

Foreign Policy Luncheon Paper: Food Security in the World and in Japan **By HOMMA Masayoshi**

(1) The World is Entering an Era of Fragmentation

In recent years, the trend toward fragmentation in international politics has intensified, and international interdependence is facing a serious crisis due to, for example, the worsening of the U.S.–China conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, recent events such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Israel–Palestine conflict, and the China–Taiwan issue, as well as the fact that many of the conflicts occurring in various regions are developing in the form of so-called “proxy wars between the major powers,” are accelerating this fragmentation and further complicating the situation. Meanwhile, several developments, including the global contraction of trade in agricultural products and energy, the trend toward increased military spending due to a heightened awareness of the need to strengthen security, and the deadlock in international efforts to mitigate global warming, have all contributed to the stagnation of globalization that has continued since around 2020. For Japan, which relies on overseas imports for its food and thus is easily affected by various global events, now is precisely the time to urgently consider how the country can be prepared to thwart food crises; in other words, an urgent issue for Japan is to consider how comprehensive food security can be provided, based on its approaches to aspects such as its food security and food self-sufficiency rate.

(2) Current Conditions in the World’s Grain and Fertilizer Markets

Exports of grains such as wheat, corn, and soybeans by Russia, the EU, and Brazil have been increasing in recent years. In particular, Russia is currently building relationships with the emerging and developing countries known as the Global South by exporting large amounts of wheat to them. Further, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine caused a temporary spike in the food price index for vegetable oil in 2022 and 2023. Seen from the perspective of population growth, there is no global food supply shortage relative to population growth, but concerns remain regarding the stable distribution of food to developing countries. In the Global South, population growth and economic development are expected to change the demand for food from grains to livestock products in the future, and in this situation keeping up with the changing demand patterns will be a challenge for the global supply system.

(3) What is Food Security?

Food security, as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, refers to “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” More specifically, it is composed of four stages: (1) “food availability” (the existence of sufficient quantities of safe and nutritious food through domestic production, imports, and stockpiling), (2) “stability” (the ability to provide a stable supply of food to all people, at all places, and at all times), (3)

“food access” (the economic resources (income) necessary to obtain food), and (4) “utilization” (a diet with an appropriate balance of nutrients and sufficient water in a hygienic and safe environment). In particular, utilization requires a healthy and hygienic environment so that the nutritional value of the food that is taken into the body as nourishment can be fully realized.

The undernourished population (the population whose food consumption is considered to be below the minimum level (borderline value) required to maintain bodyweight and support light physical activity) has continued to decline as a whole since 2000, but notably it began to increase intermittently from 2020. The percentages of the undernourished population have become particularly high in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, exceeding 20% and 15%, respectively. It is considered that the background to these increases is the geopolitical instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Irrespective of the case, addressing these political issues as a matter of urgency will have a major impact on solving the food problem.

(4) Considering Food Security in Japan

In the Global Food Security Index, which evaluates food security from the four perspectives of affordability, availability, quality and safety, and sustainability and adaptation, Japan ranked 6th in the world in 2022, and its index has remained stable throughout the past 10 years of peace. However, an evaluation using the above four perspectives is unsuitable for indicating food security during times of crisis. Therefore, going forward it will be necessary for Japan to move ahead with an examination of its crisis countermeasures.

The following are countermeasures for the various crises that may affect the food supply.

First, accidental crises caused by transportation disruptions due to natural disasters or maritime blockades, and cyclical crises caused by climate change or fluctuations in harvests, can be addressed through measures such as stockpiling and domestic distribution systems, as well as external aid systems. A Malthusian crisis caused by population growth and resource constraints occurs about once every 20 years. Theoretically, it can be overcome by supplementing market supply and demand, including from population growth in other regions, but the challenge here is to establish a framework that can achieve equitable distribution. To deal with political crises, such as the embargoes on soybeans and grain imposed by the U.S. on the Soviet Union, it is considered necessary to eliminate the acceptance of embargo measures through a WTO agreement. Finally, for divided-world crises caused by religious, political, ethnic, and other divisions, planning and legislation for contingency food supply and distribution in anticipation of crises are effective.

Therefore, below, I will clarify Japan’s current plans and problems regarding its responses to crises.

The amended Basic Act on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas establishes that Japan’s current food security during normal times is based on a combination of increasing domestic production, imports, and stockpiling to ensure a stable supply. Around the same time as this act was amended, the Act on Measures for Situations of Difficulty in Food

Supply was enacted, which allows the government to establish a countermeasures headquarters in the event of a crisis to designate food and other necessities that are important to the people, and to request that producers increase production to respond to a major food supply shortage. However, I am aware that Japan's farmland is not being used effectively even during normal times and consider that fundamental reforms of the farmland system are essential to prepare for crises. The system under the current laws, which enables instructions to be given to food suppliers for countermeasures, is designed to overcome food supply problems only from within the agricultural sector, and it is difficult to say that producers will, for example, be able to adequately respond to situations where they are unable to grow their allotted crops because of a delay in the energy supply or for other reasons. Therefore, the current legal system remains inadequate in terms of practicality for determining whether production activities can continue during a crisis.

Based on these current issues, for Japan's food security in the future, it seems that firm policies should be established for production, imports, and stockpiling, and the food supply should be comprehensively planned under emergency legislation that goes beyond agricultural policy for times of crisis. Moreover, in the medium to long term, establishing a food distribution infrastructure by diversifying importing countries and maintaining friendly relations with exporting countries, as well as by promoting the strengthening of households' stockpiles, can be considered to lead to better crisis preparedness.

(5) National Security and Food Security

The approach taken by each country to food security can be considered under a classification that is the same as the framework used in international relations theory. Africa, a rapidly growing region even among the Global South countries, has become separated from the West in terms of food supply lines through Russia's and Ukraine's export enclosures of food, and there are concerns about the instability of its food security. Japan's food security should consist of three elements—domestic measures to respond to risks, a secure trade system, and the eradication of world hunger—while cooperation to strengthen food security in the Global South countries is also essential. Based on the above, for the food security of Japan and the world as a whole, in addition to the already mentioned review of domestic measures, reforms of UN agencies and the realization of leadership through diplomacy from clear positions are challenges that should be addressed in the future.

(This is the English translation of an article written by HOMMA Masayoshi, Distinguished Professor, Asian Growth Research Institute, and Professor Emeritus, The University of Tokyo, which originally appeared on the e-Forum "Giron-Hyakushutsu" of GFJ on September 13, 2024.)