



# Japan and the European migrant crisis: Not “someone else’s problem”

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## The difference between the tone of Japan’s internal debate and the global debate

The controversy surrounding President Trump’s anti-immigrant and anti-refugee policies has died down. However, with Trump’s plans to build a wall along the border with Mexico and his ban on travel from seven Muslim countries currently on hold, this does not mean that these policies have gone away. The migrant and refugee crisis is being hotly debated at the international level. Why is Japan’s reaction to the crisis so lacking in momentum?

Whether refugees or economic migrants, both want to live somewhere with a better environment outside their own country because the social and economic conditions in their own country are difficult. People’s “freedom of movement” is a principle of democracy.

If you call this idealism, then that is the end of it, but any country which professes to be an advanced democracy cannot close its eyes to this crisis.

Of course, Japan has provided a great deal of support in the past on issues associated with humanitarian aid. The concept of “human security” advocated by Japan at the beginning of this century is based on extreme humanitarianism. It is the idea that basic human rights such as the right to freedom from hunger, the right to shelter and the right to education transcend national borders and are the international community’s responsibility. This means actions by the international community to address a global issue. This is also idealism.

The migrant and refugee issue is one such global issue. It is an issue which Japan must tackle more passionately than ever before. However, the Japanese Government’s viewpoint is that “migrants” do not exist in Japan. In other words, the Japanese Government’s view is



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that Japan only has “Temporary Visitors” or “Foreign-born Japanese” (people who have acquired Japanese nationality). Refugees tend to be thought about along the same lines. It is probably true to say that this viewpoint is in fact the general feeling of many Japanese.

### **Negative image of migrants and refugees**

In Europe, the migration of large numbers of refugees fleeing their homes in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring and the control of this migration have become major themes these past five years. There is no end to the refugees who cross the Mediterranean by boat, stow away in trucks or trains to cross the Channel Tunnel or enter the Balkan States illegally overland. There was a time when the safe Balkan route was popular, but these days, an increasing number of refugees sacrifice their lives on the dangerous Mediterranean route.

Since the start of the twenty-first century, the 9/11 terror attacks, the terror attacks in London and Madrid, and then the indiscriminate terrorist attacks that occurred in Paris and Brussels since 2015 have fueled the creation of a negative image of these foreigners and refugees. Since these acts of terror were committed by second-generation “home-grown” terrorists, in Japan, as elsewhere, the question of migration came up for discussion and hit the newspapers at the same time as terrorism. Finally, interest started being paid to the refugee and migrant issue, but rather than leading to positive acceptance, this made the voices of concern louder.

### **Confusing the acceptance of migrants and refugees with the acceptance of illegal foreigners and foreign workers**

So let’s try asking the question again? Who does the term “migrants” refer to?

I explained the Japanese Government’s viewpoint earlier, but the members of the media who discuss this openly are few and far between in Japan. In fact, we do not fully understand this concept.

According to the Report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, a long-term migrant is defined as a person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year (twelve months). Simply put, a migrant is a person from another country who establishes residence in a different country.

The question of nationality does not come into it. There are probably some long-term

foreign residents who acquire the nationality of the country they reside in. The term “migrants” refers to people who were born in another country and have become residents in a second country, and it includes both people who acquire nationality and those who do not. These people are referred to as first-generation migrants. However, this definition of an international migrant is not understood by many Japanese.

In fact, the category of “migrant” in a true sense does not exist in Japan. More to the point, it is not necessary. This is because, marriage aside, the hurdles to foreigners acquiring Japanese nationality or permanent residence are high from the outset. Recently, the restrictions are also gradually being eased, but even so it is not in the mental disposition of Japanese to comprehend foreigners (non-Japanese) becoming Japanese. And so many Japanese cannot understand foreigners who stay in Japan a long time for reasons other than work or marriage. Accordingly, there is a tendency to think that “migrant” means foreign worker or illegal foreigner. I suspect that generally refugees are viewed as a “reserve army” of foreign workers or illegal foreigners.

