

The Challenge Ahead: The Politics of Food Security in China, India, Japan and South Korea

Edited by
Noemi Lanna and Marisa Siddivò



Università di Napoli L'Orientale
Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo

Il porto delle idee

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Scarcrow in a rice field. Source: www.pixabay.com

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Chapter 1

Self-sufficiency vs liberalization: the economic diplomacy of Japan's food security¹

Felice Farina

Abstract

In this chapter, we will explore and analyze the most recent changes in Japan's approach to food security and how they affected Tokyo's economic diplomacy. The Japanese authorities have traditionally tried to address the issue of food security through a twofold strategy that combines the increase in domestic production and consumption of local products, on the one hand, and the diversification of supply sources while protecting the domestic agri-food sector with high trade barriers, on the other. From the point of view of economic diplomacy, this approach hindered the negotiations of free trade agreements (FTA) with partner countries, causing delays in their conclusion and, in some cases, an abrupt end. Abe Shinzō's arrival in power brought about a decisive change of direction in the approach to food security and then to FTAs. In this chapter, we will argue that Abe's restructuring of Japan Agriculture Cooperatives (JA) and reform of the bureaucratic personnel inside the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries have led to a new narrative on food security, according to which the liberalization of the agricultural market is no longer perceived as a threat but as an opportunity to increase exports and the food self-sufficiency potential of Japan. Finally, we will also argue that this new approach to food security is the basis of Japan's new economic diplomacy, more favorable and inclined to the participation in FTAs.

¹ This study was supported by fundings from Programma Operativo Nazionale "Ricerca e Innovazione" 2014 – 2020 (PON "R&I" 2014 – 2020) Azione IV.6.

Abstract

In questo capitolo si esamineranno i cambiamenti più recenti nell'approccio del Giappone alla sicurezza alimentare e il modo in cui questi hanno influenzato la diplomazia economica di Tokyo. Tradizionalmente, le autorità giapponesi hanno cercato di affrontare il tema della sicurezza alimentare attraverso una duplice strategia basata, da un lato, sull'aumento della produzione e del consumo interno di prodotti locali, e, dall'altro, sulla diversificazione delle fonti di approvvigionamento, tutelando allo stesso tempo il settore agroalimentare nazionale con elevate barriere commerciali. Dal punto di vista della diplomazia economica, questo approccio ha ostacolato i negoziati degli accordi di libero scambio (FTA in inglese) con i paesi partner, generando spesso ritardi nella loro conclusione se non la completa interruzione. L'arrivo al potere di Abe Shinzō ha determinato un deciso cambio di rotta nell'approccio alla sicurezza alimentare del Giappone e, di conseguenza, agli FTA. In questo capitolo mostreremo come la ristrutturazione della Japan Agriculture Cooperatives (JA) e la riforma del personale burocratico all'interno del Ministero dell'agricoltura, delle foreste e della pesca attuate dall'amministrazione Abe hanno portato a una nuova retorica sulla sicurezza alimentare, secondo la quale la liberalizzazione del mercato agricolo non è più da considerarsi una minaccia ma un'opportunità per aumentare le esportazioni e l'autosufficienza alimentare del Giappone. Vedremo, infine, come questo nuovo approccio alla sicurezza alimentare è alla base della nuova diplomazia economica del Giappone, più favorevole alla partecipazione agli accordi di libero scambio.

1. Introduction

The provision of a stable and sufficient supply of food has always been a constant theme in the political agenda of Japan throughout all its modern and contemporary history, owing to the nation's heavy reliance on foreign markets to meet its food requirements. As of 2022, Japan's food self-sufficiency rate stood at a meager 38 percent, the lowest among industrialized countries, indicating that Japan needs to import over two-thirds of its total food consumption.²

² The data was taken from the website of the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries. See: https://www.maff.go.jp/j/zyukyu/zikyu_ritu/012.html

Japan's historical dependence on imports for both food and essential raw materials for its industry led the government to consider its security in broader terms beyond the traditional definition of security, giving rise to the concept of "comprehensive security" in the 1970s. The idea behind comprehensive security was to expand the traditional definition of security to include economic aspects like the scarcity of raw materials, which were seen as potential threats to national security. Food security played a central role in this new vision. Despite Japan's high nutritional standards and its economic transformation into a producer of high-value exports after World War II, which helped to ensure foreign currency reserves for procuring essential raw materials, Japan's heavy dependence on imports have been considered a significant threat to its overall food security because it left the country vulnerable to external factors such as bad harvests or export restrictions. In this regard, it is possible to argue that the issue of food dependence has undergone a process of "securitization", understood as a discursive process by which a specific issue or topic is transformed into a matter of national security, thereby justifying extraordinary measures and policy responses in order to obtain a specific outcome (Buzan, Waever, de Wilde, 1998, 25).

