

FOREIGN NATIONALS AS CARE WORKERS IN JAPAN

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Executive Summary

1. Japan has been facing a serious labour shortage because of its rapidly growing elderly population and extreme individualism, and hence, the changing sense of responsibility towards the elderly, among Japanese youths.
2. Consequently, Japan has no choice but to rely on foreign care workers. However, some Japanese citizens (including conservatives) have become wary of the increasing numbers of foreign workers, rendering the Japanese government reluctant to accept foreign care workers.
3. For years, work permits for foreign care workers have not been granted in Japan. There are exceptions, however; Japanese care facilities hiring foreigners have exploited loopholes in the legal aspects, such as de facto free trade agreements like economic partnership agreements.
4. In 2008, drawing on economic partnership agreements (EPAs) with Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, the Japanese government introduced a programme that accepted care workers from the three countries subject to certain conditions.
5. However, the requirements for care workers were so stringent that the EPA-inspired framework remained ineffective in mitigating labour shortage in Japan's care facilities.
6. In 2016, the Japanese government launched two programmes in which care facilities could hire foreign nationals, but these programmes too met with their own challenges. Thus, the Japanese government is currently still seeking ways to increase the number of foreign care workers.
7. In 2016, the Japanese government allowed care facilities to accept foreign care workers as technical intern trainees and established a new visa status — caregiving. The government changed the category of caregiving from unskilled to skilled

labour. This new status applies to foreigners who work at care facilities as certified care workers.

8. In Japan, the key players on the centre-liberal and centre-left sides of the political spectrum reflect public ambivalence about the future of accepting foreign caregivers, preferring caution while opening up the floodgates incrementally and slowly.
9. There are actors that are completely opposed to the influx of foreign caregivers. The Japan Medical Service Employees Union (Irouren, also known as Nihon-Irouren), a major federation of unions, is against the immigration policy reform.
10. Japan is at the forefront of the technological revolution to develop assistive robots, therapeutic robots, robotic exoskeletons and androids that have immense application benefits in the elderly caregiver sector.