

Abe's Choice for Japan *Thriving Migration without Immigration*

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It may be tempting to think that Japan's demographic trends would provide an incentive for adopting major immigration policy reforms, but so far, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has chosen to tread carefully, calling for massive migration while rejecting an official shift to immigration or integration policies. Recent estimates indicate that the portion of Japan's population aged sixty-five and older will steadily grow from 27 percent in 2015 to 38 percent by 2053, but the share of Japan's foreign resident population remains well under 2 percent.¹ The growing portion of seniors is leading to declines in the available labor pool, consumer purchasing, and the overall health of the economy, along with increases in the old-age dependency ratio, welfare state costs, and demand for chronic health care services. Already, Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare was reporting at the end of June 2017 that labor market conditions were as tight as they were in 1992 toward the end of the bubble economy.² For providers of senior care specifically, the difficulties of hiring care workers for residential facilities and at-home care have been accompanied by a readiness among some of them to employ foreign migrants.³

The medley of methods for increasing migration that are situated in Abe's broader economic competitiveness strategy has potentially dramatic implications, even with-

¹ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, "Population Projections for Japan: 2016 to 2065," (2017), 17, http://www.ipss.go.jp/pp-zenkoku/e/zenkoku_e2017/pp_zenkoku2017e.asp (date accessed: 15 April 2018); Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Population Estimates, <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/jinsui/index.html> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

² Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, Press Release, 30 June 2017, <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/0000170921.html> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

³ As seen in the annual report of surveys conducted by Kaigo rōdō antei sentā. Also see: "Gaikokujin kaigo 'Shinjidai' e," *Shiruba shinpō*, 1 January 2017.

out fundamental immigration policy change. By using migration selectively, the Abe government is focusing on short- and medium-term measures to boost specific segments of the economy while opting for more flexible policies to facilitate long-term settlement for select groups. Policies attempt to use temporary visitors in ways that can contribute labor and economic energy and innovation while avoiding a long-term commitment to social costs or risking that a larger immigrant population might not do much to reverse the overall trend of population aging.⁴ Japan is already attracting visible and growing numbers of international visitors for work, study, and short-term visits. Despite the triple disasters of 2011 that temporarily depressed migration to Japan between 2010 and 2016, the annual number of short-term visitors (such as tourists, businesspersons, and guests of relatives and friends) increased by 170 percent, from about 7.6 million to over 20 million in 2016, a record high. The number of international students in institutions of higher education grew about 21 percent between 2010 and 2016. Similarly, although the data are probably quite understated, the number of foreign residents reported to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare as employed in Japan grew by 67 percent during the same period.⁵

But how far are these trends and Abe's policy directions likely to take Japan? Unlike efforts to increase the number of temporary visitors considered likely to most contribute to Japan economically, national policies to facilitate incorporation of foreign residents as members of society remain limited, despite the mushrooming of supports for international tourists. The limited and highly selective approach of the national government to social inclusion of foreign residents raises questions about Abe's strategy. Not only are misunderstandings likely to rise with the rapid increase in the number of foreign visitors and workers, the failure to provide a solid basis for foreign residents' inclusion and protections may well undermine Japan's competitiveness in attracting students, employees, and tourists, thus making this strategy unsustainable.

Medium-Term Migration Without an Immigration Policy

The government has actively tried to promote international migration to benefit the economy through encouraging study, employment, and tourism opportunities, while maintaining the precedent of resisting a major shift to an immigration policy. Except for a point system for accepting highly-skilled professionals, which was planned before Abe's installation and whose use is still limited, the government has failed to significantly ease options for permanent settlement or establish a national system of integration policies. Nor have Abe and his economic policy advisors made migration a core policy strategy as such, but rather they have encouraged diverse forms of short-

⁴ Chikako Usui, "Japan's Demographic Future and the Challenge of Foreign Workers," *Local Citizenship in Recent Countries of Immigrant: Japan in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Takeyuki Tsuda (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006).