In Japan, the interconnection between the notions of food self-sufficiency and food security has resulted in the development of a two-fold strategy, based on the increase of domestic production and the promotion of consumption of local and traditional food, on one hand, and the differentiation of its source of supply while protecting the agri-food sector with high trade barriers, on the other.³ Consequently, the concept of food security, as understood in Japan, has had a significant impact on the country's foreign policy and diplomacy, in particular during the negotiations of free trade agreements (FTA) or economic partnership agreements (EPA).⁴

³ Some scholars do not share MAFF's vision and contend that food security and self-sufficiency are not directly linked. They highlight examples like North Korea, which has a high self-sufficiency rate but still faces food insecurity. Alternatively, proponents of this viewpoint suggest that food security can be achieved through establishing positive international relations with food-exporting countries to ensure a reliable food supply system. See: Asakawa, 2010; Hayami, 2000; Honma, 2009 and 2010; Tashiro, 2009.

⁴ Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) are generally agreements aimed at eliminating tariffs, and liberalizing trade in goods and services among designated countries and regions. FTAs are recognized as exceptions to the WTO Agreement and most favored nation treatment. Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are generally based on the content of FTAs with a view to trade liberalization among designated countries and regions. EPAs aim to harmonize

Proposals relating to greater liberalization of the agri-food sector have consistently been a source of friction during the EPA negotiations with partner countries, leading to significant delays in their completion and, in certain cases, even resulting in an abrupt halt.

However, the results of this mixed strategy based on self-sufficiency and protectionism have been unsatisfactory. Japan's food self-sufficiency rate has continued to decline, necessitating continuous downward revisions of government targets.⁵ This situation has prompted the Japanese government to reassess its approach and discourse concerning food security, consequently influencing foreign policy objectives in terms of agri-food trade. A change of course occurred during the administration of Abe Shinzō. In June 2013, the Abe administration launched its "Japan is back" strategy (*Nihon fukkō senryaku*) (Prime Minister's Office [Shushō kantei], 2013), where, for the first time, a notable emphasis was placed on increasing agri-food exports as a key driver of Japanese economic growth. Subsequently, in 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) defined "food export" as one of the main objectives of Japan's economic diplomacy, marking a distinctive shift in the way the government approached food security (MoFA, 2016, 264). Within this new context, the EPA signed with the European Union in July 2018 and entered into force in February 2019 has been presented as a tremendous opportunity for Japan to increase agri-food exports and, consequently, enhance national agricultural production. In this way, Japan has shown a new attitude and adopted a new narrative towards the liberalization of the agri-food market, which stands in sharp contrast to the previous apprehensions surrounding previously signed economic partnership agreements that were perceived as a threat for the

various economic systems and reinforce economic relations in a broader range of fields by promoting investment and movement of persons, rule-making in government procurement, competition policy, intellectual property rights, etc. and cooperation in various fields. In Japan, the two terms are frequently used interchangeably and with confusion, even within official documentation. However, it is important to note that agreements related to free trade are exclusively referred to as Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). Hence, within the context of this study, the term FTA/EPA will be employed when discussing such agreements in a general sense. However, the term EPA alone will be used specifically to refer to agreements ratified by Japan.

⁵ In 2000, the government announced the Basic Plan for Agriculture and Rural Areas (*Shokuryō nōgyō nōson kihon keikan*), where it decided to raise the food self-sufficiency rate from 40 percent to 45 percent by 2010. In 2010, a new plan provided for an increase in the rate to 50 percent by 2020. The 2015 Plan provided a target of 45 percent by 2024. The most recent Plan (2020) set the goal at 45 percent by 2030 from 37 percent in 2020 (MAFF 2020).

Japanese agri-food sector and thus strongly contested not only by private producers but also within the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (MAFF) itself. As a result of this new approach, a novel indicator known as “food self-sufficiency potential (*shokuryō jikyū ryoku*)” has been devised to evaluate Japan’s capacity to meet growing international demand, following the liberalization of its market, and enhance domestic agri-food production in the absence of significant domestic demand growth.

