FEATURE

Dragons Must Eat
China’s Food Insecurity and Strategic Vulnerability

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Abstract

Although definitions of “food security” vary, most formulations of the term focus on the ability to reliably satisfy a population’s basic nutrition requirements despite friction and adverse circumstances with domestic production or imports. Historically, food security has been a critical Chinese strategic goal, and achieving it through a balance of domestic self-sufficiency and stable trade relations that deliver reliable imports is a key objective of the Chinese Communist Party’s domestic and foreign policy. This article examines whether China’s reliance on food imports constitutes a potential near to mid-term strategic vulnerability that might be exploited using a carefully calibrated and targeted approach incorporating humanitarian safeguards to influence Chinese domestic and foreign policy. The weight of evidence indicates that a shift toward coordinated, multilateral action as an element of whole-of-government engagement selectively linking agricultural exports to Chinese actions offers strategic coherence and potential leverage for beneficially shaping interactions with China.1
When goods are expensive, the hundred surnames’ wealth will be exhausted. When their wealth is exhausted, they will be extremely hard pressed [to supply] their village’s military impositions.

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

In the years leading up China’s 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Western liberalization of trade with China was premised on the assumption that economic integration would institutionalize the post-Mao market-liberalizing policies of Xi Jinping’s predecessors, leading to a free-market economy and potentially more open political system in China. In retrospect, although the economic impact has been remarkably positive for China, the weight of evidence indicates that this assumption was based on aspirational premises about how things should be rather than garnered from observing behavioral realities.

Xi Jinping’s consolidation of power has coincided with a rollback of the market-oriented reforms in favor of state control, an increasingly confrontational foreign policy, and rising tensions with the United States and other Western countries as Xi directs China’s overtly nationalistic and authoritarian leverage of economic power and influence to promote Chinese interests in an all-inclusive fashion. At the same time, China under Xi is an ascendant power increasingly pushing irredentist claims to the territory of its neighbors by asserting historic Chinese territorial patrimony. Enabled by strategic investment in military capability and capacity, military clashes in the remote Karakoram Mountains along the disputed India–China border, a People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarine incursion within a few miles of Japanese territorial waters near the island of Amami Oshima, and expanding blue water power projection including a military presence in the South China Sea along with use of selective suspension of food imports from Australia, Canada, and the United States to send political signals are all indicative of an increasingly confident and assertive China. In parallel, China’s new Hong Kong national security law, Sinicization of religion, and forced cultural assimilation and suppression of human rights in Tibet, among Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang Province in northwestern China, as well as the non-Han population of Inner Mongolia are forging a new consensus that China is a disruptive competitor whose underlying system is antithetical to the principles of liberal democracy including but not limited to openness, human rights, and democracy. As a result, Beijing’s blunt use of the instruments of national power are stressing and potentially decoupling Beijing’s relationship with the United States and other Western countries as well as Japan, India, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and the Philip-
Simultaneously, the evolving COVID-19 pandemic has raised concerns about heavy reliance on Chinese-based supply chains even as China and the United States maintain the world’s biggest bilateral trade relationship.

These developments foster a general sense that China’s policies and actions are not intended to create peer-to-peer albeit competitive relationships within a global free-trade system. Instead, they epitomize the actions of a rival and potential adversary seeking to establish normative and economic primacy globally coupled with at least regional hegemony. This more skeptical view about China’s intended external use of its growing economic and military power, when paired with domestic political considerations in China and the West, opens up the near- to mid-term and possibly long-term potential for a future characterized by geopolitical confrontation rather than negotiation and cooperation. It represents a change in mind-set reflecting a new era of competition and rivalry—especially between the United States and China—even while deep economic ties are likely to continue in parallel to mutual animosity. The world faces an emerging “Chinese Xi Doctrine” similar to America’s Monroe Doctrine in which China employs hard economic and military power in what it views as its exclusive geographical sphere of influence. In parallel to engaging in direct confrontation in Southeast Asia such as in the Spratly Islands, an assertive China that now looms as a great-power rival to the United States is also leveraging soft power, using proxy agents, and engaging in indirect confrontation to expand its influence globally.