⁵ Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, "Gaikokujin koyō jōkyō," multiple years, <http://www.mhlw.go.jp>; Ministry of Justice, "Shutsunyūkoku kanri tōkei," Immigration data, multiple years, <http://www.e-stat.go.jp> (date accessed: 26 April 2018); Japan Student Services Organization, "Gaikokujin ryūgakusei zaiseki jōkyō chōsa," Data on enrollment of international students, multiple years, <http://www.jasso.go.jp> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

and medium-term migration to secure labor for specific sectors, provide supports for Japanese women to join the workforce, and stimulate economic growth and competitiveness. Abe has continued to insist that his administration is “not at all considering a so-called immigration policy,” but the policies have potentially dramatic economic and social consequences by heightening Japan’s reliance on non-Japanese and multiplying the presence of foreign residents in everyday life.⁶⁶

The prime minister’s broad plans for economic revitalization, begun soon after he came to office for the second time in late December 2012, have integrated expansion of migration as part of the larger economic agenda; the planned 2020 Summer Olympics have compounded the incentives for doing this. After becoming prime minister, Abe instituted economic reform discussions in cabinet-level councils dominated by economic advisors and industry leaders. By June 2014, the resulting plan for Japan’s “Revitalization Strategy” was adopted as a cabinet resolution. Although some of the strategy’s plans for migration are supposed to boost employment in specific sectors, others revolve around expanding tourism and improving economic and academic competitiveness.⁷ To further support Japanese women’s entry into the labor force, the plan provides for short-term migration by foreign household workers to a handful of metropolitan areas in special strategic economic zones, an initiative that has already begun. A large-scale overhaul and expansion of Japan’s Technical Intern Training Program (TITP, previously known as the “trainee” program), which allows workers to obtain and practice skills for a few years, will increase skilled foreign construction workers in advance of the 2020 Olympics, along with satisfying other needs in shipbuilding.⁸⁸ To meet growing demand for care workers for Japan’s senior population, measures now legislated will facilitate the migration of foreign-born care workers by adding care work to the TITP and by creating a separate visa for care work as skilled employment, applicable to certified care workers who have graduated from a Japanese post-secondary program for care work.⁹

Other provisions highlight competitiveness. The push to increase the number of international students—the “300,000 International Students Plan” for 2020—combines the aspiration of remaining academically competitive with the benefit of having international students contribute to the labor force. Whether Japan has a chance of reaching that target depends on how one adds the numbers. Technically, this target excludes international students in Japanese language schools and includes only those in other post-secondary schooling, who amounted to 171,000 in May 2016.¹⁰ But given that an additional 68,000 were studying in Japanese language schools, possibly in preparation

⁶ Statement made by Prime Minister Abe on 28 January 2016 at the plenary session of the House of Representatives.

⁷ Although this strategy was subsequently somewhat updated in 2015, the 2014 plan presents elaborate and detailed plans concerning migration of foreigners.

⁸ Until November 2016, the limit was a total of three years, but this is being extended to five years for those who meet renewal criteria.

⁹ Government of Japan, “Nihon saikō senryaku kaitei 2014: mirai e no chōsen,” (2014), <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/kakugikettei/2014/> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

¹⁰ Japan Student Services Organization, “Gaikokujin ryūgakusei zaiseki jōkyō chōsa,” multiple years, <http://www.jasso.go.jp> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

for entering other educational programs, the goal of 300,000 may be in sight by 2020, but it is not assured. Linking highly-skilled graduates of Japanese universities to employment in Japan after graduation is one element of this strategy, but possibly as (or more) important for the labor force is that international students also constitute a pool of likely part-time workers during their studies.

Making Japan attractive to professionals, as in the past, is a priority today. In December 2016, the total of foreign residents whose visa statuses fell in the general category of skilled, professional, or technical expert was 36 percent higher than four years earlier.¹¹ Beyond the government's general encouragement of employing foreign skilled professionals, since 2012 a new point system grants special visas to "highly-skilled professionals" with preferential conditions such as allowing more flexibility to bring family members and a much faster path to permanent residency. Although the program got off to a slow start, its use has escalated, with over eight thousand five hundred professionals taking advantage of it as of June 2017.¹² In addition to this visa, existing visa statuses for professional employment are available alongside and account for the vast majority of skilled and professional employment. Other initiatives encourage Japanese universities to hire international faculty, and it has become easier for Japanese firms with overseas subsidiaries to bring skilled foreign staff to work in Japan. In sum, Abe has set high expectations in policies for foreign nationals to contribute to Japan through work and study, but only select groups are given preference in policies to facilitate their long-term stay.

Tourists versus Those who Stay

The Abe government has also distanced itself from the issues of foreign settlers by failing to respond to ongoing calls for a coordinated and proactive approach to integration of foreign residents, despite the government's rhetoric of making Japan appealing to foreign visitors and highly-skilled workers. While services for tourists and other short-term visitors have become a priority, more flexible conditions to facilitate permanent residency are limited mainly to beneficiaries of the new point system, and little has been done in the way of national coordination of policies to strengthen foreign residents' social and economic inclusion.