This research aims to analyze the evolving conceptualization of “food security” in Japan, along with the underlying factors driving these changes. The study will primarily concentrate on elucidating the ramifications of this transformed understanding for Japan’s economic diplomacy and investigate its influence on Japan’s approach to free trade agreements (FTAs) and economic partnership agreements (EPAs)

2. Japan’s food security: an overview

During the 1830s, the succession of particularly adverse weather conditions caused one of the most tragic famines that Japan has ever experienced in its history. According to some historical estimates, the Great Tenpō Famine (*Tenpō no daikikin*, 1833-37) caused the deaths of more than a hundred thousand people (Bolitho, 2008, 119-120). The Great Tenpō Famine was particularly severe and appalling, but periods of serious food shortages were quite common at those times. Historical records indicate that the Japanese population faced a major famine roughly once every decade throughout the nineteenth century (Saitō, 2010, 275). In the early twentieth century, until the end of the Pacific War in 1945, Japan tried to solve the persistent issue of insufficient food production by exploiting its colonial empire. Following the colonization of Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1910, the Japanese government implemented a strategy aimed at making the empire self-sufficient in raw materials, including food. Consequently, Korea, Taiwan and all the other occupied territories were transformed into Japan’s “agricultural appendages” (Ho, 1984, 350). However, the defeat in 1945 resulted in the loss of these colonial territories and the consequent end of this food supply system. What ensued was a major food crisis, still alive in the memories of many Japanese (Dower, 1999). During the period of the Allied Occupation from 1945 to 1952, Japan faced the necessity of importing notable amount of agricultural products from the United States through food aid programs. Even after regaining its independence in 1952, Japan continued to be a major market for American agricultural goods (Farina, 2018). As McCormack (2001, 124) has pointed out,

the postwar stagnation of Japan's domestic agricultural system "was matched by dependence on food imports, which had begun in the context of the postwar food crisis and continued as Japan became locked into place as the world's largest and most profitable market for U.S. agricultural surpluses (wheat, corn, soybeans, etc.)."

The great economic growth experienced during the 1950s and 1960s, coupled with the abundant availability of American agricultural surpluses, alleviated concerns about food availability. However, this situation underwent a significant change in the early 1970s. The world food crisis that emerged in this period and the subsequent US soybean embargo in the summer 1973 brought back to Japan memories of the food shortages of the 1940s. This sparked an intense political debate on the risks associated with excessive dependence on food imports, fueling concerns about national food security (Farina, 2020). This pivotal moment marked the beginning of Japan's strategic approach to addressing food security.⁶ On one hand, it aimed to enhance national production capacity to bolster food self-sufficiency and, on the other hand, sought to diversify its sources of food supplies while safeguarding domestic agriculture from further liberalization (MAFF, 1975, 98). It is evident, therefore, that the Japanese approach to food security predominantly focuses on the "macro" dimension, wherein the emphasis lies on the capacity of the entire state to ensure domestic food production and procurement to meet its population's needs. This approach prioritizes the collective ability to achieve food self-sufficiency and maintain a stable food supply at the national level, rather than solely focusing on individual-level food access and consumption patterns. However, although Japan succeeded in reducing its reliance on the United States, it has struggled to diminish its overall dependence on foreign countries. Notably, Japan's food self-sufficiency rate, which stood at 73 percent in 1965, has steadily declined to 37 percent in 2020, reaching the lowest level ever recorded.⁷

There are many factors that affect Japan's food security and explain its heavy dependence on foreign markets. Firstly, the morphological nature of the Japanese territory, characterized by a scarcity of flat arable plains, a monsoon climate, and high population density represent some of the main obstacles to

⁶ The expression "food security" originated in the 1970s, during the World Food Conference held in Rome in 1974 to discuss the issues related to the world food crisis. Before it was common to use the expression "food problem" (in Japanese "shokuryō mondai").

⁷ The data have been collected from the MAFF's website: https://www.maff.go.jp/j/zyukyu/zikyu_ritu/012.html (accessed 12/04/2022)

the expansion of agriculture. As of 2020, out of the total land in Japan, only 11.7 per cent was arable land (it was around 16 per cent in 1956).⁸ Moreover, the structure of Japanese agriculture, established through the Land Reform Act of 1946, further contributes to the country's dependence on foreign food sources. The agricultural sector primarily consists of micro-sized farms, typically owned by individual farmers who primarily engage in rice production. The limited size of agricultural land serves as a significant hindrance to improving productivity within Japanese fields. Furthermore, the drastic decline of the farming households (which decreased by 20 percent within a decade, reaching 1.7 million in 2020), the aging of the rural population and the overall demographic decline in rural areas all contribute to the low productivity levels observed in Japanese agriculture (Yoshikawa, 2022).

