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Global Food Security: Debunking the “China Threat” Narrative

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Synopsis

Playing up the China threat narrative is rather misguided and unhelpful to global food security discourse.

Commentary

IN LATE February this year, Lester Brown, who wrote the highly influential article “Who Will Feed China” two decades ago, published another piece entitled “Can the World Feed China?” In the paper he posited that China’s growing food imports and agricultural investment overseas could lead to rising food prices and political instability.

Brown is not alone in claiming China’s growing food imports will threaten global food security. In October last year, *Foreign Policy* printed an article entitled “Appetite for Destruction-Why feeding China’s 1.3 billion people could leave the rest of the world hungry”. *Thomson Reuters Foundation* also ran a piece “Chinese grain imports to strain world food supply”. Clearly, a new wave of the China threat to global food security narrative is on the rise.

Days of self-sufficiency over

While Brown is right in pointing out that China is increasingly projecting its domestic food shortage overseas, playing up the China threat narrative is rather misguided and unhelpful to global food security.

In 1994 when he published his well-known article “Who Will Feed China?”, Beijing reacted fiercely. Apart from refuting Brown’s claim that China would not be able to feed itself, the country issued a White Paper which officially set out grain self-sufficiency as the foundation of its food security strategy. Since then, China has placed huge emphasis on boosting domestic grain production and has roughly managed to keep its grain self-sufficiency rate above 95 per cent over the past two decades.

However, with rapidly rising demand, China has to import increasingly more grains and other foods from the international market. In the past four years, the country’s grain self-sufficiency rate has remained below 90 per cent and keeps dropping. As food self-sufficiency is no longer an option, China last year redefined the country’s food security strategy as one that relies on domestic supply with moderate imports. “Food imports” now forms part of the national food security strategy.

China has the right to import food

Before debating whether China's domestic food shortages pose a threat to global food security, it is important to understand that China has the legitimate right to purchase food from other countries. In this globalised world where international trade is considered the path to global prosperity, no country needs to produce everything it consumes; including China.

While it is the world's factory, utilising vast domestic resources to supply cheap manufactured goods to other countries, it is only fair and reasonable for China to import food from other countries. For years, the international community criticised China for exporting too much while importing too little, causing huge trade imbalances; it is therefore cynical to play up the "China threat narrative" when China begins to import food.

Admittedly, China is following the footsteps of Japan and South Korea by relying more on food imports and investing in overseas agricultural resources as rapid urbanisation took land away from agricultural use and pulled people off the farms and rural life. Growing wealth allowed the Chinese to enjoy more diverse diets. However, it is a misjudgement to consider China's growing integration into the global food system as a threat to global food security.

China's imports will not deprive the world

Brown argued that China's growing reliance on the international food market will strain world food supply and send the global food prices sky-high. This claim seems to be backed by convincing data - current volume of international trade in grain annually is merely 250 million tonnes, less than half of China's annual grain consumption.

However the key to whether the global grain market can meet China's huge demand is the global food producing capacity. China is feeding over 20 per cent of the world population with only eight per cent of the world's arable land, and six per cent of the world's water resources. This means the rest of the world, with over 92 per cent of global arable land and 94 per cent of the world water resources, only produced food for less than 80 per cent of the population. In other words, there is huge potential to increase global food production.

As long as China enters the international food market in a gradual and transparent manner, giving the global agricultural sectors sufficient time to respond, China's food import will not lead to food price spikes. While moderate increase in global food prices is expected, this will not threaten global food security either; instead, it will be conducive to the revitalisation of global agriculture and poverty alleviation.

Another major evidence to support the China threat theory is its alleged land grabbing in foreign countries, particularly Africa. Indeed, in 2006, China introduced the "agriculture going-out" strategy and since then China has built production bases for cereal, soybeans, rubber and other agricultural products in Russia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, South America and other areas.

However, the scale of China's land acquisition in Africa is marginal. On the contrary, agricultural aid and assistance has been the main approach of China's "agriculture going-out" in Africa. What is more, till now, agricultural produce from China's overseas agricultural investment is mainly sold on the international market instead of being shipped back to China. This not only makes economic sense but also helps harness the potential of global food production.

China's positive role overlooked

What is often overlooked by China critics is that apart from importing more food and acquiring land overseas, China has been playing a positive role in strengthening global food security. Firstly, China is a leading country providing agricultural aid and assistance to developing countries to improve their agricultural production. Secondly, China has emerged as a major global food donor and it is becoming increasingly active in participating in global food governance via increasing support to the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and World Food Programme and playing constructive roles in the Committee on World Food Security. Thirdly, China shows more willingness to cooperate with other countries to promote food security. For instance, China is a major contributor to the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve.

As China integrates into the global food system, there is intense domestic debate among the policymakers and scholars on which approach is best to safeguard China's food security: a market-oriented approach or a state-led mercantilist approach. The international environment will be a critical factor shaping China's future choices. Playing up the China threat theory will be not helpful in this regard; rather it risks turning the discourse into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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