

Japan's Foreign Resident Policy as a "Managed Coexistence Model"



Sung Chun Jung

Ph.D., Senior Research Fellow, Center for East Asian and Advanced Economy Studies, Korea Institute for International Economic Policy

Japan's policy toward foreign residents is shifting toward stronger regulation. As of the end of June 2025, the number of foreign residents in Japan stood at 3,956,619, roughly double the figure recorded in 2004. The number of foreign nationals entering Japan in 2024 also reached an all-time high of approximately 36.78 million. Alongside this quantitative increase, the long-term settlement of foreign residents has also been rising. The number of long-term residents in Japan—including permanent residents, spouses or children of Japanese nationals, spouses or children of permanent residents, long-term residents, and special permanent residents—increased from approximately 1.36 million, or 66.7 percent of all foreign residents, at the end of December 2012 to approximately 1.64 million, or 41.3 percent, at the end of June 2025. This represents an increase of about 280,000. Looking only at permanent residents among these long-term residents, their number rose from 620,000 to 930,000 over the same period, an increase of roughly 310,000.

The number of prospective long-term residents is also increasing. Even if they are not permanent residents, many foreign nationals hold a status of residence that allow them to live in Japan for an extended period. Various

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residence statuses permit employment in technical and professional fields, among which Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services is the most representative. The number of foreign nationals residing in Japan under this status increased from about 70,000 in December 2012 to 460,000 at the end of June 2025, nearly a sevenfold increase. This status is a typical pathway through which foreign nationals eventually acquire permanent residency in Japan. Therefore, the increase in foreign residents holding this status means that the number of prospective foreign nationals who may reside in Japan over the long term is also rising.

Japan has also opened channels for the entry of medium- and low-skilled workers, such as Technical Intern Training and the Specified Skilled Worker system, in order to secure labor from overseas amid domestic labor shortages. Foreign workers who entered Japan through these channels were originally expected to follow a short-term circular migration pattern. However, in response to corporate demand and demographic change, these channels are gradually shifting toward a settlement-oriented model. The number of foreign workers who entered Japan through these routes has surged since the 2010s. As of June 2025, approximately 450,000 technical intern trainees and 340,000 specified skilled workers were residing in Japan. Among specified skilled workers, 3,073 held Specified Skilled Worker (ii) status, which has no limit on the period of stay and allows family accompaniment. In addition, the Japanese government has adopted policies to support the employment and settlement of international students, and a considerable share of such students are expected to find employment and settle in Japan in the future. Currently, around 40 percent of foreign students studying in Japan find employment in Japan after graduation, while the Japanese government has set a target of 50 percent.

As the number of settled foreign residents has increased, public sentiment toward foreign nationals in Japan has gradually begun to show subtle changes. Public concern and perceptions of unfairness appear to have grown in response to legal and regulatory violations by some foreign residents. These shifts in public sentiment became increasingly apparent during the House of Councillors election in July 2025. At that time, the Sanseito party, which had strongly called for tighter regulation of foreign nationals, made significant gains. This led the existing political establishment to recognize public sentiment regarding foreign nationals and begin presenting policies that reflected it. The Liberal Democratic Party began activating a government-wide command structure led by the Prime Minister's Office: the Ministerial Council on the Acceptance of Foreign Nationals and the Realization of a Society of Well-Ordered and Harmonious Coexistence. This council was established on November 4, 2025, under the instruction of the Prime Minister, and on January 23, 2026, it adopted the "Comprehensive Measures for

the Acceptance of Foreign Nationals and Well-Ordered and Harmonious Coexistence" (*Gaikokujin no ukeire, chitsujo aru kyōsei no tame no sōgōteki taiōsaku*), which sets out the basic perspective and policy direction of Japan's foreign resident policy. These comprehensive measures marked an important starting point for a major shift in the tone of Japan's foreign resident policy, from an emphasis on "coexistence" to an one on "order."

Before these comprehensive measures were adopted, the expression "foreign human resources" frequently appeared in various administrative documents related to foreign nationals. Foreign nationals were regarded as important "human resources" needed by Japan, and the core of foreign resident policy was to create and support an environment in which they could play an active role in Japan. In the comprehensive measures, however, the expression "foreign human resources" disappeared and was replaced simply by "foreign nationals." This change in wording can be taken as a symbolic example of the transformation taking place in Japan's foreign resident policy. Foreign nationals in Japan are still "human resources," but they have also become subjects of administrative "management" expected to comply with social order. In the past, foreign nationals were objects to "support"; now they are both the recipients of support measures and the subject of control measures. This shift in policy orientation is clearly visible in the specific measures contained in the comprehensive policy package.