Although not necessarily emulating the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union if for no other reason than Chinese economic power dwarfs that of the former USSR, the current situation reflects an aphorism falsely attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte that asserts: “China is a sleeping giant. Let her sleep, for when she wakes she will move the world.” It portends a divided world with a shift away from de minimis cooperation and deconfliction based on alignment of shared interests to overt geopolitical confrontation and competition. These changes to the status quo underscore the importance of Western governments prioritizing what the West seeks to achieve in its relationship with China and determining how to employ statecraft to get those desired results going forward, especially given growing mutual animus and shrinking opportunities for open dialogue.

Viewed in this light, current events and changed perceptions raise questions about whether uncoordinated deployment of a suite of relatively narrow options on tactical timelines by the West—especially hard and soft economic power—will by themselves deliver sufficient leverage to strategically shape outcomes in a confrontational environment characterized by souring relations between China...
and the West over global trade and influence, intellectual property, market access, human rights, and territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific region.\textsuperscript{13}

The geopolitical situation is complicated by the fact that China under Mao Zedong and his successors consistently has taken the long view strategically and is insulated from democratic politics.\textsuperscript{14} However, because Western policies are tied inextricably to short-term electoral cycles within individual countries, they tend to fluctuate and potentially are subject to gaming by adversaries and competitors if they have longer timelines. Nonetheless, because the Xi regime relies on access to external markets to support economic growth and meet domestic demand, the selective and coordinated application of economic power as an element of a whole-of-government effort offers a way to adapt to the inherent temporal variability induced by democratic politics when Western governments interact with China.\textsuperscript{15} A combination of leveraging positive and negative economic incentives such as favorable trade agreements, sanctions, boycotts or embargoes, market access and pricing, and tariffs has the potential to shape policy if applied discretely. Moreover, like diplomacy, economic power is attractive—particularly when done multilaterally as opposed to unilaterally or bilaterally—as a tool for constraining or incentivizing behaviors because it may facilitate advancing and attaining strategic interests without resorting to military measures.\textsuperscript{16} This underscores the importance of elucidating whether China’s reliance on food imports constitutes a potential near- to mid-term strategic vulnerability that might be exploited to influence Chinese domestic and foreign policy. Put simply: Is food insecurity an Achilles’ heel for China that can be leveraged while addressing the normative implications inherent in using food exports as a tool of statecraft?\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Overview of China’s Food Insecurity}

The inability of governments to ensure food security has posed a threat to legitimacy, domestic stability, and strategic flexibility since antiquity. Based on its historical experience reaching back to Imperial China, food security is a critical Chinese objective, and avoiding food insecurity through a balance of domestic self-sufficiency and stable trade relations that provide access to reliable outside supply is one metric of its national power. As Xi noted in July 2020, “We must ensure China’s food security so that we always have control over our own food supply. . . . Food safety is an important foundation of national security.”\textsuperscript{18} This article provides a framework for exploring whether China’s near- and mid-term food insecurity is a potential strategic vulnerability that provides a lever to selectively influence Chinese domestic and foreign policy.\textsuperscript{19}

Although definitions of \textit{food security} vary, strategically the term refers to the enduring ability to dependably meet a population’s basic nutrition requirements
through domestic production, imports, or a mix of the two. China has a history of intermittent but major famines dating from antiquity to the modern era, with its most recent and avoidable famine occurring between 1959 and 1961 as a direct result of Mao’s policies during his Great Leap Forward.\(^{20}\) China’s periodic famines consistently caused large-scale disruptions as rural populations left their regions in search of food. With an estimated population of 1.44 billion people (19 percent of the world’s total population), China is the world’s most populous country.\(^{21}\) More than 100 million farmers and their families still experience poverty and are highly vulnerable to many forms of food sufficiency stress.\(^{22}\) Moreover, although China’s population is projected to decrease by approximately 2.2 percent between 2019 and 2050, this decrease is insufficient to make food insecurity moot as a critical issue facing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for the foreseeable future. Thus, it is realistic to posit that food insecurity is one of several factors which may be China’s twenty-first-century Achilles’ heel.

