

JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

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Will Japan Get Immigration Right?

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In the past few years, the growing sense of demographic crisis in Japan has put immigration back on the agenda for its central policymakers. As well, efforts to conclude economic partnership agreements have produced marginal broadening of immigration for professional employment. What extent of immigration reform can we expect to take place?

A New Kind of Debate

Proposals for change from outside and inside of Japan's central government have multiplied since about 2004 and they differ qualitatively from those of earlier eras. They differ, for instance, from the calls for change in immigration policy of the late 1980s, when debate focused on whether or not and through what mechanisms to open Japan to migration for unskilled or low-skilled work. Today's proposals put a priority on policies for immigrants, including strengthening social policies and services to meet the needs of foreign residents already in Japan and to support potential expansion of immigration for employment. Such plans have emanated from cabinet-level councils, multiple ministries, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations. The proposals have evolved as different groups have referenced one another's work.

Two recent broad discussions have presented opportunities for introducing a multifaceted discussion of immigration. The post-9/11 security environment produced a heavy emphasis on enforcement of border controls and controls toward resident foreigners. Separately, former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi's reform agenda enabled raising immigration issues relative to administrative and economic reforms and in negotiations with Asian neighbors.

Prevalent Themes

Four major themes permeate proposals situated in one or both of those frameworks. The first, policing, is reflected in plans for a major reform of the alien registration system, which has become a basic premise of other proposals. Second, relaxation of regulations for hiring highly skilled foreign researchers and other professionals occurred under the Koizumi reforms. The third major theme, development and consolidation of immigrant policies, is a concern for Japanese firms and universities that find that the general social and policy environments inside Japan pose obstacles to attracting foreign talent. This concern dovetails with calls for policy change by local governments already contending with significant foreign resident populations. Immigrant policies encompass such measures as multilingual information to ensure foreign residents' access to services, health insurance, supports for children's education, housing, and adult Japanese-as-a-second-language education. Finally, tentative proposals for immigration expansion have begun to consider whether and how to expand the categories of employment-related immigration, but deliberations have produced only moderate convergence in general outlines and none with regard to a concrete plan.

The current debates and pressures in Japan are a product of learning through the limited laboratory of marginal changes in immigration introduced in the early 1990s. Proposals combine concern about future directions for immigration with the aim of reworking existing programs that have been problematic; namely, the industrial trainee and technical intern programs, which are conceived as a method of skills transfer to developing countries, and the practice of granting settlement visas to ethnic Japanese foreigners.

Foundation First, Expansion Later

Politically, addressing the existing problems in immigration regulations and providing better support for foreign residents are prerequisites for any significant broadening of opportunities for work-related immigration. A brief

set of general recommendations from an ad hoc committee in the Liberal Democratic Party of 2006, which took very cautious approach to further opening, also made it clear that handling these other issues was paramount. As well, attention to the need for support for immigrants is now a major issue for many local governments, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and a study committee in the House of Councillors, which has addressed the topic since October 2007. Proposals for changes in immigration categories that would permit an intermediate level of skilled employment are being discussed, but they should be considered exploratory at this point.

Despite the flurry of discussion over immigration, we can well ask what these discussions and blueprints for change will actually produce. Recall that, in the contexts of strong economic performance and strong demand for foreign labor in the 1980s, when all was said and done the net policy innovation in 1990 was marginal. It established backdoors for labor migration, which had problematic dynamics of their own. Most likely, the Japanese government will proceed with the reforms that have a bearing on current programs—the foreigners registration program, immigrant supports, and revision of the trainee and intern programs and the criteria for ethnic Japanese to reside in Japan. These improvements, as a set, reflect what many in Japan consider necessary for further opening for employment.

Challenges Going Forward

The argument for sequencing immigration reform to address these needs first and then to expand immigration is persuasive, but only if the sequencing continues at a steady pace. But just to enact a solid foundation of reforms on which to base further expansion of immigration will entail obstacles that proponents need to consider. Overcoming the political barriers will require strong leadership, especially to overcome sectional lethargy. That leadership will be necessary for making immigrant policies a priority by allocating resources and providing direction to the agencies involved. Furthermore, leadership will be necessary to motivate the general public to change social practices, such as housing practices. Relying on a default response of delay when agreements are slow to emerge can only guarantee greater problems down the road.

Likewise, it is imperative to develop new processes to promote ongoing communications to meet the policy challenges in a sustained way. Processes that incorporate the voices of those with expertise or direct knowledge of immigrant issues and the realities of the immigration system in central policy debates are essential for planning reforms, overcoming interagency coordination problems, and providing feedback on what works and what does not. Government-sponsored forums at local, regional, and national levels for considering immigrant issues are one possible model to consider, but such forums vary by country in their inclusivity and impact and can have only as much effect as government officials allow. To effectively deal with the policy challenges it faces, Japan will need to heed the voices of local governments, nongovernmental organizations, attorneys, educational and healthcare professionals, immigrants groups, and business organizations in enacting new policies, monitoring their performance, and rectifying problems early.

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