Efforts to expand and support tourism have taken off, with the goal of attracting 30 million visitors annually to Japan by 2030. Improvements in accessibility and marketing efforts to attract tourists are moving forward. Japan's Immigration Bureau has added staff and staff language training. Streamlined entry procedures were already visible in May 2017 at Narita Airport, and the number of free wifi hotspots aimed at international visitors continues to grow. Local regions, including those outside of the usual tourist routes, are working to improve their brands and attract tourists. Both

¹¹ Based on data for those with residence cards. Ministry of Justice, "Zairyū gaikokujin tōkei," Data on resident foreigners, multiple years, <http://www.e-stat.go.jp> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

¹² David Green, "Japan's Highly Skilled Foreign Professional Visa: an early assessment," *Meiji Journal of Political Science and Economics* 3 (2014). Ministry of Justice, "Shutsunyūkoku kanri (hakusho)," (2017).

multilingual services and efforts to make travel inside the country easier are growing. For instance, beginning in March 2017 for one year on a trial basis, short-term visitors to Japan could purchase a Japan Rail Pass for the Japanese Railways (JR) instead of having to purchase them before traveling to Japan.¹³ Tourism for shopping has become a big business, especially for tourists from other parts of Asia. Anyone who has traveled to Japan recently cannot escape the pervasive “tax-free” shopping opportunities for short-term international visitors, with the number of tax-free shops expected to double between 2014 and 2020. In these and other respects, efforts to improve Japan’s attractiveness and supports for foreign tourists are intense.

Yet Abe’s policies continue a longstanding avoidance of a proactive approach to foreign residents’ integration. Japan has experienced substantial low-key but widespread change over the past two to three decades through the local growth of culturally diverse societies and local initiatives for foreign residents’ inclusion, but calls for national policies have yielded minimal progress so far. Despite some movement under the administration of the Democratic Party of Japan, there is still no nationally-coordinated set of integration policies for foreign residents, let alone a general easing of movement from temporary to permanent residency or, ultimately, naturalization. Local communities and civil society groups continue to take on much of the responsibility for providing supports to migrants and immigrants on top of social welfare policies established for Japanese citizens or very limited measures provided by the national government for non-native speakers’ public education. Local governments provide multilingual information and counseling services adapted to the linguistic needs of their populations, and many make active efforts to include foreign residents in policy consultations or to facilitate their interaction with the community. Depending on the locality, local governments, non-profits, or both working together, provide a variety of measures to support non-Japanese students through schools, such as hiring bilingual teachers, providing transitional classrooms for non-native speakers, setting up after-school tutoring programs, and creating supports for children to advance to middle school and high school. Public housing access for foreign residents is also generally determined at the local level. Some local areas, in the economic crisis of 2008 and 2009, went so far as to create employment opportunities for foreign residents who had lost their jobs.¹⁴ Local communities, migration experts, and some public intellectuals have called for a national agency for foreign residents’ integration for almost two decades, but this has not come about. The gap between local society and national policy was clear at the 2015 annual meeting of a conference of cities with large foreign-resident populations, where an intense discussion by local mayors stressed to the national elites present the need for a full-fledged immigration policy.¹⁵

¹³ See the Japan Railways website for information: http://japanrailpass.net/en/about_jrp.html (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

¹⁴ Deborah J. Milly, *New Policies for New Residents: Immigrants, Advocacy, and Governance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ This was the meeting of the Conference of Cities with Large Foreign Populations (Gaikokujin shū-jū toshi kaigi), held in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka, 7 December 2015, which the author attended. For documents related to this organization and its annual meetings, see <http://www.shujutoshi.jp> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

Aid versus Resettlement for Refugees

The lack of encouragement for socially incorporating foreigners is also visible in the response to refugees, who have not significantly touched Japanese life. Although the Japanese government has contributed large sums of financial support for refugees abroad for many years, its review of asylum applications is strict. Applicants not recognized as refugees may in some cases receive a long-term residence visa for humanitarian reasons. In 2017, 19,629 persons applied for refugee status, but out of the 11,367 cases reviewed during that year, only twenty were granted refugee status, with another forty-five receiving visas on humanitarian grounds. Of the eighty-two nationalities represented by asylum-seekers, Filipinos were the most numerous (4,895), followed by Vietnamese (3,116), Sri Lankans (2,226), and Indonesians (2,038). The number of asylum applications received in 2017 was nearly double the 10,901 applications of the previous year.¹⁶

