

# **The Geopolitics of Food Insecurity and Conflict**

## **Strategic Policy Interventions for Global Stability**

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Food insecurity, defined as the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life, is more than just a humanitarian issue. It destabilizes societies, fuels conflict, and reshapes global power structures. In this paper, we explore the geopolitics of food insecurity, analyzing how it serves as both a cause and consequence of conflict and how political actors use food to consolidate power and influence international relationships.

This definition of food insecurity includes not only calorie sufficiency but also “nutrition security,” which ensures access to nutrient-rich foods essential for health, resilience, and societal stability. Without adequate nutrition, vulnerable populations—especially children—face developmental challenges that exacerbate cycles of poverty and instability. In a world where food insecurity affects millions, addressing this issue is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for global peace and stability.

### **Case Studies: The Strategic Use of Food in Geopolitics and Conflict**

To illustrate the interconnectedness of food insecurity, geopolitics, and conflict, this paper will examine several case studies divided into three sections: food as a tool of political leverage, food security as a weapon of war, and food security impacts on global power dynamics and alliances. These case studies provide insights into the challenges and opportunities for addressing food insecurity in conflict-affected regions and highlight lessons learned from past interventions.

#### ***Food as a Tool of Political Leverage***

Food has long been used as a political instrument. The control of food resources has often been wielded as a powerful weapon by states and non-state actors to consolidate power, manipulate populations, and influence international relations. Historical and contemporary examples, such as food blockades and food-restrictive modern-day sanctions, provide us with plentiful examples from which to better understand, analyze, and extrapolate solutions that decrease hunger and increase stability.

Venezuela is a prime example in which food has been used by the government to consolidate power, with access to food closely tied to political loyalty, deepening the existing socio-political divisions. Similarly, in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, control over grain exports has been leveraged to exert pressure on international markets and influence diplomatic relations, including among those with no direct tie to the conflict.

The Sahel region is a clear example of how climate change-induced food shortages exacerbate ethnic tensions and resource competition, making food a critical element of conflict. Armed groups manipulate these dynamics to recruit fighters by controlling food resources in drought-stricken areas. The area has faced increased violence driven by ethnic tensions and resource competition, worsened by severe droughts and floods. These challenges have drastically reduced agricultural productivity, leading to chronic food insecurity. This region's vulnerability to climate change, coupled with political instability, has made it a hotbed for conflict.<sup>1</sup>

These examples underscore the importance of viewing food not just as a basic human need, but as a strategic asset that can be manipulated for political gain.

### ***Food Security as a Weapon of War***

Beyond political leverage, food security can also be weaponized in conflicts. State and non-state actors have used starvation as a tactic of war, either by directly targeting food supplies or by creating conditions that lead to food scarcity.

In the Syrian civil war, the government has used food blockades to starve rebel-held regions into submission.<sup>2</sup> This tactic has caused widespread malnutrition and famine, particularly in besieged areas like Eastern Ghouta, demonstrating how access to food can become a matter of life and death in conflict zones.<sup>3</sup> The conflict has also decimated agricultural production and food distribution networks. International sanctions have further restricted access to food. While humanitarian aid has been provided, the ongoing conflict and manipulation of aid by various factions highlight the critical need for conflict-sensitive strategies.

In the Israel-Hamas conflict, control over food supplies and access to resources has been a key aspect of the broader strategy to exert dominance over the Palestinian population. By limiting access to food and other essentials, warring factions can break the will of the people and force compliance. This control has also forced outside countries to devote significant diplomatic resources to solving the food insecurity problem. With diplomatic resources limited, this diversion means less focus on a diplomatic solution to ceasing the conflict. These tactics illustrate the devastating impact of food when weaponized, leading to mass suffering and prolonged conflict.

One of the most striking examples of food security being used as a weapon of war is the ongoing conflict in Somalia. The extremist group Al-Shabaab has repeatedly targeted food supplies and agricultural infrastructure as part of its broader strategy to control territories and weaken the central government. By blocking humanitarian aid deliveries and attacking farmers, Al-Shabaab has exacerbated food insecurity in regions under its control, using hunger as a tool to force compliance and recruit members. This tactic has not only led to widespread suffering and displacement but has also increased Al-Shabaab's strength and further destabilized the region. Similarly, in Afghanistan, before the Taliban regained power following the U.S. withdrawal, it had targeted food convoys and agricultural infrastructure to destabilize the government and undermine international aid efforts.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Impact on Global Power Dynamics and Alliances***

Food insecurity does not only affect those directly impacted by hunger; it has broader implications for global power dynamics and alliances. Nations that are self-sufficient in food production wield significant influence in global markets, while food-insecure nations are often dependent on aid, which can compromise their sovereignty. For example, countries that are major exporters of staple crops like wheat or rice hold significant sway in international markets and can influence the policies of importing nations. Nations facing severe food insecurity may be forced to align with more powerful countries in exchange for aid, even if it means compromising their sovereignty. This dynamic is particularly evident in regions where food insecurity is chronic, and external aid is both a recurring and critical lifeline.

