</sup> The data have been collected from the MAFF's website: [https://www.maff.go.jp/j/zyukyu/zikyu\\_ritu/012.html](https://www.maff.go.jp/j/zyukyu/zikyu_ritu/012.html) (accessed 12/04/2022)

the expansion of agriculture. As of 2020, out of the total land in Japan, only 11.7 per cent was arable land (it was around 16 per cent in 1956).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the structure of Japanese agriculture, established through the Land Reform Act of 1946, further contributes to the country's dependence on foreign food sources. The agricultural sector primarily consists of micro-sized farms, typically owned by individual farmers who primarily engage in rice production. The limited size of agricultural land serves as a significant hindrance to improving productivity within Japanese fields. Furthermore, the drastic decline of the farming households (which decreased by 20 percent within a decade, reaching 1.7 million in 2020), the aging of the rural population and the overall demographic decline in rural areas all contribute to the low productivity levels observed in Japanese agriculture (Yoshikawa, 2022).

Another important cause behind the lowering of the food self-sufficiency rate is also considered the radical change in the eating habits of the Japanese in the postwar period. During the years of the economic growth, consumer preferences transitioned from traditional diet staples to Western products. This shift was characterized by an increased consumption of imported meat, wheat, oils, and dairy products, along with a decrease in the consumption of traditional foods like rice (MAFF, 2012; Kako, 2009). Some scholars have even pointed the finger of blame at Japanese politicians, accusing them of preventing the development of domestic agriculture to preserve their personal interests. The so-called "farm politicians (*nōson giin*)" are part of "agricultural policy tribe (*nōrin zoku*)" of the Liberal Democratic Party and they are Diet members elected in rural district with the backing of farm voters and agricultural organizations (Mulgan, 2000, 477). These scholars argue that protectionist policies and subsidies, particularly in the rice sector, have hindered Japan's agricultural productivity growth. Consequently, these measures have been detrimental to the country's overall food security (Mulgan, 2008; Jentzsch 2017; Maclachlan and Shimizu, 2021).

The convergence of historical, geographical, social, and political factors has rendered food security a highly sensitive issue in Japan, a situation that the country shares with its neighbor South Korea. With its constrained land area, dense population, aging demographics, and a growing preference for Western dietary patterns, South Korea recorded in 2019 with a 35% food self-sufficiency rate, a situation that Grazia Milano explores in her contribution within the present volume.

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<sup>8</sup> The data have been collected from the MAFF's website: [https://www.maff.go.jp/j/tokei/kekka\\_gaiyou/sakumotu/menseki/r2/kouti/index.html](https://www.maff.go.jp/j/tokei/kekka_gaiyou/sakumotu/menseki/r2/kouti/index.html) (accessed 12/04/2022)

The concept of the correlation between food self-sufficiency and food security has exerted profound ramifications, not only on domestic policies geared towards bolstering domestic production and fostering the consumption of domestic goods, but also on foreign and diplomatic policies. This has entailed an increased focus on protecting the domestic market and countering international pressures for heightened liberalization. In particular, in the context of FTA/EPA negotiations, agricultural liberalization has consistently posed challenges for Japan. While Japan has undeniably reaped significant benefits from the global trade system, it has exhibited hesitancy in granting broader access to its agri-food market, despite persistent appeals from its key economic partners who also serve as major export destinations. Japan's reluctance to embrace agricultural liberalization within FTAs/EPAs reflects its complex position as a beneficiary of global trade. The preservation of its domestic agricultural sector and safeguarding food security considerations have remained paramount. Consequently, requests for increased market openness encounter resistance, as Japan seeks to protect its agricultural industry and ensure a stable supply of food for its population.

In the next sections, we will examine Japan's approach to free trade agreement negotiations, discerning two main periods: the period spanning from 2000 and 2012, during which Japan prioritized negotiations with countries where its reliance on agri-food imports was relatively low and with whom it held substantial negotiating leverage; and the period since 2013, characterized by Japan adopting a more assertive stance towards agricultural liberalization and engaging in agreements with major global agricultural producers.

### **3. Japan's FTAs/EPAs and agriculture protection 2000-2012**

The end of the Cold War and the growing diffusion of the neoliberal ideas prompted nations to seek new strategies for improving their chances of economic success. Deregulation, free trade, and the unhindered flow of capital emerged as the new guiding principles of the global economy. To become more competitive on the world market, countries committed to cutting tariffs and eliminating investment restrictions. The result was the proliferation of free trade agreements during the 1990s. By 1997 there were 72 fully operative FTAs worldwide, most of them being bilateral in nature. Notably, East Asia was the only region in the world to not have concluded an FTA of any kind during this period (Dent, 2016, 174-75).

Until the late 1990s, Japan did not view FTAs as a viable trade policy option. The Japanese government expressed strong criticism toward the enthusiasm shown by the European Union and the United States regarding FTAs, perceiving them more as a barrier to international free trade and preferring to continue to negotiate within the institutional framework of the World Trade Organization (Ōyane and Ōnishi, 2016, 55). However, the primary concern for the Japanese government revolved around the liberalization of the agricultural sector. As discussed earlier, food security in Japan is closely tied to food self-sufficiency, and a heavy reliance on food imports is regarded as a significant risk factor. The fear was that increased liberalization of the agricultural sector and subsequent import growth would further exacerbate dependence on foreign markets and lead to a decline in the food self-sufficiency rate.

The opposition to the signing of FTAs/EPAs was further reinforced by Japanese farmers' organizations, which vehemently resisted any form of liberalization. We have seen that the farmer population is declining, the farms are small and family-run and live on strong public support. In the 1990s, government support measures accounted for over 1.5 per cent of the GDP and more than 50 percent of farm receipts, compared with an OECD average of 1.2 and 30 percent, respectively.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Japanese farmers are very well-organized and were able to mount a strong opposition to FTAs/EPAs. In particular, the Japanese Agricultural Cooperatives (JA or *Nōgyō kyōdō kumiai* in Japanese) together with the "farm politicians" of the LDP and the MAFF forged an "iron-triangle" linkage and tried to resist the liberalization of the farm market (George Mulgan, 2011; Davis, 2003). This symbiotic relationship benefitted all three actors: MAFF sustained the agricultural groups by keeping high prices for staple foods like rice and implementing other supportive policies; the agricultural groups consolidated the political base of *nōrin giin* by supporting the LDP in elections; and *nōrin giin* exerted political power to make MAFF secure the agricultural budget (Hidetaka, 2021, 654). Prior to 2013, Japan's trade governance was fragmented, with each ministry controlling a specialized area of foreign economic policy and exerting an excessive amount of influence over the country's FTA/EPA agenda and negotiations. The resistance from a particular ministry could potentially derail FTA/EPA negotiations since ministries lacked veto power over one another's policies. Consequently, the

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<sup>9</sup> Data collected from: [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/agriculture-and-food/agricultural-support/indicator/english\\_6ea85c58-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/agriculture-and-food/agricultural-support/indicator/english_6ea85c58-en) (accessed 10/04/2022)

backing of MAFF (and subsequently JA and farm politicians) became crucial for the Japanese government to engage in FTA/EPA negotiations with other nations seeking to open Japan's agricultural market.

The outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the growing number of free trade agreements between its trading partners served as a catalyst for Japan to shift stress on trade policy from multilateralism to bilateralism. The 2000 Foreign Policy Bluebook positively addressed the topic of FTAs/EPAs for the very first time, admitting that as long as "regional trade agreements are consistent with the WTO Agreement, they would promote open trade rather than acting as a barrier to non-member countries, contribute to the expansion of world trade, and complement the multilateral trading system" (MoFA, 2000). In line with this shift, in December 2000, Japan agreed to have representatives from government, industry and academia from Japan and Singapore to examine the possibilities for a Japan-Singapore economic partnership agreement, which was eventually signed on January 2002. Since then, EPAs have superseded the WTO as the main vehicle for Japanese trade liberalization and Japan has signed twenty-one EPAs and it is in the midst of negotiations with a number of others, including the one with China and ROK, Turkey, and Colombia.<sup>10</sup> However, Japan's willingness to negotiate FTAs/EPAs has not been matched by a readiness to liberalize agricultural trade. This is also evident if we look at the Japanese government's use of the expression "economic partnership agreements" or EPA instead of "free trade agreements", to underline the desire to exclude substantial portions of sensitive items – notably, agri-food products – and not negotiate an overall liberalization on all goods.

Hence, Japan's initial reluctance to negotiate tariff reductions on agri-food products becomes understandable when considering its first Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with Singapore. Singapore accounted for a mere 3 percent of Japan's agricultural imports, making it seemingly simpler for Japan to comply with the requirements of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and achieve an agreement encompassing substantially all trade (Krauss, 2003, 319). However, the negotiations encountered obstacles, with the treatment of the agricultural sector swiftly

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<sup>10</sup> The 21 EPAs signed by Japan are with: Singapore (2002), Mexico (2004), Malaysia (2006), Philippines (2006), Indonesia (2007), Chile (2007), Thailand (2007), ASEAN (2008), Vietnam (2008), Brunei (2008), Switzerland (2009), India (2011), Peru (2012), Australia (2014), Mongolia (2016), TPP12 (signed in 2016 and never entered into force), TTPP11 (2018), EU (2018), US (2019), UK (2020), RCEP (2020).

becoming a contentious point of discussion. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) and certain members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) argued against further tariff reductions being negotiated within individual FTAs, urging that such discussions take place at the WTO. They expressed concerns that Japan would be compelled to make similar concessions with other countries if it deviated from the established WTO commitments (Yoshimatsu, 2006, 484-487). Eventually, Japan consented to eliminate tariffs that were already set at zero but resisted making concessions beyond those mandated by the WTO Agriculture Agreement. Consequently, out of a total of 2,277 agricultural, forestry, and fishery products, only 486 were covered under the Japan-Singapore agreement (Fujita et al., 2011, 197).

The second economic partnership agreement signed by Japan was with Mexico in 2004. Although Mexico was a larger agricultural country, it did not rank among Japan's primary suppliers. Once again, the biggest impediment in the negotiations was Japan's rigid opposition to liberalization in agricultural products, particularly with regard to pork, beef, and chicken products, oranges and orange juice. After a strong request from Mexican government, Japan opened up these markets by raising import quotas rather than removing or reducing tariffs would typically be expected. In return, Mexico agreed to liberalize its steel and automobile markets within seven to ten years, meeting Japan's strong request in these sectors. As a result, Mexico agreed to open its market to all imports from Japan, while Japan agreed to open its market to only 84 percent of its imports from Mexico. Instead, Japan raised import quotas on goods like beef, chicken, oranges, and orange juice that were not part of the original request (Urata, 2007, 102).

The negotiations with other countries (in particular with Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Chile) followed a similar pattern characterized by Japan's strong resistance to agricultural liberalization. This stance resulted in the exclusion of a significant number of agricultural products from tariff reduction leading to persistently lower trade liberalization rates for Japan compared to its partner countries (Urata, 2014, 10-11). On average, Japan's EPA negotiations generally excluded approximately 40 percent of its agricultural products from tariff concessions. For example, the tariff concession rates for agricultural and fishery products were 53.5 percent in the Japan-Singapore EPA, 47.4 percent in the Japan-Mexico EPA, 61.7 percent in the Japan-Malaysia FTA, 64.1 percent in the Japan-Chile EPA, 63 percent in the Japan-Indonesia EPA, 60.6 percent in the Japan-Brunei EPA, and 59 percent in the Japan-Philippines EPA. Notably, the Japan-Thailand

EPA had the highest tariff concession rate for agricultural and fishery products at 71.7 percent (Choi and Oh, 2021, 22). These relative low tariff concession rates for agricultural and fishery products are particularly surprising when one considers that Japan's EPA partners in this period were not major agri-food exporters in Japan (Ibidem). Moreover, Japan had never included sensitive primary commodities like rice, sugar, wheat, pork, and dairy products in its EPA negotiations (Ibidem). On the other side, the partner countries – most of them developing economies – have accepted the uneven terms in the expectation of benefits in areas such as aid, investments, and technical cooperation.

#### **4. Food security discourse and foreign policy: FTA/EPA as an opportunity for food export**

On November 11, 2011, the then-Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko made an announcement<sup>11</sup> regarding its decision to enter into consultations toward participating in the negotiations of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a regional free trade agreement between twelve countries of the Pacific Rim.<sup>12</sup> This news immediately prompted a reaction from the MAFF and as well as the *nōrin giin*, who expressed deep concerns about Japan joining an agreement that included major global agricultural producers such as the United States and Australia. A year prior, in 2010, the MAFF had released a study examining the potential consequences of Japan's participation in a comprehensive agreement of this nature, projecting devastating effects on the country's agriculture and food security. Specifically, the MAFF assessed the impact of tariff elimination and asserted that if Japan were to join the TPP, agricultural production would experience a decline in value amounting to 4.1 trillion yen. This decrease would include a reduction of 2 trillion yen in rice production, resulting in an overall contraction of Japan's GDP by 8 trillion yen. Most notably, it predicted a worrisome decline in the food self-sufficiency rate from approximately 40 percent to a mere 14 percent (MAFF, 2011). Although the MAFF later revised the figures regarding the decline, it consistently maintained that Japan's participation in the TPP would have catastrophic consequences for the domestic agriculture industry.

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<sup>11</sup> The press conference of the Prime Minister Noda is available at: <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/noda/statement/201111/11kaiken.html> (accessed 4 May 2022)

<sup>12</sup> The countries are New Zealand, Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Singapore, the United States and Vietnam.

However, a significant shift in Japan's approach to market liberalization occurred in 2013. Since then, Japan has successfully concluded high-level EPA agreements with important agricultural exporting nations including Australia in 2014 and the EU in 2018, marking a notable divergence from its prior EPA negotiations. In 2012, before the negotiations started, Japan's food imports from these two partners totaled 6.4 percent and 13.3 percent, respectively. To provide further context, the proportion of food imports from these two trading partners was equal to the sum of the proportions from Japan's prior thirteen EPAs (Choi and Oh, 2021, 24). Regarding the agreement with the European Union, Japan agreed to eliminate tariffs on over 90 per cent of EU agricultural export from the first day after the agreement entered into force (European Commission, 2017). Moreover, Japan successfully negotiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and sign the agreement in 2016. Despite the United States' withdrawal from the TPP soon after Donald Trump's election in 2017, Japan assumed a leadership role and revitalized the agreement as TPP-11, which came into effect for the initial six ratifying countries (Japan being the second to ratify, after Mexico) on December 30, 2018.

These achievements mark a clear reversal in Japan's economic diplomacy. The primary catalyst behind this shift was the return of Abe Shinzō to the government in 2012, following his first experience in 2006-7. Despite initial opposition to the agreement, once in power, Abe affirmed the importance of the TPP, as well as free trade agreements in general, as integral component of his strategy to revitalize the Japanese economy – the so-called Abenomics – and in March 2013 he officially announced Japan's participation in the TPP negotiations (Akimoto, 2018, 186).

To attain these outcomes, the Abe administration recognized the necessity of reducing the influence of the agricultural lobby and presenting a new narrative on national food security. Firstly, Abe sought to weaken opposition from the MAFF and the *nōrin zoku* by strategically appointing pro-free trade Diet members to key positions. His first agriculture minister, Hayashi Yoshimasa, lacked expertise in agricultural policy and did not have affiliation with *nōrin zoku* or JA (Mulgan, 2015a). In 2014, Hayashi was replaced by Nishikawa Koya, member of the *nōrin zoku* but a strong supporter of liberalization (Mulgan, 2014). Following Nishikawa's resignation due to a political scandal in 2015, Prime Minister Abe appointed Moriyama Hiroshi as the new chairman of the MAFF. Also member of the *nōrin zoku*, Moriyama was a vocal supporter of the TPP and remained in office until the conclusion of the negotiations in December 2015 (Mulgan,

2015b). The creation of a special TPP unit, the Government Headquarter for the TPP (*TPP sōgō taisaku honbu*), within the Cabinet Secretariat Office (*Naikaku kantei*), provided another means to bypass lobbying groups and thereby advance in the negotiations (Koshino and Ward, 2022, 96). In this way, the Abe government has been able to give shape at the *kantei nōsei* or “the agricultural politics of the Cabinet”, downgrading the MAFF’s role in agricultural policymaking and formally centralizing the process in the Cabinet for the first in postwar history (Maclachlan and Shimizu, 2021, 424).

But probably the most significant and effective agricultural policies introduced under the Abe administration was the reform of JA, thus “violating one the last remaining taboos of postwar Japanese politics” (Ibidem, 427). The President of JA-Zenchū (the administrative “control tower” of the federation), Banzai Akira, strongly criticized the reform. However, with the appointment of pro-TPP politicians to key positions in the cabinet, he found considerable difficulties in garnering support (Choi and Oh, 2021, 74). After two years of deliberation, the Agricultural Cooperative Law was ultimately passed by the upper house of the Diet on August 28, 2015, and came into effect in April 2016. The reform reduced some of JA-Zenchū internal organization authority over lower-level JA groups and changed its status to general incorporated association, essentially making it a voluntary association similar to other interest groups. Additionally, the reform abolished its legal right to submit proposals to the government on matters relating to the cooperatives (Mulgan, 2016a and 2016b).

The new course in agricultural policy and economic diplomacy inaugurated by the Abe administration also concerned the approach to food security. As we have already discussed, Japan has traditionally associated the concept of food security with self-sufficiency, believing that liberalization posed a threat that needed to be avoided. The prevailing belief was that the enhancement of self-sufficiency, and consequently food security, could only be achieved through a substantial consumption of locally produced products, particularly those associated with traditional cuisine. In a speech delivered in Tokyo in May 2013, Abe unveiled his plan for the agriculture sector, which aimed to expand the domestic production by boosting agricultural export from 450 billion yen in 2012 to 1trillion yen by 2020. This ambitious goal was reaffirmed in June 2013 when the Abe administration launched the “Japan is back” strategy (*Nihon fukkō senryaku*), listing the increase in agri-food exports as a key target for the growth of the Japanese economy. In August 2013, the MAFF officially outlined the strategy to increase food

export. This new strategy, nicknamed as “FBI strategy”, centers around three main activities: promoting of the use of Japanese ingredients in the various cuisines of the world (“made from Japan”), developing the food industry and promoting of Japan’s food culture (“made by Japan”), and expanding of Japan’s food export (“made in Japan”) (MAFF 2013). The inclusion of *washoku*, the traditional cuisine of Japan, on the UNESCO Intangible Heritage List in December 2013 should be viewed within the context of this strategy aimed at promoting Japanese food abroad.