The low recognition rate does not mean that Japan has been untouched by international refugee conditions, however. Instead of resettling large numbers of refugees or working to markedly increase the number granted asylum after applying in Japan, Abe's government has given humanitarian and development assistance for countries close to those from which refugees flee.¹⁷ The government has committed billions of dollars in aid for Middle Eastern countries and for refugees since 2015; besides pledging general aid totaling \$4 billion in 2015 to Middle Eastern countries for assisting refugees, in September 2016, Abe promised \$2.8 billion for refugee aid over three years.¹⁸ In June 2017, the Japanese government announced emergency grants-in-aid of about \$10 million for Uganda to respond to refugees from South Sudan, and in July 2017, Abe concluded an agreement with Jordan's Prime Minister Al-Mulki that included \$12.6 million in grants for basic water and sanitation infrastructure to help Jordan provide services to its 1.3 million Syrian refugees.¹⁹

What is Stopping Abe?

Why has the Abe government chosen to eagerly invite foreign visitors and employees, while avoiding the topic of broad social inclusion, even for those already settled in Japan? It does not take access to behind-the-scenes decision-making to speculate on the reasons. First, Abe himself appears to prefer limited options for immigration. Certainly, his strong alliance with far-right groups with strongly nationalist positions, such

¹⁶ Ministry of Justice, "Heisei 29-nen ni okeru nanmin ninteisha-sū ni tsuite," Press Release, 23 March 2018, <http://www.moj.go.jp> (date accessed: 4 May 2018).

¹⁷ Japan resettles from Malaysia a small number of refugees from Myanmar in coordination with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

¹⁸ For instance, see: "Shiria nanmin shien," *Yomiuri shimbun*, 26 September 2015; "Shiria shien ni 11-oku doru," *Asahi shimbun*, 22 September 2016; and similar newspaper coverage.

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "State Minister Kishi Attends the Uganda Solidarity Summit on Refugees," Press Release, 23 June 2017; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan-Jordan Summit Meeting," Press Release, 14 July 2017, <http://www.mofa.go.jp> (date accessed: 26 April 2018). Foreign Minister Kishi's statement on 23 June also includes a useful summary of Japan's approach to using aid in humanitarian situations.

as the rejection of local voting rights for foreigners, suggests that he would be reluctant to encourage increased political or social incorporation of non-Japanese. Second, Abe is unlikely to allow any issues—including immigration—to derail his core agendas of defense policy reforms, constitutional revision, and economic reforms. Opening up the discussion on easing the current principles governing immigration would divert attention from his main policy objectives and likely further undermine support for his administration. Third, despite his resistance to major changes in immigration, Abe faces strong pressures to boost the economy and increase the pool of workers available across many sectors. But because efforts by his and previous administrations to meet demand with unused domestic labor, such as women and older workers, have proven inadequate, he has opted to rely on selective measures for employment migration while limiting the possibilities for settlement.

Are the Policies Sustainable, with What Effects?

Overall, the disparate measures being taken in Japan to encourage migration fall short of major immigration reform and are designed, for the most part, to promote economic growth while keeping migration temporary and avoiding social costs associated with immigration. But are these policy directions sustainable as conceived? There are a number of reasons to expect that Abe's approach may be ineffective.

The steep rise in foreigners' presence itself may have a perverse effect. As in the late 1980s, the presence of foreigners in Japan is already very much on the upswing and likely to intensify. Although Japan's social and policy conditions are now far more prepared to incorporate international residents than they were thirty years ago, they may not be enough to counter negative reactions from the general Japanese population and elected officials to this large presence. As first-time short-term visitors to Japan quickly grow in numbers, especially in regions that are off the beaten track, many small interactions are likely to influence Japanese perceptions of foreigners and vice-versa, whether by breaking down the sense of barriers or by magnifying tensions over linguistic differences and cultural expectations. Such conditions could easily dampen enthusiasm for using foreign nationals to fuel the economy, lead to some of the same abuses of twenty-five years ago, and likewise alienate foreign visitors and discourage others from visiting Japan.

The lack of a well-planned and nationally-coordinated set of integration policies may undercut Japan's efforts to compete internationally for labor and short-term visitors.