In times of crisis, food aid can be used to forge alliances or exert pressure. For instance, the United States has historically used food aid as a tool of foreign policy, assisting countries in need in exchange for political support.<sup>5</sup> Another example is China's food diplomacy: China's Belt and Road Initiative has included food security elements to

strengthen its influence in Africa and other regions.<sup>6</sup> Through agricultural investments and trade agreements, China is leveraging food diplomacy to expand its global footprint. All these strategies have created alliances, but they have also drawn criticism when food diplomacy conditions compromise the recipient nation's autonomy.

### **Food Security and Conflict Dynamics: The Cyclic Effect**

The relationship between food insecurity and conflict is cyclical: food scarcity can lead to conflict and conflict can exacerbate food scarcity. In many parts of the world, particularly fragile states, food insecurity is both a cause and a consequence of violence. In regions like the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, conflicts are often sparked by competition over scarce resources, including food and water. Once conflict erupts, it disrupts food production, displaces populations, and creates conditions that make food access increasingly difficult.

Yemen's civil war, ongoing since 2014, has led to one of the most severe humanitarian crises globally, with over 80 percent of the population requiring aid. The conflict has devastated agricultural production, destroyed infrastructure, and imposed blockades, restricting vital food and fuel imports. The World Food Programme (WFP) has provided essential aid, but its efforts have been complicated by access restrictions and security concerns. Yemen's situation underscores the need for conflict-sensitive food aid and long-term strategies that rebuild agricultural infrastructure and integrate food security into peacebuilding.<sup>7</sup>

This cyclic effect remains abundantly clear in many conflict-affected regions, where widespread famine is linked to the destruction of agriculture, import blockades, and mass displacement. Hunger can drive individuals to join armed groups for survival, further perpetuating the cycle. Addressing food insecurity is thus crucial to both conflict prevention and resolution.

### **Strategic Policy Interventions for Food Security**

Addressing global food insecurity requires deliberate diplomacy and methodical international cooperation. Policy interventions must integrate food security into broader peacebuilding and diplomatic processes. Nations must work together to ensure that food is not used as a weapon of war or a tool of political leverage. Key recommendations include the following.

**Educating Political Leaders on Food Systems.** A structured educational initiative, led by organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and WFP, should educate political and security leaders about food systems and their security implications. This could include briefings, seminars, and partnerships with academic institutions that focus on integrating food security into national and global security portfolios. This knowledge will empower these leaders to implement policies that not only mitigate conflict but also build resilient food systems that foster long-term global stability.

**International Cooperation and Food Diplomacy.** International organizations like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization play a critical role in facilitating cooperation and ensuring that food security is prioritized on the global agenda. For example, the FAO has been instrumental in coordinating international efforts to combat food insecurity, particularly in conflict-affected regions. Food diplomacy can also be used to build diplomatic relations and de-escalate and resolve conflicts, as seen in the grain deal brokered between Russia and Ukraine in 2022.

**Sanctions Relief and Economic Diplomacy.** Additionally, sanctions relief can be an important tool for increasing food security in countries that are facing economic difficulties due to international sanctions. One of the most widely used

diplomatic tools to prevent conflict, sanctions can negatively affect food security. While sweeping sanctions are meant to compel and deter a political state from its behavior, they can lead to sharp decreases in GDP that further exacerbate food insecurity in conflict-prone areas. Sweeping sanctions or “non-smart sanctions” have been shown to distort agricultural values and decrease food production.<sup>8</sup> For long-standing conflicts, targeted sanctions combined with food security–boosting initiatives, including food aid, agricultural sector rebuilding, and sweeping sanctions relief, can alleviate GDP decline in order to increase food security. Fiscal-based diplomacy must remain focused on food security to prevent leaders from utilizing food security as a weapon against their own people.

Conversely, the absence of this form of diplomacy or the inability to reach a compromise fosters deep divisions, leading to enduring repercussions in regional conflicts that have the potential to escalate on a global scale.

**Conflict-Sensitive Food Aid.** Providing food aid in conflict zones is fraught with challenges. If not done carefully, food aid can exacerbate existing conflicts by fueling corruption, strengthening warring factions, or creating dependency. To be effective, food aid must be conflict-sensitive, meaning it should be designed and delivered in a way that takes into account the dynamics of the conflict and seeks to minimize harm.

One approach to conflict-sensitive food aid is to work with local communities to ensure that aid is distributed equitably and does not fall into the hands of armed groups. In some cases, cash-based transfers or vouchers may be more appropriate than direct food aid, as they can empower recipients to make their own decisions about how to meet their needs while reducing the risk of aid being diverted. The WFP has implemented such approaches in conflict zones with some success, although challenges remain in ensuring that aid reaches those who need it most.

