

FROM SUNFLOWER FIELDS TO HAWKER CENTERS: REIMAGINING MIDDLE-POWER FOOD SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

Middle-power states face a dilemma amid global food volatility. Will they trust markets or build costly state-led buffers? Drawing on fieldwork in Singapore, Indonesia, and Turkey, this essay examines different strategies for managing food security. While Singapore and Indonesia have invested in import diversification and state-managed logistics, Turkey's neoliberal retreat has left its population vulnerable to supply shocks. These cases suggest that state capacity provides essential resilience in an increasingly unstable world.



Keywords: Food security • Middle powers • State capacity • Political economy • Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

When I applied for a Fulbright award in 2023, I took a gamble on my ability to reinvent my research agenda in real time. After years as a comparative political scientist focusing on party politics in the Middle East, I was ready for a post-tenure transition back to my roots in political economy. I wanted to understand the intersection of politics and staples, the bread of the Middle East and the rice bowl of Asia. I was interested in how “middle power” states navigate the increasingly volatile international trade and politics of food. To do this, I had to leave my comfort zone. I had never been to Southeast Asia, yet I was convinced that the future of global food security was being designed in the ports and markets of Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia as much as anywhere else in the world.

THE ENGINEERING OF SINGAPORE

Singapore is a fascinating case in food politics. It is a tiny city-state with a big appetite – famous for its hawker centers, a delicious fusion of Chinese and Malay flavors, and affordable eats in an otherwise eye-wateringly expensive city. Watching Anthony Bourdain eat his way through the city's main offerings was my first introduction to the city's food culture, but what I discovered behind the scenes of its famous malls and food stalls was even more intriguing. A meticulous policy landscape upholds the Singaporean food ecosystem. Its plentiful and diverse offerings are enabled by a system of deliberate import

diversification, strategic national food reserves, and land lease agreements abroad for agriculture, aquaculture, and livestock production. These measures allow the city-state to maintain its food supplies even under conditions of severe import dependence and a complete lack of self-sufficiency.

Singaporean policymakers are fully aware of their import dependence and have been seeking to boost domestic production. In 2019, they adopted the “30 by 30” farming goal, aiming to produce 30% of the country’s nutritional needs domestically by 2030. The initial focus was on eggs, vegetables, and fish, an ambitious target for a state where only one percent of the land is devoted to agriculture. My interviews in Singapore in 2024 already suggested that this agenda might not meet its targets. The COVID-19 pandemic had wreaked havoc on supply lines, and overblown expectations for agricultural technology had not yet paid dividends. Not surprisingly, policymakers dropped this goal in 2025, replacing it with more modest domestic production goals by 2035.

Import diversification remains Singapore’s most potent tool to limit its vulnerability to single-source disruptions. If a natural disaster or a political crisis halts exports from one state, other sources can be mobilized as substitutes. This strategy rejects the logic of “just-in-time” efficiency; Singapore is willing to pay more for its food imports to avoid dependence on any one source. The prudence of this policy was clear when India banned non-basmati rice exports during the pandemic to protect its own domestic supply. While rice prices in Singapore rose as a result, the city-state avoided a significant shortage of the staple crop.

Singapore’s strategy has enabled it to withstand supply shocks in the international food market, yet recent studies suggest that up to 10 percent of its population remains food insecure. This is a striking finding for a state that consistently ranks among the most food-secure nations in the world. It suggests that food vulnerability is likely more pervasive globally than standard metrics capture.

THE LOGISTICS OF INDONESIA

Indonesia confronts a different set of challenges. Unlike tiny, wealthy Singapore, it cannot simply purchase its way out of food scarcity. It’s the quintessential middle power: it possesses a large population and a growing economy, yet struggles with massive wealth inequality and rural poverty. Its food security is tied as much to income distribution as to the geography of its more than 900 inhabited islands. Distributing culturally acceptable food at affordable prices across this vast archipelago is a Herculean task at the heart of Jakarta’s struggles.

When I visited ID Food Group in Jakarta, I observed firsthand the work of coordinating wholesale food prices across hundreds of islands. A state-owned holding company formed in 2022, ID Food is responsible for stabilizing prices for essential products like sugar, meat, fish, and cooking oil. While the state giant BULOG focuses on rice, the country’s most politically sensitive staple crop, ID Food represents a new effort to centralize control over the rest of

the Indonesian food space. It was created by merging multiple state-owned enterprises. ID Food's mandate is to increase the professionalization and efficiency of the supply chains of sugar, meat, and poultry, ensuring that price volatility doesn't lead to shortages or unrest in the outer islands.

In my interviews with ID Food managers, I saw a bureaucracy wrestling with a continent-scale logistics network that challenges price stability every day. Their primary concern was securing a reliable "cold chain" – the infrastructure for refrigerated storage and transportation of heat-sensitive food across the archipelago. It became clear through our conversations that the cold chain can be viewed as a matter of both national development and sovereignty. The ability of the state to ensure the movement of perishable foodstuffs across thousands of miles of ocean is a project of both logistical precision and of national integration. Without this integration, Indonesia remains a fragmented market, and its population remains vulnerable to local monopolies and price volatility. The Indonesian state's direct role in managing logistics and setting wholesale prices is a calculated rejection of the market-reliant models prevalent in other middle-power states like Turkey.