The 2015 Basic Plan for Food, Agriculture, and Rural Areas (*Shokuryō nōgyō nōson kihon keikan*) reiterated the importance of increasing the consumption of traditional food to improve the food self-sufficiency rate. However, for the first time, it also acknowledged the significance of “domestic and foreign demand (*kokunaigai no juyō*)” for Japanese food, highlighting the strategic role of food exports in strengthening national food security (MAFF, 2015, 15). To gain a better understanding of Japan’s productive capacity, the Plan introduced a new indicator, the “food self-sufficiency potential (*shokuryō jikyū ryoku*)” that, in comparison to the food self-sufficiency rate, displays the potential per capita caloric supply per domestic food produced using all farmland in Japan, including abandoned but recoverable farmland (Ibidem, 24).

The introduction of this new indicator signifies a shift in perspective regarding the relationship between self-sufficiency and food security. The food self-sufficiency potential rate not only provides insights into Japan’s ability to cope with potential food import crises but also demonstrates its capacity to adapt to a significant increase in demand for agricultural products from abroad (Ibidem). For this reason, in the 2016 White Book, the MAFF declared that “the government will continue to improve food self-sufficiency potential and the food self-sufficiency ratio through efforts such as the increase in the demands of domestic agricultural products at home and abroad including exports” (MAFF, 2017, 10). The White Book also stated that, in order to achieve these objectives, Japan’s agriculture should become more competitive through a number of significant reforms, including the development of manpower, structural reform of distribution and processing, etc. – but also through the development of strategic export system (Ibidem, 4).

In order to develop this export system, the MAFF established the Executive Committee for the Export Strategy (*yushutsu senryaku iinkai*) and formulated the Export Expansion Policy (*yushutsu kakudai hōshin*), where seven categories of food and agricultural products to promote abroad were

identified – seafood products, rice and rice-made processed foods, forest products, flowering trees (bonsai), vegetables, beef meat and tea (MAFF, 2015). In the same year, the ministry put into practice a new, more thorough strategy, based on seven main actions that are: the collection of data concerning the export markets; the promotion of Japanese food culture by highlighting the “good quality” of Japanese food and agricultural products; holding regular events where to promote Japanese foods and improve logistic networks; supporting the creation of overseas sales bases; reviewing the current regulation and help foreign buyers to buy directly from Japanese wholesalers; relax export regulations; and renovate the procedures for food export (Prime Minister’s Office, 2016, 3-4).

In pursuit of these goals, a number of initiatives have been launched to assist companies that want to expand their international sales or to promote Japanese food outside the archipelago. Examples include the JFOODO (Japan Food products Overseas Promotion) program, established within JETRO as a support platform for Japanese agri-food companies that operate or wish to operate on the international market to increase exports, and the Japanese Food Supporter Program, a certification system for restaurants, bars or simple vendors that certifies the offer to the public of true Japanese products.

The new strategy implemented in 2012 has yielded significant results. Although Japan has not succeeded in improving its self-sufficiency rate, the implementation of economic partnership agreements and the strategy of promoting Japanese food abroad have led to a substantial increase in Japanese agri-food exports, reaching the government’s target of almost 1 trillion yen. Moreover, total agricultural output has increased from approximately 84 billion yen to nearly 93 billion yen in 2018.<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

The worsening of climate change, the pandemic crisis from Covid-19, the Russian aggression of Ukraine are some of the factors that in recent years have tragically brought back to the spotlight how deeply interconnected threats to food security are. Furthermore, given their scale, these factors clearly show, if ever there were a need, that food security issues cannot be

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<sup>13</sup> The data have been collected from the MAFF Statistical Yearbooks (Nōrin suisanshō tōkei-hyō). Url: <https://www.maff.go.jp/j/tokei/kikaku/nenji/index.html>

addressed only domestically but require diplomatic and international cooperation.

In this paper, we have seen that Japan has traditionally associated the concept of self-sufficiency with food security as a response to perceived external threats. This connection between self-sufficiency and security has been a significant aspect of Japan's approach to ensuring a stable food supply. The country has regarded the attainment of self-sufficiency as a means of safeguarding its population against potential disruptions in the global food system, thereby securitizing the issue. By emphasizing the importance of domestic production and reducing dependence on imports, Japan has sought to mitigate vulnerabilities and maintain a reliable food source in times of uncertainty, despite the results never being satisfactory. This approach has strongly influenced Japan's economic diplomacy and its stance towards free trade agreements or economic partnership agreements. In the period between 2000 and 2012, Japan pursued FTAs/EPAs without a clear strategy, primarily aiming to minimize liberalization in the agri-food sector to safeguard national food security. The fears associated with food security, coupled with the close ties among the agricultural lobby, the agricultural cooperatives (JA), rural interest groups (*nōrin zoku*), and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF), have hindered the establishment of comprehensive FTAs/EPAs between Japan and its trading partners.

However, the advent of the Abe administration led to a radical change in Japan's approach to agri-food market liberalization. The appointment of pro-liberalization personalities to the MAFF and the reform of the JA were able to weaken the power of the agricultural lobby. Moreover, the narrative surrounding food security underwent a significant transformation. The liberalization of the agricultural market was reframed as an opportunity to enhance exports and Japan's food self-sufficiency potential, rather than as a threat. This strategic shift is exemplified by the successful negotiations and implementation of FTAs, including the TPP-11, the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement, and the RCEP, which showcase Japan's altered attitude towards agri-food market liberalization. It is noteworthy that the MAFF website now features comprehensive information on various FTAs/EPAs, highlighting tariff advantages for Japanese exporters in the Export-International section (*yushutsu-kokusai*).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See: [https://www.maff.go.jp/j/yusyutu\\_kokusai/index.html](https://www.maff.go.jp/j/yusyutu_kokusai/index.html)

These changes represent a significant milestone in expanding Japanese agri-food exports, although certain challenges still persist, such as the high price of Japanese products. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that this new approach has not only impacted the country's food security but has also turned Japan into a free trade champion in a world economy still widely threatened by protectionism.

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## Chapter 2

### China: food security or food securitization?

Marisa Siddivò

#### **Abstract**

*Following the trend that characterized studies and policies regarding national security after the Cold War, China has broadened the concept of “threats” to include challenges to “human security” like poverty, climate change, financial crisis, migration, and so on, which could result in risks to domestic and international stability. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the topic of “non-traditional security” (NTS) has attracted the attention of Chinese analysts who are debating the range of the “threats” to be covered by security and defence policies. The aim of this paper, however, is limited to the Chinese leadership’s urgency, since 2018, when it comes to including food security in “non-traditional security” issues. Data seem to confirm that due to the financial, technological, and regulatory support of the State, the supply of food in China is no longer a problem. The strong commitment by the current leadership to positioning food security among the issues to be managed by exceptional measures creates many questions worth considering.*

#### **Abstract**

*Dalla pubblicazione (1994) del Report delle Nazioni Unite sullo sviluppo umano fino all’invasione dell’Ucraina (2022), il concetto di “sicurezza nazionale” si è andato ampliando includendo le cosiddette “non-traditional security issues” come il terrorismo, gli attacchi cibernetici, i flussi migratori e, in seconda battuta, il cambiamento climatico, la sicurezza alimentare e le pandemie. La Cina non fa eccezione e a partire dai primi anni 2000 include nelle politiche di sicurezza nazionale un insieme sempre più ampio di “minacce” alla stabilità del paese. Tra queste emerge, con la forza*

*dell'impegno diretto del Partito, il tema della sicurezza alimentare. La Cina non è affetta da problemi di insicurezza alimentare e sebbene sia un importatore netto di prodotti alimentari, ha un'autosufficienza che supera il 90% per gran parte dei cereali. Secondo le stime degli esperti, nel 2030 la capacità di produzione nazionale potrebbe ridursi per effetto di fattori come la scarsità di acqua, il deterioramento dei suoli agricoli e la mancanza di manodopera ma al momento il paese è ancora in grado di nutrire 1 miliardo e 400 milioni di persone con una incidenza delle importazioni che non supera il 10% dell'approvvigionamento complessivo. Perché, quindi, già prima del COVID-19 e della guerra in Ucraina, due eventi che hanno oggettivamente condizionato la sicurezza alimentare a livello globale, il governo cinese ha avviato un processo di "securitizzazione" di questo tema spostando i rapporti di forza tra i soggetti istituzionali ed economici?*

## **1. Introduction**

In 1994, the United Nations Development Program published the Report on Human Development, which aimed to move the attention of governments from "military security" to "human security". Three years later, the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attested that the country had to "protect its economic security" and that "the interaction (*among countries*) based on mutual trust, mutual benefit and parity represent the core of a new concept of security" (Li *et alii*, 2014). Following a global trend, the CCP expressed two new concepts. The first was the necessity of broadening the concept of national security encompassing "traditional" and "non-traditional"<sup>1</sup> threats to national sovereignty. The second was the need to override the state-centric approach to traditional security issues and coordinate security efforts at a global level. Not by chance, interest in the NTS among Chinese analysts dates from the Asian financial crisis in 1997 (Breslin, 2014), an exogenous shock that put at risk the miraculous ascent of the Asian region as a whole. As reported by Liu Hongyi, however, it was only at the beginning of the 2000s that "China's mention of 'non-traditional security' (NTS) issues in official media increased significantly...from 11

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<sup>1</sup> "Non-traditional security"(非传统 安全) is the term preferred by the Chinese leadership and analysts in place of "human security" (人的安全), which has been associated with the "right of people to live in freedom and dignity" by the United Nations General Assembly.

articles in the People's Daily newspaper in 2001, to 78 in 2005,<sup>2</sup> and 66 in 2007. After a lull between 2008 and 2009, mentions notably increased from 2010, with the People's Daily mentioning the term in 68 articles in 2010, 82 in 2014, and 87 in 2015" (Liu, 2021, 506).

Pak and Lai confirm, "The first research project on "China and non-traditional security issues" was undertaken in September 2003, followed by the first national academic conference on the issue held in Beijing in December 2003...In order to strengthen dialogues about how to address non-traditional security threats in the era of globalisation, *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), a monthly academic journal published by the Institute of World Economics Challenges and Policy, "has run a special column on 'non-traditional security studies' since 2003" (Pak and Lai, 2007, 301).

Analysing the domestic debate over national security in the first decade of the current century, Susan Craig found, "There is a consensus among the élite that the likelihood of traditional military conflict has decreased and has been successfully managed through military deterrence. It is the non-traditional threats such as energy insecurity, environmental degradation, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), terrorism, transnational crime, drug-trafficking, piracy, and the spread of disease that increasingly are threatening to China due to their potential to impede progress during China's period of strategic opportunity. Non-traditional security threats are thus of just as much concern, if not more, than traditional ones, in China's new security environment" (Craig, 2007, 18).

The term "comprehensive security" (*zongti guojia anquan guan*, 总体国家安全观), stated by Xi Jinping at the first meeting of the National Security Commission in April 2014, includes all the suggestions proposed by national experts.<sup>3</sup> The new strategies and the consequent reorganization of security structures and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) encompass many fields: the political subversion determined by terrorism, separatism, and extremism,<sup>4</sup> cyber-attacks, piracy, climate change, the pandemic, food safety and security. From The White Paper on China's National Defense that attests to the "new security concept" in 2002 to the White Paper on "China's

<sup>2</sup> The spread of the SARS epidemic in 2003 accelerated the debate over NTS issues.

<sup>3</sup> About the debate among scholars and national security experts, see Wang, 2004; Liu, 2020. Xi Jinping's speech at the National Security Commission was reported by Renmin Ribao (People's Daily) on 16 April 2014.

<sup>4</sup> The so-called "three evils".

National Defense in the New Era” in 2019, all official documents stress the interwoven between “traditional” and “non- traditional” security; the need to coordinate them; the necessity of overcoming national boundaries to “establish a new regional security cooperation architecture”; and the enlargement of international and domestic threats and the need to focus on dual-use technology. At the same time, many Chinese analysts wonder about the spread of this topic: “The awareness of a close nexus between security and development is increasing at a high level. Why [is] security becoming so important? Which is the relationship between development and security and how to manage them in a unified manner?” (Changjiang, 2020). As in the rest of the world, however, boundaries between the two kinds of threats and between instruments to manage both of them were, and still are, not easily identifiable. According to Craig (2007), the widely cited General Xiong recognized in the NTS threats the following characteristics: “(1) they transcend national boundaries and are thus transnational in nature; (2) they go beyond the military sphere; (3) they often are sudden and unexpected; and (4) they are frequently interwoven with traditional security threats...they often are crises that ‘explode in a sudden way, . . . lack clear signs, . . . or have a strong, random character’”. Despite General Xiong’s advice to limit the sphere of NTS issues, in the last years, the term has included more and more “threats” that, until now, have been identified and managed as “contradictions”. Regional, income, and gender gaps, the energy supply deficit, environmental pollution, unsafe food, and so on became matters of concern to be managed by *ad hoc* instruments or, as Buzan and Wæver (2003) would say, by exceptional measures. The concept of “securitization”, developed by Buzan and Wæver inside the Copenhagen School, represents the analytical framework of our consideration of the current approach to food security in China. Securitization has been explained as “the discursive process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat” (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, 491). It is, indeed, a process “constructed” by an authoritative actor and triggered by its “speech act”. According to Nyman and Zeng, the term “securitization”, coined by the Copenhagen School, aims “to conceptualise what happens when particular threats are labelled as issues of security by elite actors...securitization can be beneficial, attracting attention and extra resources to address an issue, it can also have potentially negative consequences” (Nyman and Zeng, 2016, 302). Many scholars believe that authoritarian countries do not need to use the

securitization approach. Namely, they do not need to move an issue “from the realm of regular politics into the realm of security, where emergency measures are legitimised and where they are treated differently: using ‘threat, defense, and often state-centred solutions’” (Nyman and Zeng, 2016, 302). In fact, terms like “threat, defense and state-centred solution” are echoed in China’s official literature without invoking a state of emergency. However, in some fields, like energy (Nyman and Zeng, 2016), water management (Lei and Warner, 2021), artificial intelligence (Zeng, 2021), climate change (Ma *et alii*, 2019), and, since the arrival of SARS-Covid in 2003, public health (Gebaska, 2022), it is possible to identify an increasingly alarmed tone that legitimizes a shift in power balance among Party, State, and Army, between central and local governments, between state-owned enterprises and private ones, and between administrative instruments and market levers.

The question we pose is the following: Can we suggest that “food availability, access, utilization and stability”<sup>5</sup> is experiencing an increasing process of “securitization”? The paper was outlined before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, when all data led experts to a positive assessment of China’s capacity to satisfy the needs of its population through domestic production and “moderate” imports. It is also true that, in order of trade frictions with the most relevant exporters<sup>6</sup> of food to China and in order of the difficulties involved in land reclamation, grain storage, and water scarcity, the same data suggested some dull forecasts for food security in 2030. Before the onset of war in Ukraine, however, the urgency of the Chinese government when it came to safeguarding food self-sufficiency as a tool to protect national security did not seem to be well grounded. It was not rare to read ironic comments on Chinese blogs about the connection between food and the defence of national security.<sup>7</sup> Now the context is changing. The hot war active in Ukraine as well as the cold war, resulting from the increasing hostility between the two alliances, is affecting food availability worldwide. During the Fifth Session of the 13<sup>th</sup> NPC (March 2022), in fact, a researcher at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs admitted that the Ukraine “crisis”, the trade frictions, and the Covid-19 pandemic could affect

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<sup>5</sup> Concept of food security by FAO.

<sup>6</sup> Australia, Canada and United States.

<sup>7</sup> The Danone/Wahaha dispute provides an example. “The Chinese food company Wahaha accused the French competitor Danone of endangering Chinese “economic security” and called for industrial protection—prompting some Chinese newspapers to react with sarcasm (“We find cookies and beverages have become national security issues this morning”)", Goldstein, 2012.

the food supply in China: “Safeguarding national food security and ensuring the supply of major agricultural products remain prime topics amid the ongoing annual two sessions as the nation's top leadership, legislators and political advisers all highlighted the issues” (Zhao, 2022).<sup>8</sup> However, the question of the urgency of associating the evergreen concept of food security with national security, just before the two mentioned “black swans”, is still pending.

## 2. Food Security in China

Food security is a longstanding issue of concern for the Chinese leadership. In the last 19 years, the CCP has devoted the so-called Document no.1<sup>9</sup> to the revitalization of agriculture and rural areas, to remind all economic and institutional actors that grain self-sufficiency is still a strategic goal of the country. Perhaps it is useful to clarify that in the Chinese language, “food” always means “grain”, 粮食 *lianshi* (wheat, rice, and corn<sup>10</sup>), while “security”, 安全 *anquan*, is a flexible concept that changes over time. “Food security” in fact, ranges from the autarchy in the Fifties to the “grain self-sufficiency at 95%” in the Nineties to the capacity to supply food to the population in this century, by both domestic production and import or investment abroad. It is also useful to clarify that food security in China has always been a “national security issue”; since the Great Leap Forward (1958), the quantity of grain stockpiled in silos and the number and location of those silos have been a “State secret”.<sup>11</sup> Finally, it is similarly

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<sup>8</sup> Last year, Ukraine supplied China with 29% of its imported corn and 26% of its imported barley. According to Dimsum Blogspot, “Agriculture was a prominent part of China’s Ukrainian investment plan launched in 2013 and Black Sea port and logistics facilities belonging to grain traders Nidera and Noble Agri were targeted in COFCO’s multi-billion-dollar acquisitions of the two companies. In 2021 China imported ag products from Ukraine worth over \$5 billion—composed mainly of corn, barley, and sunflower oil and meal—and COFCO probably handled much of the trade”.

<sup>9</sup> Also known as the “red characters document”. It explains priorities in the Party’s agenda.

<sup>10</sup> The Statistical Yearbook of China distinguishes between “cereal” and “grain”. Cereal consists of rice, wheat, and corn, while grain includes beans and tubers. Soybeans, root tubers, and coarse grains are not included in the self-sufficiency policy.

<sup>11</sup> Nikkei Asia reports, “According to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, China is expected to have 69% of the globe’s maize reserves in the first half of crop year 2022, 60% of its rice and 51% of its wheat” and highlights that “[l]ess than 20% of the world’s population has managed to stockpile more than half of the globe’s maize and other

useful to stress that, in China, “the concept of food security no longer just refers to the desperate plight of people in danger of dying through starvation and malnutrition, but also to the ability of people (and states) to get supplies of the foods that they want to eat at acceptable and stable prices. This expanded understanding means that the search for food security is no longer just about preventing hunger, but now also about the geostrategic objectives of states that justifies, for example, securing agricultural land and/or produce overseas...” (Breslin, 2014, 8).