**Nutrition Security as Conflict Prevention.** Nutrition security should be a key component of food security and conflict prevention. Ensuring access to nutrient-rich foods is vital not only for immediate health but also for the cognitive and physical development of vulnerable populations, especially children. Poor nutrition exacerbates instability as malnourished individuals face poverty and limited opportunities. Research shows that childhood malnutrition leads to poor educational outcomes and poverty, which fuel instability. Targeted food programs in schools and communities can foster resilience and lay the groundwork for stability.

**Integrating Food Security into Peacebuilding Processes.** Addressing food insecurity in conflict-prone regions requires a comprehensive overhaul of local food systems that prioritizes the integration of food security into peacebuilding efforts. This is vital for stabilizing conflict-prone and post-conflict regions. Strengthening local food systems through conflict-sensitive, climate-smart agriculture can empower smallholder farmers, reduce reliance on foreign aid, and boost economic stability. Governance reforms in agriculture, coupled with inclusive, locally driven food aid programs, are key to addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering reconciliation. Early warning systems and regional collaboration can prevent food crises from worsening instability. Incorporating food security into peace negotiations addresses both immediate needs and future conflict risks, leading to long-term peace.

For example, in Colombia, the peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) included provisions for rural development and food security. By addressing the economic and social inequalities that had fueled the conflict, the agreement sought to create a more stable and prosperous society.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in Rwanda, post-genocide recovery efforts included a strong focus on policies aimed at rebuilding the agricultural sector and ensuring food security for all citizens. By ensuring that all Rwandans had access to nutritious food, regardless of their ethnic background, the government sought to reduce tensions and build a sense of national unity. The success of these policies in improving food security and fostering social cohesion has been a key factor in

Rwanda's recovery and long-term stability.<sup>10</sup> These examples demonstrate the potential for food security to contribute to lasting peace.

**Embedding Leadership within the National Security Framework.** As we know, beyond political leverage, food security can be weaponized in conflicts, making its integration into national security policy a critical priority. This weaponization highlights the need for increased education and guidance among national security leadership. Addressing food security, particularly in pre- and post-conflict areas, requires a specialized expertise that is not yet fully developed within the national security apparatus. Understanding the complexities of food systems is not a skill that comes naturally to national security leaders; organizational knowledge must be deliberately expanded within the upper echelons of the national security framework.

Uninformed leadership can inhibit the effective implementation of conflict-sensitive food aid, potentially undermining efforts to address food insecurity in fragile or conflict-prone regions. A lack of knowledge or understanding may hinder the development and execution of strategies aimed at fostering international cooperation and advancing food diplomacy—both essential for building global partnerships and addressing systemic food crises.

Additionally, some leaders may underestimate the importance of targeted sanctions relief and economic diplomacy as critical tools for mitigating food insecurity. These measures play a key role in ensuring that vulnerable populations gain access to essential resources while maintaining broader national security objectives.

The integration of food security policies into the national security framework requires informed and deliberate leadership. Without it, there is a risk of mismanagement, inefficiencies, and misaligned priorities, which could exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. This paper underscores the importance of cultivating knowledgeable leadership to navigate these complex yet vital strategies effectively.

To address these challenges, the Department of Defense should consider establishing a dedicated position within the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy (USDPA). An assistant secretary of defense for food systems could act as the essential bridge between national security leaders, who bring expertise in diplomacy and conflict, and professionals focused on food security. This role would lead efforts to embed food security into national security policies and war planning, ensuring that considerations for food systems are prioritized from the outset rather than treated as secondary concerns. This approach could foster more comprehensive, effective decision-making at the intersection of food and security.

Additionally, establishing a corresponding position within the diplomatic corps—specifically a deputy secretary of state for food systems—would further strengthen the connection between the national security framework and diplomatic efforts to address food security. Diplomacy should remain the first and most effective tool in preventing and resolving conflicts, and this role within the Department of State would enhance America's ability to navigate the strategic use of food in geopolitics and conflicts. Moreover, it would focus on reducing the exploitation of food as a tool of political leverage, fostering cooperation and promoting sustainable solutions to global food security challenges before conflict arises.

## **Conclusion**

The connection between food insecurity and conflict is clear: food scarcity fuels violence, and conflict exacerbates hunger. Addressing food insecurity requires deliberate diplomatic efforts, conflict-sensitive aid, and long-term agricultural development. By integrating food security into peacebuilding processes, the international community

can contribute to global stability and security, breaking the cycle of violence and hunger that continues to plague vulnerable regions.

Equipping political and security leaders with an understanding of food systems and their role in security is essential. Armed with this knowledge, policymakers will be better equipped to implement initiatives that not only reduce conflict but also cultivate resilient food systems, paving the way for lasting stability and global peace.

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Navy, U.S. government, Food Systems for the Future, nor any other affiliated organization or employer.*

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