

A COMMENTARY ON THE FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT OF THE SEVERITY OF JAPAN'S DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE

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INTRODUCTION

To quote the Japanese minister of defence in the publication of the *Defence of Japan 2023*: “The world is at a turning point in history. The international community is facing its greatest trial since World War II (WWII), and we have entered a new era of crisis”. According to this theme, the increase in military spending from Yen 17.2 billion between 2019-23 to Yen 43.5 billion over the next five years perhaps best captures the gravity of Japan’s strategic outlook. If Japan is to address these emerging challenges successfully, its human resources will play a crucial role. Unfortunately, Japan’s demography is in decline, and its prime minister has recognised it as “an urgent risk to (Japan’s) society.”¹ Much has happened between this statement, the author’s research visit to Japan in 2024 and the present day. This period presents an opportunity for reflection on what could be either

Group Caption **Kamran Nazeer**, UYSM, is a serving officer of the Indian Air Force who was actively involved in Op Sindoor and is pursuing his PhD.

1. “Japan’s Fumio Kishida Says Tackling Low Birth Rate Crisis ‘Cannot Wait’”, *NDTV*, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/japans-fumio-kishida-says-tackling-low-birth-rate-crisis-cannot-wait-3717126>. Accessed on November 30, 2025.

an ostrich moment in geostrategy or a significant shift in Japan's social politics.

During the visit to Japan, it was not hard to notice that the young, especially children, are conspicuous by their absence in Japan's public landscape. This is specially stark outside Tokyo's city limits.² Studies indicate that the working-age population in Japan, aged 15-64, has declined since 1997, and this trend will continue. In this, the salient aspects are population decline and population ageing.³ Together, contributing to depopulation.⁴ While it can be argued that this situation is not unique to Japan, in this case, along with the declining numbers, the rate of Japan's population ageing is astonishing.⁵ This critical demographic problem and the significant challenges to Japan's strategic security point to a complex situation that would need robust policy responses.

This paper will reflect on depopulation and rapid ageing as Japan's most significant strategic priority, as observed during the research visit to Japan in May 2024. It would first examine the conundrum of a declining, rapidly ageing population, followed by its effects. Thereafter, replacement migration will be examined as a possible solution to Japan's demographic shortfall. The paper will then outline a possible policy trajectory for Japan to address this issue, with special emphasis on the Japanese Self-Defence Force (SDF). I would highlight my most significant personal reflection on this issue before concluding.

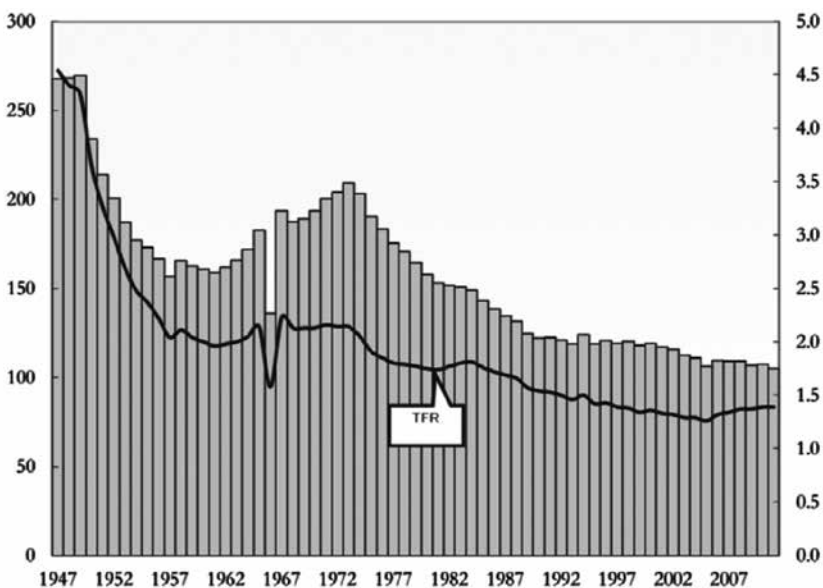
JAPAN'S POPULATION CONUNDRUM

Japan's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has been below sustenance levels for a protracted duration. Replacement-level fertility is defined as the level of fertility at which a group of women, on average, have just