As mentioned above, the Chinese state has always spared no efforts in guaranteeing food security. Its support of the grain output can be identified at the regulatory level and in price policies, technology transfer to rural areas, and overseas investments aimed at directly managing other countries’ cultivated land (in land-intensive countries like Brazil) and acquiring management/technology capacity in developed countries.

**Table 1. Total and per capita grain output**

	Total output (millions of tons)	Per capita output
2011	571.20	438
2012	612.22	453
2013	630.48	464
2014	639.64	469
2015	660.60	482
2016	660.43	479
2017	661.60	477
2018	657.89	472
2019	663.84*	474*
2020	669.49**	
2021	682.90***	483
2022	686.53****	481

Source: Statistical Yearbook of China

\* National Bureau of Statistics, Bulletin on the National Grain Output in 2019, [http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202012/t20201211\\_1808729.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202012/t20201211_1808729.html)

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grains, leading to steep price increases across the planet and dropping more countries into famine” (Nikkei Asia, December 23, 2021 16:47 jst, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Datawatch/China-hoards-over-half-the-world-s-grain-pushing-up-global-prices>).

\*\* National Bureau of Statistics, Bulletin on the National Grain Output in 2020, [http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202012/t20201211\\_1808729.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202012/t20201211_1808729.html)

\*\*\* State Council Information Office: SCIO briefing on China's economic performance in 2021, [http://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/node\\_8027805.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/node_8027805.htm) SCIO economic

\*\*\*\*National Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Communique of PRC on the 2022 national economic and social development.

The result of these combined strategies is a constant increase in total and per capita grain output and a general improvement in production, availability, and access to most staple and non-staple food and feed. In 2021, for instance, wheat gained a self-sufficiency rate of 93.51 percent, corn of 91.16 percent, and rice of 90%. Statistical data reveal that the whole food and beverage sector has been able to face the increasing demand by the population. From 1979 to 2020, meat, for instance, grew by 5.1% yearly, aquatic products by 6.5%, vegetables by 8.6%,<sup>12</sup> and so on. According to a broad analysis conducted by Liu, Han, and Chai, “China has experienced a dramatic diet transition over the past half a century. The per capita caloric supply of Chinese people increased from 1782 kcal/day in 1965 to 3200 kcal/day in 2018,<sup>13</sup> leading to a significantly decreasing risk of hunger. The prevalence of malnutrition in China has decreased from 24% in the early 1990s to less than 10% in recent years thanks to an upgraded diet pattern, e.g., a higher intake of high-protein foods. According to FAO data, the per capita intake of meats has increased by almost 11 times over the past 50 years” (Liu, Han, and Chai, 2021,1). The problem is, rather, the excessive consumption of meats. The 2021 China Health and Nutrition Survey showed that “...the per capita intake of protein and fats was 85g/day and 79g/day in 2020, respectively, exceeding the recommended standards; the proportion of energy supplied by fats was 34.7%, surpassing the recommended range by 20% to 30% as well” (Huang, 2021).

In short, China is not a “low-income food-deficit country”. Recent state and private investment in land consolidation and technology diffusion in the whole agri-food supply chain have paved the way for the modernization process that struggled to emerge because of the excessive fragmentation of the

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<sup>12</sup> From 1980 and 2000.

<sup>13</sup> At the “2021 China and Global Agricultural Policy Forum” organized by IFRI and the China Academy of Social Sciences, Mei Xurong said that in 2020, China's per capita energy consumption was 2.248 kcal/day.

land and the supply chain determined by reforms in 1978. Domestic output is constantly increasing; imports from diversified partners and overseas investment in land and technology sources have largely improved both the agri-food supply chain and the diet of the people. China, in other words, shows its ability to face the uncertainty of international and domestic contexts.

From 2008,<sup>14</sup> however, we can note the increasing attention paid by Chinese lawmakers to food security; from 2018, the uncertainties of the domestic and international context have allowed the debate about the options “self-sufficiency/import” to override the academic borders to invest all players of the agri-food chain and the national security structure as well.

The White Paper on food security,<sup>15</sup> published in 2019, lists the documents enacted since 2008 to improve the macroeconomic regulation of food production and trade:

“ – Paying close attention to state planning as guidance. China has formulated a series of plans, including the Outline of the Thirteenth Five-year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China, Outline of the Medium- and Long-term Plan for National Food Security (2008-2020), National Plan for an Increase of Production Capacity for 50 Billion Kg of Food (2009-2020), Outline of China’s Food and Nutrition Development (2014-2020), National Agriculture Sustainable Development Plan (2015-2030), National Land Planning Outline (2016-2030), National Rural Vitalization Strategic Plan (2018-2022), and Outline of the 13th Five-year Development Plan for the Food Industry. Through these plans, China defines its goals and measures at different levels, and guides agricultural modernization, food nutrition, and the food industry, with the goal of safeguarding national food security in every respect”.<sup>16</sup>

Most of the documents fix four points:

The first is the threshold of 122 million hectares of agricultural soil below which the country cannot assure food security (“Medium- and long-term food security plan for 2008– 2020”<sup>17</sup> and National Land Planning Outline 2016-2030).<sup>18</sup> Currently, China has 135 million hectares<sup>19</sup> of

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<sup>14</sup> In response to the world food price crisis of 2007-08.

<sup>15</sup> The second one that the Chinese government has published on food since 1996.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.etogether.net/wap/foreignAffairs/20191031/10635\\_2.html](https://www.etogether.net/wap/foreignAffairs/20191031/10635_2.html)

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-11/13/content\\_1148414.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-11/13/content_1148414.htm)

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-02/04/content\\_5165309.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-02/04/content_5165309.htm)

<sup>19</sup> It ranks third in the world after India and the United States.

agricultural land but urbanization and excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides have depleted the soil. The threshold serves to avoid an additional loss of agricultural soil.

The second is the overcoming of the household farm. Since 1989, the Chinese state has expressed its disappointment about the failed passage from the small household farm to a large, modern agricultural enterprise. The many attempts to solicit peasants' investment in enlarging the production scale have followed two trajectories. The first is the consolidation of the land throughout the marketization of the land rent certificates; the second is the inclusion of the small farm in the supply chains led by so-called dragonhead enterprises.<sup>20</sup>

The third point is the transfer of technology in agricultural work. Both the "Outline of the 13th five-year development plan for the food industry",<sup>21</sup> and the National Rural Revitalization Strategic Plan 2018-22<sup>22</sup> endorse the project of a "digital countryside" that is an "internet (including big data, intelligent farming, and e-commerce) + agriculture" strategy. It, in turn, requires the reclamation of degraded soil and the re-consolidation of the plots distributed during the seventies to rural households. The digital countryside "will develop in 4 core directions: logistics and commercialization; service diversification; smart agricultural production and industrial ecological system".

**Figure 1: Agri-food tech**



Source: startupbootcamp-china-industry-report-2018-85-63

<sup>20</sup> Dragonhead firms (longtuan qiye) are firms that the government has chosen to lead the agri-food supply chains.

<sup>21</sup><https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fggz/fzzlgh/gjjzxgh/201706/W02019110462425962445>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-09/26/content\\_5325534.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-09/26/content_5325534.htm)

The fourth point regards the consumption of food. The “National plan for an increase of production capacity for 50 billion kg of food, 2009-2020”,<sup>23</sup> the Outline of China’s food and nutrition development, 2014-2020,<sup>24</sup> draft of the “Grain Security Law” and “Anti-food waste law”<sup>25</sup> focus on better accessibility among the entire population to a nutritious diet (fighting poverty and its consequences, malnutrition)<sup>26</sup> and, on the opposite spectrum, food waste.

Finally, a more accurate utilization of the resources (soil and water) is addressed by the “National agriculture sustainable development plan, 2015-2030”.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, in 2018, China’s State Administration of Grain (SAG), renamed the State Administration of Grain and Reserves (SAGR), acquired more weight, as it “will consolidate responsibilities for the stewardship of strategic reserves of corn, wheat, rice, oilseeds, [and] natural gas” (USDA, 2018, 2)

Efforts to ensure the increasing availability of food to the population seem to be significant, albeit extremely costly.<sup>28</sup> The scope of the government’s action is very large because, as we saw, it departs from the land and its consolidation, crossing agricultural work with incentives for peasants to enter the supply chains led by domestic dragonhead firms, and includes the massive introduction of advanced technologies. Finally, it deals with the sensitive problem of storage and consumption behaviour, both of which are deemed responsible for food waste.

Imports and foreign investment inflow and outflow also play a relevant role in the food security strategy. The import value of agricultural products has increased by 78% in constant US\$, while domestic agricultural value increased by 36% from 2010 to 2018. It is useful to highlight that most grain imports (soybean and barley, in particular) are destined for feed. According

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<sup>23</sup> [http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2009-11/03/content\\_1455493.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2009-11/03/content_1455493.htm)

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2014-02/10/content\\_2581766.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2014-02/10/content_2581766.htm)

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/c23934/202112/f4b687aa91b0432baa4b6bdee8aa1418.shtml>

<sup>26</sup> In January 2021, the Chinese government announced that it had achieved the goal of “elimination of ... extreme poverty”. International agencies like FAO and IFPRI attest that, in China, the largest problem is no longer under-nourishment but, rather, over-nutrition and its related diseases.

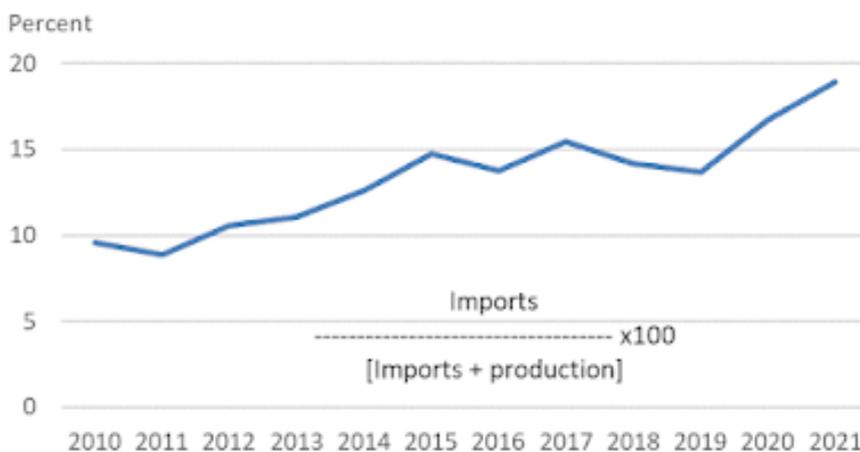
<sup>27</sup> [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-05/28/content\\_2869902.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-05/28/content_2869902.htm)

<sup>28</sup> In terms of impact on the environment and of state financial burden since the government set the grain purchase price well above the international price.

to most market surveys, the *westernization* of the diet has stimulated an increase in the consumption of meat and dairy products and, as a consequence, the import of grain for animal feed. For soybean products, the reliance on imports increased from 46% to 83%; for ruminant meat, imports increased from 2% to 17%, while for dairy products, imports increased from 11% to 24%.<sup>29</sup>

The last documents by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Areas (MARA) prescribe,

**Figure 2: Imports as share of China’s grain and oilseed supply, 2010-21**



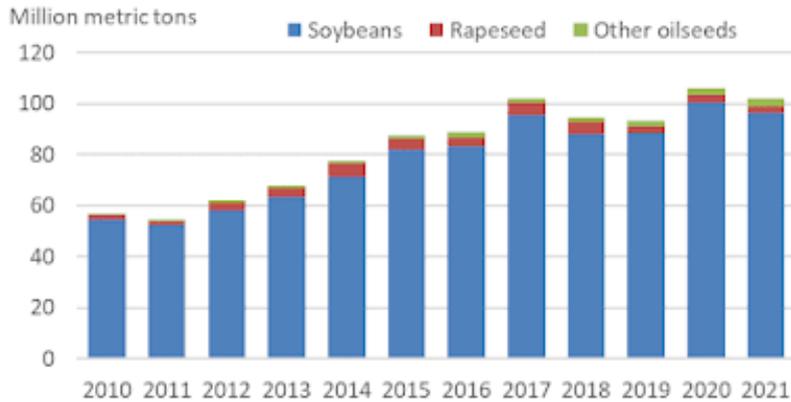
Source: Dimsum Blogspot, 20 January 2022

in fact, finding alternatives to soybean and corn for animal feed in order to reduce imports. Moreover, in 2022, Xi Jinping highlighted the importance of developing plant, animal, and microorganism-based proteins, that is to say, substituting meat proteins with vegetable ones. “A signal that China is willing to embrace cultivated meat marks a major milestone for the technology and is hugely significant for global climate efforts given that

<sup>29</sup> China is the fourth largest dairy producer in the world but “still relies heavily on dairy imports. In 2018, China imported whey, packed milk, and whole milk powder in volumes of over 500 thousand metric tons each. New Zealand, Australia, United States, Germany, and France are among the major suppliers of the dairy products for the Chinese market” (Statista, 2021).

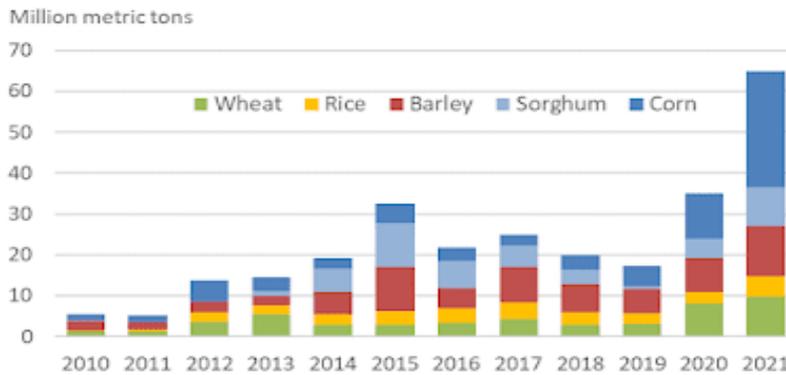
China's meat consumption is expected to double by 2050" (Tony Blair Institute, 2022).

**Figure 3: China's grain imports, 2010-2021**



Source: Dimsum Blogspot, 20 January 2022

**Figure 4: China's imports of oilseeds, 2010-21**



Source: Dimsum Blogspot, 20 January 2022

Top suppliers of high-quality grain to China are the United States, Canada, Australia, France, and Kazakhstan.<sup>30</sup> Brazil (soybeans) and Argentina (sorghum) follow the top suppliers. Until the 24<sup>th</sup> of February

<sup>30</sup> Imports from Kazakhstan fell from 400,000 to 179,000 metric tons between 2019 and 2021.

2022,<sup>31</sup> imports from Russia were modest due to phyto-sanitary troubles,<sup>32</sup> while Ukraine supplied 29% of the total import of corn by China destined for animal feed.

The top three categories of imported food in China, however, are not grain, but meat and meat products, seafood, and milk products. Dried fruit, nuts, seasoning, and spices follow the top categories. “Asian countries remain the largest source of food imports by China last year (2019), totalling US\$26.1 billion, followed by European countries whose food exports to China amounted to US\$22.2 billion last year” (Chen, 2020).

Import, however, is only one of the channels supporting food security. Chinese enterprises, in fact, have invested in many countries. “Between 2000 and 2018, China purchased an estimated 3.2 million hectares of land abroad, making it the fourth largest buyer in the world, behind the US, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Malaysia. In Australia, China was the second-largest foreign landholder in 2018, after the UK and ahead of the US” (China Power, 2022). Moreover, the acquisition of firms like Smithfield (US), Syngenta (Switzerland), Nidera (the Netherlands), Weetabix (Great Britain), and so on<sup>33</sup> shows the will to acquire know-how and market shares in developed countries. Dim Sums attests that, “This year (2023) dozens of agricultural officials have come to China to talk about cooperation. A compilation of news reports from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs web site shows 29 meetings with foreign dignitaries. Mostly visits with Minister Tang Renjian in Beijing, but also including Vice Minister Ma Youxiang’s trip to the western pacific and Australia, regional meetings of Southeast Asian and Pacific Island nations hosted in China, a meeting with Russia on fishing, and a meeting with Latin American diplomats to show off Chinese technology at the Academy of Agricultural Sciences.... China’s food security strategy has begun to look outward. During COVID years Chinese officials began to rant about a global food crisis caused by destabilizing policies taken by other countries. In 2021, the party’s “document number one” called for inserting Chinese companies in global supply chains to ensure stable food supplies for China” (dimsums.blogspot, May 18, 2023).

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<sup>31</sup> Russian attack on Ukraine.

<sup>32</sup> Due to the presence of mycothossine, China allowed the import of grain from only seven regions of Russia. Now it has lifted all barriers.

<sup>33</sup> For a detailed analysis of M&A operations in the agrifood sector by Chinese firms, see Gooch and Gale, 2018, and the China Global Investment Tracker by the Heritage Foundation.

### 3. Food securitization (安全化) in China

According to Liu Hongyi, the term “food security” as one of the “NTS” issues has been quoted by the People’s Daily one time each in 2008, 2009, and 2010, two times in 2011, and zero times until 2019. His research should be interpreted as evidence that, for the Chinese leadership, the food supply does not represent a risk to domestic stability. Although the nexus between food supply and national security had already emerged in 1998 at the Asean Regional Forum,<sup>34</sup> followed in 2007-08 as a reaction to the global food crisis, in 2011 with the surge of South China Sea disputes about fishing rights, and finally, in 2017 with the debate over climate change, Liu’s finding basically gets the point. The link between food and national security has entered the domestic debate as a “speech act” only in the last years. Nowadays, the most quoted sentence in the literature on this topic is “food security is an important base for national security” (粮食安全是维护国家安全的重要支粮食安全是维护国家安全的重要支撑).<sup>35</sup> A sign of the new climate is the designation awarded by the Administration of Food and Commodity Reserves as an “advanced collective in national secrecy work”. The National Administration of State Secrets Protection explained, “The award given in January 2019 is a recognition of the bureau's work in maintaining secrecy. The reserves administration is responsible for overseeing the procurement, storage and distribution of government grain and cotton reserves” (Dimsum Blogspot, 25 January 2020).

On April 2020, the Bohao Forum for Entrepreneurs<sup>36</sup> focused its attention on this topic. According to some lecturers, locusts in Africa, fires in Australia, and the Covid epidemic were severely affecting the prices of grain and soliciting some countries’ government in reducing the export of grain.