In fact, as the Xi quote illustrates, the historical challenge to social and political stability posed by food insecurity—especially for China’s poor—remains a significant strategic concern because meeting demand is precariously reliant on imports. Chinese domestic food production is constrained by limits on available arable land, widespread environmental contamination from industrialization, depletion of groundwater aquifers, and the potential consequences of climate change on droughts, growing seasons, and crop yields.\(^{23}\) Despite maximizing agricultural production domestically, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization projects an 18-percent reduction in Chinese cereal grain production between 2000 and 2040 and climate change risks to aquaculture and ocean harvests.\(^{24}\) China is currently a net food importer and likely to remain one deep into the twenty-first century. And, because the net impact of climate change over time on Chinese food production is indeterminate, this creates significant uncertainty about the reliability of domestic food production over the next five to 50 years, which exacerbates strategic uncertainty for Xi and the rest of the CCP’s Central Committee. Food imports, therefore, are critical to avoiding malnourishment and a possible humanitarian disaster for portions of China’s population.

Underscoring the importance of food imports to the Chinese diet, the government of Canada’s list of China’s top-10 food and beverage imports in 2017 from Canada was led in order by the following basic food stuffs: meat, edible oil, dairy products, aquatic products, and grain products.\(^{25}\) For the year ending prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s food imports increased 36 percent to USD 142 billion, while its exports of food commodities increased by only 8.7 percent to USD 64.8 billion, resulting in a net commodity deficit of USD 77 billion.\(^{26}\)
Chinese leadership at the most senior levels has acknowledged the challenge that food insecurity poses to domestic stability and strategic ambitions and, in recent years, has taken steps to not only enhance domestic production but also ensure access to foreign supplies. These efforts have included the purchase of large swathes of foreign agricultural land by Chinese companies, major investments in offshore agribusiness and processors, including companies such as Smithfield Foods in 2013, and recent efforts at the highest levels within government—including statements by Xi—explicitly stigmatizing overconsumption and waste of food. From the perspective of Xi, and therefore from the perspective of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, food security is central to the continuing legitimacy of one party rule in China. However, ensuring continuing food security through growing reliance on imports and overseas investment in Western firms may become problematic if disputes over trade balances, intellectual property, human rights, and military competition accelerate tensions between China and major Western suppliers such as Australia, Canada, and the United States.

**Geopolitical Implications**

Although China’s leadership recognizes that food security is a strategic concern, a potential vulnerability is not synonymous with an actual vulnerability. Chinese financial resources provide a substantial base for funding food imports, simultaneously extending its diplomatic power globally and enhancing its capability to project military force far beyond its borders. In essence, China has the requisite capital to pay market prices for its commodity imports, so unless sanctions, a boycott, or an embargo are instituted, the normative implications of using food as a tool of statecraft are avoided. For example, China’s overall positive trade surplus in 2019 was approximately USD 421.9 billion, while its gold reserves in mid-2020 totaled USD 108.29 billion, and China held USD 3.102 trillion in foreign currency reserves with one-third of those reserves consisting of US debt. China has used this economic power to provide approximately USD 1.5 trillion in direct loans and credits to more than 150 countries to accrue diplomatic leverage in a focused attempt to offset its perceived vulnerabilities.

For example, the new Silk Road component of China’s Belt and Road Initiative—previously known as One Belt One Road (Chinese: 带 路)—offers overland access to Central Asian and Russian agricultural production and aligns with core Chinese strategic objectives. In time, relatively secure high-volume land routes will reduce significantly but not completely eliminate Chinese dependence on food imports via maritime corridors transiting the Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean, and South China Sea that are vulnerable to naval interdiction. And the mass
incarceration of Uighur Muslims, when viewed in the context of Chinese national security, may be a preemptive measure to secure the land route for imports through Xinjiang Province’s approximately 1,370-kilometer border extending from east to west against possible pan-Turkic separatism. As such, from Beijing’s perspective, it mirrors Mao’s 1950 invasion and occupation of Tibet to advance Chinese strategic interests by falsely asserting the narrative that Tibet is a historically inseparable part of China, thereby securing a militarily important border with its rival India. In parallel, acquiring long-term use agreements for ports in multiple countries bordering the Indian Ocean—especially Pakistan and Sri Lanka—offers the Chinese military strategic maritime access for a blue water naval presence as well as commercial economic benefits.

