

THEME 02

Geopolitics of food

FOOD

GEOPOLITICS

RESOURCES

Food insecurity has regained attention as a geopolitical risk. In last year's outlook, we wrote that global food production would continuously be negatively impacted by climate change. In 2019, food insecurity was mainly driven by multiple political events around the world, such as conflicts and the trade war. As food is again becoming an increasingly strategic asset for more and more countries, we expect that food will reemerge as an urgent geopolitical matter in 2020: What will this mean for the food insecure African continent, for China, whose rise is constrained by its dependency on food and for a food nation such as the Netherlands?

Our observations

- In 2019, conflicts drove millions into hunger. For example, ongoing war and conflict are the primary drivers of the food insecure situation in north-eastern Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen.
- Besides conflicts, climate change is an essential driver of food insecurity. According to the first-ever model examining [how nature and humans can survive together](#), five billion people, particularly in Africa and South Asia, will likely face shortages of food and clean water in the coming decades as nature declines. Although the authors of the study believe that people in wealthier countries can buffer the impact by means of imports of food and infrastructure, the magnitude of the impact is such that it cannot be mitigated by technological advances.
- Food insecurity is a matter of national security. In [Zimbabwe](#), for instance, food insecurity has increased over the past months, to such an extent that it now poses a potential threat to national security and could cause civil unrest and general insecurity in the country. This illustrates how food insecurity in turn is also an important driver of unrest and conflict.
- Today, among the main geopolitical events [giving rise](#) to food insecurity around the world is the ongoing trade war between China and the U.S. Besides trade flows being disrupted, there is less growth in China and the U.S. is slowing down global demand and lowering prices of food exports in poor economies. The trade tensions between the U.S. and China are particularly affecting agriculture because that is the main export from the U.S. to China.
- [Resource nationalism](#) is on the rise. As natural resources such as water and land, including the supply of food and fresh water, are increasingly considered [critical resources](#), food is becoming a strategic asset.
- Japanese think tank Nomura recently warned about the [heightened risk of rising food prices](#). As the effects of climate change will further harm food production around the world, it is expected that after years of a downward trend in food prices, they might surge again. Next to climate change, sharp depreciation of the U.S. dollar and the oil price surge are additional possible triggers for a food price surge. As globally, trade protectionism continues and debt levels in emerging economies remain high, this could further amplify the effects that drive food prices up. Countries most vulnerable to food price surges are often emerging economies. They account for more than half of the global population. Numerous times in the past, higher food prices have led to protests, instability, and even conflict and migration.



Connecting the dots

In the past decades, food was less of a pressing geopolitical matter. The Green Revolution that took place in agriculture from the sixties on, mostly in Asia, saved millions of people from hunger. It meant great progress for humanity. Long gone are the days when Western consumers spent more than half of their income on food, as in the fifties. However, several recent developments have put food as a geopolitical theme back on the agenda. Numerous conflicts and the negative effects of climate change on food production have pushed large numbers of people into food insecurity. How can we understand food as a geopolitical matter? First, we are beginning to understand the complex nexus between food security, climate change, conflict and migration. Since [more than half of the global population](#) live in the 50 most food insecure countries (mostly in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia), only a small increase of food insecurity can lead to large displacement. In addition to the link between conflict and food insecurity, there is a [direct link](#) between food insecurity and migration. Second, food is increasingly becoming a strategic resource. National food strategies are becoming more relevant for countries with large populations in a world of climate change, resource scarcity, more protectionism and trade wars disrupting food trade flows. Food security, having unencumbered access to food, raw materials and other goods, is a matter of national security.

What are the developments that define the current geopolitics of food? First, while Africa's population is rapidly growing, which will make it more de-

pendent on food imports, 2019 also showed repeated signs of a [new scramble for Africa](#). Second, out of necessity, [China is on the rise](#) as a global food power. The superpower will have to import more food in the future as well as try to buy land or crop facilities in other countries. Both the African continent and China are important to watch in 2020, considering that both populous and rising regions produce insufficient food to meet the needs of their own populations, making them dependent on food imports. Other food vulnerable countries are India, Indonesia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Ethiopia.

What are the consequences for food secure countries? The U.S. and many European countries belong to the [most food secure countries of 2019](#). If countries produce plenty of food for their own population and beyond (exports), this solidifies their position as a food nation. Food can be an important foreign policy tool. If food insecurity is a threat multiplier for conflict, improving food security can reduce tensions and contribute to more [stable environments](#). One of the root causes of migration can be addressed by helping countries to improve their food security with [agricultural projects or land restoration projects](#).

For instance, the EU could use its strong agricultural capacity to create strategic dependencies in exchange for raw materials. Likewise, the [Netherlands](#) is considered an important food nation but will have to adapt its capacity to the changing geopolitical reality of food.

Implications

- Humanity is making progress in many areas, but daily and healthy food on the table does not seem to be a given even for citizens of developed countries. This is especially visible in rich countries where healthy food is not always affordable for low-income families. Activist movements for food justice are growing.
- Developing countries are trying to gain from the value that is created in the processing part of the food chain. The African Development bank is attempting to break the trend of exporting food commodities and importing food products. It is creating Staple Crops Processing Zones to develop agricultural value chains and agro-allied industries that process and add value to commodities. As there are [signs of agricultural development on the continent](#), one could even speculate that Africa might feed the world in the future, as Africa has around 60% of world's uncultivated arable land.