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<sup>34</sup> At the forum, Senior Captain Yang Yi, Deputy Director of the Institute for Strategic Studies, National Defense University China, spoke about “New Roles in Areas of Non-traditional Security of the Armed Forces in the New Century”, saying: “As a matter of fact, economic security has become a more and more important component of national security. Without stable economic development and continuous improvement of [the] living standard of its people, it is impossible for a country to keep internal political stability and to assure its security. This shows that it has become an important component of national security to assure the development of [the] national economy, internal stability and social progress”.

[http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/event/other/arf/pdf/china\\_paper.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/event/other/arf/pdf/china_paper.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> About the attention that the Chinese Communist Party paid to food security in years past, see Zhang Zhenghe, 2019 and Yang Jianguo, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> An important forum on economic issues; it is often called “the Asian World Economic Forum”.

China, as a consequence, had to assume a larger commitment to safeguarding its domestic ability in supplying food (Jingji Ribao, 2020).

In April 2021, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Areas (MARA) informed provinces' governors that, from that point on, responsibility for the grain supply to the state (*midaizi*) would be managed in conjunction with the local party's committee and local state officials. Together, they would "manage, take charge of, assume responsibility and bear responsibility" (一起管、一起抓、一起负责、一起担责) for the grain supply because the "top priority of the country that is the food security which has now a new strategic identity must be protect".<sup>37</sup> Until then, responsibility for supplying and storing grain had been committed to the provinces' governors but, as the Ministry said, now both domestic and international situation impose to give greater attention to the food security. The tone of the Minister is almost apologetic towards local state officials who, perhaps, interpreted the Party's decision as an act of distrust in their capacity. The news, however, did not arouse particular surprise among analysts because it had to be included in a broad process in which the Party regained control of the chief levers of the economic mechanism. Its alarmed tone was instead interpreted by the Chinese population as a signal of an imminent food crisis and provoked an assault of the markets.

In April 2022, during a visit to a seed laboratory and an ocean research institute on Hainan Island, Xi Jinping confirmed that food security was a strategic issue and Pang Zhongying, professor of International Relations at the Ocean University of China in Qingdao, said that maritime technology and food security were more than national issues. "Food security and marine science prowess are important aspects in the geopolitical competition between China and the US" (Cai and Chen, 2022). Last July, Xi said that Beijing should treat food security as it would any other type of security: "If we rely on imports for food, others can lead us around by the nose".

Food safety has also become a non-traditional security issue. According to Ren Xiao (2019), since the scandal involving melamine milk in 2008,<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In Chinese: "把粮食安全这个国之大者的重要性提升到崭新的政治高度, 更为落实好这个国之大者谋划了坚实的制度保障". According to some interpretations, however, the choice of the Party has also been dictated by the corruption marking the whole grain procurement system. See <http://dimsums.blogspot.com>, January 29, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> In the same year, another food safety scandal affected the image of China and its role in international relations. It is known as the "jiaozi (dumpling) scandal" and led to the illnesses of 10 person in Japan. After attempts by Chinese institutions to deny their country's

which exposed the country to international scorn, food safety, which had not previously been a security issue, “became such an issue”. He noted that at the 2013 National People’s Congress press conference, Premier Li Keqiang utilized the same term (“utmost care”) to identify the attention that the government paid to both food safety and the missing MH370 aircraft. The scarce quality of food affects the state-people relationship and the role of China in the international market more than food security does, so it is attracting more attention from both institutions and analysts. Xu Jinghe said, “Food safety is now an important part of a country’s public safety and national security as well as an important measure of government administration capacity. The integration of food safety into the broader sphere of public safety and national security highlights food safety’s strategic value” (Xu, 2018). The Chinese government has largely improved the regulatory system for food safety. As for food security, the government’s guidelines tend to impose a consolidation-friendly approach, that is to say, an industrial integration, which can turn out from the market’s small enterprises, unable to assure their compliance with the stricter norms. The same will happen to the institutions involved in the surveillance system that, in many cases, has shown weak compliance with their duties. Although in the food safety realm there is a constant call to a participatory approach through the involvement of consumers in reporting unsafe cases, every policy converges with Xi Jinping’s call for a more centralized supervision system. In 2016, China News reported, “Noting the impact that food safety has on people’s livelihoods and public confidence in the government, Xi called on all authorities to perform their due duty with the people at the forefront of all work. The reputation of food safety in China is grave, Xi said, adding that there must be a more unified, authoritative supervision system as well as supporting regulations. He said the strongest measures were needed, featuring rigorous standards, strict supervision, serious punishments and an authoritative accountability system”. While on that occasion Xi Jinping said that food safety was a “sacred political duty for the CCP”, in 2019 he cited it as “an important foundation of national security” (Neo, 2020). For food safety, just as for food security, the government has enacted many new regulations. The Covid-19 pandemic, moreover, has been a fruitful opportunity for focusing more attention on the problem, expelling from the

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responsibility, in 2014 a former Hebei-based factory worker was sentenced to life in prison for poisoning dumplings.

market many small farms and firms that slaughtered pigs and poultry,<sup>39</sup> closing unsafe markets, imposing a stricter traceability system, and limiting imports.<sup>40</sup> Since the start of the 2000s, food safety rules have aimed to protect consumers from “accidents” caused by the avidity or inability of small players in the domestic processing food chain. According to a widespread interpretation among analysts, since February 2020, the government has enacted many regulations to protect its population from alleged contaminants in foreign food. In other words, the Covid-19 pandemic helped the government with the vertical integration that it had planned for the entire economic apparatus since the start of the 2000s.<sup>41</sup> It was helpful to reinvigorate the perception of defence of the nation from external threats.<sup>42</sup> Regarding vertical integration, the plan of the China National Cereals, Oil and Foodstuffs Corporation (COFCO) to merge its international trading with some domestic businesses to broaden the range of its operations (April 2021) is an example of the trend. It was followed one year later by an agreement with Sinograin to set up two joint ventures to take control of overlapping businesses. COFCO and Sinograin are destined to manage the country’s central grain reserve and “will keep pace with grain

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<sup>39</sup> The scandal of melamine in baby milk represented an opportunity to consolidate the food-processing sector, which was marked by the large presence of small firms unable to cope with the high costs of regulations on quality. “According to the data of the National Bureau of Statistics of China there are more than 2,000 dairy companies in China but only 1,176 reapply for [a] production license - about 1,000 voluntary give up for re-examination. One of the reasons is that they can’t afford the huge funds needed in [the] production process to meet the requirements of re-examination” (“China Agriculture Investment Express”, vol. 1, issue 1.11, 5-6, available at: <http://www.cnchemical.com>).

<sup>40</sup> In January 2022, the General Administration of Customs of China (GACC) announced two new decrees on food import. Decree 248 focuses on registration requirements, while Decree 249 aims to bring food import safety measures up to code. “These rules have faced some opposition. Diplomats from seven countries have asked to extend the grace period for another 18 months, saying businesses need time to adjust, but the GACC said these rules and their transition period fully comply with the requirements of international trade organizations” (<https://www.ice.it/it/news/notizie-dal-mondo/19895030> December 2021).

<sup>41</sup> Commenting on the COFCO and China Grain Reserves Group (known as Sinograin) agreement, an official of the State Asset Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) said, “This year, integration of companies based on their specialized business is a key task for SASAC. The integration between COFCO and China Grain Reserves Group serves as the first such integration case this year” (Global AG.Investing, 2022).

<sup>42</sup> Norwegian salmon, crabs from Chile, chicken from Brazil, and so on have been labelled as sources of SARS-CoV-2, highlighting the narrative of an outside origin of the virus.

collection and storage policies, management, sale, and transport while the combined oilseed business will find itself in a more competitive position, better able to innovate, influence and control risk and generate appreciation for state-owned asset” (Global Ag.Investing, 2022).

#### **4. Conclusions**

The war in Ukraine is affecting the availability of grain worldwide. Difficulties in the management of the production and transport of grain in one of the top wheat belts in the world are provoking a rise in prices globally and, in some low-income countries, a decline in the already scarce availability of food. Indeed, the most authoritative global institutions are expressing concern about the next world food crisis.

China alerted the same risk before the war and before the Covid epidemic. Likely, trade frictions with some of its top exporters of grain, like Australia and the United States, the humanitarian crisis in some African and Latin American countries, and the European Union’s sudden change in its approach to China contributed to arousing alarm about China’s ability to supply food to its population. Warnings from the scientific community about climate change and its consequences in terms of soil and water depletion also contributed to the government’s increasing concern.

Reasons, which the food securitization grounds on, however, are more complex.

The Chinese leadership expects that increasing reliance on food imports by its country can elicit hostility in public opinion in developing countries that would have to cope with a decrease in the food supply or, if it goes well, an increase in food prices. In 2020, when COFCO bought a great amount of corn, provoking a price increase on the international market, some analysts drew a parallel with the so-called Great Grain Robbery by the Soviet Union in 1972, which provoked inflation in the United States first and at a global level later. The architect of the Belt and Road Initiative and many other trade and economic agreements, like FOCAC<sup>43</sup> and RCEP,<sup>44</sup> cannot risk its reputation. In May 2022, Premier Li Keqiang said, “Maintaining the food security of 1.4 billion Chinese people is a great contribution to the world”. Although many analysts argue that “China’s additional imports of 3 to 5% of its total food consumption in the coming decade are unlikely to threaten global food

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<sup>43</sup> Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.

<sup>44</sup> Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

security” (Huang et alii, 2017), Li Keqiang’s statement has been endorsed by many other experts investigating the impact of increasing imports from China on food-deficit countries. Showing concern about this impact, at any rate, is important to the reputation of China as a “responsible stakeholder” in the world, like the United States and the European Union countries, which stress their commitment to lessening the impact of food insecurity.

Moreover, the “securitization” process can allow operations beyond the country’s borders. With regard to China, Cheung says, “Xi has highlighted three salient features of this blurring between internal and external security threats, which he has referred to as the ‘three prominents’ (三个更加突出). The first trend is that traditional and non-traditional security threats are becoming increasingly intertwined. The second trend is that the transnational nature of security threats has become more prominent. The third trend is the broadening diversity of security threats that are borderless, especially cyber related threats and financial and high-tech crimes. An important consequence of this integrated national security perspective is that the geographical remit of Chinese security and intelligence agencies has broadened to allow them to increasingly conduct operations against individuals and organizations well beyond the country’s borders” (Cheung, 2020, 12). Claims in the South China Sea represent an example because they have been legitimated by the need to assure fishery stocks.

Finally, we can interpret food securitization as a pure instrument to enhance nationalist sentiment, which, in turn, is instrumental to the people’s consensus with the Party-state now that economic growth’s achievements are fading. The use and abuse of terms like “strategic” and “national security” mark, in fact, the food supply chain but also the technology process, the manufacturing chain, and financial circuits. The charge to the “Western countries headed by the US (to) use grain to consolidate their hegemony and gain political benefits” and to weaponize “the ‘food crisis’, by trying to antagonize developing countries against Russia and China and heighten geo-strategic and factional confrontations” (China International Development Cooperation Agency, 2022) reveals the logic of securitization.

China, however, is not alone in the escalation of tone. Even in a high-income country such as Singapore, we are witnessing a securitization process regarding the supply of food. Al Lim attests that the country’s public discourse reveals much evidence of this trend. “It is imperative to “*secure* a supply of safe food for Singapore”, according to the Singapore Food Agency (SFA). This is reinforced by Minister Chan, expressing how Singapore should not “comprise our ability to secure such supplies from

other sources by revealing our national *stockpile*". Singapore has been "buttressing" its food security for decades, and it is now "every individual's *fight*". The repetition of these securitized terms in the discourse – "security", "fighting", and "stockpiling" – frames how Singapore needs to *secure* its food supply using military terminology (Lim, 2020).

In China, in any case, the term "securitization" assumes a more nuanced profile than in democratic countries. We do not witness, in fact, a move "from the realm of regular politics into the realm of security, where emergency measures are legitimised". Rather, in a context in which the "threat" (military, economic, financial, health, technological, and so on) to national security marks every discourse, the government is already, borrowing the Copenhagen School's concepts, "able to justify and then call for exceptional measures to address the threat". We recognize, however, a modulation of the balance among the stakeholders, where Party prevails on the State (see the management of the *midaizi*), large state-owned enterprises (like COFCO) prevail on small-medium private enterprises, the centre prevails on local institutions in the decision-making process (see the Zero Covid policy), and the administrative levers prevail on the market ones (in the 14th Five-Year Plan, grain production has been set as a compulsory target, the first time since 1978).

Two unexpected events i.e., the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have worsened the securitization approach that, it is worth noting, had spread in many countries, especially in China, before 2020. The balance between the need for security and the integration at a global level that, in turn, is necessary to cope with most of the NTS issues is the bet for the future – or, rather, one of the bets. De-escalation from the emergency tones of the securitization process could be a more complex task.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Dimsum Blogspot reports an odd story about the decision of some farmers to cut their wheat fields a month before harvest to sell as silage for animal feed. The Ministry deemed this choice as a violation of food security policy. According to Dimsum, a Chinese social media post suggests that the destruction of wheat fields is an American plot to destroy China's food supply and thus conquer the country. Citing a story about a similar stratagem in China's 'spring and autumn period,' the author suspects that American companies are buying wheat silage at high prices as a sneaky way of destroying the wheat crop in a 'food war.' The author of the post disagreed with people who argue that the government has no business interfering with how farmers sell their crops, suggesting that they also support Ukraine, oppose the zero-covid policy, and support 'lying flat.' The post continues by praising the superiority of China's socialist model that features active intervention over the 'stupid' American economic thinking that relies on markets to equilibrate supply and demand". An odd story and a sign of the times.

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## Chapter 3

### Food security in India

Diego Maiorano

#### **Abstract**

*The chapter reconstructs the history of independent India's struggles to achieve food security. When India broke free from colonial domination in August 1947, the country was on the brink of famine and with immense developmental challenges ahead. The chapter analyses how and to what extent has India been able to address all four dimensions of food security: producing food; making a rapidly growing population access food; ensuring that food is transformed into nutrition; and guaranteeing that people do not lose access to food in the future. The main argument of the chapter is that India's record has been mixed. While it achieved substantial success in achieving self-sufficiency in food production and avoid mass starvation, access to food and its transformation into nutrition have been very disappointing, especially if one considers that the country achieved impressive rates of economic growth since 1980. The future of food security also is a question mark, as India must meet the interrelated challenges of feeding a population marked by severe economic precarity and adapting to a rapidly changing climate, which is already having a profound impact on India's agriculture.*

#### **Abstract**

*Questo capitolo ricostruisce la storia dei tentativi dell'India indipendente di conquistare la sicurezza alimentare. Quando l'India si liberò dal dominio coloniale nell'agosto del 1947, il paese si trovava sull'orlo della catastrofe alimentare e con enormi problemi di sviluppo davanti a sé. Il capitolo analizza in che modo e con quale grado di successo l'India ha raggiunto la sicurezza alimentare nelle sue quattro dimensioni fondamentali: la*

*produzione di cibo; assicurare che una popolazione in rapida crescita avesse accesso al cibo; promuovere la trasformazione del cibo in nutrizione; garantire la sicurezza alimentare in futuro. La tesi principale del capitolo è che l'India ha ottenuto importanti successi nel raggiungere l'autosufficienza alimentare ed evitare situazioni di carestia, ma i risultati concernenti l'accesso al cibo e ancor più la sua trasformazione in nutrizione sono stati molto deludenti, specialmente se si considera la rapida crescita economica che ha caratterizzato il paese dal 1980. Anche il futuro della sicurezza alimentare indiana è in dubbio e segnato dalla duplice sfida di nutrire una popolazione afflitta da profonda precarietà economica e di adattarsi al cambiamento climatico, che sta già avendo un impatto molto negativo sull'agricoltura indiana.*

## **1. Introduction**

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) defines “food security” as a situation when “all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2001). As per this definition, food security does not thus simply entail producing enough food to feed its population. That is just the first of four interrelated dimensions. The second one is the ability of all people to have access to food, including and especially the ability to afford it. Third, people must be able to utilise food to transform it into nutrition, in order to conduct an active and healthy life. Finally, people must not be at risk of losing access to nutritious food. In other words, for a country to be food secure it must produce or import enough food; it must guarantee access to food to its population; it must put in place mechanisms to ensure a healthy utilisation of food; and it must ensure stability over time in the production, access, and utilisation of food. All these conditions must be realised simultaneously for a country to be food secure.

This chapter looks at India’s attempts and struggles to achieve food security. As the chapter will show, the Indian state has been both remarkably successful and remarkably ineffective. On the one hand, India managed to avoid famines, which had occurred with tragic regularity during the colonial period. In fact, the last large colonial famine happened in 1943, just a few years before India became independent. The nationalist leaders who took over from the British made it a national priority to avoid starvation. In other words, the issue of food security – at least in its most basic dimension of food production and

distribution – went through a process of "securitization" (Wæver 2010), directly related to both the nation-building process and the legitimization of the political leadership. As we will see in section 2, the preoccupation of independent India's leaders with food availability – a matter of national security in the first decades after independence – justified exceptional policy measures, including compromises on the country's foreign policy.

However, and consistently with a "securitization" approach to food security, once the Indian state managed to secure food availability to its population – sometime between the 1970s and the 1980s – it declared "mission accomplished" and neglected the other dimensions of food security. In other words, India failed to balance the urgency of immediate needs with sustainable long-term solutions – a challenge within the securitization framework. This is in fact one of the risks of securitizing food, as it put an emphasis on solving emergency situations or short-term goals, to the detriment of longer term – but equally important – ones. This is evident from the concluding part of the chapter, which shows India's utter failure in ensuring adequate levels of nutrition – as against lack of hunger – to a sizable part of its population, particularly women and children.

The Indian case and its contrasting success at tackling different dimensions of food security also reveals a theoretical distinction between "securitizing" food and simply making it a political priority. While the two issues are related and overlap – in particular the former presupposes the latter – political will is a weaker instrument to tackle food security. In fact, whereas we can talk of a securitization of food availability in the first decades after independence, which was marked by a remarkable success also considering the weakness of the Indian state immediately after 1947, the other dimensions of food security were made a political priority – but not a national security issue – only after 2004, as section 4 and 5 will show. While the prioritization of food security was marked by significant policy changes and a betterment of virtually all human development indicators, this was far from enough to tackle what was – and still is – a disastrous nutritional situation, which contrasts dramatically with India's growth story.