Another important cause behind the lowering of the food self-sufficiency rate is also considered the radical change in the eating habits of the Japanese in the postwar period. During the years of the economic growth, consumer preferences transitioned from traditional diet staples to Western products. This shift was characterized by an increased consumption of imported meat, wheat, oils, and dairy products, along with a decrease in the consumption of traditional foods like rice (MAFF, 2012; Kako, 2009). Some scholars have even pointed the finger of blame at Japanese politicians, accusing them of preventing the development of domestic agriculture to preserve their personal interests. The so-called "farm politicians (*nōson giin*)" are part of "agricultural policy tribe (*nōrin zoku*)" of the Liberal Democratic Party and they are Diet members elected in rural district with the backing of farm voters and agricultural organizations (Mulgan, 2000, 477). These scholars argue that protectionist policies and subsidies, particularly in the rice sector, have hindered Japan's agricultural productivity growth. Consequently, these measures have been detrimental to the country's overall food security (Mulgan, 2008; Jentzsch 2017; Maclachlan and Shimizu, 2021).

The convergence of historical, geographical, social, and political factors has rendered food security a highly sensitive issue in Japan, a situation that the country shares with its neighbor South Korea. With its constrained land area, dense population, aging demographics, and a growing preference for Western dietary patterns, South Korea recorded in 2019 with a 35% food self-sufficiency rate, a situation that Grazia Milano explores in her contribution within the present volume.

⁸ The data have been collected from the MAFF's website: https://www.maff.go.jp/j/tokei/kekka_gaiyou/sakumotu/menseki/r2/kouti/index.html (accessed 12/04/2022)

The concept of the correlation between food self-sufficiency and food security has exerted profound ramifications, not only on domestic policies geared towards bolstering domestic production and fostering the consumption of domestic goods, but also on foreign and diplomatic policies. This has entailed an increased focus on protecting the domestic market and countering international pressures for heightened liberalization. In particular, in the context of FTA/EPA negotiations, agricultural liberalization has consistently posed challenges for Japan. While Japan has undeniably reaped significant benefits from the global trade system, it has exhibited hesitancy in granting broader access to its agri-food market, despite persistent appeals from its key economic partners who also serve as major export destinations. Japan's reluctance to embrace agricultural liberalization within FTAs/EPAs reflects its complex position as a beneficiary of global trade. The preservation of its domestic agricultural sector and safeguarding food security considerations have remained paramount. Consequently, requests for increased market openness encounter resistance, as Japan seeks to protect its agricultural industry and ensure a stable supply of food for its population.

In the next sections, we will examine Japan's approach to free trade agreement negotiations, discerning two main periods: the period spanning from 2000 and 2012, during which Japan prioritized negotiations with countries where its reliance on agri-food imports was relatively low and with whom it held substantial negotiating leverage; and the period since 2013, characterized by Japan adopting a more assertive stance towards agricultural liberalization and engaging in agreements with major global agricultural producers.

3. Japan's FTAs/EPAs and agriculture protection 2000-2012

The end of the Cold War and the growing diffusion of the neoliberal ideas prompted nations to seek new strategies for improving their chances of economic success. Deregulation, free trade, and the unhindered flow of capital emerged as the new guiding principles of the global economy. To become more competitive on the world market, countries committed to cutting tariffs and eliminating investment restrictions. The result was the proliferation of free trade agreements during the 1990s. By 1997 there were 72 fully operative FTAs worldwide, most of them being bilateral in nature. Notably, East Asia was the only region in the world to not have concluded an FTA of any kind during this period (Dent, 2016, 174-75).

Until the late 1990s, Japan did not view FTAs as a viable trade policy option. The Japanese government expressed strong criticism toward the enthusiasm shown by the European Union and the United States regarding FTAs, perceiving them more as a barrier to international free trade and preferring to continue to negotiate within the institutional framework of the World Trade Organization (Ōyane and Ōnishi, 2016, 55). However, the primary concern for the Japanese government revolved around the liberalization of the agricultural sector. As discussed earlier, food security in Japan is closely tied to food self-sufficiency, and a heavy reliance on food imports is regarded as a significant risk factor. The fear was that increased liberalization of the agricultural sector and subsequent import growth would further exacerbate dependence on foreign markets and lead to a decline in the food self-sufficiency rate.

The opposition to the signing of FTAs/EPAs was further reinforced by Japanese farmers' organizations, which vehemently resisted any form of liberalization. We have seen that the farmer population is declining, the farms are small and family-run and live on strong public support. In the 1990s, government support measures accounted for over 1.5 per cent of the GDP and more than 50 percent of farm receipts, compared with an OECD average of 1.2 and 30 percent, respectively.⁹ Nonetheless, Japanese farmers are very well-organized and were able to mount a strong opposition to FTAs/EPAs. In particular, the Japanese Agricultural Cooperatives (JA or *Nōgyō kyōdō kumiai* in Japanese) together with the "farm politicians" of the LDP and the MAFF forged an "iron-triangle" linkage and tried to resist the liberalization of the farm market (George Mulgan, 2011; Davis, 2003). This symbiotic relationship benefitted all three actors: MAFF sustained the agricultural groups by keeping high prices for staple foods like rice and implementing other supportive policies; the agricultural groups consolidated the political base of *nōrin giin* by supporting the LDP in elections; and *nōrin giin* exerted political power to make MAFF secure the agricultural budget (Hidetaka, 2021, 654). Prior to 2013, Japan's trade governance was fragmented, with each ministry controlling a specialized area of foreign economic policy and exerting an excessive amount of influence over the country's FTA/EPA agenda and negotiations. The resistance from a particular ministry could potentially derail FTA/EPA negotiations since ministries lacked veto power over one another's policies. Consequently, the