One particularly noteworthy policy is the strengthening of foreign resident management through information-sharing among administrative authorities. Japan's foreign resident policy has long been characterized by the dispersion of authority and functions across multiple agencies: the Immigration Services Agency of Japan, which manages immigration and residence; the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, which manages foreign workers; the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, which handles education for foreign nationals; and local governments, which are responsible for matters related to the daily lives of foreign residents. Related administrative information is yet to be integrated. As a result, the Immigration Services Agency of Japan has not been able to smoothly access information held by other administrative bodies—such as information on taxes, social insurance contributions, and criminal records—when conducting immigration inspections or screening applications for residence status.

The Japanese government is now seeking to correct this problem. Through information linkage using the My Number / Individual Number system, it intends to build a system that integrates and shares various types of information related to individual foreign residents and to use such information in administrative measures concerning foreign nationals. As early as March next

year, the Immigration Services Agency of Japan is scheduled to receive from relevant institutions information on payments of National Health Insurance premiums and National Pension contributions, local tax assessment information, and information on eligibility as insured persons under medical insurance schemes. In turn, the Immigration Services Agency of Japan will provide relevant institutions with information on nationality, status of residence, and immigration records. In addition, as a longer-term issue for consideration, information on local tax payments and public assistance may also be used in decisions related to foreign resident policy by the Immigration Services Agency of Japan. The key point is that the government intends to establish a system in which various types of personal information are mutually shared among relevant agencies through an identification number assigned to each foreign resident. This foreshadows a strengthening of immigration inspections, residence status screening, permanent residency screening, and naturalization screening.

However, the comprehensive measures do not merely propose stronger management and control measures for foreign nationals. They also present a dense network of measures to support the domestic settlement of foreign residents. The comprehensive measures declare that the ultimate responsibility for improving the environment for accepting foreign nationals lies with the central government. They state: "Japan must create an environment in which foreign nationals can learn the Japanese language and Japan's social norms. To this end, rules must be verbalized and visualized so that foreign nationals can understand them. Under the responsibility of the central government, efforts will be made to develop such an environment in cooperation with local governments. It is also necessary to consider measures to further clarify the roles that accepting organizations should play." Until now, Japan's foreign resident policy has in practice been handled mainly by local governments, while the central government has done relatively little. From now on, however, the Japanese government has declared that it will build a multilayered governance system in which the central government, local governments, and host organizations such as companies and schools each assume their respective roles. It has also presented as many as 369 specific measures. For each measure, the responsible administrative agency is identified, and the measures are divided in detail into those to be implemented swiftly within one year and those to be implemented over the medium term, thereby clarifying responsibility and deadlines. It is truly a remarkably detailed policy package. It also contains a vast number of elements from which Korea can draw lessons.

In this way, Japan is defining the direction and framework of its foreign resident policy. This policy can be summed up as a "managed coexistence model"—one that seeks not merely coexistence, but a thoroughly managed form of coexistence. This model is neither one that

centers primarily on civic and cultural rights, nor an assimilationist model that demands that foreign nationals conform to Japan in every respect. Rather, it can be understood as an evolving form of social integration model for foreign residents that has emerged in East Asia amid the rapid increase in labor migration. Japan's "managed coexistence model" does not tolerate vague or half-hearted inclusivism. It demands that foreign nationals be thoroughly integrated into Japan's social norms and institutions, and it seeks to support their learning and adaptation through the involvement not only of the central and local governments, but also the institutions that receive them. Will this Japanese model of foreign resident integration succeed? Can foreign resident integration policies actually be implemented in accordance with this philosophy? And how satisfied will foreign migrants be with Japan's integration policy?

Korea's foreign resident policy faces an environment very similar to that of Japan. As demand for foreign workers rises rapidly, the number of circular migrant workers is increasing significantly, and the need for comprehensive policies for these workers has grown. Until now, the main policy concern has been how to accept foreign workers effectively. Now, however, Korea has entered a stage in which it must consider the social integration of foreign residents who have entered the country, enabling them to settle in Korean society and play roles as members of local communities. Japan emphasizes order and management in its foreign resident policy. What about Korea? Korea has argued for the need to embrace the civic and cultural rights of foreign nationals, yet it still lacks concrete policies to help them learn and adapt to Korean institutions and norms. As the number of foreign residents continues to increase in Korea, Japan's experience is expected to offer useful implications. Korea should pay close attention to this important policy experiment taking place in its neighboring country. **KIEP**