The competition for foreign residents and visitors is not limited to highly-skilled professionals, but extends to other medium-skilled workers, international students, tourists, and even short-term visitors seeking medical care: the "new newcomers" are a very diverse group. In competing for these groups, including medium-skilled workers such as care workers, Japan's government will need to consider the full range of social conditions in which these visitors find themselves, including not just salary and immediate work conditions (for the employed), but such things as flexibility of work visas, the option of permanent residency, social supports, and general social receptivity. Although Japan's policy discussions have encompassed some attention to supports for

these groups, fully grasping the needs and making those supports available are separate matters. Access to medical care, linguistic supports, recourse against mistreatment by owners of lodging, access to police protection when they are victims of crime, protections from employers, and access to the educational system are examples of the recurrent challenges foreign residents face, yet only a few of these issues have surfaced in planning discussions. Furthermore, to the extent that the planned supports serve mainly temporary visitors and do not create a landscape receptive to non-Japanese for long-term or permanent residence, Japan could easily lose its luster with the very groups the prime minister aims to attract.

Japan's experience in the late 1980s highlights the potential in a tight labor market for wide-scale abuses of foreign-born workers if social supports and integration measures are not actively pursued. In the 1980s, unmet demand for workers stimulated employers' eagerness to hire foreign workers, leading to large numbers of overstayers and employer abuses. Today's tight labor market could easily lead to a repeat of past patterns in the recruiting and employing workers who, after coming to Japan as tourists or students, remain as overstayers. Many potential employers are already trying to exploit a variety of legal mechanisms for recruiting and employing foreign employees, whether as international students working part-time, as interns recruited from foreign universities, as regular employees hired abroad and then brought to Japan to work, or as relatives of Japanese who may be eligible for a long-term residence visa. Unless the restructured TITP proves to be significantly better than the previous system at preventing abuses, the program's expansion could also easily worsen worker mistreatment and worker flight to underground employment, producing yet more international criticism of Japan.

Taken together, these likely outcomes suggest that the policy goals of attracting foreign visitors and residents may not be sustainable. Backlash from inside and outside of Japan, Japan's inability to compete successfully with other countries for the groups it seeks to attract, and lack of adequate social protections and inclusion for foreign residents could all undermine the effort.

Furthermore, even if foreign migration that benefited the economy were sustainable, Japan's economic challenges extend beyond those that migration is intended to address.

As a subset of measures to promote economic growth, foreign residents and tourists will not compensate for the broader problem of regional economic disparities. Abe's plan for Japan's revitalization is broad, with narrow migration goals as only one element. At the same time, it is important for outsiders to recognize that the structural disparities inside Japan suggest that even a more flexible opening to migration, whether temporary or permanent, would not be a panacea for the economic and demographic challenges that Japan faces. The ageing of the population has occurred together with depopulation, economic weakness, and changing medical care needs in some regions, but with strong demand for labor and intense turnover across sectors in other areas with stronger economies. Tourism alone is not a likely basis for stimulating depressed regions, and the national availability of foreign workers across skill levels may offer few solutions for the regional inequalities that bedevil Japan. Immigrant workers are

likely to congregate in flourishing areas where employment opportunities are plentiful, competition for labor intense, and social networks for foreign residents more available. From this perspective, there may be advantages to increasing foreign residents, but they are unlikely to be a solution for core economic challenges that Abe's larger strategy is intended to address.

Ultimately, politics will determine whether Japan continues with its "non-immigration policy," through which significant numbers of foreigners are already working, settling, marrying, and having families. If Abe's desired patterns of migration continue to flourish, they will likely produce further pressures for changes in both immigration and integration policies. Implementing a few changes could make a big difference. A coordinating agency for foreign residents' integration, proposed for years by various experts and nongovernmental organizations, could officially acknowledge and legitimize foreign residents' presence and their social contribution, in addition to ensuring financial support and guidance to local governments that currently bear much of the responsibility for foreign residents' integration. Changes such as this might increase the likelihood that international graduates of Japanese universities, for whom post-graduation employment visas are possible, would opt to remain in Japan to work, especially if recruitment and hiring processes to reach these graduates were expanded. Other policy changes to enable recognition of foreign-earned care-worker credentials and the granting of a skilled care-work visa to these workers would create greater competitiveness for workers while signaling greater respect for overseas credentials. These are just a few examples of possible concrete policy changes that could be made, but in the meantime, for as long as Abe is prime minister (and possibly longer), we should not expect official policy to change much.

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