⁹ Data collected from: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/agriculture-and-food/agricultural-support/indicator/english_6ea85c58-en (accessed 10/04/2022)

backing of MAFF (and subsequently JA and farm politicians) became crucial for the Japanese government to engage in FTA/EPA negotiations with other nations seeking to open Japan's agricultural market.

The outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the growing number of free trade agreements between its trading partners served as a catalyst for Japan to shift stress on trade policy from multilateralism to bilateralism. The 2000 Foreign Policy Bluebook positively addressed the topic of FTAs/EPAs for the very first time, admitting that as long as "regional trade agreements are consistent with the WTO Agreement, they would promote open trade rather than acting as a barrier to non-member countries, contribute to the expansion of world trade, and complement the multilateral trading system" (MoFA, 2000). In line with this shift, in December 2000, Japan agreed to have representatives from government, industry and academia from Japan and Singapore to examine the possibilities for a Japan-Singapore economic partnership agreement, which was eventually signed on January 2002. Since then, EPAs have superseded the WTO as the main vehicle for Japanese trade liberalization and Japan has signed twenty-one EPAs and it is in the midst of negotiations with a number of others, including the one with China and ROK, Turkey, and Colombia.¹⁰ However, Japan's willingness to negotiate FTAs/EPAs has not been matched by a readiness to liberalize agricultural trade. This is also evident if we look at the Japanese government's use of the expression "economic partnership agreements" or EPA instead of "free trade agreements", to underline the desire to exclude substantial portions of sensitive items – notably, agri-food products – and not negotiate an overall liberalization on all goods.

Hence, Japan's initial reluctance to negotiate tariff reductions on agri-food products becomes understandable when considering its first Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with Singapore. Singapore accounted for a mere 3 percent of Japan's agricultural imports, making it seemingly simpler for Japan to comply with the requirements of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and achieve an agreement encompassing substantially all trade (Krauss, 2003, 319). However, the negotiations encountered obstacles, with the treatment of the agricultural sector swiftly

¹⁰ The 21 EPAs signed by Japan are with: Singapore (2002), Mexico (2004), Malaysia (2006), Philippines (2006), Indonesia (2007), Chile (2007), Thailand (2007), ASEAN (2008), Vietnam (2008), Brunei (2008), Switzerland (2009), India (2011), Peru (2012), Australia (2014), Mongolia (2016), TPP12 (signed in 2016 and never entered into force), TTPP11 (2018), EU (2018), US (2019), UK (2020), RCEP (2020).

becoming a contentious point of discussion. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) and certain members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) argued against further tariff reductions being negotiated within individual FTAs, urging that such discussions take place at the WTO. They expressed concerns that Japan would be compelled to make similar concessions with other countries if it deviated from the established WTO commitments (Yoshimatsu, 2006, 484-487). Eventually, Japan consented to eliminate tariffs that were already set at zero but resisted making concessions beyond those mandated by the WTO Agriculture Agreement. Consequently, out of a total of 2,277 agricultural, forestry, and fishery products, only 486 were covered under the Japan-Singapore agreement (Fujita et al., 2011, 197).

The second economic partnership agreement signed by Japan was with Mexico in 2004. Although Mexico was a larger agricultural country, it did not rank among Japan's primary suppliers. Once again, the biggest impediment in the negotiations was Japan's rigid opposition to liberalization in agricultural products, particularly with regard to pork, beef, and chicken products, oranges and orange juice. After a strong request from Mexican government, Japan opened up these markets by raising import quotas rather than removing or reducing tariffs would typically be expected. In return, Mexico agreed to liberalize its steel and automobile markets within seven to ten years, meeting Japan's strong request in these sectors. As a result, Mexico agreed to open its market to all imports from Japan, while Japan agreed to open its market to only 84 percent of its imports from Mexico. Instead, Japan raised import quotas on goods like beef, chicken, oranges, and orange juice that were not part of the original request (Urata, 2007, 102).