This chapter will cover the four dimensions of food security in separate sections, which will also follow a loose chronological storyline. In fact, independent India's leaders had to tackle each of these dimensions one at a time, as India broke free from two centuries of colonial domination literally in the wake of a massive famine. The first task was thus to avoid another famine and ensure that India produced or imported enough food for its rapidly growing population. This is the topic of section 2. The following

section looks at the next step of the ladder, namely guaranteeing access to what was an overwhelmingly rural, impoverished, and illiterate population. The section in particular looks at the origins of what would become the largest food distribution network of the world, India's Public Distribution System, which, from the 1970s onwards, would guarantee access to subsidies food to a growing number of its citizens (currently about 950 million people out of 1.4 billion inhabitants). Section 4 brings the story forward to the contemporary period and looks at India's extremely poor record in terms of ensuring adequate nutrition to its citizens. The section will also look at the construction, since 2004, of a relatively comprehensive social safety net, which, however important to avoid mass starvation, has failed to climb up the next step of the food security ladder, namely ensuring adequate nutrition. Section 5 looks at what the future of India's food security might look like and how difficult it will be for the country to achieve food security in the years to come. The section will focus on two main dimensions. First, the economic precarity of a very large proportion of Indian citizens; second, the environmental challenges brought about by a changing climate and unsustainable agricultural practices. Section 6 concludes arguing that the key policy challenge for India is to switch its attention to the third dimension of food security, or, in other words, to focus on nutritious security.

## **2. Producing food**

In 1943 India's once richest province, Bengal, was struck by a devastating famine that would kill between 2 and 3 million people, roughly 3-5 per cent of the population (Maharatna, 2016; Sen, 2003). The Bengal famine was the last of several catastrophic famines occurred during the colonial period. A key feature of colonial famines – and of famines in general – is that while they often have natural or proximate causes, their death toll is almost invariably a result of government inaction or the consequence of government policy (Davis, 2017). The Bengal famine was a case in point. While food became scarce largely as a result of the disruption caused by World War 2 and of a cyclone hitting the Bengal coast in 1942, the colonial government's inaction and the decision to redirect available food towards the British Army and other parts of the British Empire is what led to large scale devastation. Winston Churchill, then Prime Minister, reportedly blamed the famine on the Indians who were "breeding like rabbits" so that little could be done to help them. And little he did (Safi, 2019).

The Bengal famine was a turning point for India's nationalist movement. From that moment, food became a central plank of the nationalist leadership, which "tied the promise of independence to the guarantee of food for all" (Siegel, 2018, 5). This resonated with a central plank of the Indian liberation struggle from its very origins in the late 19th century. In fact, perhaps the most important glue that brought together the first nationalists was the formulation of the so-called "drain theory" according to which British rule was causing a massive impoverishment of India and leading to devastating famines (Chatterjee, 2023). After India broke free from colonial domination in August 1947, food security became a central element of the new country's nation-building project and a national security issue. The challenges were immense.

The first and most immediate problem was the first dimension of food security, namely the production of sufficient food to feed the population. The agricultural sector had been stagnant for decades, largely because of virtually non-existent investments by the colonial administration (Roy, 2013). The war had caused global food shortages and, in any case, India's foreign reserves for food imports were scarce (Siegel, 2018). The partition of the subcontinent had not only deprived India of its most fertile lands, but it caused a massive influx of refugees that needed to be fed in camps scattered throughout North India (Khan, 2008). War with Pakistan in 1948 further depleted India's already trembling fiscal situation. Furthermore, India's population was growing rapidly. Independent India's first leaders were soon to realise how difficult it would be to fulfil their promises.

The government of India, however, managed to avoid mass starvation. But this did not make the country anywhere near food secure. On the one hand, India's diplomats were literally sent across the world to ask for food assistance, which undermined the government's effort to put in place an independent foreign policy (Siegel, 2018). On the other hand, India's leaders – and in particular India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru – were convinced that India's development problems would be solved through industrialisation, rather than through sustained investments in the primary sector (on which the overwhelming majority of the population relied for their livelihoods). Therefore, very little resources were dedicated to increasing agricultural productivity. In fact, India's main plan to increase food production was a combination of half-hearted land reform, the setting up of Chinese-style agricultural cooperatives and the top-down infusion of technical knowledge over India's peasants. All these initiatives were met with fierce resistance by Nehru's own party, which effectively derailed any

attempt to socialise agricultural production (Frankel, 2005). India's attempts to increase food production in the first two decades after independence almost entirely relied on the extension of the agricultural frontier – a policy which had obvious limitations in the long term (Torri, 2007).

In 1966 India faced a major economic crisis. The second Indo-Pakistan war in 1965 was accompanied by a severe drought in the same year, which precipitated a major food crisis. The US administration and the World Bank came to the rescue, but only on condition that India devaluated the rupee, which Indira Gandhi, recently appointed as Prime Minister, grudgingly agreed to in 1966 (Brecher, 1977). The episode, which was a severe blow to Mrs Gandhi's popularity, accelerated plans to make India self-sufficient in the production of food. Over the following decades, India embarked on a "Green Revolution".

The new agricultural policy represented a radical shift in ideological terms. While Nehru's policy had explicitly tried to promote equity, the Green Revolution was based on the idea of concentrating resources where investment could ensure the best results, even if that meant creating a class of surplus-producing farmers concentrated in particular areas of the country. This is exactly what happened, as massive investments in irrigation and agricultural inputs (in particular high-yield seeds and fertilizers) started flowing towards Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. The results were spectacular and by the early 1980s India had largely solved the problem of recurrent food shortages. In fact, India's food imports declined from 23.2 per cent of total imports in the 1960s to 5 per cent in the 1990s (Raj et al., 2008).

The adoption of the Green Revolution was the premise of India's approach to food security, which came to rely on two pillars. The first one was a policy of procurement of wheat and rice from farmers (largely from the green revolution states) at a guaranteed price (called Minimum Support Price). The second pillar was the distribution of this food through a network of Fair Price Shops (FPSs), at heavily subsidised prices. This Public Distribution System (PDS) was gradually expanded and, by the 1980s, it covered most of the country.

To sum up, India emerged from colonial domination to face immense challenges to feed its population. While mass starvation was avoided, India did not manage to produce enough food until the 1980s, when the fruits of the Green Revolution began to be reaped. More recently the launch (in 2007) of the National Food Security Mission (NFSM) contributed to increasing food production in areas not touched by the Green Revolution (Narayanan, 2015). However, this did not make India food secure. India's challenge was

now to ensure that its population had physical access to food, a problem that is only partially solved even today.

### **3. Accessing Food**

The domestic availability of food, while a fundamental prerequisite to food security, is just the first step of the ladder. The next one is that people have physical access to food. Two dimensions are crucial in this respect. First, people must live in proximity to markets or food distribution centres (like the PDS network). Second, people must be able to afford enough food.

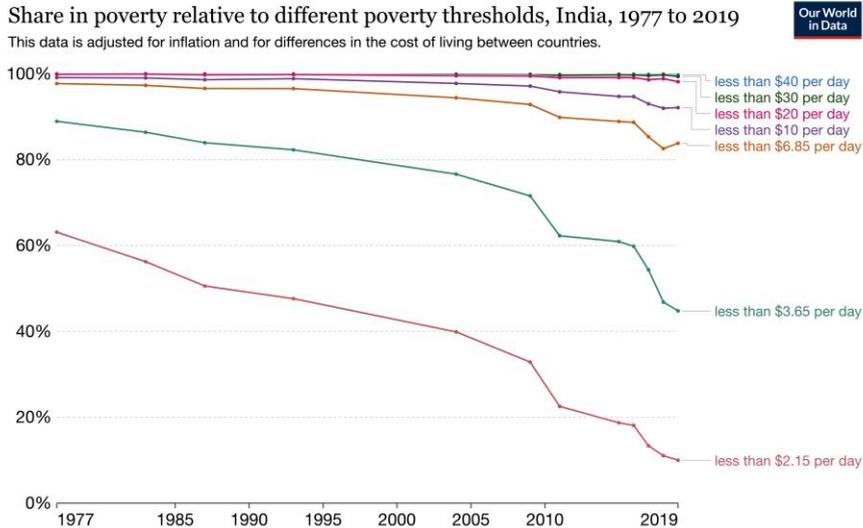
The scaling up of PDS network (i.e. the number of FPSs) has ensured that the first of these problems is by and large resolved. In fact, the number of FPSs increased from about 120,000 in 1971 (George, 1984) to 537,019 in 2022, covering 731 of the 735 districts of the country.<sup>1</sup> While this does not ensure a complete coverage – particularly in areas which are particularly remote and where some of India’s most vulnerable citizens live – the PDS does represent a comprehensive network of support, covering around 950 million people out of an estimated population on 1.372 billion (Khera & Somanchi, 2020). A survey conducted in 2010 in nine Indian states found that 93% of the respondents lived within 3 km of an FPS (Khera, 2011).

The second dimension – affordability of food – is more problematic. Two issues are critical here. First, the number of people who are just too poor to afford food; second, the number of people entitled to access state support. On both dimensions, despite significant improvements over the years, India has failed to ensure universal access to food.

Let's start with poverty. Figure 1 show the share of the population at different poverty lines.

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<sup>1</sup> Data taken from the National Food Security Portal on 15 June 2022, available at: <https://nfsa.gov.in/>

**Figure 1**

Data source: World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform (2022)

[OurWorldInData.org/poverty](https://OurWorldInData.org/poverty) | CC BY

Note: This data is expressed in international-\$<sup>1</sup> at 2017 prices. Depending on the country and year, it relates to income measured after taxes and benefits, or to consumption, per capita<sup>2</sup>.

**1. International dollars:** International dollars are a hypothetical currency that is used to make meaningful comparisons of monetary indicators of living standards. Figures expressed in international dollars are adjusted for inflation within countries over time, and for differences in the cost of living between countries. The goal of such adjustments is to provide a unit whose purchasing power is held fixed over time and across countries, such that one international dollar can buy the same quantity and quality of goods and services no matter where or when it is spent. Read more in our article: What are Purchasing Power Parity adjustments and why do we need them?

**2. Per capita:** 'Per capita' here means that each person (including children) is attributed an equal share of the total income received by all members of their household.

As the figure shows, extreme poverty (below the 2.15\$ PPP line) declined significantly. However, more than 40% of the population is still below the 3.65\$ PPP poverty line and as many as 80% are below the 6.85\$ PPP line. This means that an extremely large proportion of the population live in poverty or on the brink of poverty. These people are thus extremely vulnerable to income shocks, such as an illness, a job loss, a drought, or high food inflation. In the words of Anirudh Krishna, they are just “one illness away” from extreme deprivation (Krishna, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic represented one such shock, that might have pushed tens of millions of people below the extreme poverty line (Azim Premji University, 2021). In other words, even though fast economic growth – only 10 countries in the world have grown as much as and for as long as India did over the last four decades (Lamba & Subramanian, 2020) – did lift many out of extreme poverty, the growth model – essentially jobless and reliant on an inordinately large informal economy (see below) – has not been able to create a middle class that is cushioned off from extreme deprivation.

The degree of precarity of a large section of India's population had consequences for overall access to food. In fact, the per capita calorie intake in rural India declined from 2240 calories/day in 1983 to 2020 in 2009 (the corresponding figures for urban India are 2070 and 1946 calories/day, respectively) (Deaton & Drèze, 2009). Calorie intake subsequently increased to 2214 (rural) and 2169 (urban) in 2011, which remain 12 and 13 per cent below, respectively, the recommended calorie intake (Srivastava & Chand, 2017). Furthermore, per capita data conceal stark differences between income groups. For instance, in 2011 (the most recent available data), people in the top income decile consumed 3174 calories/day (27 per cent more than recommended), whereas people in the bottom decile had an intake of 1645 calories/day (34 per cent less than recommended) (Sharma et al., 2020). If gender-disaggregated data were available, they would probably reveal similarly significant differences between men and women, as the latter tend to eat after all other members of the family have eaten (if there is something left) (Singh, 2021). While calorie intake is a very bad indicator for a person's nutritional status,<sup>2</sup> it is a rather accurate measure of people's hunger and access to food. In this respect, while Independent India managed to avoid famines, it has not prevented a large proportion of its citizens to eat less than they should, a situation that perdures.

The second critical issue for ensuring access to food is the degree of state support. This is particularly relevant in a country like India where, as we have just seen, as large proportion of the population lives in poverty or on the hedge of poverty. For long, India's policy pillar to food security was the PDS. Launched in the 1960s as a system designed to cushion urban dwellers from food price volatility, it has over the years expanded to cover the entire country. A crucial change occurred in 1997 when, in the wake of the economic reforms of the start of the decade, India decided to scale back social expenditure (from an already very low base) and limited access to the PDS only to people owning a "Below Poverty Line" (BPL) Card. The change led not only to the exclusion of people not deemed to be poor enough to access subsidized food, but to the administrative headache of identifying those household eligible for a BPL Card. This had three main consequences. First, the change led to increased inefficiency and leakages (Khera, 2011b). Second, it led to inclusion errors, as non-poor people with connections or

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<sup>2</sup> Micronutrients and the absorption of nutrients are at least as important as calories. This means that one could be eating enough calories and still be severely malnourished. More on this in the next section of this chapter.

wealthy enough to pay a bribe were able to get a card even if they did not meet the eligibility criteria. Third, and most crucially, the switch to a targeted PDS led to significant exclusion errors, whereby people who were poor were left out as they did not manage to get a BPL card. According to an analysis of both types of errors, in 2004 15 per cent of the people in the top income quartile and 23 per cent in the next quartile possessed a BPL card (inclusion errors). On the other hand, 51.4 per cent of the households in the poorest quartile did not have one (exclusion errors) (Mahamallik & Sahu, 2011). These (very large) exclusion errors go a great deal in explaining declining calorie intake despite very fast economic growth.

Subsequently, a number of factors led the Indian government to rethink its food security strategy. First, economic growth picked up in the early 2000s from already high levels. This led to a significant increase in revenues, which could be used for social expenditure. Second, researchers and civil society put pressure on the government by putting into the limelight two “Indian dilemmas”. One was the very poor (and stagnating, if not deteriorating) nutritional status of the population despite very rapid economic growth; the other dilemma was the paradoxical situation whereby the state granaries were storing massive amount of foodgrains, while a large amount of people struggled to secure enough food: this was a particularly urgent problem in the mid-2000s, when extremely high global food prices put in jeopardy the access to food for millions of Indian citizens (Dev, 2011). The unexpected victory of a progressive coalition of parties (the United Progressive Alliance, UPA) at the 2004 general elections opened the way to a new phase of India’s welfare state, which expanded significantly (Chiriyankandath et al., 2020). I will deal with both issues – the nutritional status of Indian citizens and the policy response since 2004 – in the next section.

#### **4. Utilizing Food**

As we have seen, while Independent India has managed to avoid famines, it has been unable to ensure that all its citizens (or even a majority) had access to enough food (or calories) to conduct a healthy life. The problem is aggravated by the fact that a large proportion of the population is unable to transform food into nutrition. The issue has two main dimensions. First, a sizable part of the population does not have access to nutritious food, in particular fruits, vegetables, legumes, meat, fish and eggs. In fact, most of the calorie consumption in India comes from grains, with consequent deficiencies of micronutrients (Sharma et al., 2020). Second, a large

proportion of the population is only partly able to absorb those nutrients that they get to ingest.

The lack of an adequate diet is only very partially due to cultural or personal choices regarding vegetarianism. In fact, contrary to a well-established myth, the great majority of Indians (somewhere between 60 and 80 per cent of the population) are *not* vegetarians (Biswas, 2018). The main reason for a lack of adequate diet is twofold. One the one hand, non-vegetarian proteins are somewhat difficult to access, because of societal pressure coming from largely vegetarian upper caste Hindus, which often translates into policy. For instance, many Indian states do not provide eggs to children in school menus – eggs are considered non-vegetarian items in India – both because upper caste cooks might refuse to cook them and because of pressures from radical Hindu groups (Saha, 2018). Lack of reliable electricity, especially in rural areas, also makes it difficult for many households to preserve meat or fish. On the other hand, nutritious food tends to be more expensive, which makes it unaffordable for a significant segment of the population. According to a recent study by the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi, 71 per cent of Indians cannot afford a healthy diet (Centre for Science and Environment, 2022).

Coming to the second issue (the absorption of nutrients) the causes are complex, but a prominent one is the lack of sanitation facilities, particularly toilets. Until very recently, India had one of the highest rates of open defecation in the world. According to 2011 census data, 53 per cent of the households defecated in the open. This practice contaminates water sources and contributes to spread diseases, with severe effect on nutrition, as the body uses energy acquired from food to produce antibodies, rather than to nourish itself. Frequent infections, particularly in children, have deleterious consequences on growth and nutritional status, not to mention the increased risk of death. (More on this below).

India's government, however, has taken decisive steps in recent years to stop open defecation. In 2014, the government launched the Swachh Bharat Mission (Clean India Mission), which included constructing toilets for every household in the country. According to government data, the result has been achieved. However, independent surveys (the National Family Health Survey, round 5 (NFHS-5) show that, in 2020, 19 per cent of the population did not use a toilet, underscoring the need to invest on information campaigns that go beyond the mere construction of infrastructures. Still, the steep decrease in the proportion of people that practice open defecation was a remarkable achievement that *should* bear fruits in the years to come.

However, the nutritional status of a large proportion of Indian citizens remains extremely poor. Table 1 shows some data taken from the NFHS (rounds 4 and 5).

**Table 1 – Nutritional indicators in selected South Asian countries**

	India 2015-16	India 2019-20	Bangladesh 2019	Nepal 2019
Proportion of children under 5 who are stunted*	38.4	35.5	28.0	31.5
Proportion of children under 5 who are severely wasted **	7.5	7.7	2.3	2.9
Proportion of anemic children (age 6-59 months)	58.6	67.1	43.1	44.6
Proportion of anemic women age 15-49	53.1	57.0	36.5	35.4
Proportion of anemic men 15-49	29.2	31.1	NA	NA

Sources: National Family Health Survey, rounds 4 and 5, Available at: [http://rchiips.org/nfhs/factsheet\\_NFHS-5.shtml](http://rchiips.org/nfhs/factsheet_NFHS-5.shtml); World Development Indicators.

\*low height-for-age

\*\*extremely low weight-for-height

A few points are worth noting. First, as captured by the first two lines, India has very high rates of child malnutrition and progress is excruciatingly slow. In fact, the proportion of severely wasted children – a condition with a 35 per cent mortality rate – increased between 2015 and 2019. The national average, moreover, masks the fact that severe wasting increased significantly in almost half of the districts of the country (and declined in others) (Ulahannan et al., 2022). In a comparative perspective, the nutritional status of Indian children is abysmal. Neighbouring and poorer countries like Bangladesh and Nepal have lower stunting and severe wasting rates. In fact, India has higher malnutrition rates than most Sub-Saharan African countries, despite much higher GDP per capita. Open defecation almost entirely explains these differences, underscoring the importance of both providing toilets (and maintaining them) as well as invest on information campaigns (toilets are useless if used as storage) (Spears, 2020).