In Japan, the migrant issue often appears interchangeable with the debate on the acceptance of illegal foreigners and foreign workers. No wonder “migrants” are often talked about negatively. And there is only one understanding: that controlling migrants is an inherent right of Japan as a sovereign state.

### **Acceptance of foreigners has been treated as exceptional and rare**

The main reason the Japanese public cannot fully understand the concept of “migrant” is that, as an island nation, Japan is not accustomed to dealing with the issue of foreigners. Therefore, in Japan, long stays by foreigners and the acquisition of nationality have been treated as exceptional and rare.

According to statistics, by the end of 2016, the global refugee population was 65.6 million. In Japan, the number of refugee applicants exceeded 10,000 for the first time in 2016, reaching 10,901, and of these, 28 were recognized as refugees. Only 0.6% of applicants were recognized as refugees. A further 125 were permitted to stay in Japan, including 97 who were given permission to stay on humanitarian grounds. Based on 2015 statistics, the country which recognized the most refugees was Germany, accepting 138,666 refugees or 59% of total applicants, followed by the US (23,361; 77%), France (21,287; 22%) and the UK (15,376, 33%).

The number of foreigners in Japan is currently around 2.6 million, which is equal to around 1.95% of the total population, while the number of foreign workers is 790,000 (of which, 40% are Chinese). What these statistics show is that in Japan the foreigner issue is still considered to be a minor issue. The issue of foreigners living in Japan, including refugees and migrants, is debated internally in Japan only as an issue of labor in relation to the declining population. Nor is cultural friction a major issue. Consequently, the situation as it currently stands in Japan is that the presence of migrants (foreigners) and second-generation migrants is only an extremely limited minor issue.

### **Behaving like a country with global diplomatic insight**

Japan operates on the “principle” that even if there are foreigners who stay in the country a long time for education or work, they all return home. In other words, they are foreign workers or foreign students. From an international perspective, to quote the definition mentioned earlier, these foreigners are “migrants” if they are in Japan for at least a year. However, in Japan, people who move to Japan from overseas are no more than “foreigners” staying in Japan temporarily. Other than that, there is a very small number of foreigners who obtained Japanese nationality through marriage or as specialists. The general attitude toward naturalized athletes is an example of this.

Basically, foreigners cannot become Japanese. They cannot establish residence in Japan. I suppose you could also say the principle of “blood-descent” is strong, but this way of thinking is still common among Japanese.

The idea that a person has the right to be able to live in any country and acquire nationality provided he or she satisfies certain conditions and duties is a basic accepted view of modern civilized society. Of course, this idea of global citizenship is extreme idealism. In reality, it is difficult. However, this is precisely the ideal that European integration and the “freedom of movement” has tried to achieve. The issues currently facing EU countries is part of the process of trying to achieve this ideal and the stance that if the EU stopped trying to achieve this ideal, it would not have these problems is unconvincing. Rather than trying to exclude refugees and looking critically at the disarray in the EU as though “it’s not Japan’s problem,” Japan should consider how to share awareness of the issue. This would doubtless be the approach of a country with global diplomatic insight.

Japan is an economic and technological power in the international community and

assuming Japan deserves this reputation, then it needs to act like a global player. When it comes to accepting people from other countries, surely Japan needs to move beyond its own internal policies and economic situation and determine and fulfill its role and responsibilities in the international community as a whole. Even if this is difficult to achieve straight away, from the viewpoint of diplomacy and promoting Japan to the rest of the world, this cannot necessarily be dismissed as idealism, because I think it is a realistic and definite first step.

This means that Japan must first ask itself how to make the official procedures for acquiring nationality more widely accessible and how to position permanent residency, which these days is said to be more difficult to acquire than nationality. Opening the door to the acceptance of migrants involves developing an approach to such legal measures based on global standards. I believe that, for Japan, the migrant issue starts with this first step.

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