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农业强国 nongye qianguo

Making China into an agricultural power

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DEFINITION

农业强国 nongye qianguo | agricultural power: The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), released in October 2022, for the first time spelled out the target of building China into an agricultural power by the middle of the century. Building an agricultural power highlights the Chinese government's commitment to strengthening the nation's agricultural capacity, including production, science and technology innovation, sustainability, infrastructure, and international competitiveness. The term reflects the growing urgency that policymakers place on guaranteeing the nation's food security.

Relevance

Context

The 20th CPC Congress, held in October 2022, marks the beginning of a new term of the government for the next ten years. The report released at the congress, as the new government's administrative guideline, outlined a strategy to build China into a socialist modern strong country by the middle of this century. This ambitious goal requires China to become a powerhouse in agriculture, alongside other areas such as education, science and technology, talent, culture, sports, manufacturing, product quality, aerospace, transportation, cyberspace, maritime activities, and trade.

The annual Central Rural Work Conference of the CPC, held in December 2022 in Beijing, further elaborated the importance of and the direction for building China into an agricultural power.

At the conference, Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC, pointed out that a strong agriculture sector is the foundation of a strong modern socialist country and that agricultural development is essential to meeting the people's needs for a better life, achieving high-quality development, and

consolidating the foundation of national security.

The fundamental reason underpinning the government's new commitment to build China into an agricultural power is the increasing pressure on food security. First, although China has maintained grain production above 650 million tons since 2015, decreasing and degrading farmland means that China's potential for further increases in agricultural output becomes more difficult. According to survey data released by the

Ministry of Natural Resources in 2021, China's farmland decreased from 135.4 million ha in 2009 to 127.9 million ha in 2019, signaling a total loss of 7.5 million ha of farmland. Meanwhile, over one third of China's farmland suffers from erosion, acidity, salinization, and other forms of degradation. Second, China's overall food self-sufficiency rate decreased from 101.8% in 2000 to 76.8% in 2020 and is further expected to fall to 65% by 2035 if timely measures are not implemented. Rising import dependency on crucial food items, particular soy, has largely worsened China's food security. Third, in recent years, climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, and war in Ukraine have caused turbulences in global food supply chains. Against this background, China's top leaders have repeatedly stressed that "the Chinese people's rice bowls must always be held firmly in their own hands and should be filled mainly with Chinese grain."

An agricultural power with Chinese characteristics

There is no standard definition of an agricultural power. Compared with the existing agricultural powers in the world, such as the U.S., Canada, Australia, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Israel, Chinese academics and officials have

stressed the following common features of an agricultural power:

- strong capacity in agricultural and food production,
- strong capacity for agricultural science and technology innovation,
- high levels of agricultural infrastructure and facilities,
- high levels of sustainability, and
- strong international competitiveness.

Chinese officials and scholars have also stressed that building an agricultural power needs not only to incorporate the common traits presented by developed countries, but also needs take account of Chinese characteristics, including a large population with relatively little arable land and China's strong agricultural tradition. In addition, commentators have emphasized the need to balance food production with environmental protection.

History

Agricultural modernization has always been considered vital for the development of China and a key priority work for the Chinese Communist Party. Building an agricultural power sets a new goal for China's new government amid the increasing food security challenges China is facing.

The goal of agricultural modernization

In 1964, the first generation of Chinese leaders set forth the Four Modernizations Goals to modernize China's agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology. In his government working report at the third National People's Congress, then Premier Zhou Enlai pointed out the need to "build China into a strong socialist country with modern agriculture, modern industry, modern national defense and modern science and technology within a not too long historical

period." Since then, agricultural modernization has been continuously upheld as a development goal.

Rural reform and household farming system

In the early 1980s, China's reform first started in the agriculture sector with the introduction of the household contract responsibility system (HCRS), which greatly unleashed rural productivity and boosted agriculture production. In 1982, the Central Committee of the CPC issued the first agriculture-themed No 1 Central Document, officially endorsing the HCRS. Since then, issues regarding agriculture, farmers, and rural areas have continued as the main theme for subsequent No 1 Central Documents, which are issued at the beginning of each year.

The HCRS was a major driver of agricultural production in the early stages of rural reform. However, the small-scale and fragmented household farming plots under the HCRS system have gradually become a barrier to further improvement in resource use efficiency, mechanization, and market competitiveness. Facilitating and enabling small-holder farms to adopt improved practices for production, marketing, and environment protection, thereby gaining better livelihoods, is still a vitally important part of China's agricultural modernization.