Second, research has shown the extremely important role of entrenched patriarchal norms that both affect the health of mothers and children (particularly females). This is captured by both exceptionally high (and rising) rates of anemic children and women, and significantly lower prevalence among men (Table 1, lines 3,4,5). Not only women tend to eat much less food – and only if something is left after the other members of the households have eaten – but more nutritious food is often given to males (Coffey et al., 2013; Nair et al., 2013). As malnourished mothers tend to give birth to malnourished children, the intergenerational transmission of malnutrition (and associated inequalities) persists.

Third, the human cost of child malnutrition is dramatically high. Researchers estimate that 68 per cent of all child deaths in India are related to malnutrition, amounting to 706,000 deaths per year (Bhan, 2019). The toll is particularly high for females, who have a biological advantage over boys and tend to have higher survival rates. However, India is, together with Tonga, the only country in the world where child mortality rates are higher for females than for males.<sup>3</sup> This reflects the poor status of Indian women, which is further corroborated by a very strong male preference, which in turn results in millions of “unwanted girls”, which tend to be neglected by their families later in life (Jayachandran & Pande, 2017).

Fourth, poor nutritional status of children has profound consequences for overall, long-term development. In particular, malnutrition during the first two years of a person’s life has irremediable consequences in terms of cognitive and physical development (Gragnotati, 2006; Spears, 2012), which negatively impact schooling performance first, and productivity as a worker later in life.

In fact, malnutrition affects children’s *lifelong* ability to learn, to remain focused and to think clearly, not to speak of the fact that malnourished children are often ill and therefore absent from schools. Adults who were malnourished during childhood also have a much higher probability of developing chronic illnesses and to die prematurely. In other words, malnutrition during childhood affects the entire life of individuals, as it affects their ability to become intellectually and economically productive adults. At the national level, high levels of child malnutrition constitute a huge loss in terms of the accumulation of human capital and capabilities (Victora et al., 2008). High levels of child malnutrition also translate into a perpetuation of poverty and inequalities across generations. In fact, nutritional status can be a reliable indicator of future educational and labour

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<sup>3</sup> As per the latest available World Development Indicators.

market outcomes (Currie, 2008; Vogl, 2012). In other words, the price for high levels of child malnutrition today is a huge loss in terms of the accumulation of human capital and economic growth tomorrow.

Finally, it should be noted – and concerning – that the latest data on malnutrition were collected *before* the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused widespread disruption to the economy. According to data collected by the World Bank, about one third of rural households had to skip meals or reduce portions during the long lockdown between March and June 2020. In fact, four months after the lift of restrictions, 23 per cent of the survey respondents said that they were still in a situation where they had to compromise on their daily food consumption (Murali & Maiorano, 2021).

The nutritional status of the Indian population is concerning also because the government, since 2004, has stepped up significantly its efforts to tackle poverty and food insecurity, which however had only a limited impact on nutritional outcomes. Two policies initiatives are worth mentioning.<sup>4</sup>

The first one is a nationwide programme aimed at offering guaranteed employment to the rural population called the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Launched in 2006, the MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of employment per year in public works to all rural households and a relatively decent minimum wage, which is equal for women and men.<sup>5</sup> It is a self-targeting programme because everyone has the *right* to get a job on demand. Considered to be the largest workfare programme in the world, 100 million people worked under the scheme in the financial year 2021/22, with an average income of 7,500 rupees per year (about 90 euros).<sup>6</sup> More than half (54 per cent) were women. This sum, however tiny it may appear, is a considerable one in the context of rural India. The latest expert group on poverty, the Rangaatrajan Committee (2014), put the poverty thresholds for rural India at a yearly per capita expenditure of 11,664 rupees (at 2011/12 prices). While the threshold has been criticized as too low and inflation has averaged at 6 per cent over the last ten years, it remains that the income coming from the MGNREGA is a substantial amount for people at the very bottom of the economic ladder and does constitute a cushion against extreme vulnerability. A number of studies evaluated the

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<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of five anti-poverty initiatives undertaken by the UPA government between 2004 and 2014 see Chiriyankandath et al. 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Currently the wage is in the range of 200-350 rupees per day, depending on the state (2.40-4.20 euros/day).

<sup>6</sup> Data taken from the official MGNREGA portal at [nrega.nic.in](http://nrega.nic.in).

welfare impacts of MGNREGA. These include impact on poverty, education, dietary intake, infant nutrition, and reduction in violence and distress-led migration (Afridi et al., n.d.; Das, 2015; Dasgupta et al., 2017; Deininger & Liu, 2019; Imbert & Papp, 2015; Klonner & Oldiges, 2012; Nayak & Khera, 2009). In short, the MGNREGA, since its inception in 2006, acted as a rather effective safety net for the rural population, some sort of insurance policy to which people can resort to in case of need. The importance of the MGNREGA was fully on display during the COVID-19 pandemic, when demand for work surged (Lokhande & Gundimeda, 2021; Narayanan et al., 2022).

The second set of initiatives are a cluster of food security-related policies covered by the National Food Security Act 2013 (NFSA). The main focus of the Act was to provide a legal minimum entitlement to food at affordable prices. The main instrument was a substantial expansion of the number of people eligible to access the PDS. The Act expanded coverage to 75 per cent of the rural population and 50 per cent of the urban population. Every household eligible to access the PDS receive 5kg of food grains per month for every member of the family. Extremely poor people are entitled to 35 kg of foodgrains per month, irrespective of household size. The Act also included provisions for particular categories of people. For instance, pregnant women and lactating mothers are entitled to a daily cooked meal through a local health centre and a maternity benefit of 6,000 rupees (about 72 euros) over six months. Every child under the age of 14 is also entitled to a cooked meal at school or at the local health centre, through the Midday meal scheme, which was universalized in 2009.

Overall, these initiatives contributed substantially to provide a safety net for India's most vulnerable population. Studies have shown that not only has food security increased (mainly through extended coverage of the PDS) but that the provision of food to children had a number of added benefits, particularly related to school attendance, learning achievements and child nutrition (Drèze & Khera, 2017).

Perhaps more fundamentally, these initiatives represented a shift from (poorly) targeted assistance programmes, to the establishment of a right-based approach to development (Ruparelia, 2013). Indeed, much of the policy action in the area was triggered by a series of rulings by the Supreme Court which mandated the government to provide certain entitlements in order to protect the right to life enshrined in article 21 of the Constitution (Friedman & Maiorano, 2017). While implementation has been far from perfect, it remains that the state is now legally obliged to provide these entitlements. Furthermore, these entitlements are protected by the power of

the law. Removing them requires an Act of Parliament, which would be politically suicidal. This contributes to provide a degree of stability over time in accessing food.

On top of these rights-based policies, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government elected in 2014 (and re-voted into power in 2019) launched a series of programmes aiming at providing a set of mostly private goods, which had repercussion of food security. Since 2014, the government accelerated the provision of toilets, bank accounts, cooking gas, electricity, water, and cash. I mentioned already the importance of sanitation facilities for nutritional outcomes. Here I will just underscore the importance of a comprehensive digital infrastructure linked to personal bank accounts, which have been provided to most of the population. This digital infrastructure – the backbone of this “new welfarism” (Subramanian & Felman, 2022) – increased substantially the state’s capacity to reach its citizens and the speed of the state's response in times of crisis. For instance, in 2019, the government introduced a new cash transfer programme for farmers and managed to deliver the first payments within weeks. Similarly, the government was able to reach struggling household during the COVID-19 pandemic with cash support relatively quickly, however inadequate the amount of that support was. State governments have also been able to use the same digital infrastructure to supplement the central government's safety net. Overall, since 2017, about US\$ 270 billion have been transferred to some 950 million beneficiaries (The Economist, 2022). The extensive use of technology for welfare delivery, however, it is not without serious problems. In fact, relying on an inflexible digital infrastructure makes the system prone to exclude from its safety net precisely those who are most vulnerable. In recent years, there have been cases of starvation deaths, even in the national capital, because extremely poor people could not produce a valid digital identity, essential to access subsidized food. However, the increased state capacity obtained through technology, remains an asset which might help India to ensure that the last dimension of food security (stability over time) does not represent an insurmountable obstacle in the decades to come and that the country will be at least able to maintain the (far from satisfactory) current situation. To this topic we now turn our attention.

## **5. Stability of food security**

Food security relies not only on the realization of the three dimensions already discussed (production, access, and utilization of food), but also on

their stability over time. In other words, for a country to be food secure, there must be reasonable expectations that its citizens will be able to produce, consume and absorb food not only today, but also in the years to come. India's main challenges in this domain relate to two highly interrelated dimensions: economic and environmental.

The economic dimension can be divided into supply and demand factors. Among the formers a prominent one is the fiscal sustainability of agricultural subsidies. Electricity, fertilisers and food subsidies alone amount to an annual expenditure of 2.78 per cent of the GDP.<sup>7</sup> This is a huge amount, that limit fiscal space for arguably more important development expenditure such as health and education (for which India spends just 4.4 per cent of the GDP, 1.2 percentage points less than the average for Lower Middle Income Countries).<sup>8</sup> Subsidies are also subjects to global shocks, which makes planning somewhat unpredictable. For instance, in May 2022, the Finance Minister announced a doubling of the fertilizer subsidy in the wake of spiking global prices because of the Russia-Ukraine war (The Hindu, 2022).

The issue of subsidies also collides with India's multilateral obligations. According to World Trade Organization (WTO)'s regulations, a country's food subsidy should not exceed 10 per cent of the value of production. In 2013, India successfully pushed for the adoption of the so-called "Peace Clause" which de facto exempts developing countries from the limitation. While a permanent solution to the issue is currently under negotiation, it remains that India will not be considered a developing country indefinitely, at which point a drastic reduction of the food subsidy will be necessary, even if politically very costly (The Times of India, 2021).

On the demand side, the main factor, already mentioned, is the economic precarity of a large section of the population. This situation is unlikely to go away in the foreseeable future for a number of reasons. First, India's atypical structural transformation, whereby the share of the (employment-intensive) manufacturing sector has remained constant around 17 per cent of the GDP for many decades, means that agriculture is still the largest employer in the

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<sup>7</sup> The fertiliser subsidy amounts to 1.14 per cent of the GDP in the latest financial year (The Hindu, 2022). The electricity subsidy amounted to 0.6 per cent of the GDP is largely (75 per cent) destined to agricultural producers (Aggarwal et al., 2020). The food subsidy (1.14 per cent of the GDP in the latest financial year) covers both subsidies prices for PDS beneficiaries, but the bulk of it goes to farmers for the procurement of foodgrains (Iqbal, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Most recent data taken from the World Development Indicators.

country (about 45 per cent of total workers). Jobs in the primary sector are poorly paid, precarious and subject to weather conditions, which are increasingly unpredictable due to climate change. Second, the overwhelming majority of the workers are in the informal sector, which account for 80-95 per cent of the workforce, depending on the type of definition employed (Nagaraj & Kapoor, 2022). This means that an extremely large section of the workforce has no contract or any benefit or even a guarantee to be still employed in the very short term. Third, job creation remains very slow and not commensurate to the growth of the working-age population. A World Bank study concludes that to keep the employment rate constant – which is very low to start with – India would need to create 8 million *additional* jobs every year (World Bank, 2018). Fourth, India's female labour force participation rate is extremely low (23.5 per cent in 2019) and declining, despite increasing levels of education and declining fertility (both usually associated with increasing participation in the labour market) (Deininger et al., 2022; Deshpande & Singh, 2021). This suggests that many Indian families are foregoing additional income opportunities that could ameliorate their precarious economic situation.

Being this the situation, it is reasonable to expect that a large proportion of the population will keep being subject to income shocks, which could affect their food security. For instance, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, combined with the disruption of global supply chains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and extreme heat in April-May 2022, pushed up food inflation, affecting many vulnerable people's ability to purchase food.

Economic factors combine with environmental ones to exacerbate food security challenges. Two important ones relate to food production. First, climate change is threatening India's agriculture, which has been already under stress from several decades of low investments (Narasimha Reddy & Mishra, 2009). According to the latest Global Food Policy Report (2022), 16.7 million people in India are at risk of going hungry by 2030 exclusively because of disruption to food production and food chains due to climate change. Second, whatever the successes of the Green Revolution, its environmental price has been heavy. Not only has massive use of fertilisers – also thanks to subsidies – negatively impacted agricultural productivity over the long run, but the water table has been dramatically reduced. Between 2007 and 2017, the groundwater level declined by 61 per cent, leaving farmers with the option of either digging further to find water – at increasing cost – or reduce acreage under irrigation. Both options will tend to push up

prices, unless the government is willing to further increase subsidies (Verma, 2019).

This is not of course a comprehensive analysis of India's environmental challenges and their relation to food security. But it is a way to show that the challenges ahead are significant, and the government will have to invest important resources in adaptation and mitigation strategies, as well as in an expansion of its social safety net.

## 6. Conclusions

India's struggles with food security accompanied the country since the very beginning of its journey as an independent nation in 1947. The challenges were enormous, from increasing production to feed a rapidly growing population, and from tackling extremely high levels of poverty and deprivation, to shift the focus from food to nutritious security. Future challenges, both economic and environmental, are not less daunting. India's record cannot be seen as satisfactory. While the country has been able to avoid famines – a massive achievement indeed, given the initial conditions – the current, extremely poor nutritional status of a very large section of the population – 75 years after independence, 40 of which under very sustained economic growth – cannot but be seen as a major failure on the part of the Indian state.

These two extremes – the major achievement of avoiding famines and the major failure of ensuring minimal adequate nutrition – well capture the centerpiece of India's food security problem: a keen focus on avoiding hunger and much less attention to avoid malnourishment. This was on display also during the current crisis due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine: with global wheat prices soaring, the government made a complete policy U-turn and banned exports of wheat, hoping to calm prices. The same policy attention, however, is missing from the much more difficult task to ensure adequate nutritional levels.

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## Chapter 4

### Meanings and paths of food security in modern South Korea

Grazia Milano

#### **Abstract**

*South Korea can be seen as one of the countries in East Asia that better appears to enjoy a reasonable rate of food security, ranking thirty-second in the world among the one hundred and ten countries analyzed by The Economist Group in 2021. However, South Korean food security is highly troublesome from at least three points of view: import dependency, the increasing rate of population poverty, and the scarcity of local labor in rural areas. These issues are economically and socially relevant in a historical context in which individuals discover that they belong to a new and global risk society. This situation prompts reflection on the evolution of South Korean FS's meaning and management paths according to the state and their implications in light of the challenges that may arise in the future years. Therefore, the present chapter ponders the evolution of FS' meanings and paths in modern South Korea, considering both state-centric and societal perspectives. Also, the study takes into account the interaction between state policies and changes in the population awareness regarding FS from the late 80s to the present day, mainly reflecting on the scenario of the pandemic and that the pandemic has opened. The study highlights how South Korean food security-related problems from the late 80s to today have essentially taken on two meanings and consequent management by the Korean state: an imminent threat to national sovereignty and a potential risk to national security.*

#### **Abstract**

*La Corea del Sud appare come uno dei Paesi dell'Asia che maggiormente gode di una buona sicurezza alimentare, classificandosi al trentaduesimo posto al mondo tra i centodieci Paesi analizzati dal The Economist Group*

*nel 2021. Tuttavia, la sicurezza alimentare sudcoreana è problematica sotto almeno tre punti di vista: la dipendenza dalle importazioni, il crescente tasso di impoverimento della popolazione e la scarsità di manodopera locale. Queste problematiche sono rilevanti sia a livello economico che sociale in un contesto storico in cui gli uomini scoprono di appartenere ad una nuova e globale società del rischio. Tale situazione spinge ad una riflessione sull'evoluzione del significato e della gestione della sicurezza alimentare sudcoreana da parte dello Stato e delle sue implicazioni alla luce delle sfide che potrebbero presentarsi nei prossimi anni. Il presente capitolo, dunque, si impegna in questa riflessione prendendo in considerazione sia la prospettiva dello Stato che quella della società, nonché dell'interazione tra le misure dello Stato e la consapevolezza della popolazione in materia di sicurezza alimentare a partire dagli anni successivi alla guerra fredda. Lo studio mostra come i problemi di sicurezza alimentare sudcoreani a partire dalla fine degli anni '80 ad oggi hanno assunto essenzialmente due significati con conseguenti gestioni da parte dello Stato coreano: uno di minaccia imminente per la sovranità nazionale e uno di potenziale rischio per la sicurezza nazionale.*

## **1. Introduction**

The expression “food security” generally refers to the universal or local availability of a food quantity sufficient for people to conduct a dignified life.<sup>1</sup> To better comprehend the characteristics of food security, it might be generally helpful to consider its factors of production/availability, physical and economic accessibility, and usability of food (Caballero-Anthony and Montesclaros, 2020). Furthermore, due to its nature, a series of structural vulnerabilities – from climate instability to the possible spread of diseases and economic or criminal problems – constantly threaten global and local food security. Nevertheless, South Korea can be seen as one of the countries in East Asia that better appears to enjoy a reasonable rate of food security, thanks to the food policies adopted by the different governments that succeeded each other over time since its foundation. Looking at the rate of food security compiled by The Economist Group in 2021, South Korea ranks thirty-second in terms of food security among the one hundred and thirteen countries analyzed by the system, scoring an overall 72.6 over 100. The land

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<sup>1</sup> The expression differs from that of “food safety”, which refers to the conditions of hygiene and healthiness of food.

of the morning calm is not a cause of concern with regard to food supply which is enough to meet the population demand (86.2 points); furthermore, both the physical accessibility and the usability of the food products are not problematic thanks to the national and international transport networks and the relatively stable diet of the Korean citizens (96.2 points). However, this frame can be misleading. Admittedly, as several researchers and experts underline, food security in South Korea is highly troublesome from at least three different points of view: as much as for Japan a problem for Korea is its import dependency (Kang, 2011) as well as the increasing rate of population poverty (Kang, 2014) – in particular, elderly poverty in an ageing society like South Korea's – and the scarcity of local labour in rural areas (Kwak & Kim, 2012), where households suffer relatively poor living conditions and are not equipped to face climate changes.