THE MIDDLE POWER DILEMMA

These two Southeast Asian cases – Singapore's ability to shape its markets and Indonesia's state-control over vast areas of the food sector – exemplify a broader dilemma facing middle powers today. In the era of "polycrisis," where geopolitical conflicts, climate events, and health emergencies occur simultaneously, the old Washington Consensus advice to trust the global market has become a dangerous gamble. Middle powers lack the hegemon's ability to dictate the rules of trade, yet they are too large and too integrated into global exchanges to ignore the social consequences of food price volatility. They face a difficult choice: build a resilient bureaucratic state capable of intervention, sometimes at the cost of market efficiency, or outsource food security to the global market at the cost of strategic vulnerability, as the Turkish case so vividly illustrates.

THE NULL HYPOTHESIS: TURKEY

The strongest contrast to Indonesia's direct intervention and Singapore's active diversification is Turkey. My work on Turkey's food security strategy has been an effort to identify the null hypothesis: whether the absence of a strategy is itself a strategy. Despite lip service to food security on official websites, the state notably lacks a clearly articulated long-term strategy in this area. There are no discernible food reserves and no agency to coordinate trade with an eye toward crisis management. Ankara seems to have unmitigated confidence in the market's ability to provide. State intervention in agriculture is intended more to maintain rural livelihoods at tolerable income levels than to guarantee stable food supplies during a crisis.

The dismantling of Turkey's state support for agriculture was a gradual, decades-long process. The shift began with the "January 24 decisions" of 1980, preceding the military coup. Following the return to civilian rule, Prime Minister Turgut Özal became the primary architect of a transition toward a neoliberal regime, which included the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the erosion of agricultural subsidies. The deep economic crisis of 2001 paved the way for an IMF-supported austerity program, which entrenched a market fundamentalist regime. This market-led trajectory continued during the early AKP period under Erdoğan (2002-2011) during a decade defined by rising commodity prices. Economic growth was fueled by a burst of construction and global integration rather than domestic agricultural resilience. Consequently, Ankara's unmitigated confidence in the market is not accidental. It is the culmination of a systematic retreat from the state's role as a guarantor of economic development and, ultimately, food security.

A stark reminder of the absence of state preparedness emerged after Russia invaded Ukraine. Unbeknownst to most Turkish citizens, the society had become dangerously dependent on Black Sea grain and seed oils. My own grandfather was a sunflower and wheat farmer in Edirne, in Eastern Thrace. I have vivid memories of endless sunflower fields from childhood travels to our village. Yet those fields no longer supply enough to ensure self-sufficiency. When Ukrainian imports halted in 2022, cooking oil prices skyrocketed, rising fourfold from 2019 levels as overall food inflation hit 85%. While market efficiency enables cheap consumption in good times, boosting food security, moments of crisis expose the high cost of the absence of coordinated state action.

RESEARCHING THE TRANSITION

The Fulbright U.S.-ASEAN Visiting Scholar Program also provided me with new opportunities for professional collaboration. At our orientation in Jakarta, I met Dr. Ngo Minh Hai, an agricultural economist from the Vietnam National University of Agriculture. We made an instant connection over our mutual interest in the food policies of middle powers. This led to a joint proposal for the Citizen Diplomacy Action Fund (CDAF): a "summer school" designed to bring together Vietnamese farmers, civil society organizers, officials, students, and academics to explore the promises and limitations of organic farming. Although the project was ultimately not funded, it sparked a lasting collaboration. I am writing this essay while flying back from Hanoi to Saratoga Springs, having just visited Dr. Hai's department to discuss our new joint research on the intersection of smallholder farmers, their resilience in the face of climate change and the challenges of industrial farming, and national food security. This intersection represents a critical and politically charged area for middle powers that are attempting to decouple from chemical-intensive practices in conventional farms and aquaculture.

In Vietnam, the push toward organic farming and improved conventional agricultural practices is a strategic necessity born from the limitations of the Green Revolution. For decades, conventional farming on small plots has relied on heavy chemical inputs to maintain yields. However, this model has reached an ecological and economic ceiling. Vietnamese agriculture is now characterized by soil exhaustion and the inability of smallholders to meet strict food safety standards of high-value export markets. Our research explores whether an organic transition can serve multiple purposes, restoring domestic ecological sustainability, improving farmers' health by reducing chemical exposure, expanding Vietnam's export capacity in high-value agricultural markets, and boosting domestic food security.

My semester in Southeast Asia deepened my appreciation for the vast variation in how middle-power states formulate and implement coordinated action. The responses of Singapore, Indonesia, and Turkey are very different from each other, yet they face similar fundamental pressures. Middle-power states do not set the rules of the international order, but they are not mere rule-takers either. They possess a significant degree of agency. While they don't have the ability to overhaul global trade rules, they have the capacity to build state-led buffers against them. Whether through Singapore's resilience premium for food security, Indonesia's logistical market-building practices, or even Turkey's market-first approach, these states are calculating how much of their domestic stability will be defined by market exigencies versus state-led intervention. These state and corporate capacities make the definitive difference in how their populations weather a crisis. This agency is what makes middle powers so fascinating; understanding their disparate responses to similar challenges reaffirms the necessity of comparative analysis in making sense of a volatile world.

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FURTHER READING

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Dr. Ocakli presenting his research to colleagues at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU Singapore).

BIOGRAPHY

Feryaz Ocakli is Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. He earned his PhD in political science from Brown University and teaches and researches comparative politics, political economy, and food security. His work examines state-business relations, Islamist parties, authoritarianism in Turkey, and the relationship between oil and insurgency. He received a Fulbright U.S.-ASEAN Visiting Scholar Award for January–May 2024. Email: focakli@skidmore.edu