The negotiations with other countries (in particular with Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Chile) followed a similar pattern characterized by Japan's strong resistance to agricultural liberalization. This stance resulted in the exclusion of a significant number of agricultural products from tariff reduction leading to persistently lower trade liberalization rates for Japan compared to its partner countries (Urata, 2014, 10-11). On average, Japan's EPA negotiations generally excluded approximately 40 percent of its agricultural products from tariff concessions. For example, the tariff concession rates for agricultural and fishery products were 53.5 percent in the Japan-Singapore EPA, 47.4 percent in the Japan-Mexico EPA, 61.7 percent in the Japan-Malaysia FTA, 64.1 percent in the Japan-Chile EPA, 63 percent in the Japan-Indonesia EPA, 60.6 percent in the Japan-Brunei EPA, and 59 percent in the Japan-Philippines EPA. Notably, the Japan-Thailand

EPA had the highest tariff concession rate for agricultural and fishery products at 71.7 percent (Choi and Oh, 2021, 22). These relative low tariff concession rates for agricultural and fishery products are particularly surprising when one considers that Japan's EPA partners in this period were not major agri-food exporters in Japan (Ibidem). Moreover, Japan had never included sensitive primary commodities like rice, sugar, wheat, pork, and dairy products in its EPA negotiations (Ibidem). On the other side, the partner countries – most of them developing economies – have accepted the uneven terms in the expectation of benefits in areas such as aid, investments, and technical cooperation.

4. Food security discourse and foreign policy: FTA/EPA as an opportunity for food export

On November 11, 2011, the then-Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko made an announcement¹¹ regarding its decision to enter into consultations toward participating in the negotiations of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a regional free trade agreement between twelve countries of the Pacific Rim.¹² This news immediately prompted a reaction from the MAFF and as well as the *nōrin giin*, who expressed deep concerns about Japan joining an agreement that included major global agricultural producers such as the United States and Australia. A year prior, in 2010, the MAFF had released a study examining the potential consequences of Japan's participation in a comprehensive agreement of this nature, projecting devastating effects on the country's agriculture and food security. Specifically, the MAFF assessed the impact of tariff elimination and asserted that if Japan were to join the TPP, agricultural production would experience a decline in value amounting to 4.1 trillion yen. This decrease would include a reduction of 2 trillion yen in rice production, resulting in an overall contraction of Japan's GDP by 8 trillion yen. Most notably, it predicted a worrisome decline in the food self-sufficiency rate from approximately 40 percent to a mere 14 percent (MAFF, 2011). Although the MAFF later revised the figures regarding the decline, it consistently maintained that Japan's participation in the TPP would have catastrophic consequences for the domestic agriculture industry.

¹¹ The press conference of the Prime Minister Noda is available at: <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/noda/statement/201111/11kaiken.html> (accessed 4 May 2022)

¹² The countries are New Zealand, Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Singapore, the United States and Vietnam.

However, a significant shift in Japan's approach to market liberalization occurred in 2013. Since then, Japan has successfully concluded high-level EPA agreements with important agricultural exporting nations including Australia in 2014 and the EU in 2018, marking a notable divergence from its prior EPA negotiations. In 2012, before the negotiations started, Japan's food imports from these two partners totaled 6.4 percent and 13.3 percent, respectively. To provide further context, the proportion of food imports from these two trading partners was equal to the sum of the proportions from Japan's prior thirteen EPAs (Choi and Oh, 2021, 24). Regarding the agreement with the European Union, Japan agreed to eliminate tariffs on over 90 per cent of EU agricultural export from the first day after the agreement entered into force (European Commission, 2017). Moreover, Japan successfully negotiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and sign the agreement in 2016. Despite the United States' withdrawal from the TPP soon after Donald Trump's election in 2017, Japan assumed a leadership role and revitalized the agreement as TPP-11, which came into effect for the initial six ratifying countries (Japan being the second to ratify, after Mexico) on December 30, 2018.

These achievements mark a clear reversal in Japan's economic diplomacy. The primary catalyst behind this shift was the return of Abe Shinzō to the government in 2012, following his first experience in 2006-7. Despite initial opposition to the agreement, once in power, Abe affirmed the importance of the TPP, as well as free trade agreements in general, as integral component of his strategy to revitalize the Japanese economy – the so-called Abenomics – and in March 2013 he officially announced Japan's participation in the TPP negotiations (Akimoto, 2018, 186).

