Changing Dynamics in Japan’s Refugee Policy
A Discussion with Dr. Saburo Takizawa

Abstract

On Thursday, April 14, 2023, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) hosted the virtual policy briefing, “Changing Dynamics in Japan’s Refugee Policy.” In this event, Dr. Saburo Takizawa, Professor Emeritus, Toyo Eiwa University; Former UNHCR Representative in Japan; and Vice President, CARE International Japan, shared his analysis of ongoing changes in Japan’s refugee policy, including the acceptance of evacuees from Ukraine, the complementary protective status granted to people from Myanmar, current legislation before the Diet to reform Japan’s asylum system, and Japan’s role in international support for refugee resettlement. His remarks were followed by a commentary from Dr. Peter Skerry, Professor of Political Science, Boston College, and 2023 recipient of Sasakawa USA’s Journalism & Academia Fellowship as well as a lively Q&A session touching upon several topics related to Japan’s refugee policy and immigration system.

This discussion was presented by Sasakawa USA’s Policy Briefing Series and was held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington, D.C. policy community along with members of academia, think tanks, and media. Dr. Satohiro Akimoto, Chairman and
Global Trends in Refugee Policy

Dr. Takizawa began by outlining the challenges facing the Global Refugee Regime, noting that according to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) the number of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) has increased from 10 million in 1981 to 104 million in 2023, which has created a severe strain on the system, and ability of recipient and donor countries to cope. This sharp increase has created several humanitarian and political problems that must be addressed. Examples of humanitarian problems include health and safety issues related to protracted stays in refugee camps or urban slums, as well as the dangers of violence and human trafficking encountered during perilous journeys to safer countries. Some political problems that have emerged include global pushback to accepting refugees, states making it more difficult for refugees to enter and seek asylum, and the severe spike in populist nationalism in the United States and Europe leading to decreased political support for resettlement.

Dr. Takizawa also discussed current international efforts to address the growing challenges to the Global Refugee Regime, comprised of the 1951 Refugee Convention and other regional agreements, the UNHCR, and the actions of UN member states to provide asylum and support burden sharing on refugees. He explained that the Global Refugee Regime is not currently successful because of the sharp increase in forced displacement since its creation, the limited definition of refugees in the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the lack of burden-sharing among states when it comes to refugee policy. Efforts to improve the regime have included the Global Compact on Refugees adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018, with four aims of sharing burdens of host countries by supporting the self-reliance of refugees, promoting resettlement or alternative pathways, and improving conditions for return to home countries. In December 2023, Japan will be the Vice Chair of the second Global Refugee Forum, which builds on the framework of the Global Refugee Compact, showing that the international community expects Japan to play a positive role in addressing refugee issues.
Japan’s Refugee Policy

Dr. Takizawa then moved into discussing Japan’s contemporary refugee policy, which he said has three main parts related to asylum, burden sharing of resettlement, and burden sharing of financial contributions. Since 1981 Japan has recognized only 1,117 refugees and granted a form of humanitarian status to 5,049 others, having a small impact on the global situation. In terms of resettlement, Japan has accepted 229 people since 2010 and introduced scholarship programs welcoming another 200 as students. Japan’s financial assistance has been considerable, with the government providing $200,000,000 and the private sector donating $150,000,000 to support refugees overseas in 2022, making it one of the world’s major funders.

Asylum in Japan

Dr. Takizawa stated that asylum applications in Japan peaked in 2017 at nearly 20,000 and have since declined to 3,772 in 2022, with recognition remaining very low. More people are granted status in Japan through alternative pathways such as the humanitarian “Complementary Protection” granted to over 1,700 people or the “Specified Activities” status granted to over 2,000 Ukrainian evacuees, over 9,000 from Myanmar, and over 300 Afghans as of 2022. The use of these alternative pathways has increased significantly since 2020 and the Ministry of Justice is seeking to devise a more permanent solution for people in these categories.

When considering why there has been a dramatic increase in the number of people being granted refugee or alternative status in Japan, there are four main factors:

1) **Refugees closer to home (security):** In recent years refugee issues have become high politics in Japan with the Prime Minister’s Office being active in decision-making. National security considerations motivated recent decisions to accept Ukrainian evacuees as a form of support for Ukraine in its resistance against Russia’s invasion in 2022, which has generated significant public support. In Afghanistan, Japan provided aid to the country for over 30 years in a failed effort to help stabilize that country, and Japan now feels a duty to assist the Afghans who supported Japan’s past policy in Afghanistan. Following the 2021 coup in Myanmar, where Japan is a major investor, Japan acted to provide visa
extensions and protection from deportation to 35,000 people from Myanmar who were already living in Japan.

2) **Reform of Asylum System (rights):** Reform of refugee status in Japan started roughly ten years ago with the introduction of the Complementary Protection System that grants protected status in Japan to people whose cases merit the ability to stay in Japan but do not fall within the legal category of being a “refugee” as established under the 1951 Refugee Convention. In March 2023 Japan released revised refugee status determination guidelines broadening the definition of persecution to include “a violation of human rights of cumulative discrimination or disadvantage with equally grave consequences” to the other qualifications that Japan uses to assess applications. This change is the first of its kind in Asia.

3) **New immigration policy (market):** In the context of Japan’s declining population and labor shortage, more Japanese consider that foreign workers are indispensable for Japan’s economy, which led to Japan’s 2018 opening to foreign workers and the technical trainee system, which is now set to be reformed following abuses. The greater acceptance of foreign workers in Japan drives increasing acceptance of refugees.

