

# Is food security a contemporary national security issue for Japan?

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the question of whether food security is a contemporary national security issue for Japan. It notes that while Japan is one of the most secure countries in the world, it is and will likely remain highly dependent on food imports because government policies have both actively and unwittingly created the conditions for the failure of its domestic agriculture sector.

The paper acknowledges Japan's enormous economic resilience. However, it argues that Japan's dependency on food imports would leave it critically exposed in the event of a food crisis caused by export bans, crop failures, turmoil in supplier countries, or economic sanctions. It concludes that Japan's over-reliance on international food imports, against the backdrop of declining self-sufficiency, represents a potentially virulent threat to its national security.

## Introduction

Japan is one of the most secure countries in the world. It has a modern history of politically stable governments, its military is well-equipped and effective, and its society is well-ordered.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Japan is ably configured to counter traditional threats to its national security. But contemporary Japan is now being confronted with non-traditional security threats that compromise its wider national security interests.<sup>2</sup> This includes the 'shifting tectonics' of food security, which are of paramount importance to Japan despite an evident absence of the traditional linkage between national poverty and access to food.<sup>3</sup>

The Indo-Pacific is one of the most important regions for the world food economy, and while Japan practises protectionism of its domestic agriculture sector, it also actively fuels this economy as a major importer of food from across the region.<sup>4</sup> Currently, more than 60 per cent of food calories consumed by the Japanese people come from overseas markets and, despite protectionist measures, Japan's domestic agriculture sector is declining rapidly.<sup>5</sup>

After contextualising what is meant by 'food security' in Japan, this paper will first examine Japan's capacity for nutritional self-sufficiency. It will analyse the effect of Japanese government policies on the domestic agriculture sector, highlight considerable limitations within the Japanese agriculture industry, and reveal changing contemporary consumer behaviour as being a contributory factor towards a critical decline in self-sufficiency. The paper will then analyse Japan's over-reliance on international food imports and assess Japan's attendant resilience to global economic crises, during which stable, high-volume supply could be compromised. It will conclude that food security is not a standard policy problem for the Japanese Government to address; it is a clear and present national security issue.

## Food security in the world's third-largest economy

Food security is not an unfamiliar issue on Japan's national political agenda. The foremost task that the post-World War 2 government of Japan had to contend with was the management of risk regarding food supply.<sup>6</sup> Japan has since developed into a stable and prosperous state that does not fit the stereotype of a nation that has contemporary food security concerns. The economy is strong, the country has an established domestic agriculture sector, and Japan is the world's largest net importer of food. Instances of undernourished people in Japan are few.

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Japan has a global food security index score of 77.9, which means that it has a highly adaptive capacity to change, and is resilient towards nutritional pressures in general.<sup>7</sup> However, global food price shocks in 2007-08 resulted in food commodities such as corn, wheat, rice and soybeans peaking at historically high prices, and demonstrated a pressing requirement to address food security in Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup> The Japanese government led the resultant discussion at the 2008 G8 leaders' forum on global food security, where it became clear that food security was a major national concern for Japan due both to its high cereal import dependency and low self-sufficiency rates.<sup>9</sup>

At the World Food Summit of 2009, food security was defined as 'a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary need and food preferences for an active and healthy life'.<sup>10</sup> Most nations with poor food security tend to be impoverished, and access to food is limited both by availability of domestic supply and affordability of imports. However, the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries defines food security as 'preparation for ensuring food supply measures, and swift action in case that food supply is subject to a negative effect from unexpected factors'.<sup>11</sup>

Japan is not concerned about affordability but is acutely concerned by food 'availability' and the stability of sufficient physical supply.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries promotes a strategy to assure capacity to feed the people and become less dependent on an uncertain global market. The attendant policy measures include increasing the quantity of food produced domestically; national food education programs to promote the traditional Japanese diet, rich in fish, rice and vegetables; and securing a stable import base through greater diversification.<sup>13</sup> However, there are problems associated with the application of these measures.