In essence, through its rent-seeking behavior, China has sought to mirror elements of the tributary system of Imperial China and the British mercantile system of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. China’s dramatic rise and transformation economically in this century has allowed it to dominate much of the flow of global trade using a combination of co-option and coercion to increase influence over client states and trading partners and decrease vulnerability relative to potential rivals, especially the United States.31

Beijing now simultaneously confronts the reality of unbalanced economic recovery internally in the wake of the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, domestic pressure to expand economic growth, and geopolitical stress externally while trying to maintain the primacy of the CCP.32 As a result, China’s political leadership—like its Western counterparts—is increasingly wary of the vulnerability inherent in dependency on global supply chains. And, given the paramount importance assigned to maintaining the primacy of the CCP, the nexus between food insecurity and dependence on imports is a potential strategic threat of existential proportions for Beijing. In response to this perceived problem, China has started efforts to shift to a dual circulation model placing domestic consumption and supply chains at the center of Chinese economic growth going forward to make China more resilient to commercial or geopolitical disruption.33 However, rebalancing by cutting dependence on overseas suppliers and shifting to an economy driven by domestic consumption is constrained. The reality is China must import to fully meet its food needs, many of its export-centric/labor-intensive products are not wanted or needed domestically in significant quantities, and economic growth is likely to slow as the population ages and the Chinese domestic labor force shrinks.

Thus, in terms of geopolitics, can Chinese food insecurity and growing reliance on imports to satisfy rising domestic consumption be transformed into a strategic lever that modifies Chinese actions without exacerbating malnutrition or foster-
ing a humanitarian disaster? Put simply: Can Western nations—particularly major food producers such as Australia, Canada, and the United States—along with other agricultural commodity-producing countries perceiving threats from China globally align voluntarily to use food exports as a tool to shift policy in Beijing? If so, would China react confrontationally or be willing to adopt détente and move away from its narrow transactional rent-seeking and aggressive behavior without triggering Thucydides’ Trap?²³⁴

Broadly speaking, two approaches are plausible going forward. The first involves avoidance or minimization of linkage between food exports and Chinese behavior, which the West finds objectionable. The second approach involves coordinated and coherent multilateral action selectively employing food exports to affect Chinese actions. The strategy pursued by the United States, Australia, and Canada as well as other democratically oriented producers—especially if they choose coordinated, multilateral action in lieu of individual national action—will determine whether Chinese food insecurity is effectively and strategically leveraged by the West and partner nations in the near- to mid-term timeframe. Each strategy option involves risk and inevitably will have unanticipated consequences. Both may fail to varying degrees, and neither one is assured of being successful, although ample evidence already is available on the relative success of the first approach in affecting Chinese behavior.

The first approach embodies efforts to date and is a continuation of the status quo, with each exporting country responding to internal political concerns by emphasizing its own domestic agribusiness interests to capture market share. In essence, linkage between Western food exports and Chinese behavior—primarily but not exclusively internationally—is avoided or minimized. To the extent that past is prologue, there are significant political pressures within multiple Western countries—especially the United States, Canada, and Australia—favoring avoidance of linking Chinese domestic and foreign policies to its food imports, despite concern about China’s actions and intentions. The traditional separate-tracks approach also is consistent with arguments against using food as a political weapon.²⁵ Ironically, however, the traditional approach does not consider the importers’ restricting access through tariffs, pricing, or favorable trade agreements to constitute normatively inappropriate action.

The non- or minimal linkage approach, however, embodies the cliché commonly misattributed to Albert Einstein of doing the same thing and expecting a different result. The weight of evidence demonstrates that the presumption that a rising China would liberalize economically and politically by integrating with the world has proven illusory. China, instead, has created a thriving state capitalism economy and failed to democratize. In the almost 20 years since China joined the
WTO, the original Western assumption proved to be erroneous if not naïve as China became a rival with burgeoning diplomatic, economic, and military power. As a nascent great power, China has acquired sufficient capacity to mitigate or diffuse any lasting strategic effects of unilateral action—even by the United States—that relies on the non- or minimal linkage approach. Thus, it is highly dubious that actions embodying this scenario, essentially perpetuating the status quo going forward, will alter substantially Chinese behavior and policies deemed objectionable by the West.