Already Müller (2008; 2015) as well as Ch'oe and Yi (2010), while systematically dealing with the creation of today's problem of food security in South Korea, highlight how the dependence on imports in the peninsula is the result of specific political choices made since the end of the Korean War and dictated by the interactions between local socio-political actors and the world economy, leading to Korea's fast export growth. Today, South Korea is one of the leading importing countries globally, with an expenditure of about 11,3 billion dollars allocated to the import of food products, whose majority came from the United States (2,4 billion) and China (1.7 billion) in 2019 (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2019; OEC, 2022). Despite the efforts to control imports, the dependence on them cannot be underestimated since, according to data from a report to the Foreign Agricultural Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (Oh, 2021), South Korea produces only 45% of the food requirements of the local population. In this scenario shared also by other countries – most notably Japan – and perhaps more related to the macroscopic and economic-political aspects of the food security-related problems in Korea, some scholars highlight how the socio-economic weakest part of the South Korean population suffers because of it. In particular, a study conducted in 2009 (Kim, Kim & Shin) shows how socio-economically disadvantaged categories, including families run by women, the elderly, the unemployed, or people with a low education level, chronic diseases or disabilities, tend to be affected by food insecurity. In other words, these categories are more likely to be unable to access sufficient food. This study as well as Park and Kim's one (2018) also revealed how the above-mentioned population segments have relatively little access to food aid programmes and how these have a relatively mild effect on their lives.

Therefore, the most urgent problem at the social level appears in the guise of economic access to food for the less wealthy. The majority of these people were those over 65 years old in 2018, when South Korea turned out to be the country with the highest poverty rate among the elderly in the OECD countries (43.4%) (OECD, 2018). It also needs to be noted that since 2017, when the elderly exceeded 14% of the total citizens, South Korea has been defined “aged society” according to the UN standards (Kim & Kim, 2020). This figure, combined with the increasingly high life expectancy and the prospect of a “super elderly” Korea by 2026, sets a rather alarming picture concerning the future of the economic access to food in the country and workforce. Consistently, another factor to be taken into account is the depopulation and impoverishment of the rural areas as partly an effect of economic and industrial development and, partly, of the declining rate of childbirth (Kim, 2021). In the current “liquid society” (Bauman, 2005/2008), dwindling young people are drawn to cities – particularly Seoul – searching for well-paid jobs and better living conditions than in countryside areas. This condition gradually impoverishes Korea’s rural areas, while agricultural activities increasingly exploit foreign workers. The OECD (2019) highlights how the increase in the rate of foreign population in South Korea between 2004 and 2016 has also significantly increased the percentage of the active population in the country. In addition, the report points out that the employment rate of foreigners in 2017 (71%) is slightly higher than that of Koreans (68%) even though migrants are academically less qualified than South Korean citizens, thus indicating a great need for labour in rural areas. However, given the overall good economic situation of the country, South Korean food security-related problems are not perceived as severe as in 2012. According to a study conducted that year (Kim & Lee, 2012), the South Korean population does not perceive any problems with the South Korean food security and does not consider food security a concern also because South Korean citizens tend to believe that food supply represents a problem of the individual rather than of the society as a whole. Therefore, research on South Korean food security in a more or less fragmented way paints a picture characterized by many “invisible” problems to the Global Food Security Index that, in the years since the foundation of South Korea, have been shaped by political-economic events within the local and international influence. The relevance of these issues lies not only in the consequences they have at the economic level in South Korea but also at the social level in a historical context in which people discover that they belong to a new and global “risk society” (Beck, 2020). This circumstance, especially when

contextualized in the recent years of the COVID-19 pandemic, leads to a reflection on the evolution of South Korean food security's meaning and management paths according to the state, together with their implications in light of the challenges that may arise in future years.

Therefore, the present study ponders the evolution of the meanings and paths of food security in modern South Korea mainly from a state-centric point of view from the late '80s to the present day. It also considers the changes in the matter and its possible future paths and implications coming into being in a historical moment in which food security is acquiring a new preponderant value within a broader discourse of stability of national and international structures. While doing so, the chapter also contemplates the societal perspective and the interaction between state policies and changes in the population awareness regarding food security. In particular, the study seeks to understand if, when and why food in Korea became a national security issue, undergoing a process of securitization, and how its interpretations and subsequent management plans have changed since the years following the Cold War. Investigating the Korean state's choices regarding food security, this chapter eventually dwells on the scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic and that the pandemic opened, trying to understand how the pandemic changed the perception of the food security within the South Korean society to draw a most recent picture of the relationship between the state and the population in this matter. Therefore, this chapter emphasizes the South Korean political position regarding food security between the '90s and the present day while also reflecting on the sociological aspect of the risk of physical and economic inaccessibility to food that the pandemic introduced to Korea lately.

## **2. Theoretical considerations**

The present study adopts, on the one hand, the theoretical political-economic perspective defined by Müller (2008), which, in turn, makes use of Winders' theory of food regime, gastronationalism and economic nationalism to understand the South Korean context and, on the other hand, Beck's thesis of the risk society (Beck, 2020). The first frame of reference, linked to the interactions between the state, the global economy and social classes, sees these three entities as dynamic and constantly changing. In particular, Müller interprets the world economy as a structuring force that determines the space of South Korean political possibilities, but that does not automatically regulate South Korean politics and policies in

detail. Moreover, the scholar points out that the South Korean state does not necessarily operate as a cohesive unit as political coalitions can form between the state-class and within classes themselves. This perspective also indicates a helpful way to understand the state's choices regarding food security considering a double movement not as oscillating between free market and protectionism but between self-regulated market and political ideas and organizations to which men refer in times of crisis. In this sense, Müller argues, some coalitions may require policies that promote and limit the free market at the same time. In Müller's approach, the free market can be pursued in its material form (reducing quotas and tariffs) while simultaneously allowing protectionism by reinforcing conceptual barriers on those products and services allowed to transit freely. The answer to the question "what does an economic doctrine do for the nation" sets political efforts in any economic direction. Economic nationalism thus intervenes as a form of connection between national identity and economic policy while encountering the forces of globalization. On the other hand, Beck's thoughts on reflexive modernity are particularly striking in the current times. In this perspective, the control of risks is a new and powerful necessity. An increasing part of the individuals who constitute contemporary globalized societies, characterized by a condition of ontological uncertainty that they face through consumption choices, are more or less aware of a category of global, invisible, "democratic", and uncontrollable risks. These risks, product of modernization, become a structuring force for a new system of values based on security that requires the political fact of eliminating the causes of dangers. Beck (2020, 103) argues that "as the dangers increase, the old priorities take a back seat, and simultaneously, the centrally managed policy of the state of emergency grows (...). Where danger becomes the normality, it permanently assumes this institutionalized form". The government, in this sense, is (pre)occupied with handling risks that frequently exceed its competencies espousing experts' advice within an increasingly politicized society.

### **3. Korean food security-related issues as an imminent threat to national sovereignty and identity**

As expressed in the introduction, this chapter intends to contemplate the topic of food security in South Korea since the late '80s. However, to achieve this aim, it appears necessary to outline a background as the South Korean food policies daughters of the '70s and '80s seem to be a keystone in

understanding the evolution of the concept of food security for the Korean state and, therefore, its management. It is possible to argue that food security might have been a national security problem during the '90s with some peculiar characteristics precisely due to the South Korean food and economic development strategies conceived and implemented during the political authoritarianism following the Korean War. In addition, the food policies of these years cooperated in constructing the frame of the most contemporary South Korean food security's weak points, revealing the long-term inefficiency of some choices of both authoritarian and democratic governments.

According to Burmeister (1987; 1990), the South Korean authoritarian state of the '70s focused almost exclusively on national economic goals and did not consider citizens' preferences in the different social groups. When Pak Chŏng Hŭi took the reins of the Korean peninsula with a coup d'état in May 1961, he had in his hands a somewhat underdeveloped socio-economic reality that led him to make industrialization his main objective in an international context in which the economic status of a country increasingly determined its importance. In the first phase of his government, therefore, Pak's food policies were designed with the sole purpose of contributing to the economic growth of the country as it was the leading risk factor for the survival of Korea in the global system. In particular, Pak set the achievement of food self-sufficiency as the objective of his first two five-year plans (Ch'oi, 2018; National Archives & Records Services, n.d.). From a perspective closely related to food, South Korea then depended largely on aid from the American and Vietnamese states while the country operated a local structural system of small multifunctional plots of land. Thus, Pak's strategy for achieving food self-sufficiency envisaged, on the one hand, the manipulation of consumption choices and, on the other, the mobilization of the masses for the development of rural areas (Pak, 2015). It can be said that the vital key to the success of this strategy is the reliance of Pak's policies on the needs of the population at this particular moment in history, correctly identified by the government as the construction of a well-defined national identity. It is important to underline how the strategy for economic development leveraged the sensitivity of the population concerned with the need to shape a South Korean national identity following the vicissitudes of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> This approach led to a tight

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<sup>2</sup> These include mainly the Japanese colonization (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953).

relationship between national identity and food which played a central role later in the '80s and '90s. Also, in this historical moment, national identity, apart from being of extreme urgency for the state and the population, assumed the enhanced connotation of growing deeper and stronger roots in a collectivist social reality such as the South Korean one. The Korean concept of "*uri*" (us) consolidated in these years defines a group of people heirs of the Confucian tradition and parents of the South Korean modernity. This drive towards modernity while preserving a Confucian mindset is appreciable in Müller's (2008) and Ch'oi's (2018) reports on Pak's ability to manipulate food consumption choices under economic development through campaigns that discouraged the consumption of rice – the production of which was unable to meet the demand of the population – and favoured, in its place, wheat and dairy products – part of the aid coming to Korea. These campaigns exploited nationalist and patriotic rhetoric that emphasized, on the one hand, the cultural backwardness of the Korean diet and, on the other hand, the benefits of the "modern" Western diet to the people's health and the country's economy. Similar considerations can be made when considering how Pak's government chose to act in two directions following the interruption of food aid by the United States. On the one hand, it promoted the spread of a new type of rice strategically called "*t'ongil*" (reunification rice), taking advantage of the emotions surrounding the division of Korea, which tore apart the unity of the population (Yi, 2019). On the other hand, Pak also promoted meat consumption and organized a series of agricultural programs, including the famous "*saemaül undong*" (movement of the new village). This particular movement was aimed at enhancing modernization, curing "the malaise of idleness and complacency which sprouts in the shade of stability" (Pak in Moore, 1984, p.580) through the mobilization of villages in competition while "exploiting nationalism to arrange peasants and country as an origin of nation" (Hwang, 2011, 48). In conclusion, it seems evident that the success of these strategies relies on the importance of the South Korean nationalist and identity message for the masses. All these actions by the South Korean government reveal how economic nationalism intervened in the '70s as a form of connection between society and the economy, at the same time consuming and packaging nationalist and identity discourses while leveraging that aspect of collectivism which sentenced to social ostracism those who did not conform to the discourses of socio-economic modernization of the country. This matter is relevant as it shows the formation process of a national identity imbued with a capacity for modernization in which food consumption and

the agricultural sector played a pivotal role. The management policies of food security were based on the tendency to exalt the qualities of the masses – especially farmers – to make them the heroic symbol of South Korean socio-economic development and agricultural modernization. This background could be a key to analyzing how civil society's politicization in the '80s determined the securitization of food, i.e. the rise of the nationalist meaning of food security-related problems and their importance as a national security issue.

In the '80s, one could argue that two economic occurrences influenced social mobilization. On the one hand, Pak's policy of developing heavy industries and replacing food imports met a growing international pressure – particularly from the United States – to liberalize the market. On the other hand, Korea was experiencing a period of economic crisis due to the collapse of exports,<sup>3</sup> which led, on one side, the inhabitants of rural areas to borrow money exponentially between 1983 and 1988 and, on the other, the growth of dependence on products' import such as corn, flour, and soybeans (Burmeister, 1992, 153–160). In this context, new phenomena unrelated to the military sphere were regarded as threats (non-traditional threats) to national security, which was no longer seen solely in terms of the traditional defense of territorial integrity but also as the preservation of national identity (non-traditional security). In particular, in the light of the link between agriculture and national identity discussed above, Korean farmers were vested with the role of natural custodians of the Korean identity threatened by liberalization. Korean civil society challenged the legitimacy of the new government led by Chŏn Tu Hwan, stained by the Kwangju massacre of 1980, and – also following this tragedy – interpreted the pressure toward market liberalization as a symbolic form of American imperialism. The fall of farmers, a symbol of “Koreanness”, would have represented the unravelling of the Korean identity. In a way, the Kwangju massacre strengthened the embracement of the symbolic value of farmers among the masses through the spread of the so-called “*minjung*” (people) ideology. As Müller (2008, 222) points out, “trade liberalization as another invasion of imperial powers, provid[ed] farmers with a visible opponent, namely the Korean government-US alliance, to vent frustrations over declining living conditions”. Therefore, the pro-democratic movements and protests of the period

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<sup>3</sup> This is the result of the combination of an increase in livestock and meat imports due to the country's new diet and the growth of domestic reserves that, in fact, caused a surplus with a consequent collapse in prices.

demanded political liberalization and economic protectionism of the agricultural sector in the name of “Koreanness”. In doing so, people sometimes resorted to violent actions such as slaughtering animals in public squares, self-immolation and suicide (Müller, 2008, 223–225). It could be plausible to interpret this historical moment as the one when, for the first time in modern Korean history, food undergone a process of “securitization”, meaning that food security became in South Korea a sort of matter of national security as the mass uprisings undermined the stability of the political and economic structure of the country while actively hindering negotiations between South Korea and other states (most notably the United States). This reading of the circumstance occurs precisely in the light of the link between agriculture, economy and “Koreanness” formed in the ‘70s, determining the widespread of an idea among the South Korean population for which their own collective identity depended on food security’s strategies. Food security as a problem of national security in South Korea could be consequently described as determined by the looming risks for the state produced by the clash between the population – influenced by the idea of equivalence between Korean identity and collective economic stability (including that of farmers) – and foreign national actors, who no longer accepted the protectionist measure of the Korean state on their market. The stability of the peninsula was at stake depending on the decisions of the new democratic government of No T’ae U (1988-1993) in terms of food security-related strategies. Endorsing the masses would have meant losing other states’ political and economic support while endorsing the demands of foreign governments solely could have led to a revolt or a series of revolts possibly characterized by unpredictable and unmanageable scale and consequences. In other words, the Korean state was concerned with protecting national sovereignty and national identity. In this sense, food security can be interpreted as a national security problem with a nationalistic nuance. Initially, to manage the situation, the Korean state opted for a ban on imports. However, following the beginning of a democratization path and in light of the upcoming Seoul Olympics, the liberalization of the market was no longer postponable although the opening of the rice and beef markets would have been detrimental to the rural households (Burmeister, 1990). The state needed adjustment policies related to food security in “a period of competition between global modernity and local nationalism” (Kim, 2010, 16). Thus, the state decided to undertake a liberalization policy in the primary sector while encouraging the population to buy and eat Korean products endorsing the slogan “Korean is good” (Kweon, 2017). In other terms, the government enhanced – also through funding – the spread of that

rhetoric in which Korean food was described as full of “Koreanness” which is naturally good for Koreans. The strategy for food security became that of *sint’oburi*, the concept of a body connected to its native land and thus better suited to consume its native land’s products while markets were opened, and globalization took foot in the country (Hyön & Im, 2009). In this way, the government sought to protect Korean products by exploiting the very link between agriculture and national identity that created part of the issue of national security related to food security in the first place in a newly liberalized market and consumer society. This evolution is in line with Müller’s reflection that

in the case of South Korea, (...) policies can be defended and opposed not only on the ground of economic impact but also on its cultural importance to the maintenance and survival of the nation. This is particularly the case if one considers economic nationalism as a way in which national identities shape economic strategies in encountering the forces of globalization (Müller, 2008, 55).

Besides, internationally the increase in consumerism and competitiveness in response to modernization and market liberalization denoted the need to imbue products with a value to make them attractive and defend them from the competition. Gastronationalism was thus a handy perspective for a new globalized-prone South Korea. The commodification of culture operated in Korean society can be seen as the most congenial way to obtain the aforementioned effects. The national culture by market logic should have been developed to maximize profit and was defined accordingly for its economic function. The construction of nationalistic discourses on Korean food can be read with this lens as a political act aimed at maintaining control over social actors and accompanying them towards the consumption of certain products to guarantee national security. This act involves building and strengthening a precise national identity and idea of modernity in the land of the morning calm (Moon, 2010). Pae Il Ho’s 1994 song “Sint’oburi” reflects these emblematic aspects.

Who are you? Who am I? / All of us who were born in this land,  
Sint’oburi. (...) / Apgujöng Kangnam Street. Where am I? / Where is  
Soonie, is there only Miss Lee? / Show window mannequins dance to  
foreign products. / Rice, barley, beans, red beans. / It’s ours, for our  
bodies but why are you looking for someone else’s? / Red pepper paste,

soybean paste kimchi and radish kimchi. / Don't forget, you and I are Koreans. / Sint'oburi. Sint'oburi. Sint'oburi. (Translated from *Again kayot'op* 10: KBS KPOP Classic, 2018).

In this text, it can be noted the fundamental theme of reconnection to the past (“Do not forget, you and I are Koreans”) and the difference between “us” and “them”, Koreans and the others. In particular, the adoption of English terms – a reference to the United States – such as “Miss Kim” (“*misŭ Kim*” in the original Korean) and “show window” (“*shouindŏ*” in the original Korean) associated with a foreign and alien culture strengthen the concept as they are juxtaposed to terms referring to the Korean tradition. In addition, the text underlines how the liberalization of the market is a cause of identity confusion among Koreans who can no longer tell if they are on “Apgujŏng Kangnam Street” or somewhere else. Therefore, the author suggests, it is necessary to look for oneself in the collectivity of which Korean land is imbued and not give in to the consumption and consumerism of foreign – and thus potentially harmful – products. Moreover, the Korean state was absolutely against *kwasobi*, or excessive purchase and consumption of food, and supported frugality (Kim, 1996). In the rhetoric of the time, this frugality was an expression of how Koreans traditionally lived, and it was characterized by those Korean land products. It is possible, of course, to reflect on how this “tradition” is partly very recent. For example, the consumption of meat which in the 90s became an integral part of the imaginary national diet within the *sint'oburi* rhetoric, is not at all a centuries-old tradition but was initiated by the Korean state and researchers while rediscovering court cuisine and creating *hanu* (Feffer, 2004, p. 46). *Hanu*, a breed of small cattle native to Korea, was born in those years as a result of research whose purpose was to replicate the standards of American meat, and yet it was presented to the population through scientists and politicians as somehow superior to other types of meat as it was pure Korean since more than two thousand years (Müller, 2008, 236). In other words, to strengthen its consumption, the idea spreads that *hanu* was born together with the Koreans on Korean soil. Another food whose narrative has been reinvented to meet the needs of food security is rice. As Kim (2010) points out, only recently rice has become a product accessible to all the population of South Korea and, therefore, could not have been part of the traditional diet of the Korean people. However, with the growth of nationalist fever and the popularization of the idea of *sint'oburi* by the Agricultural Cooperative Federation, Korean rice was inserted into a new cultural tradition capable of

providing a philosophical and cultural symbol to its consumers. In this sense, the Korean state financially promoted discourses praising the benefits of a national and “traditional” diet (Müller, 2008, 238). Therefore, the Korean food security’s strategy in the 90s was characterized by the consumption of traditions, and it defined as actual Koreans only those who were economically able to do so. As Bauman (1988/2020, p.112) stated, “consumers are not enemies of the poor; they are models of a good life, examples that we try to imitate to the best of our ability”.