## An industry in terminal decline: Japan's domestic agriculture sector

Over the past half century, a blend of government developmental policies has catalysed and then perpetuated decline across the Japanese agriculture sector. Industrial development post-World War 2 necessarily reorganised the use of land across Japan, with one consequence being the reduction in the total area available for farming.<sup>14</sup> The effect was to denude domestic food supply capacity. In the 1970s, the government introduced further policies to reduce rice acreage in order to control rice prices and reduce the costs associated with the management of surplus stock.

The Rome Summit on World Food Security in June 2008, initiated in response to food price increases, galvanised food security's geopolitical status. The subsequent OECD 2009 Annual Report emphasised the need for improved competitiveness within the farming sector through trade and efficiency measures, rather than by propagating support subsidies.<sup>15</sup> This influenced the Japanese government to introduce interventionist policies that ran contrary to Japan's traditional policy of agricultural protectionism. These included tariff protection and price supports for imported foodstuffs, which disadvantaged the Japanese farming community by depreciating the saleable value of their home produce and limiting their output.

The agriculture sector's resultant contribution to GDP is now only 1 per cent (compared to China's 10 per cent), and less than 4 per cent of the population is employed within the sector, compared to 35 per cent as a worldwide average.<sup>16</sup> Japan currently produces only 39 per cent of the food it consumes. This is a decrease from 79 per cent in 1960, and represents the lowest self-sufficiency rate among all major developed countries. By comparison, the UK produces 61 per cent of the food it consumes, and France produces a surplus of 121 per cent.<sup>17</sup>

In recognition of the impact of these policies, the Japanese Government is now seeking to increase the food self-sufficiency ratio to 50 per cent by 2020, and there are several protectionist policy responses to energise the declining domestic agriculture market.<sup>18</sup> These measures include subsidies, such as cutting the price at which the government sells imported wheat to domestic flour millers by 23 per cent, and the application of tariffs on imported foodstuffs such as frozen vegetables from China, which constitute over half the vegetables consumed in Japan.<sup>19</sup>

But these measures alone are insufficient, and attainment of any real increase in self-sufficiency is restricted by the physical structure of the agriculture sector. Modern farming involves exploitation of large rural space, such as the plains of Brazil.<sup>20</sup> But mini-farms, limited by topography, dominate the Japanese agricultural sector, with each farm shouldering its own growing operating and logistics costs due to government tax legislation and lease rights restrictions which prohibit the clumping up of ownership shares into larger areas of shared farmland. This legislation has forced many farmers out of business and has left the landscape peppered with abandoned farms that are no longer economically viable.

Demographic change is also exacerbating food security concerns for Japan, with the population both ageing and decreasing.<sup>21</sup> Japan's rural farming community is dominated by over 65-year olds, and their farmlands

are accordingly recognised by the government as 'communities living on the edge of extinction through depopulation', because people aged 65 and over constitute more than half the total population within these areas. This results in a policy-driven lack of central investment and infrastructure development, which impacts directly on the extant farming communities and serves as a disincentive to the creation of a next generation of farmers. Ironically, this long-term downward trend is aligned with contemporary dietary requirements.

Since the end of World War 2, the Japanese people have markedly increased their consumption of meat and fat, resulting in a decrease in the requirement for traditional agricultural produce.<sup>22</sup> For example, rice represented 48.4 per cent of the Japanese diet in 1960; by 2005, this had reduced to 23.3 per cent, supplanted by farm products and vegetables imported from overseas markets. Changes in popular eating habits and lifestyle choices, in particular the 'Westernisation' of a broad range of diverse foodstuffs now widely available in supermarkets and difficult to grow in Japan, are a major contributor to Japan's uniquely low self-sufficiency levels.<sup>23</sup>

This 'nutritional transition' is culturally perceived by the Japanese consumer as replacing inferior food products with those considered superior. It is a novel cultural paradigm in the making; one which has undermined attempts by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries to promote historic dietary values. The implication of the situation is a heavy and growing dependency on foreign imports.<sup>24</sup>

## Over-reliance on imports in an unstable world

Japan depends on a comparatively small number of countries for the majority of its food imports.<sup>25</sup> Grain and legume imports from the US represent more than 25 per cent of Japan's total agricultural imports. ASEAN, China and the EU are the next largest supplier group, with a combined share of over 39 per cent. Meats are the largest agricultural imports and, based on the value of those imports, Japan is the largest meat importer in the world.

