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China and Global Food Security: Conflicting Notions

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Synopsis

China is central to international efforts to address the global food security challenge. However the Chinese interpretation of the concept of Food Security is problematic: it is outdated and diverges from the international norm.

Commentary

THE NEW year began with global food prices rising to the highest level since 1990. They even exceeded the 2008 price hikes that sparked deadly riots across the world. Although not attracting as much world-wide attention as the global financial crisis, food security could be the gravest challenge to humanity. It means a lot more than simply putting food on the table. To tackle the food security challenge, international cooperation is important, but efforts of states are critical, particularly China.

Being the most populous country in the world, China is central to international efforts to address the growing global food insecurity. However, there is a serious potential concern with China's position: the Chinese interpretation of the concept of food security is outdated, and at variance with that of the larger international community.

Chinese Interpretation of 'Food Security'

The Chinese equivalent of food security is "Liangshi Anquan". But it can be translated to either food security or grain security, and both have been used interchangeably by Chinese officials and academic researchers. However, no clear official definition of "Liangshi Anquan" has been given. Nonetheless, as far as official policy is concerned, "Liangshi Anquan" is generally referred to grain security. And according to China's first official grain security plan, "Liangshi Anquan" is mainly about boosting grain production.

International Definition of Food Security

Internationally, food security, according to the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), is defined as existing when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life. The concept of food security includes both physical and economic access to food that meets people's dietary needs and their food preferences. It has two main points. One is that food security is not just about food supplies; it is also closely related to affordability of the food. The other is that the objective of food security is to ensure all people a healthy and active life; far beyond just sustaining life. Hence the term

'food' here should include not only grains, but also other agricultural products such as meat, milk, eggs, and fruits.

The importance of grain to the Chinese can never be overemphasised; self sufficiency of grain supply is vital for China's "Liangshi Anquan". However, it may not go as intended if China focuses too much on grain supply while neglecting the production of other agricultural products. With rapid economic development and cultural changes, the dietary needs and food preferences of the Chinese have changed dramatically. The Chinese are consuming less and less grains and vegetables, but more and more meats, eggs, fruits and aquatic products. These changes imply that China's interpretation of the concept of food security is increasingly outdated, and thus inadequate. There are serious domestic and international implications.

Domestic Implications

Strongly influenced by the concept of "Liangshi Anquan", Chinese policymakers have implemented many agricultural policies to expand land usage and improve grain productivity to safeguard the national grain supply. In recent years, China has introduced a variety of agricultural supporting policies to boost its grain production, ranging from easing taxes on agriculture to subsidising seeds. Statistics released by the Chinese authorities suggest that these policies have been very effective in boosting China's grain production.

However, when the concept of China's "Liangshi Anquan" is broadened from simple grain security, particularly grain production, to the notion of food security as defined by FAO, the impact on the China's otherwise impressive grain production is reversed. Firstly, it is far from sufficient to stress grain production alone to guarantee the Chinese people's access to food.

Also, some policies encourage the farmers to invest more in grain production through the continuous raising of grain prices. But increased prices make grain more expensive for the consumers.

Secondly, although China's annual grain production has dramatically increased in recent years, the production of other important agricultural products have experienced significant fluctuations.

The underlying principle of some major agricultural policies is to increase the supply of land as well as investment in grain production. However, given the limited total arable land and financial resources, the dramatic increase in the use of land for wheat, for example, has been achieved at the expense of other crops.

Global Implications

The vital role of China in addressing the global food security challenges means that the divergence in understanding and defining food security will inevitably have serious global repercussions.

Firstly, it is very difficult for the other countries to cooperate effectively with China to tackle the global food security challenge when the concept of food security is interpreted differently. Secondly, China's tight control and frequent intervention to its grain trade may cause tension and instability to global grain trade. Thirdly, given the importance of China's demand for other agricultural products in the international market, such as beans, meat, sugar, fruits and vegetables, the fluctuation of those products as a result of China's overemphasis on grain production could destabilise the international market.

The food security challenge needs to be seriously addressed internationally and domestically. Being the most populous nation in the world, China has a very big role to play. The effective management of the challenges should start with a clear and appropriate definition of the concept of food security.

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