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2. Author's personal observations during the research visit in May 2024.
 3. "New Report on Replacement Migration Issued by UN Population Division, Meetings Coverage and Press Releases", <https://press.un.org/en/2000/20000317.dev2234.doc.html>. Accessed on May 5, 2024.
 4. Toshihiro Menju, "Mounting Pressure for Japan to Tackle Immigration Policy", East-West Centre, 2017, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17391>. Accessed on September 10, 2025.
 5. David Green, "Immigrant Perception in Japan: A Multilevel Analysis of Public Opinion", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 57, no. 2, 2017, pp. 368-94, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26367754>. Accessed on September 12, 2025

enough daughters to replace themselves in the population at current mortality levels. Japan's replacement level is a little less than 2.1 per woman. Fig 1 below shows that Japan's fertility level has been well below this number since the mid-1970s, and it reduced further to 1.3 to 1.4 children per woman in the 2000s. This has been described by Kohler, Billari and Ortega as the "lowest-low" level.⁶

Fig 1: The Number of Live Births and the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) per Woman: Japan 1947-2012



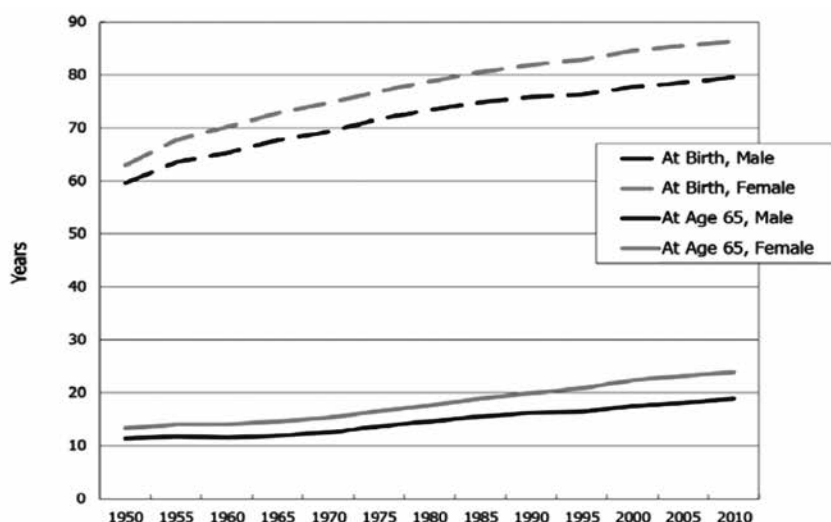
Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2014, pp. 49-51, https://www.suntory.com/sfnd/jgc/forum/005/pdf/005_tsuya.pdf. Accessed on August 5, 2025.

The second factor contributing to Japan's ageing demography is declining mortality in old age. Research by the National Institute of Population and Social Security shows that the population aged 65 and above will grow from around 29 million in 2010 to over 38 million

6. Noriko Tsuya, "The Impacts of Population Decline in Japan: Demographic Prospects and Policy Implications", *Population Aging*, https://www.suntory.com/sfnd/jgc/forum/005/pdf/005_tsuya.pdf. Accessed on December 20, 2025.

by 2040. Further, the population aged 75 and 85 years will increase dramatically by 2060.⁷ This is significant as such individuals are not considered economically productive. Fig 2 below demonstrates these trends.

**Fig 2: Life Expectancy (in Years) in Birth and at Age 65 by Sex:
Japan 1950-210**



Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2014, p. 79, https://www.suntory.com/sfnd/jgc/forum/005/pdf/005_tsuya.pdf

Given the two factors discussed earlier, Japan is currently the world's oldest society, and its population has begun to decline precipitously since 2010. Its population is set to reduce from about 128 million in 2010 to 87 million by 2060. That is a decrease of approximately one-third over the next 50 years. The size of the working-age population aged 15 to 64 is also estimated to decline dramatically, from about 81 million in 2010 to around 44 million in 2060. Additionally, the population aged 65 and above, which is