Japan's high dependency on food imports has stemmed from US pressure in the course of globalisation and liberalisation of world trade, as well as the Japanese government's own import liberalisation policies.<sup>26</sup> The state is under continued pressure to completely open its agricultural market and deregulate agricultural policy through mechanisms such as the evolving Trans Pacific Partnership and other free trade agreements.<sup>27</sup> While Japan has made it a top priority to try and keep many of its own agricultural products exempt from trade-dependent tariffs and price reductions, such a strong defensive stance

has made it difficult for Japan to elicit compromises from other potential and actual trade partners, in particular the US.<sup>28</sup>

Japan's dependence on such a narrow trading base is a vulnerability. Legacy trade with countries and blocs cannot be assured in a constantly changing political landscape. Uncertain future strategic direction from a Trump-led US, or from the EU whose free-trade outlook is being re-examined as a result of the UK's decision to leave the European trading framework, could result in a stagnation or reduction in food imports available to Japan.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Japan has sensibly sought a mutual deepening of its stable strategic relationship with Australia.<sup>30</sup> Australia is Japan's third biggest import trading partner and, in terms of food availability, Australia is a major supplier of beef. Notwithstanding, this trade relationship affords minor mitigation against wider availability dependencies and concerns.<sup>31</sup>

The economic development of the Indo-Pacific region's two most populous countries, China and India, will entail a huge increase in food demand and it is far from certain that the international food market will be able to cope with it.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the nature of markets is such that this will result in significant global food price inflation. Japan can afford to buy food during a sustained price hike. Even during the 2008 food crisis, when the price of grain quadrupled, Japan's food consumer price index only increased by 2.6 per cent.<sup>33</sup>

For Japan, therefore, availability of supply of its considerable food imports is crucial, as it could not feed its people without these imports. As a regional partner, whose supply base is largely free from the potential of industrial dispute and unstable internal politics, Japan's dependence on China could, and arguably should, increase substantially. With respect to food security alone, it would be in Japan's national security interests to promote greater regional cooperation with China, and to blend out competing national agendas.

But to do so, Japan's government would have to grant political concessions regarding ongoing territorial disputes if it were to overcome the mutual antipathy that undermines the attendant diplomatic relations between these historic rivals.<sup>34</sup> In reality, only a paradigm shift or 'critical juncture' in food security issues caused by crop plagues, environmental disaster or large-scale bioterrorism might catalyse the emergence of more effective cooperation in this area of global security.<sup>35</sup> Until it does, Japan's uniquely high dependence on agricultural imports will remain a vulnerability that threatens the security of the state.

## Conclusion

Food security is a pressing global challenge. Failing to secure a stable supply of sufficient food to feed the population threatens more than just the national security of individual states; it could create the conditions for national, regional or international conflicts.<sup>36</sup> Unlike all other developed countries, Japan is highly dependent on food imports because government policies have both actively and unwittingly created the conditions for the failure of its domestic agriculture sector.

Irreversible demographic trends within farming communities, physical limitations of the Japanese rural landscape, and contemporary globalised tastes among the Japanese people all contribute to the irreversible decline of the domestic supply base. No change in policy could now mitigate this demise. And despite Japan's reducing population, the decreasing capacity for self-sufficiency diminishes projections of Japan's future societal size.

Therefore, Japan will remain heavily dependent on imports to sustain its population. Of course, concerns regarding the cost of importing the majority of Japan's nutritional requirements must be contextualised by recognising the enormous economic resilience of the country. However, this dependency would leave Japan critically exposed in the event of a food crisis caused by export bans, crop failures, unrest or even wars in supplier countries, or economic sanctions against the Japanese state. This eventuality, when considered against the backdrop of declining food self-sufficiency rates, represents a potentially virulent threat to Japan's national security.

## Notes

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