Rural revitalization strategy

In 2017, the Chinese government launched the "Rural Revitalization Strategy", which provided a new framework for integrated development of agriculture and rural areas. The aim of the strategy is to build rural areas with thriving businesses, pleasant living environments, good social etiquette and civility, effective governance, and prosperity.

The 14th Five-Year Plans (2021-2025)

In 2021, China entered its 14th Five-Year Plan (FYP) period (2021-2025). Building on the achievements gained in the previous five-year period, during the 14th FYP period, China will continue to consolidate the foundation of agricultural production, enhance the competitiveness of agricultural industry, upgrade resource use efficiency and recycling, mainstream green development, and integrate poverty alleviation into rural revitalization. Full implementation of the 14th Five-Year Plans in agriculture and the rural sector will lay a solid foundation for achieving China's goal of becoming an agricultural power, according to these official documents.

Analysis

Pathway towards becoming an agricultural power

To build an agricultural power with Chinese characteristics, the government set forth some guiding principles. These include setting national food security as the bottom line; taking technology and institutional innovation as primary driving force; emphasizing the upgrading of infrastructure and facilities; advancing green development to transform the agricultural sector to high quality, resource efficiency and competitiveness; and developing integrated supply chains.

The key tasks

While there is no official action plan or road map yet, some documents such as the No 1 Central Document from 2023, the 20th CPC national congress report, and articles by government officials have outlined the key tasks toward becoming an agricultural power. These tasks and actions are all in line with China's 14th Five-Year Plans. They include:

- Advancing protection and development of farmland. This has been a fundamental priority for China's food security strategy for decades. The key elements include maintaining an area of arable land at not less than 120 million ha, developing high-standard farmland, and upgrading medium- and low-yield fields. In order to secure the nation's grain supply, high-standard farmland should be mainly used for grain production.
- Advancing breakthroughs in all fields of agricultural technology and equipment, including science and technology innovation in the seed industry; breakthroughs in key technologies such as gene editing and artificial intelligence (AI); development and application of advanced farm machinery; as well as development of smart farms and digital agriculture.
- Advancing the development of green agriculture, including the protection of agricultural resources; reducing pollution from agriculture; fostering green and low carbon circular agricultural industry systems; protecting and restoring agricultural and rural ecosystems; improving the carbon sequestration capacity of rural ecosystems; and establishing agricultural ecosystem service compensation mechanisms.
- Advancing the diversification of agricultural services, with a focus on fostering new types of agricultural business entities; developing moderate-scale agricultural operations; and promoting the organic connection between small-holding farmers and modern agricultural development.
- Upgrading agricultural supply chains. This involves speeding up the integration and development of primary, secondary and tertiary industries in rural areas;

developing primary and intensive processing of agricultural products; strengthening the construction of storage and cold chain logistics for agricultural products; accelerating the development of rural e-commerce; and generating more value-added income sources and jobs in rural areas.

- Advancing all-round international cooperation in agriculture, with a focus on improving information sharing in agricultural international trade; diversifying agricultural imports; cultivating large international grain merchants and multinational agricultural enterprises; strengthening global agricultural science and technology cooperation with a particular focus on food security, climate change, and green development; and actively participating in and contributing to global food and agriculture governance, for example by jointly formulating international standards and rules.

Implications

Becoming an agricultural power has both domestic and global implications.

Domestically, policymakers hope that through government commitment and investment, China will become more **self-reliant in food supply and technology innovation**, will generate more prosperity in rural areas, and make food production more environmentally sustainable.

Globally, **China will re-shape the global food supply landscape** through trade development, for example by establishing overseas trade promoting centers, fostering giant multi-national agri-businesses such as COFCO, and speeding up technology transfer through south-south cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative. For example, China's hybrid rice has already been planted in many African countries.

The Chinese government is investing heavily in seed industry revitalization, AI, e-commerce and smart agriculture, greatly enhancing China's the prospects of becoming a global powerhouse in **agri-tech innovation**.

China is also becoming an increasingly important player in **global food and agriculture governance**. The government has been encouraging domestic agri-food businesses, particularly those involved in transnational supply chains to comply with international rules and standards. On the other hand, Chinese policymakers actively participate in and contribute to the establishment of global and regional agri-food governance.

Finally, China appears to place greater emphasis on **green development** in agriculture. In 2021, for the first time, MARA and five other government departments jointly issued the 14th Five-Year Plan for agriculture green development. China's advances in green agricultural development will have important implications for other developing countries and will contribute to global sustainable development.

Building China into an agricultural power is the new government's long term commitment. Through investment in science and technology innovation, infrastructure upgrading, and optimization of international trade and cooperation, it is expected that China will further consolidate its national food security, while deepening its influence on regional and global agri-food governance.

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