4) **Shifting public opinion (culture):** Japan increasingly recognizes that it must accept more people. In public opinion surveys in recent years, more Japanese people have responded that Japan should accept more refugees and fewer people say that they are afraid of refugees or that refugees are not Japan’s problem.

**Burden Sharing**

In 2010 Japan started its Third Country Resettlement Program, the first of its kind in Asia, with a current quota of 60 refugees from Asian countries. The program is small, but Dr. Takizawa said that he expects it to grow in the coming years. As for alternative pathways, since 2007 the UNHCR office in Japan has cooperated with 13 universities to accept refugees as students, including 150 Syrian refugees. Several NGOs have copied this approach and accepted Syrians and Ukrainians via a private sponsorship program.

The least appreciated but most effective way in which Japan supports refugees is through its financial contributions, which are fourth largest annual contributions to UN refugee programs at a
level of roughly $200,000,000 annually. In addition, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 Japan has provided $600,000,000 in humanitarian aid to Ukraine, much of which is meant to support refugees and internally displaced people. Private financial contributions from Japan of several hundreds of millions of dollars annually are also significant. Japan has a comparative advantage in financial support, despite some criticisms of checkbook diplomacy.

Japan is Changing

International media has described Japan as a “refugee-isolated country” that is reluctant to accept refugees, but Japan’s refugee policy is changing rapidly. Reforms of Japan’s asylum system are ongoing while Japan’s contribution to burden sharing has been strong. Additionally, as other developed countries have closed their doors to refugees, Japan has begun to slowly open its doors. Examples of growing expectation in the international community for greater Japanese contributions include:

1) Gillian Triggs, UNHCR Assistant High Commission for Protection, who said “Major changes and new movements in refugee policy are taking place in Japan.”

2) Alexander Betts of the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford, who said “Japan is at an exciting and pivotal moment in shaping its national refugee policies. It is opening access to asylum, while continuing to support humanitarian and development aid abroad. At a time in which the global refugee system is under threat, and in need of reform, Japan can play an important leadership role.”

Commentary by Dr. Peter Skerry

Dr. Peter Skerry began his commentary by remarking on how refugee policy has become a part of high politics around the world, partially because of the populist nationalist response to refugee and immigration issues. He observed that Japanese political and economic elites are responding to the perceived need to address Japan’s declining population and address its global reputation. Refugee and migration policy has exposed divisions in the world’s affluent and developed countries, which policy elites in these countries have not dealt with effectively. Increasingly, refugee and immigration issues have become linked as refugees carry some high moral standing whereas immigrants have strong domestic allies like businesses and diaspora communities, creating mutual
benefit for advocates for both groups. This convergence is a problem because it blurs the distinctions between the two groups, which can undermine and weaken the claims of refugees by leading to them being equated with economic migrants. This is especially clear in the United States. Like in Japan, there are also alternative pathways to gain status in the U.S., such as Temporary Protected Status, which is well-deserved but serves as a substitute for formal refugee resettlement programs.

Dr. Skerry then shared his impressions gained from his recent research trip to Japan sponsored by Sasakawa USA, observing that a similar dynamic is taking shape where de facto refugees are not being admitted to Japan as refugees but through alternative pathways such as the Complementary Protection System. Given the experience in western countries, this gives rise to a concern that there is a danger of Japanese elites adopting a dismissive position relative to concerns that are expressed by the public. This may create a political challenge to Japan’s refugee policy that Japanese policymakers do not currently foresee. In the past in western countries, experts did not expect political backlash to immigration, which has since been proven wrong following the 2016 election in the United States.

Dr. Takizawa responded to Dr. Skerry’s commentary by sharing that Japan has been shielded from having a public debate about refugees and migration due to its doors being shut. Japan is very unlikely to rapidly open to refugees or immigrants, instead taking a cautious approach reflecting Japan’s cautious political culture. By doing this, Japan will follow a disciplined approach to admitting refugees and immigrants that ensures the compliance of new arrivals with the rules and expectations of Japanese society and gains the acceptance of the Japanese public.

Q&A Discussion

An engaging Q&A with the audience followed Dr. Takizawa’s remarks and Dr. Skerry’s commentary. Questions covered a wide range of topics including the nature of Japan’s “disciplined” approach to refugees, Japan’s preparation for the arrival of climate refugees, and questions from the Brookings Institution’s Dr. Mireya Solís about the status of integration support for refugees in Japan, changes on the horizon for an easier path to citizenship in Japan, and how the situation in Myanmar is driving Japan’s policy reforms. A summary of the responses is below:
• Dr. Skerry said that Japan’s disciplined approach to refugees differs from that of the United States, which does not have a unified or particularly effective approach to promoting assimilation and English language learning among new arrivals.

• Dr. Takizawa shared that there has been no preparation in Japan for the arrival of climate refugees, while Dr. Skerry stated that climate refugee concerns are receiving more attention in the U.S. but that there may be political troubles ahead.

• Dr. Takizawa responded to Dr. Solís’s questions by sharing that the creation of the Immigration Services Agency is meant to provide greater support for the integration of Japan’s foreign residents and the government is generally aware of the need to support integration and Japanese language learning, that the path to permanent residency and naturalization in Japan is being made simpler and available on a shorter timeline, and that most of the people from Myanmar granted status in Japan were already in Japan prior to the coup.

---

Sasakawa USA is grateful to Dr. Takizawa for sharing his insights on the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance amidst rising threats to international peace and order. Sasakawa USA also thanks the Q&A participants and attendees for joining us in this engaging discussion.

The summarized views of the speakers expressed herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.

For more information about Sasakawa USA’s Policy Briefing Series, click [here](#).