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China's Food Security: Sourcing from the Seas

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Synopsis

Facing increasing difficulties to feed its growing population, China is turning to its "blue territories" and high seas for food. While this shift in the food system contributes to China's food security, it also has regional and global implications.

Commentary

CHINA IS facing increasing difficulties to feed its growing population which is at the same time becoming more affluent. Although China has achieved nine consecutive years of increase in grain production from 2003 to 2012, its grain demand and supply gap continues to widen. In the first ten months of 2012, China's cereal import reached 12.6 million tonnes, representing a 212% increase over the same period in 2011.

With nearly 1.4 billion people to feed, the country considers self-sufficiency the foundation of its food security strategy. However, China faces a severe shortage of land and water resources in per capita terms - 40% and 28% of world average respectively. As it is increasingly challenging for China to maintain food self-sufficiency, the country is turning towards its "blue territories" – the surrounding seas and beyond - for food.

Party Congress resolutions

At the recent 18th Party Congress Chinese leaders pledged that they would enhance China's capacity for exploiting marine resources, safeguard its maritime rights and interests, and build itself into a maritime power. Inspired by the strong commitment from the top, Chinese officials and marine experts advocate that the country's food system be more maritime-based.

This maritime-based food security strategy is twofold. Firstly, it aims to intensify its fishery operations in its territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs); and secondly, it wishes to expand its Distant Water Fishing (DWF) reach to utilise the resources of the oceans. While this shift in China's food system contributes to its food security, it also has regional and global implications.

While defending the red line of 120 million hectares arable land, further exploitation of the "blue territories" could significantly contribute to China's food security. To enhance its capacity for this, the development of China's fishing industry is key. China has by far the largest fishing industry in the world, with more than one million ships and employing over 13 million people. China's current fishery production accounts for over 30 % of global

production, with aquaculture production representing 70% of global production.

Top priority has been given to promoting aquaculture, with more policy and financial support from both central and local governments. The strengthening of China's aquaculture sector could also have positive spillover effects on the other regional countries' aquaculture through technological transfer and training and education cooperation.

Distant Water Fishing (DWF)

Facing severe degradation of the marine ecology and depletion of fishery resources in its inshore and offshore waters, the Chinese government has taken steps to reduce marine fishing since the late 1990s. However, with the new focus on the marine economy and driven by growing demand for high quality fishery products, China's marine fishing sector may resume its growth trend, and the structural shift from inshore to offshore fishing could be accelerated and intensified.

Given the tensions over maritime territories in East and South East Asia, as well as competition for marine resources, China's growing fishing operations in the region's disputed waters could lead to rising fishing disputes, which might escalate into larger maritime conflicts.

A 2010 report was put out by a high level task force on strengthening the country's Distant Water Fishing (DWF) sector. It argues that China cannot merely rely on its resources on land and its territorial waters and EEZs to satisfy the country's growing demand for food. Instead, China should actively explore and utilise ocean resources, particularly marine biological resources in the high seas which are seen as the largest store of protein. Over the past two decades, China has put in great efforts to expand its fishing operations in distant waters. China's annual production of distant water catch reached one million tonnes in 2010 and the total number of DWF vessels topped 1991 - the largest in the world.

According to China's 12th Five Year Plan for the development of the fishing industry, one of the key targets is to further expand China's fishery operations in distant waters. China aims to increase the size of its distant water fishing fleet from 1991 vessels in 2010 to 2300 in 2015, and the distant water fishing production from one million tonnes in 2010 to 1.3 million tonnes in 2015.

Need for inclusive strategy

While expansion of China's DWF operations could contribute to the country's food security, it might have undesired impacts far beyond China's borders. Even though China claims that the development of the country's DWF has been based on cooperation with local governments and enterprises, and China's DWF contributes positively to local economic development, there are growing concerns that China's DWF could exacerbate the degradation of fishery resources worldwide.

Furthermore, restricted by inadequate equipment and limited techniques, most of Chinese DWF fleets are only capable of operating in coastal waters; indeed a large number of Chinese fishing vessels are operating in coastal waters of many African countries. This might pose threats to the food security conditions of Africa, which is the world's most food-insecure region.

As the most populous country in the world yet facing shortage of land and water resources, it is inevitable for China to source food from the seas to meet its growing food demand. However, this shift in its food procurement strategy entails vigilance and careful policymaking. It should be an inclusive strategy which takes full consideration of China's rising demand for food, marine ecology, regional maritime security, as well as food security concerns of other countries. Only then will China's food system serve as a positive model for the world.

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