To attain these outcomes, the Abe administration recognized the necessity of reducing the influence of the agricultural lobby and presenting a new narrative on national food security. Firstly, Abe sought to weaken opposition from the MAFF and the *nōrin zoku* by strategically appointing pro-free trade Diet members to key positions. His first agriculture minister, Hayashi Yoshimasa, lacked expertise in agricultural policy and did not have affiliation with *nōrin zoku* or JA (Mulgan, 2015a). In 2014, Hayashi was replaced by Nishikawa Koya, member of the *nōrin zoku* but a strong supporter of liberalization (Mulgan, 2014). Following Nishikawa's resignation due to a political scandal in 2015, Prime Minister Abe appointed Moriyama Hiroshi as the new chairman of the MAFF. Also member of the *nōrin zoku*, Moriyama was a vocal supporter of the TPP and remained in office until the conclusion of the negotiations in December 2015 (Mulgan,

2015b). The creation of a special TPP unit, the Government Headquarter for the TPP (*TPP sōgō taisaku honbu*), within the Cabinet Secretariat Office (*Naikaku kantei*), provided another means to bypass lobbying groups and thereby advance in the negotiations (Koshino and Ward, 2022, 96). In this way, the Abe government has been able to give shape at the *kantei nōsei* or “the agricultural politics of the Cabinet”, downgrading the MAFF’s role in agricultural policymaking and formally centralizing the process in the Cabinet for the first in postwar history (Maclachlan and Shimizu, 2021, 424).

But probably the most significant and effective agricultural policies introduced under the Abe administration was the reform of JA, thus “violating one the last remaining taboos of postwar Japanese politics” (Ibidem, 427). The President of JA-Zenchū (the administrative “control tower” of the federation), Banzai Akira, strongly criticized the reform. However, with the appointment of pro-TPP politicians to key positions in the cabinet, he found considerable difficulties in garnering support (Choi and Oh, 2021, 74). After two years of deliberation, the Agricultural Cooperative Law was ultimately passed by the upper house of the Diet on August 28, 2015, and came into effect in April 2016. The reform reduced some of JA-Zenchū internal organization authority over lower-level JA groups and changed its status to general incorporated association, essentially making it a voluntary association similar to other interest groups. Additionally, the reform abolished its legal right to submit proposals to the government on matters relating to the cooperatives (Mulgan, 2016a and 2016b).

The new course in agricultural policy and economic diplomacy inaugurated by the Abe administration also concerned the approach to food security. As we have already discussed, Japan has traditionally associated the concept of food security with self-sufficiency, believing that liberalization posed a threat that needed to be avoided. The prevailing belief was that the enhancement of self-sufficiency, and consequently food security, could only be achieved through a substantial consumption of locally produced products, particularly those associated with traditional cuisine. In a speech delivered in Tokyo in May 2013, Abe unveiled his plan for the agriculture sector, which aimed to expand the domestic production by boosting agricultural export from 450 billion yen in 2012 to 1trillion yen by 2020. This ambitious goal was reaffirmed in June 2013 when the Abe administration launched the “Japan is back” strategy (*Nihon fukkō senryaku*), listing the increase in agri-food exports as a key target for the growth of the Japanese economy. In August 2013, the MAFF officially outlined the strategy to increase food

export. This new strategy, nicknamed as “FBI strategy”, centers around three main activities: promoting of the use of Japanese ingredients in the various cuisines of the world (“made *from* Japan”), developing the food industry and promoting of Japan’s food culture (“made *by* Japan”), and expanding of Japan’s food export (“made *in* Japan”) (MAFF 2013). The inclusion of *washoku*, the traditional cuisine of Japan, on the UNESCO Intangible Heritage List in December 2013 should be viewed within the context of this strategy aimed at promoting Japanese food abroad.

The 2015 Basic Plan for Food, Agriculture, and Rural Areas (*Shokuryō nōgyō nōson kihon keikan*) reiterated the importance of increasing the consumption of traditional food to improve the food self-sufficiency rate. However, for the first time, it also acknowledged the significance of “domestic and foreign demand (*kokunaigai no juyō*)” for Japanese food, highlighting the strategic role of food exports in strengthening national food security (MAFF, 2015, 15). To gain a better understanding of Japan’s productive capacity, the Plan introduced a new indicator, the “food self-sufficiency potential (*shokuryō jikyū ryoku*)” that, in comparison to the food self-sufficiency rate, displays the potential per capita caloric supply per domestic food produced using all farmland in Japan, including abandoned but recoverable farmland (Ibidem, 24).

The introduction of this new indicator signifies a shift in perspective regarding the relationship between self-sufficiency and food security. The food self-sufficiency potential rate not only provides insights into Japan’s ability to cope with potential food import crises but also demonstrates its capacity to adapt to a significant increase in demand for agricultural products from abroad (Ibidem). For this reason, in the 2016 White Book, the MAFF declared that “the government will continue to improve food self-sufficiency potential and the food self-sufficiency ratio through efforts such as the increase in the demands of domestic agricultural products at home and abroad including exports” (MAFF, 2017, 10). The White Book also stated that, in order to achieve these objectives, Japan’s agriculture should become more competitive through a number of significant reforms, including the development of manpower, structural reform of distribution and processing, etc. – but also through the development of strategic export system (Ibidem, 4).