The second approach is a sharp break from the status quo embodied by the traditional approach. It seeks to adapt to the dramatic evolution of the geopolitical environment, emphasizes the use of economic power coupled with diplomacy, and is grounded in attempting to leverage the strategic uncertainty that China faces in terms of food security. It also is sensitive to the normative implications of using food exports as a tool of statecraft. In fact, the linkage approach confronts the issue directly by recognizing that sanctions, boycotts, and embargoes can affect the most vulnerable. As a result, instead of reliance on those blunt instruments that are used routinely under the traditional approach, the linkage strategy is grounded in using more targeted and transactional measures such as selective pricing to avoid or minimize the likelihood of contributing to morally ambiguous or ill-advised consequences. Additionally, China has the option of internally real-locating resources away from projects such as the expansion of its strategic force projection capabilities (e.g., the blue water navy, the port at Gwadar, Pakistan, etc.) to support increased food import costs and prevent the impact from affecting the food purchasing power of the average Chinese citizen. In effect, if street-level food costs increase as a consequence of a rise in import costs, this means that Beijing has made a deliberate choice to pass them on to Chinese citizens instead of absorbing the increase from the center.

This strategy explicitly links concerns about Chinese policies and relations with the West and food exports presumably to incentivize desired outcomes. Implicit in the linkage approach is the assumption that Chinese food insecurity is a vulnerability that can be exploited by increasing prices but not embargoing exports without causing a humanitarian disaster or war to happen. It also reflects the premise that, rather than keeping them on separate tracks diplomatically and implemented through individual national action, selective but coherent multilateral linkage of the West’s food exports as an element of long-term (e.g., multi–electoral cycle) whole-of-government efforts aimed at the strategic geopolitical objective of tangibly shaping Chinese actions is viable politically and economically.
There is no guarantee that policies embodying the second approach will be adopted or will modify China’s increased assertiveness and confidence that it can act autonomously to pursue its self-interest without costs internationally while benefiting from the rules of global commerce. Unlike Russia’s foreign policy outlook, which is grounded more in image and optimism than geopolitical dynamics, China’s narrowly self-interested policies and near-to mid-term prospects reflect a more realistic understanding of its current economic power vis-à-vis its competitors and rivals.

Consequently, successful implementation of targeted measures that leverage Chinese reliance on food imports is dependent on meeting several conditions. First, it requires a long-term commitment to collective action by the governments of major Western producers acting jointly. Success is predicated on a critical mass of food producers acting cooperatively, thereby emulating OPEC to increase commodity price levels for Chinese imports of food relative to supply and demand. Put simply, despite its position as a leading exporter of food products, the United States cannot act alone, because America does not control enough of the food export market to implement this strategy unilaterally. Thus, the United States needs the willing cooperation of major food-producing allies such as Australia and Canada and partners such as Argentina and Brazil to implement and sustain a policy that explicitly links the West’s food exports and its geopolitical objectives to tangible Chinese actions. Moreover, because the US dollar is the reserve currency for global financial transactions, attempting to execute this strategy is sensitive to Chinese retaliation in global markets, potentially creating unintended adverse consequences for the US economy as well as the economies of other countries. In addition, and most critically, it also requires long-term strategic vision and patience to calibrate those measures and provide mutually acceptable off-ramps by encouraging cooperation and rewarding Chinese behavior consistent with the rule of law to minimize risks of actually falling into Thucydides’ Trap, which would have catastrophic consequences for all parties.

More broadly, were it created and sustainable, this multilateral coalition of agricultural commodity producers might be extended over time. By working to gain the participation of other major producers of agricultural commodities, the explicit linkage approach might be expanded beyond the United States, Canada, and Australia to include food exports from other nations whose own interests align generally with the West or who would benefit from an increase in commodity prices offsetting the current balance of trade favoring China. Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico as well as many Central American and sub-Saharan African countries reliant on food exports for growing their gross domestic product are plausible targets for inclusion in such a producers’ alliance.
Some may contend that explicitly linking food exports to Chinese behavior runs the risk of igniting armed conflict or ignores its normative implications. However, war is not an inevitable outcome, and substituting a coordinated, multilateral approach involving selective linkage of agricultural exports to reciprocal Chinese behavior for one based on avoidance or minimization of linkage offers strategic coherence. Further, the normative implications are addressed if pricing mechanisms instead of sanctions, boycotts, and embargoes are used, thereby attenuating the likelihood of creating a humanitarian disaster, since China has more than sufficient financial resources to pay for its food imports. The linkage approach also has multiple benefits to the extent that domestic politics within exporting countries or Chinese countermeasures do not preclude its adoption.  