Hence, the Korean state in the ‘90s started to liberalize the agricultural market – especially due to the pressures from the WTO of which Korea became a member in 1995 – through a series of negotiations while simultaneously protecting it through investments for farmers and campaigns that commodified the “Koreanness” so dear to the population (Burmeister & Choi, 2012). This strategy however was characterized by policies which “are suspected to go against small-scale producers” (Reinschmidt, 2009, 110) and found its end mainly with the financial crisis of 1997. Its weakness was its dependence on constant economic development, a ground for financial efforts toward farmers, producers, promotional campaigns, and South Korea’s industrialized identity overall. Thus, the government-imposed austerity on the population and focused on an economic recovery based on the access to the market to export manufactured products. It was imperative to repay the debt to the World Bank as soon as possible, and the surplus of manufactured products was identified as the strong point of a possible strategy. The government embarked on the stipulation of several multilateral and bilateral FTA agreements in the early 2000s (Chang *et al.* 2005), meeting the hostility of local farmers and producers (Müller, 2008, 195–6). Nevertheless, the positive balance of Korean trade and the globally stable low price of food products pushed the Korean administration to pursue the path of dependence on food imports. In this sense, the issue of the Korean food security somewhat took a back seat and then re-emerged a few years later, when the negligence in this area led to a poor workforce, little generational turnover, large debts for rural households, as well as, of course, a strong dependence on imports which proved to be extremely risky for national security. As Beck (2020, 79) reflects, “in the effort to increase productivity, risks have always been overlooked, and this also applies today. The most urgent priority for technical-scientific curiosity is the utility to productivity. Only later, and often not even in the second instance, do we think about the dangers that can be created”.

#### **4. Korean food security-related issues as potential risks for national security**

According to data from the World Integrated Trade Solution (2007), in 2007, South Korea ranked tenth in the world for the percentage of imports. Food imports amounted to about 5 billion, more than double the approximately 2 billion in 2000. As Kim *et al.* (2019) argued, a progressive decline in self-sufficiency occurred between 1980 and 2010 concerning the local production of nutrients. According to the Chung-ang Herald data (Park, 2006), the rice self-sufficiency rate of South Korea dropped from 79% in 1975 to 50% in 2004. In addition, in 2006, South Korea ranked twenty-seventh out of thirty OECD countries for grain self-sufficiency, whose demand increased due to the diet of Koreans now massively characterized by meat, oil and fat. In this regard, the crisis of 2007-2008 represented a decisive moment to realize the problems of the country's food security. It is possible to argue that 2008 was a sort of watershed in South Korea regarding food policies as both the state and the population realized some of the food security's risks to national security.

The Great Recession, generated by a significant financial crisis in the United States of America in 2007, affected most countries globally, and South Korea was naturally one of them. Several scholars systematically deal with the problems of food security in South Korea following the crisis mentioned above and even though the state and the population did not suffer particular negative consequences, it is clear to experts how problematic the dependence on imports is; a problem over which the Korean state had very little control (Lee, C.J. 2013; Park, 2011). In particular, when considering the factors of food security, the most significant risks could be identified at the level of product availability and affordability. Moreover, price volatility also posed a potential threat to the entire economic strategy of the state. The risks related to the food security strategy adopted by the Korean state up to that moment emerged strongly from the technical reports, and the government was called to take responsibility and find solutions to decisions previously taken in the name of development. The management of these risks took the form of a strategy named "Overseas Expansion of Agri-Food Industry" (MAFRA, n.a.). The Korean state approved the so-called "10-year Comprehensive Plan for Overseas Agricultural Development", whose purpose was to exploit foreign plots of land to control the price and management of imported agricultural products (Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2012). It is noteworthy that the South

Korean government was mainly committed to self-sufficiency while the well-being of farmers was not necessarily a priority, as it is evident from the statement of the KREI (Korea Rural Economic Institute), whose research purposes “do not guarantee farmers’ incomes” (Park, 2006). In any case, unlike what had historically happened previously, the Korean state acted in relation to food security for preventive purposes within an increasingly globalized world where dangers are ever less tangible and impossible to circumscribe. In this sense, the Korean state approved a strategy based on the risk to national security that dependence on food imports produced. This could be fundamental for two reasons. From a purely political-economic point of view, unlike what had happened up to that moment, the state’s focus shifted from immediate profit and accelerated development to the easing of a structural tension produced by the South Korean food security’s strategy which had been adopted until then. Moreover, the government showed difficulty in predicting and controlling these risks. Also, from a social point of view, the new perspective at the base of the government plan on food security grafted a mechanism of gradual and more significant attention and participation in resolving the problems concerning South Korean food security by the overall population as it is evident from the active response to the above-mentioned plan (Müller, 2008, 261–295). This participation is framed in a new light that sees food security’s identity features increasingly decentralized while a collective feeling of fear related to the risk of food insecurity makes its appearance. While “in the industrial society, the ability to fight material misery and to avoid social decline is essential in order to survive (...) in the risk society (...) the ability to anticipate dangers and to endure, biographically and politically, the relationship with them acquires a central role” (Beck, 1986/2020, 100). The global risks revealed by the 2007-2008 crises also shook the population. In this regard, active participation in the 10-year Comprehensive Plan for Overseas Agricultural Development could be read not only as a response to the entrenched South Korean nationalist sentiment on the part of the population or the possibility of economic enrichment, but also as a manifestation of what Beck (2020) calls “solidarity of fear”, that is, a social cohesion produced by the perception of risks, albeit at a relatively immature stage. This cohesion is also visible in consumption choices made by consumers in Korea who, although influenced by nationalism and the commodification of culture described above, are increasingly attentive to the producer-consumer process for their physical and social well-being (Son & Lim, 2021). Thus, in South Korea, there has been a change in the perception of food security between

the early 2000s and today. In the past, the problem of access to or consumption of food products was not regarded by the population as a collective issue, and food insecurity was considered a responsibility of the individual. In this context, people would have joined farmers to denounce the problems concerning the liberalization of the agricultural market in terms of assault on South Korean identity. Over time, however, the problems related to food security have begun to be seen as a matter of collective survival. This might be because the closest risks for South Koreans when it comes to food security are those of a sudden increase in prices that would negatively affect the broadest segment of the population, together with a general shortage of food that – in the long run – could not be avoided even with the power of money (and in any case, it would cost a lot in economic terms). As Beck (1986/2020, 48) stated, addressing global risks, “poverty is hierarchical, smog is democratic”. As such, the 2007-2008 crisis posed the question of the centrality of risks for the population in relation to the discourse of South Korean food security, determining the beginning of a strategic path characterized by technical foundations. Despite the outcomes of the Overseas Expansion mentioned above, the need for such a path was further strengthened with the spread of COVID-19 as risks produced by import dependence, such as the shortage of South Korean rural households and their precarious living conditions, emerged on the surface.

COVID-19 was officially confirmed in South Korea in January 2020, when the authorities confirmed the first case of contagion in the country. Although initially Korea managed the spread of the virus relatively well, in February 2020 an outbreak in the city of Taegu determined its rapid propagation so much that the Korean government was forced to immediately declare a state of emergency on February 23, 2020. Besides some peaks of infections, the security measures adopted allowed the South Korean government to control the spread of COVID-19. In particular, South Korea implemented a system of contagion tracking and five levels of social distancing, each associated with different restrictions. In addition, subsidy funds have been disbursed to the population segment most affected by hardships caused by the virus (OECD, 2021; Cho, 2021). However, despite the praised management of the pandemic, restrictions on the entry of foreigners, lockdowns in other countries of the world and global economic instability had a clear negative impact on food security in South Korea. First of all, numerous technical reports in the food sector testify that even though Korea did not suffer from a deficiency of food thanks to its stocks and trade was not significantly damaged, imports fell significantly in 2020 while

prices rose rapidly both due to the costs of the currency and transport. In addition, although the population did not necessarily perceive it, it is highlighted how COVID-19 affected the local agricultural production (ATO and OAA Seoul, 2020; Yong & Olson, 2020; Cho, 2021). Lockdowns abroad and restrictions on issuing visas led to a severe lack of labour in rural areas (Kim & Yam, 2020). According to the Ministry of Employment and Labor, only 1,384 of the 9,400 seasonal workers in the South Korean agricultural and fish sector entered the country during the pandemic (Cho, 2021). Although probably not immediately perceptible by the population in general, these situations alarmed experts in different sectors and, consequently, the South Korean government. In the KREI Agri-policy Focus of June 2020 (Seo *et al.*, 2020), experts took into consideration two possible scenarios according to the possible duration of the pandemic, and it emerges how the restrictions in international trade and travel resulted in social and economic contractions, economic recession and social distancing all contribute to an inevitable worsening of the agricultural sector's conditions. It is noteworthy that, although data show how the sale of local agricultural products significantly increased in 2020, the poorest part of the Korean population has been affected by the impact that COVID-19 has had on the increase in food prices due to the logistical difficulties related to the pandemic. Therefore, the already known problematic aspects of the case showed the potential to jeopardize the country's food security. Considering the data in the report on food security related to COVID-19 (APEC, 2020), Korea, as an APEC member, recognized the severe impact that the pandemic has had and continues to have on the food security of the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, it lingered on the conditions of producers and consumers at an economic disadvantage and on the urgency to support them. In addition, it is pointed out that COVID-19 has highlighted the problematic aspects of the supply chain in conjunction with the shift in consumer demand. For this reason, Korea reiterated the importance of strengthening solidarity and cooperation between countries. International free trade is considered essential in line with the conclusions of the OECD report (2021) on trade restrictions defined as "counterproductive" for the food security. In dealing with the challenges imposed by COVID-19 on the food security, the international economic policy aims at a path of "sustainability, efficiency and resilience". In this regard, in November 2020, South Korea signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership with ten ASEAN countries and four other countries in the Asia-Pacific region (China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand). It is a free trade agreement to lower trade barriers and

ensure better access to goods and services for markets. In addition, the South Korean government plans to expand its online distribution platforms in such a way as to promote and improve the digital distribution of agricultural and food products. In particular, given the trends of South Korean society and the weight of progress, the use of technology and biotechnology is seen as a strategy with direct beneficial effects both in relation to the environmental problem and that of the impoverishment of rural areas of the country as it aims to attract young Koreans in the agricultural sector (Neo, 2021). The economic condition of agricultural producers in Korea, impacted by the pandemic, has already required state intervention through sponsorship programs and low-interest loans. At the same time, even though the population has not actually experienced a lack of food, the South Korean MAFRA (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs) emphasizes the importance of South Korean self-sufficiency, at least when it comes to the production of the most frequently imported cereals. For this reason, the government plans to build and expand more infrastructure, such as specialized production complexes, while trends related to the international grain market will be monitored with “an alarm system in case of sudden changes in supply and demand” (Neo, 2021). An emblematic aspect of these decisions and strategies and the technical basis and politicization of risk management is the normality that seems now to characterize the emergency underlying them, that “tendency to a “legitimate” totalitarianism of defense from dangers” (Beck, 2020, 108).

Finally, the South Korean government’s statement concerning the issue of the food supply for South Korean athletes at the Tokyo 2021 Olympics seems relevant. In the tense climate generated by the importation of Korean food to Japan to feed Korean athletes, the South Korean government declared that it had never ordered or approved the action (iMedia, 2022), however also implying that it neither prevented it nor discouraged it. This episode amid the pandemic gives credit to the reflection on the peculiar position of the South Korean government related to the food market already discussed previously in this chapter. The government chooses to adopt a strategy aimed at strengthening free trade according to the international standard of sustainability and digitalization of agriculture while simultaneously exacerbating the importance of self-sufficiency and not directly preventing episodes of protectionism in consideration of the complexity of the negative impact COVID-19 had on the Korean food security. This being said, however, unlike what previously happened with the “10-Year Comprehensive Plan”, the risks for national security linked to food

security highlighted by COVID-19 induced the government to shift its attention to the Korean soil and – given the current situation of the countryside and its dwindling inhabitants – to aim at modernization in the form of technologization of rural areas in a sort of historical recourse although with a very different conceptual basis. Nonetheless, the evolution underwent by South Korean society could produce a substantial limitation in this strategy. Unlike the ‘60s, today’s South Korean society is a consumer and liquid society whose individuals are bound to the condition of economic autonomy-independence that, at present, only the city potentially offers due to the lack of services in rural areas. The technologization and digitalization of these areas may not be enough to mobilize the number of young people needed to modernize and repopulate South Korea’s countryside. This is mainly the case in a historical moment when the centralization of Seoul is a constantly growing process, and the living conditions of rural areas are not particularly attractive to young people. On the other hand, the social aspect in the face of which the strategy could be successful is the already mentioned “solidarity of fear”. A study conducted by Kim *et al.* (2020) reveals that 84.2% of South Koreans in their sample “agreed on the importance of domestic production and self-sufficiency of agricultural products,” thus revealing an effective transition of the perception of food security-related problems from individual to collective issues. Nevertheless, the doubt about the efficiency of this new political strategy remains. To quote Beck again:

In place of the commonality induced by scarcity comes the commonality induced by fear. (...) however, it is still entirely to be defined what effects the cohesion of fear has. To what extent do the commonalities produced by fear hold? What kind of motivation and energy for action do they put in place? What characteristics does this new community of solidarity of fear have? Will the social energy of fear really succeed in knocking out the calculation of individual gain? (...) Will not fear be (unlike material misery) too uncertain a basis for political movements? (Beck, 2020, 65).

## **5. Conclusions**

This chapter argues that the problems related to South Korean food security from the late ‘80s have essentially taken on two different meanings with subsequent different paths of state management. The first meaning is rather distinctly nationalist and required the manipulation of Korean

agricultural products and consumers within a progressively liberalized market. As for the second meaning, this is a matter of risk to national security and, therefore, requires technical reports that highlight the poor state control over the risks pertaining to it and a new configuration of the government's responsibilities. The chapter posits how in the '90s, food security could be considered for the first time a matter of national security. While for the population, it concerned the salvation of the Korean identity, for the state, it was an issue of safeguarding the economy and the sociopolitical structure of the peninsula. Following first the 2007-2008 financial crisis and then the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible to observe a change in the understanding of the problems pertaining to food security in terms of potential risks for the South Korean population and economy. The government appears to handle food security through policies conveying definitions and risk management projects related to the food security in South Korea capable of persuading citizens to cultivate lands abroad or repopulate the rural areas of Korea. Be that as it may, the efficiency of the most recent measures related to food security in Korea seems to depend partially on the strength of that "solidarity of fear" (Beck, 2020, 65) that arose with the broader population's awareness of the problems of food security amid capitalist drives.

An article by Lee, Y. (2013) highlights that the significant changes in the anthropometric measures of South Koreans between 1979 and 2010 can be linked to the cultural processes underlying the same period. In particular, the answers to the four questionnaires collected between 1979 and 1997 show an increase of about 2-3 cm in the height of both women and men in each questionnaire. On the other hand, as reported in this chapter, the rates of dependence on imports and the impoverishment of rural areas are equally relevant – and concerning – figures in the same years. These numbers and their analysis reveal that the management of food security at the hands of the South Korean state for many years was characterized by manipulating the diet and the discourses and rhetoric about food. For example, in the case of meat, its consumption has been introduced, popularized and "traditionalized" in this very period. On the one hand, such a strategy aimed to solve a national security threat related to national sovereignty and linked to food security and, on the other, to allow the state's economic growth in a liberal international context. The food security, as a result of the urgency for market liberalization, presented problems concerning the local production of food as South Korean producers were not able to survive the competition. Moreover, the Korean identitarian value in which agricultural producers played a role

already in the '70s engaged a mechanism of mobilization of the masses who cried out to American imperialism and the loss of "Koreanness". Given this, the South Korean government resulted in adopting a fundamentally gastro-nationalist strategy during the '90s, promoting the consumption of "tradition", or Korean products, while consecrating the opening of the agricultural market. However, as the data above show, in an attempt to respond immediately to the problems concerning food security that emerged and repay the debt to the World Bank following the financial crisis of 1997, the government lost sight of the risks associated with food security's strategies. With the crisis of 2007-2008 and, more recently, the spread of COVID-19, these risks have fiercely risen to the surface as underlined by expert reports and are perceived to varying degrees even by the population that is more or less aware of the severe risks of food insecurity that for the most part could face in the future. This is prompting the government to reaffirm its economic policy position within the international system while maintaining a form of protection of Korean agricultural products as much as possible to support producers and their families. Simultaneously, the government tries to manage the national security risks related to the food security through projects of digitalization and technologization of rural areas to try to achieve self-sufficiency in at least some products and push young people to the countryside to limit dependence on the workforce of foreigners. In particular, this is visible in the Korea Agriculture and Rural Community and Food Industry Development Plan for 2018-22 characterized by five main goals, namely the strengthening of the income safety net for farmer households, the promotion of innovation for sustainable agriculture, the enhancement of food safety in the supply chain, the improvement of rural welfare and the usage of a more bottom-up policy approach (OECD, 2021). Given this, it is difficult to say whether the population of young people will positively react to the state's call because of cohesion produced by the fear of food insecurity or whether capitalist drives will prevail. However, it is clear that the South Korean food security is suffering from some critical problems, such as the dependence on imports and the impoverishment of rural areas as well as the dependence on foreign workers and price volatility in an increasingly poor society. Such issues involve risks that the state must manage for national security. If the strategy proposed in recent years reveals to be inefficient, it will probably be necessary to touch the elephant in the room, that is to say, the progressive centralization of Seoul.

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The book analyzes how the theme of food security is approached in four key economic and political players in East Asia: India, China, Japan, and South Korea. These countries were chosen because of their geoeconomical relevance — they include the three largest economies in East Asia and a rising power like India —, because they are key players in the global food security debate due to their geopolitical weight and also because they assign a strong role to the state for ensuring food security. Relying on the concept of “securitization”, the book addresses the following questions: how did these four countries approach food security? What policies did they put in place? How was food security framed in national security policies? What implications did policy responses have for discourses on national identity?