In order to develop this export system, the MAFF established the Executive Committee for the Export Strategy (*yushutsu senryaku iinkai*) and formulated the Export Expansion Policy (*yushutsu kakudai hōshin*), where seven categories of food and agricultural products to promote abroad were

identified – seafood products, rice and rice-made processed foods, forest products, flowering trees (bonsai), vegetables, beef meat and tea (MAFF, 2015). In the same year, the ministry put into practice a new, more thorough strategy, based on seven main actions that are: the collection of data concerning the export markets; the promotion of Japanese food culture by highlighting the “good quality” of Japanese food and agricultural products; holding regular events where to promote Japanese foods and improve logistic networks; supporting the creation of overseas sales bases; reviewing the current regulation and help foreign buyers to buy directly from Japanese wholesalers; relax export regulations; and renovate the procedures for food export (Prime Minister’s Office, 2016, 3-4).

In pursuit of these goals, a number of initiatives have been launched to assist companies that want to expand their international sales or to promote Japanese food outside the archipelago. Examples include the JFOODO (Japan Food products Overseas Promotion) program, established within JETRO as a support platform for Japanese agri-food companies that operate or wish to operate on the international market to increase exports, and the Japanese Food Supporter Program, a certification system for restaurants, bars or simple vendors that certifies the offer to the public of true Japanese products.

The new strategy implemented in 2012 has yielded significant results. Although Japan has not succeeded in improving its self-sufficiency rate, the implementation of economic partnership agreements and the strategy of promoting Japanese food abroad have led to a substantial increase in Japanese agri-food exports, reaching the government’s target of almost 1 trillion yen. Moreover, total agricultural output has increased from approximately 84 billion yen to nearly 93 billion yen in 2018.¹³

5. Conclusions

The worsening of climate change, the pandemic crisis from Covid-19, the Russian aggression of Ukraine are some of the factors that in recent years have tragically brought back to the spotlight how deeply interconnected threats to food security are. Furthermore, given their scale, these factors clearly show, if ever there were a need, that food security issues cannot be

¹³ The data have been collected from the MAFF Statistical Yearbooks (Nōrin suisanshō tōkei-hyō). Url: <https://www.maff.go.jp/j/tokei/kikaku/nenji/index.html>

addressed only domestically but require diplomatic and international cooperation.

In this paper, we have seen that Japan has traditionally associated the concept of self-sufficiency with food security as a response to perceived external threats. This connection between self-sufficiency and security has been a significant aspect of Japan's approach to ensuring a stable food supply. The country has regarded the attainment of self-sufficiency as a means of safeguarding its population against potential disruptions in the global food system, thereby securitizing the issue. By emphasizing the importance of domestic production and reducing dependence on imports, Japan has sought to mitigate vulnerabilities and maintain a reliable food source in times of uncertainty, despite the results never being satisfactory. This approach has strongly influenced Japan's economic diplomacy and its stance towards free trade agreements or economic partnership agreements. In the period between 2000 and 2012, Japan pursued FTAs/EPAs without a clear strategy, primarily aiming to minimize liberalization in the agri-food sector to safeguard national food security. The fears associated with food security, coupled with the close ties among the agricultural lobby, the agricultural cooperatives (JA), rural interest groups (*nōrin zoku*), and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF), have hindered the establishment of comprehensive FTAs/EPAs between Japan and its trading partners.

However, the advent of the Abe administration led to a radical change in Japan's approach to agri-food market liberalization. The appointment of pro-liberalization personalities to the MAFF and the reform of the JA were able to weaken the power of the agricultural lobby. Moreover, the narrative surrounding food security underwent a significant transformation. The liberalization of the agricultural market was reframed as an opportunity to enhance exports and Japan's food self-sufficiency potential, rather than as a threat. This strategic shift is exemplified by the successful negotiations and implementation of FTAs, including the TPP-11, the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement, and the RCEP, which showcase Japan's altered attitude towards agri-food market liberalization. It is noteworthy that the MAFF website now features comprehensive information on various FTAs/EPAs, highlighting tariff advantages for Japanese exporters in the Export-International section (*yushutsu-kokusai*).¹⁴

¹⁴ See: https://www.maff.go.jp/j/yusyutu_kokusai/index.html

These changes represent a significant milestone in expanding Japanese agri-food exports, although certain challenges still persist, such as the high price of Japanese products. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that this new approach has not only impacted the country's food security but has also turned Japan into a free trade champion in a world economy still widely threatened by protectionism.

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