

THE DEMOGRAPHIC DEFICIT: NATIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES FOR JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA

by
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By 2050, Japan's current population of 122 million is projected to decline to 100 million, while South Korea's population is expected to decrease from [51.6 million to 46 million](#). The demographic shifts in both countries are characterized by declining birth rates, rapidly aging populations, and significant gender imbalances in the workforce. These trends have already raised alarms concerning their economic and social welfare systems, but the potential security consequences of these demographic changes have not been fully explored. As their populations continue to decline, these countries face growing challenges in maintaining robust armed forces.

Not Adding Up: Despite aging populations, youth feel increasingly hopeless

The steep decline in working-age populations and increase in the proportion of elderly citizens is straining the healthcare and social welfare systems of both Japan and South Korea. Early retirement trends, combined with precarious, low-wage employment for older workers, further reduce the active labor force. This has direct implications for the sustainability of pension systems and the economic foundation needed to support robust military expenditures. The reliance on state-backed pensions, which are often insufficient to cover basic living expenses, increases the risk of poverty among retirees, potentially leading to social unrest and a [reduction in national cohesion](#).

At the other end of the spectrum, the youth are also facing major problems. South Korea in particular is battling growing youth unemployment rates at 6.4 percent for those aged 15–29 years, more than double South Korea's overall unemployment rate of 2.9 percent. Undesirable employment opportunities and stiff competition for positions within large international corporations, which offer better pay and

labor union protections, [are partly to blame](#).

Due to the academic pressures from both their families and society, there remains an alarming increase in depression and suicide rates over the last few years among South Korean youth in particular. According to a [recent survey](#) conducted by the NGO World Without Worry About Private Education “one in four South Korean teenagers has contemplated self-harm or suicide due to the overwhelming pressure of academic competition.”

As a result, calls for education and societal reforms are growing, with advocates urging the government and institutions to address academic pressures, improve and increase access to mental health support systems, and foster a more balanced approach to education that [prioritizes well-being alongside academic achievement](#).

The Baby Bust: Japanese and South Korean women face soaring costs, societal pressures

Heightening the demographic changes is a reduction in fertility rates. Japan's fertility rate stands at 1.367, significantly below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. South Korea's two-child policy, implemented during the 1960s and 1970s, was initially successful in curbing the population boom that followed the Korean War in the 1950s, but arguably it [worked too well](#). South Korea's fertility rate has [declined to a provisional 0.72](#) – the lowest figure globally, and a position [the nation has held since 2013](#). Total fertility rates among OECD countries in general have witnessed [a steep decline](#) over the last few decades, “falling from an average of 2.8 children per woman of childbearing age in 1970 to 1.7 in the early 2000s.”

Another reason for the lower birth rate is that women are more likely to prioritize their career aspirations. Simultaneously, the rising costs associated with raising a child, including a lack of affordable childcare and housing options, have led many couples to delay starting a family.

This trend is particularly pronounced in Northeast Asia, where societal pressures emphasize the

importance of higher education for children, further increasing the financial [burden on young parents](#).

Persistent gender disparities in wages and employment opportunities also contribute to Japan and South Korea's low birth rates. Many women face a difficult choice between pursuing career advancement and starting a family. In male-dominated work environments, women often experience limited opportunities for promotion, and taking time off for childbirth can set back their careers. As a result, [many women delay or avoid having children altogether](#). Gender wage gaps contribute to economic insecurity, making it harder for couples to afford children. With women earning less and often bearing a disproportionate share of childcare costs, families may feel they cannot financially sustain having more children.

These challenges were reflected in The Economist's [2023 Glass Ceiling Index](#), which measures the role and influence of women in the workforce with performance indicators including “the gender pay gap, parental leave, the cost of childcare, educational attainment and representation in senior management and political jobs.” The index, which rates OECD nations, ranked South Korea in last place out of 29 countries, with Japan ranking 28th.

Military Readiness in the Wake of Declining Demographics

Potential threats from China and North Korea have forced both Japan and South Korea to reconsider their defense strategies. Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy marks a significant shift in the country's defense policy, calling for a substantial increase in defense capabilities, including doubling the defense budget and adopting counterstrike capabilities. This change is particularly noteworthy because since the end of World War II, Japan has maintained a pacifist stance enshrined in Article 9 of its constitution, which limits the country to maintaining only self-defense forces.

Smaller-populated nations, which lack the capacity

to field large, conventional militaries, increasingly rely on regional military partnerships to bolster their defense capabilities. Regional alliances become essential to their security strategies, allowing them to pool resources and share intelligence. These collaborations also strengthen their ability to respond to regional threats more effectively.

For example, the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral security cooperation is meant to strengthen economic and security ties, particularly against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats. The Rim of the Pacific, organized by the U.S. Department of Defense, is the largest maritime exercise globally, bringing together nearly 30 nations to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific while enhancing military interoperability. Long-standing alliances such as the 1960 U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and the 1953 U.S.-Republic of Korea Mutual Defense Treaty remain cornerstones of regional stability, obligating the U.S. to defend these allies and reinforcing peace in the Asia-Pacific.

Another way Japan and South Korea are coping with their demographic challenges and growing regional tensions is by targeting women for recruitment. General Yoshihide Yoshida, chairman of Japan's Joint Staff, aims to [increase female recruitment](#) to at least 12 percent by 2030.

Shingo Nashinoki, former commander of Japan's elite marine unit, the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, emphasized that women are “crucial to ensuring a stable supply of suitable recruits.” Currently, women make up [only 8.7 percent](#) of the 230,000 members of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF). Nonetheless, the JSDF continues to fail recruitment targets with today's force [10 percent smaller than in 1990](#).

Women in the military might have also boost birth rates, as these jobs offer secure employment, healthcare benefits, housing, and other family-supportive structures that help reduce the economic burdens that often discourage couples from having children. As women take on more visible roles in traditionally male-dominated fields like the military,



societal expectations about gender roles may shift. This could lead to more equitable sharing of childcare and domestic duties, making it easier [for women to combine career ambitions with family life](#).

Solutions

To address their demographic challenges, the governments of Japan and South Korea should implement and expand policies that encourage couples to have children. Key initiatives could include increasing access to affordable childcare, promoting a healthy work-life balance, offering flexible work arrangements, providing tax breaks for college tuition, and enacting laws to ensure pay equality. To help alleviate financial burdens, South Korea has spent more than [\\$270 billion on childcare subsidies since 2006](#). Such measures are essential to create an environment where raising a family is more feasible and attractive for young couples.

In the military, investments in cutting-edge defense technologies are being made to address recruitment shortfalls and the challenges posed by shrinking populations. Andrew Oros, Professor of Political Science and International Studies at Washington College, believes that countries like Japan and South Korea will increasingly depend on labor-saving technologies, such as uncrewed and autonomous systems which are [fundamentally altering the means by which wars are fought](#). Japan has already begun integrating advanced technologies, such as robotics and artificial intelligence, into its defense strategy to compensate for the shrinking workforce.

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