7. Ibid.

considered the most credible indicator of *ageing, will increase from around 23 per cent in 2010 to 40 per cent in 2060.*⁸

Government initiatives aimed at boosting birth rates have seen limited success. Despite providing subsidies for pregnancy, childbirth, and child care, there appear to be fundamental shortcomings that have prevented improvements in birth outcomes. This may point to the need for innovative solutions. During a group discussion, a mutually beneficial arrangement was proposed to the Japanese counterparts at the Joint Staff College. It involved senior citizens taking on social responsibility for child care, thus, easing the burden of parenthood for working couples and encouraging childbirth. However, subsequent discussions with locals exposed social obstacles, such as a lack of direct kinship, which might have rendered such a scheme problematic in Japan. While recognising that existing subsidies have failed to halt the decline in the TFR, the Japanese participants in the debate offered no practical solutions to the issue.

‘SO WHAT?’: THE EFFECTS OF A DECLINING AND AGEING POPULATION

Population ageing and a declining birth rate impede economic growth due to the pressure to increase spending on healthcare and social security. They also result in reduced tax collections as the productive earning population is limited. Consequently, this adds to fiscal deficits and reduces other spending. Therefore, defence expenditure may be curtailed in the interest of public welfare. Such financial burdens can impact Japan’s commitment to spend Yen 43.5 trillion on security by 2028.⁹

A declining population diminishes the Human Resource (HR) pool from which the security forces can recruit. Discussions with SDF counterparts and senior officials on this issue indicated that the SDF has repeatedly failed to meet recruitment targets. Despite offering competitive pay, military service is not a popular career choice in Japan. This is especially challenging as Japan faces increasing threats

8. Ibid.

9. Ministry of Defence (Japan), “Defence of Japan 2023”, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/>. Accessed on May 2, 2024.

and aims to defend itself independently: its policy documents state the need “defend our country by ourselves”.

Lack of security collaboration and risk aversion are also plausible security implications of an ageing and declining population. Studies indicate that an ageing electorate, like the one expected in Japan, is less likely to support collective security and a collaborative foreign policy.¹⁰ Moreover, smaller family sizes may lead to occupational choices with a low-risk profile.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the diminished risk appetite for enduring battle casualties among SDF personnel was clear during the discussions. For example, the continuation of operations after a tragic air accident during Exercise Talisman Sabre on July 28, 2023,¹² was viewed with surprise by SDF personnel. Such a perception of hazards by its population is incongruent with Japan’s security threats. Let us examine the most expedient methodology for arresting demographic shortfalls: replacement migration.

REPLACEMENT MIGRATION

In Japan’s case, ‘replacement migration’ is not a practicable solution for its population decline.¹³ Notwithstanding its effectiveness, studies emphasise that perceptions about immigration among the local Japanese population are largely negative due to the ‘culture threat’ perceived by its populace in view of the unfamiliar and different cultures of the immigrants.¹⁴ This suspicion of outsiders was

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10. “MPIDR—Publications”, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, https://www.demogr.mpg.de/en/publications_databases_6118/publications_1904/monographs/germany_s_new_security_demographics_military_recruitment_in_the_era_of_population_aging_5128. Accessed on May 5, 2024.
 11. Deborah Brooks, et al., “The Demographic Transition Theory of War: Why Young Societies Are Conflict Prone and Old Societies are the Most Peaceful”, *International Security*, 43, February 2019, pp. 53–95, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00335. Accessed on September 12, 2025.
 12. Department of Defence, Australian Government, “Exercise Talisman Sabre Incident”, April 16, 2024, <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2023-08-01/exercise-talisman-sabre-incident>. Accessed on August 25, 2025.
 13. United Nations, “Replacement Migration: Is it A Solution to Declining and Ageing Populations?”, Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, March 21, 2000, https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/unpd-egm_200010_un_2001_replacementmigration.pdf. Accessed on March 17, 2025. The UN Population Division describes it as the international migration that would be needed to offset declines in the size of the population, as well as to offset the overall ageing of a population.
 14. Green, n. 5.

validated by the account of an immigrant living in Tokyo for more than two decades.¹⁵ Moreover, according to estimates, Japan would have to assimilate about 10 million immigrants each year over the next five decades. Considering its present population and prevailing migration rates¹⁶, these numbers appear untenable. Let us examine the way forward.

