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## **China's Agricultural Power Strategy: What Is It All About?**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*"The world's truly powerful countries have no weaknesses, and they all have the ability to solve their own food problems."*

*– Xi Jinping, 2013.*

*To prepare for "struggles" with the United States and manage food security concerns amid the global food crisis, China is pursuing an "agricultural power" strategy.*

### **COMMENTARY**

On 13 February, China unveiled its "[No. 1 central document](#)" for 2023, which outlined key tasks for promoting agricultural and rural development for this year. This is also the 20th consecutive No. 1 document issued by the central government since 2003 to guide the work on three rural issues, "agriculture, rural areas and farmers". The document reiterated the importance of, and urgent need for, strengthening food security and broached the idea of more targeted moves to prevent a widespread resurgence of poverty in rural areas.

What is striking about the document is that it is the first time that a new grand goal – striving to become an [agricultural power](#) – has been set down in a No.1 central document.

## What is an Agricultural Power?

When the concept of agricultural power is mentioned and discussed in the Chinese context, the following key characteristics have been stressed: strong capacity in agricultural and food production, strong capacity for agricultural science and technology innovation, strong capacity in terms of sustainable agricultural development, strong agricultural competitiveness, and high level of agricultural development.

According to [Chinese officials](#) and [scholars](#), the core idea of accelerating the building of agricultural power is about ensuring an adequate food supply, fitting agriculture with the level of economic and social development, promoting an increase in the income of farmers, promoting the harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature, and enhancing the Chinese discursive power in global food governance.

## Why Is Becoming an Agricultural Power Important for China?

There are three key related reasons why China has decided to pursue the agricultural power strategy. To begin with, the development of agriculture has always been considered vital for the development of China and a key criterion for the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Most notably, the [Four Modernizations Goals](#) set forth in the 1960s by the first generation of Chinese leaders include strengthening the development of agriculture. Soon after assuming leadership of the country, Xi Jinping put forward the idea of the “Chinese Dream” and continued to promote it over the past decade. The centrepiece of the Chinese Dream is the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. A nation cannot be rejuvenated without strong agriculture. In particular, it has been widely acknowledged by Chinese leaders that the “most arduous tasks” in building China into a modern socialist country are those associated with the nation’s rural areas, and agriculture is the [“shortest plank”](#) of the Chinese economy.

The second reason is the growing concerns over the [country’s food security](#) as volatile geopolitics and growing climate shocks worsen the global food security outlook. China’s food imports have soared over the past three decades. In 2021, China’s grain imports reached a record high of 162 million tonnes, causing China’s grain external dependence rate to reach 19 per cent. Meanwhile, the meat dependence rate reached 9 per cent, and, more worryingly, [only 33 per cent of the country’s total demand for edible oils](#) was met by domestic production. With growing dependence on food imports amid the global food crisis, top Chinese leaders have repeatedly stressed that securing the supply of major agricultural products, especially grain, must be given top priority. [In a speech released](#) in March 2023, Xi referred to historical analogies from two millennia ago to show the importance of food security on national security and stressed that the Ukraine war had shown the “extreme importance” of food security to social stability and regime security.

The third reason why pursuing an agricultural power strategy has become imperative for China is its growing strategic rivalry with the United States. Becoming an agricultural power is about making full preparation for [“struggle”](#) with the United States. One of China’s particular concerns revolving around its growing food imports is its reliance on the United States, which has long been China’s top food supplier. In the wake of growing hostility between the two countries, closer agricultural and food ties,

which used to be considered a key approach to facilitate strategic trust between them, have increasingly become a cause for national security concern. Just as the United States is decoupling from China to reduce its reliance on China's manufactured products, China is also aiming to decouple from the United States in terms of agricultural supplies by boosting domestic production, diversifying its imports, and seeking global agricultural leadership. Food supply could be China's 21st-century [Achilles' heel](#). As the possibility of military clashes between the United States and China over Taiwan grows by the day, China's growing dependence on imported food supplies will make it vulnerable to a US-led [blockade](#) in times of war.