Conclusion

A shift away from the traditional approach toward the selective linkage approach might accomplish any of the following:

- demonstrate clarity of purpose, energize critical alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific and beyond that region essential for balancing China;
- reinforce the strategic position of countries sharing liberal democratic values;
- foster greater global parity in commodity-based trade;
- decrease the overall global trade imbalance between China and Western countries; and/or
- force China to pay a geopolitical penalty for its increasingly confrontational and revisionist actions.

Achieving any single one of those end states would be no small accomplishment and create optimism about the future. In fact, because the selective linkage approach is grounded in principled realism, pursuing such action ultimately might increase the likelihood that China conforms to global norms, thereby deescalating conflict and avoiding the worst possible outcomes of an intensely competitive great-power relationship.

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Notes

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2. China’s WTO accession was premised on four key assertions: (1) WTO membership would accelerate China’s transition to a market economy; (2) China would adhere to WTO rules by reducing tariffs and guaranteeing intellectual property rights; (3) it would further legitimize the WTO because China would have a greater stake in setting global rules; and (4) free trade leads to democracy which would act as a check on China’s communist government.


9. Issued on 2 December 1823 by President James Monroe in his Seventh Annual Message to Congress, the Monroe Doctrine was a cornerstone of US foreign policy from 1823 to the mid-1930s and was symbolically invoked during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The Monroe Doctrine had four key elements: (1) The United States would not interfere in the internal affairs of or the wars between European powers; (2) the United States recognized and would not interfere with existing colonies and dependencies in the Western Hemisphere; (3) the Western Hemisphere was closed to future colonization; and (4) any attempt by a European power to oppress or control any nation in the Western Hemisphere would be viewed as a hostile act against the United States. See Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2011); Ernest R. May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Mark T. Gilderhus, “The Monroe Doctrine: Meanings and Implications,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2006): 5–16, https://jstor.org/; and US Department of State, “Message from the President of the United States, to both Houses of Congress,” US Congressional Serial Set: Documents on Monroe Doctrine (The Americas) before 1861 Serial Set Vol. No. 93, Session Vol. No. 1, 18th Congress, 1st Session, H. Doc. 2 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian), https://history.state.gov/.

10. Although this observation has an element of truth, it does not appear in any of Napoleon's writings or in the principal source for his statements during his exile on St. Helena prior to his death. China has its own version of the quote, referring to the country as a “sleeping lion,” where it may be a bigger cliché there than in the West with President Xi Jinping using a version of the quote in a March 2014 speech in France. See Isaac S. Fish, “Crouching Tiger, Sleeping Giant,” *Foreign Policy*, 19 Jan. 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/.

11. In this case, “tactical timeline” is defined as less than 60 months to encompass foreign policy initiatives designed to deliver results within a single electoral cycle of the Western democracies. Strategic timelines inherently require sustaining policies across multiple electoral cycles as a whole-of-government effort to achieve enduring national interests rather than transitory partisan objectives.


17. The principal normative implication of using food as a tool of statecraft in such action may foster malnutrition and cause a humanitarian disaster. Selective use of economic measures such as favorable trade agreements, market access and pricing, and tariffs can avoid this problem while sanctions, boycotts, and embargoes—especially boycotts and embargoes—are blunter instruments with greater potential to generate undesirable normative consequences.


34. The concept of Thucydides’s Trap was introduced by Graham Allison in Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap? (Boston: Mariner Books, 2018): xiv–xvii, to characterize whether the dynamics and structural stress of a rising power confronting an established power inevitably lead to war. Thucydides in History of the Peloponnesian War provides the definitive narrative of how the interplay between the rise of Athens threatened Sparta’s preeminent role among the Greek city-states, ultimately evolving from cooperation to peaceful strategic competition to catastrophic warfare. See Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, edited by Robert B. Strassler and translated by Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 1996).


39. For example, China along with 14 other countries—including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea—and 10 Southeast Asian nations signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) on 15 November 2020. RCEP, if fully implemented, will result in a more unified trading system and reduce or remove tariff barriers for approximately one-third of global output. RCEP might complicate but does not preclude automatically Australian participation in an alliance of food exporters.
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