THE 'PRECIPICE' HAS ARRIVED

Psychological insights into rapid social changes have some pointers in this regard. They suggest that significant societal shifts, even revolutions, can occur when existing systems reach a critical point. This is referred to as the 'precipice'. Widespread dissatisfaction, systemic failures, or a profound sense of urgency can characterise such a social inflexion point.¹⁷ The constraint here appears to be the lack of urgency in the social narrative and discourse, which can translate this problem into a social policy crisis.

POSSIBLE POLICY TRAJECTORY FOR JAPAN

Japan may be expected to enact policies to boost its birthrate and arrest the decline in fertility. Policies that incentivise childbearing through workplace modifications and state-sponsored incentives need a fillip. Considering the failure of past policies, greater innovation is needed on this front.

While migration may not be the silver bullet, Japan must make allowances to enhance the inflow of appropriate HR. The Japanese working population is expected to decline by 50 per cent over the next 50 years.¹⁸ This calls for a radical alteration of the policies to augment labour. For example, existing policies such as the Technical Internship

15. Personal observations of the author. When I interacted with a Sri Lankan national living in Japan for the past 27 years, he lamented that despite being married to a Japanese citizen, and running an established business for two decades, he is still considered an outsider and routinely faces discrimination on this count.

16. "Japan Population (2024) Live—Countrymeters", <https://countrymeters.info/en/Japan>. Accessed on May 20, 2024.

17. Laura G. E. Smith, et al., "Advancing the Social Psychology of Rapid Societal Change", *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 58, no. 1, 2019, pp. 33–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12292>. Accessed on August 24, 2025.

18. Tsuya, n. 6.

and Training Programme (TITP) may be enhanced.¹⁹ Further, critical sectors such as healthcare may be identified for targeted skill-based work permits for foreigners.²⁰

There have been recent policy changes, but will they be enough? Japan and India announced an ambitious human resource action plan in August 2025. It aims to achieve a two-way exchange of 500,000 personnel over five years, including 50,000 skilled personnel and potential talent from India to Japan.²¹ While this move acknowledges the problem, the challenges for its successful implementation abound. This initiative must be brought to fruition to address demographic challenges to some degree. This replacement rate is far below the required rate of assimilation highlighted earlier, but it is a nascent policy initiative that may open the door to hitherto unexplored methodologies.

Current social schemes may become unmanageable in the future due to the age profile of the Japanese population. There is likely to be an acute decline in the ratio of *paying citizens to beneficiaries*, with grave policy and socio-economic consequences. Thus, Japan would be forced to redistribute financial loads in the foreseeable future. Critical issues that need policy action include a review of retirement ages, benefits, and labour laws. Japanese society must be prepared for such changes to avoid large-scale discontent.

Strategic documents indicate the primacy of cooperative security and an intent for self-reliance. Its strategic publications suggest that, apart from the US alliance, Japan would try to have more regional allies in the Indo-Pacific to balance China.²² Thus, it would enhance its engagement with regional organisations like AUKUS (Australia,

19. Menju, n. 4.

20. Personal observations of the author during the discussions and engagements with Japanese citizens during the study tour of Japan as part of the DSSC 2024 delegation of Australian Defence College. Japanese citizens expressed concern about the lack of adequate doctors. This led to the affluent misusing ambulances to feign severity to gain access to specialists.

21. "Action Plan for India - Japan Human Resource Exchange and Cooperation", <https://www.pib.gov.in/www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=2161975>. Accessed on November 24, 2025.

22. Jorge M. Bravo, "The Demographics of Defense and Security in Japan", in Álvaro Rocha, et al., eds., *Developments and Advances in Defense and Security* (Springer, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-4884-7_29.

United Kingdom, United States) and the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue).