Though the Chinese Dream relies heavily on strong agriculture, China's agriculture remains the "shortest plank" of its economy, motivating China to pursue an agricultural power strategy amidst growing food security concerns and strategic rivalry with the US. *Image from Pixabay.*

## **The Kind of Agricultural Power China Aspires to Be**

Based on Chinese official statements and scholarly discussions, there are two types of agricultural powers in the world: comprehensive agricultural powers and specialised agricultural powers. The primary characteristic of comprehensive agricultural powers is their possession of a high quality and variety of agricultural products that allow them to dominate the global agricultural trade; specialised agricultural powers are characterised by possession of strong competitiveness in a few specific agricultural subsectors. Using this distinction, Chinese officials believe that only the United States is a comprehensive agricultural power, while Germany, the Netherlands, Israel, Japan and others are all specialised agricultural powers. The common characteristic among specialised agricultural powers is that they all have a highly developed agricultural sector and are international leaders in certain subfields. For instance, Germany is the world's largest exporter of agricultural machinery and Japan is a leader in smart agricultural technologies.

Nevertheless, neither the status of comprehensive agricultural power nor specialised agricultural power seems to be a feasible goal for China. Although China's agricultural sector is bigger than that of the United States, due to its agricultural factor endowment, the country's agricultural production will continue to be dominated by small household

farming, similar to that of Japan, and its net food imports are set to grow further. Against this backdrop, as proclaimed by Xi, the country intends to become an [agricultural power with Chinese characteristics](#). In contrast to specialised agricultural powers such as Germany and Japan, China envisions its agriculture to be characterised by both completeness along the entire supply chain and the lack of severe weaknesses. Compared with the United States, one key source of China's agricultural power would come from its technological prowess and strong state presence in the domestic and global agricultural supply chain.

### **How Will China Achieve Agricultural Power Status?**

China's agricultural power strategy will consist of the following main features. First and foremost, the bottom line of the Chinese approach to agricultural power will be safeguarding the country's food security, mainly through domestic food supply. Second, a major focus will be on scientific and technological development. In this respect, the most important policy is the seed industry revitalisation plan, which Xi first promoted in 2021. In addition to agricultural biotechnologies, China is investing heavily in artificial proteins, agricultural AI, and autonomous agricultural machinery. Third, while China aspires to boost domestic food production, it is inevitable that the global food market will continue to play an important role in China's overall food security, perhaps, even more so in the future. Recognising this inevitability, China is seeking to exert control over its external food supply and more influence on [global food governance](#). Fourth, [China aims to develop its own agricultural giants](#). It is providing huge support to its agricultural state-owned enterprises (SOEs), such as COFCO Group, Beidahuang Group and Bright Dairy & Food Co, with a view to turning them into global agribusiness champions. Fifth, rather than promoting specialisation based on factor endowments, China is trying to build a [complete agricultural industrial chain](#), which is considered a key approach to boosting the competitiveness of its agriculture.

### **Global implications**

China is pursuing an agricultural power strategy. Domestically, through strong political commitment at the highest levels, the Chinese government has been investing enormous financial and policy resources to boost its domestic food production and enhance its agricultural competitiveness. Globally, China attempts to [reconstruct global food supply chains](#) through overseas agricultural investment, agricultural technology transfer, massive investment in agricultural infrastructure, and accelerated policy coordination.

China's bid to become an agricultural power will not only be crucial for the 1.4 billion Chinese people but will also have significant worldwide effects as China remains the largest agricultural producer, leading agricultural importer, major agricultural exporter and one of the leading agricultural tech innovators. In particular, the global food market will be significantly shaped by changes in China's domestic food output and food import diversification efforts.

Moreover, with the growing US-China strategy rivalry and amid China's bid to become an agricultural power, not only will agriculture and food emerge as one of the frontiers for US-China competition, but food will also likely become a geopolitical instrument in regional and international politics. At a time when global food prices are soaring and

hundreds of millions go to bed hungry, more food cooperation, rather than competition, is needed, and the deployment of food as a geopolitical instrument should be avoided, especially among big powers.

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