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ACCEPTING IMMIGRANTS IS THE ULTIMATE KEY TO REVIVING JAPAN

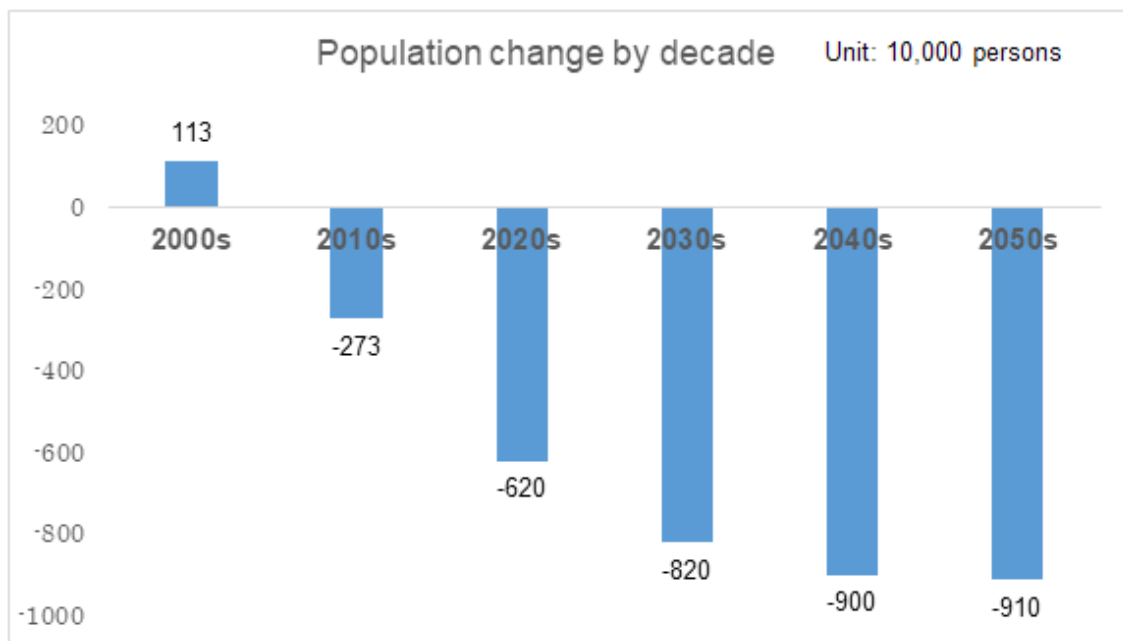
Toshihiro Menju

- The Japanese government continues to avoid adopting an immigration policy unpopular with the public, but its policies to revitalize local economies and promote more active roles for women have had little effect in halting the population decline.
- At the same time, the population decline and labor shortages prompted the highest annual increase ever in the number of resident foreigners in 2016, and foreign nationals are rapidly settling down in irregular patterns.
- While the groundwork for receiving migrants has already been laid to a degree at the grassroots level, the government should undertake to develop a comprehensive immigration policy.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

The greatest crisis facing Japan is its population problem. Its population has been on the decline since 2010. In 2015, the population appeared to be shrinking at a rate of 270,000 per year, but projections by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (Figure 1) show even steeper declines ahead. The population level is expected to fall by 6.2 million in the 2020s, 8.2 million in the 2030s, and 9 million in the 2040s, meaning a drop-off larger than the population of Tokyo every two decades. Of concern are not only the dwindling population but Japan's aging society and diminishing birthrate as well. The elderly (persons aged 65 and over) accounted for 26% of the country's population in 2014, and the number of those 80 years of age or older exceeded 10 million in 2015. At the same time, the number of births in 2016 fell below one million for the first time since statistics have been collected.

Figure 1: Japan's accelerating population decline



Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, "Population Projection for Japan (2017 Projection)"

There is also a growing need for professionals to provide nursing care for this burgeoning elderly population, and demand is expected to exceed supply by 370,000 caregivers in 2025. With a reduced workforce, the unemployment rate

as of July 2017 stood at a historical low of 2.8%, and Teikoku Databank has announced that bankruptcies due to labor shortages in the first half of 2017 were up by a factor of 2.9 from four years ago. The economic impacts of the labor shortage are becoming apparent.

The new post of Minister of State for the Promotion of Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in Japan was created in 2014 and an enormous budget allocated to address this serious population decline, but there has been no progress whatsoever in achieving the aims of maintaining the overall population and rectifying the excessive concentration of population and industry in Tokyo; indeed, the influx of people into the Tokyo Metropolitan Area from the rest of the country has actually increased. The birthrate, too, has seen almost no change, and the total fertility rate for 2016 was 1.44, a far cry from the 2.07 level needed to keep the population level constant.

In the face of such a serious population problem, it might be expected that immigration policy would be a hot topic of discussion, but the current administration has shown no intent of adopting measures to encourage immigration, with the result being that no vigorous debates on immigration policy are taking place in Japan.

The primary reason that the government has avoided addressing the issue of immigration is that the Japanese public has an extremely negative image of the word “immigration.” Many citizens presume that a policy favorable to immigration would lead to a massive influx of unruly foreigners unable to speak Japanese who would disrupt Japan’s domestic harmonious society. The idea that the country would be taken over by Chinese immigrants also enjoys wide currency. The government has neglected to make sufficient efforts to provide the public with correct information on immigration in order to broaden deliberation on an objective immigration policy. As a consequence, the government is unable to initiate discussions on immigration policy despite the severe population decline.

The shortage of labor led to a sharp rise in the number of resident foreigners in 2016. At the end of that year, there were 2.38 million foreign residents in Japan, 148,959 more than at the end of the previous year, and the


numbers of resident foreigners were up in all 47 prefectures. It has become increasingly frequent in recent years for foreign nationals to come to Japan on student visas but then in fact to find employment as laborers, or to work under the Technical Internship Training Program (TITP) ostensibly designed as a means of technology transfer to developing countries. However, TITP is internationally criticized as there are many cases of human right violation witnessed. Moreover, number of absconders from TITP nearly tripled last three years. While these approaches may help secure workers on a temporary basis, they will not serve as medium- to long-term solutions to the population issue, and the current refusal of the government to officially admit foreign laborers heightens the risks of illegal work becoming more common and of more foreign nationals staying in the country illegally.

At the grassroots level, local governments and NGOs have offered support to foreign residents for the past 20 years or more, despite the lack of a national immigration policy. Forty percent of local governments have formulated a “multicultural coexistence promotion plan” to support foreign residents. This author’s book *Japan on the Edge* recommended that young people able to speak Japanese to some degree be accepted in phases from Japan-friendly countries by establishing the framework at both national and local levels to accept these foreign nationals, and this idea garnered considerable media interest. The general populace is gradually coming to an understanding of the need for an immigration policy.

Developing an immigration policy suitable for Japan is absolutely essential to abate the population decline and ensure the sustainability of Japanese society. Accepting immigrants would secure vital labor resources, in addition to which the ambition and drive of immigrants could inspire Japanese youth to enter into a relationship of cooperation and friendly competition with the immigrants, providing the trump card needed to revive Japan’s fortunes. This might also prove effective in overcoming the insular mindset of many Japanese people and in alleviating feelings of unease about the future.

Time is running out for Japan. For the sake of a brighter future, a national debate on accepting immigrants should be started and the government should adopt more pro-active approaches.

Reference:

Menju, Toshihiro. *Genkai Kokka – Jinko Gensho de Nihon ga Semarareru Saishu Sentaku* [Japan on the Edge – Population Decline Pushes Japan toward Its Final Option]. Tokyo: Asahi Shinsho, 2017. 

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