Japan must maintain optimal SDF numbers for credible deterrence. SDF's most significant opportunity in this regard is to increase women's participation. With current levels of about six per cent, there is substantial room to increase the number of women in the SDF. If Japan matches the 16 per cent female recruitment proportion in Australia or the USA, it can significantly enhance the SDF's workforce.²³ Further, the trends of increasing the age for recruitment and retirement will likely continue.²⁴

The SDF will increasingly depend on technological solutions to overcome the lack of manpower. Automation, artificial intelligence, and robotics are global trends, but they are imperative for Japan's SDF as they can significantly reduce the need for personnel manning. Therefore, it will likely accelerate the acquisition of unmanned systems and automated equipment. Investment in Research and Development (R&D) and defence procurements in emerging fields will also intensify to ensure technical superiority to contending forces.

MOST SIGNIFICANT REFLECTION

Even in an era of emerging technologies, the temptation to treat population numbers as a misleading indicator of national power may be misguided. Notwithstanding, many senior SDF functionaries and experts opine that technology could mitigate the effects of a dwindling population. Even as they acknowledge the looming crisis, there is hesitance to assess its gravity and an absence of concrete policy solutions.²⁵ Contrary to their beliefs, the concepts of security, identity, and cultural conceptions of nations are hinged on a numerically sustainable population.²⁶ Therefore, the assumption that emerging technologies can fully offset the decline in human resources

23. Ibid.

24. Andrew L Ores, "Japan's Aging & Shrinking Population Plans for "Gyayer" Security Challenges Ahead," *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, July-August 2023, <https://www.jef.or.jp/journal/>. Accessed on November 11, 2025.

25. n. 20.

26. "Depopulation: What's It All about?", UNDP, <https://www.undp.org/serbia/blog/depopulation-whats-it-all-about>. Accessed on May 5, 2024.

may prove fatal. Moreover, Japan faces a historically unprecedented situation in this regard.²⁷ I found this lack of urgency towards their demographic decline shocking among the Japanese. Regrettably, it appeared as if Japan had hit its 'ostrich moment'. I would describe it as an instance of socio-political paralysis in which a state fails to enact and execute definitive, appropriate, and adequate policy responses despite an identified strategic risk to its national interests.

The Japanese society has shown a capacity for large-scale changes. The Meiji reforms are an apt example of how the Japanese could rewrite their entire socio-economic code. Thus, the capacity exists; the issue is of harnessing this latent capacity for change.²⁸ Perhaps the answer lies in orchestrating another such metamorphosis. If psychology dictates that revolutionary changes are enacted only at the precipice, then it may be argued that the precipice has arrived for Japan. It must course correct, even at the cost of social disruption, to brace for the impending storm.

CONCLUSION

Japan faces a challenging security environment while struggling with the problems of depopulation and an ageing population pool. The problem originates from the combination of two factors: dropping fertility rates and low mortality. I consider this to be the most significant strategic priority for Japan. Considering its gravity, the Japanese leadership has adjudged this situation as an 'urgent risk to society'. Possible policies to contend with the demographic issues may include regulated migrations and incentivisation of childbearing. The emerging age profile of the Japanese population will also force a review of social schemes, including retirement, pensions, and support, to ensure their sustainability. Japan's SDF will be severely affected by a shrinking population pool and will seek to mitigate the impact by modifying its HR policies and adopting emerging technologies. These issues will have a cumulative impact on Japanese society. Profound social changes are hard to

27. Tsuya, n. 6.

28. Hideichi Horie, "Revolution and Reform in Meiji Restoration", *Kyoto University Economic Review*, Vol. 22, no. 1(52), 1952, pp. 23–34, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43216962>. Accessed on July 15, 2025.

absorb, and the Japanese culture will have to display resilience and adaptability to face the challenge of an acute demographic decline. Unfortunately, most Japanese do not recognise the severity of the country's demographic decline. There appears to be an air of inevitability about it, without a definite plan. For the sake of stability of the Indo-Pacific, I hope this is not Japan's ostrich moment, but the precipice for definitive action. The latest Indo-Japanese HR exchange is a step in the right direction. However, the question remains: if this is successfully implemented, will it be adequate?

