China on the flight path

China is at the epicentre of the bird-flu problem. The particularly nasty strain now circling the world first appeared in southern China in 1996, claimed its first human victim in Hong Kong in 1997 and is endemic among the mainland’s 14 billion poultry. Beijing’s ability to control the disease will have global implications, as the more widespread it becomes in birds, the greater the chance of mutations that will make human infection easier. With many wild-bird migratory flight paths crossing China, the country could be a launching pad for global spread of the virus.

A test
- Avian influenza also represents the first test of Communist Party Secretary Hu Jintao’s pledge to put poor people first.
- If a bird flu epidemic strikes, GDP growth will not suffer - but the 50 million rural households who raise most of the mainland’s chickens will feel the heat.
- Corrupt and inefficient local officials may thwart the central government’s attempt to deploy an equitable, transparent and efficient programme to control the disease.
- If bird flu spreads widely to humans, poor farmers will be the first to fall ill and will have to contend with a weak and expensive rural healthcare system.
- Failure by the authorities to respond effectively to widespread outbreaks - in birds or humans - could lead to rural unrest and a global spread of the disease.

Human risks over dramatised?
- Some experts believe the probability of a human pandemic has been over dramatised, as ‘the present avian flu virus is barely infectious to humans’. ‘The risk of infection for most people in Europe is close to zero,’ according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

Economic impact in China
- Although a nationwide outbreak among birds could have a significant impact on millions of poor farmers, the macroeconomic cost would not be substantial.
- China has c.25% of the world’s chickens, but poultry accounts for only 3% of GDP.
- A fall in consumption of poultry would be largely offset by higher demand (and prices) for pork, the most popular meat in the PRC.
- Poultry accounts for only 0.25% of the value of China’s exports.
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Our special report on 
bird flu, published 
earlier this year, 
examined avian 
influenza and the 
economic fallout of a 
potential pandemic