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A HISTORICAL TURNING POINT – JAPAN CHANGES COURSE TOWARD ADMITTING IMMIGRANTS

Toshihiro Menju

- The Immigration Control Act was revised in December 2018 to permit foreign laborers to enter Japan from April 2019 under the newly created visa status of “Designated Skilled Labor.”
- The new policy is to accept foreign workers in blue-collar sectors who would be accorded the same treatment as Japanese workers.
- The government also announced a policy of expanding Japanese-language education and providing other support to the 2.6 million foreign nationals in Japan that can be deemed an integration 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.

Following Diet deliberations marked by fierce clashes between the ruling and opposition parties, the Immigration Control Act was revised in December 2018 to permit foreign laborers to enter Japan from April 2019 under the newly created visa status of “Designated Skilled Labor” and take on active roles in Japan.

The government approved the acceptance of 345,000 workers in 14 blue-collar industry sectors over the next five years, explaining that this measure was designed to alleviate the serious labor shortages stemming from the success of Abenomics that have even driven some companies into bankruptcy, meaning that it was not an immigration policy per se.

However, Japan now stands on the verge of a serious population decline, and foreign workers will unquestionably continue to be accepted in growing numbers. Underlying the government’s hesitancy to call this an immigration policy is the mistaken view that has gained traction among the public that immigrants equate to potential criminals, which has made the term “immigration” an unpopular one. There is also strong opposition to immigration from among the right-wing factions of the Liberal Democratic Party that are part of Prime Minister Abe’s base so, despite the new policy very much resembling an immigration policy in substance, the pretense (excuse?) that it did not constitute an immigration policy seems to have worked in shutting down any opposition and allowing a major transformation to be achieved.

This new policy features the following three important points :

(1) Creation of “Designated Skilled Labor No. 1” work visa status permitting a maximum stay of five years

In blue-collar sectors suffering serious labor shortages because of the country’s declining birthrate, labor resources were heretofore being secured in practice through the Technical Intern Training Program, a program whose official purpose was to contribute to the international community. However, there were frequent divergences between the ostensible *raison d’être* of the Technical Intern Training Program (making international contributions) and its actual aim (securing cheap labor), as well as violations of the Labor Standards Act and other infringements

of foreign workers' human rights. The government accordingly created the new visa status of "Designated Skilled Labor No. 1" for employment rather than training, and devised a policy to accept foreign workers who would be accorded the same treatment as Japanese workers. In this way the government came to a decision on accepting foreign workers in blue-collar sectors.

(2) Creation of "Designated Skilled Labor No. 2" allowing long-term residence

Holders of a "Designated Skilled Labor No. 1" visa who pass an examination can switch to a "Designated Skilled Labor No. 2" visa, which permits family members to reside together with the visa holder in Japan and which can be renewed, holding out the prospect of permanent residence or naturalization. It can thus be said that a path to actual immigration has been opened.

(3) Comprehensive measures to support foreigners living as long-term residents

Following the revision of the Immigration Control Act, the government announced a policy of expanding Japanese-language education and providing other support to the 2.6 million foreign nationals currently resident in Japan to help them in their day-to-day lives.

The national government has not previously involved itself in social welfare for foreign residents, leaving this up to local governments and NPOs. The government's vocal commitment to arranging Japanese-language instruction for foreigners and education for their children can be deemed part of a policy of integrating immigrants.

The number of non-Korean foreign residents in Japan began to rise notably in the 1990s. These foreign residents numbered only about one million in 1990, but by 2018 this figure had reached 1.6 million and the number of nationalities represented had increased. Over the past 30 years – an entire generation – during which this policy did not exist, there was an increase in the number of foreign children who did not receive adequate education in Japan as

well as foreign adults whose Japanese was unsatisfactory despite living in Japan a decade or longer. The government needs to carefully examine the issues faced not only by foreigners newly arriving in Japan but also by resident foreigners prior to this policy change, and provide them with thoroughgoing support that will ensure future problems do not arise.

With the lid only recently having been blown off immigration as a taboo, discussions on immigration policy have just started. Japan's population decline is expected to accelerate in future, making the acceptance of immigrants unavoidable for Japan. Multifaceted discussions involving the public on the acceptance of immigrants will likely now begin in earnest. 

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