投稿論文

Shutting the Door:

Japan's COVID-19 Border Control Policy in the Context of Its (Non-)Immigration Policy

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan has made headlines for its strict border control policies, many of which were targeted specifically at foreigners. These included a blanket "no entry, no re-entry" ban in effect at the beginning of the pandemic as well as continued restrictions and bans on newly arriving foreign residents. This piece examines the details of these policies, including when, how and why they were implemented. Additionally, Japan's pandemic-era border measures are assessed in the context of its immigration policy. The results of this analysis show that these measures have resulted in a temporary stagnation in the expansion of the foreign workforce observed during the second Abe administration, while creating an altered policymaking environment when it comes to immigration policy. Furthermore, the effects of the border measures, especially when viewed in context of general regional macroeconomic trends, have raised questions about Japan's attractiveness as a destination country. Overall, Japan's pandemic-era border control measures have validated a skeptical outlook for the country's political will to reform the most problematic aspects of its modern immigration regime going forward.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented societal change to our world, whether it be through the immediate public health crisis or the related broad-ranging socioeconomic and political impacts. Specifically, one of the most consistently applied countermeasures by governments around the world were restrictions on human movement in the form of border control measures. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has identified these measures to be disproportionally impactful to migrants, having the potential to place migrants in precarious status, deny them access to the asylum process and leave them socioeconomically isolated (International Organization for Migration, 2021: 22-30). Though not alone in this regard, Japan has made international headlines throughout the pandemic for its strict *mizugiwa taisaku* (border control measures), especially with regards to how these measures targeted foreigners (Dooley, 2020; McElhinney, 2021; Yokohama, 2022). These included a blanket "no entry, no re-entry" ban in effect at the beginning of the pandemic as well as continued restrictions and bans on newly arriving foreigners for almost all visa categories, including those most utilized by foreign workers. Scholars have begun to analyze the impact these and other pandemic-era policies had on foreigners residing in Japan, such as on their health and wellbeing (Wels, 2021), socioeconomic situation and integration (Burgess, 2021), or in the specific cases of Vietnamese technical interns (Tran, 2020) and international students (Murata, 2022). Furthermore, Eriko Suzuki (Suzuki, 2021a) edited a book that compiled numerous scholars in-depth accounts on these and other issues, exposing the precarities facing immigrants in Japanese society during the pandemic.

On the other hand, relatively little has been written about what Japan's COVID-19 border control measures mean in the broader context of its immigration policy. In the above mentioned book, Korekawa (2021) outlined Japan's border measures and compared them to those of other OECD countries. However, his analysis only covers the period until late 2020, i.e., the first entry ban and the subsequent temporary softening of restrictions. Suzuki (2021b) began to explore how the pandemic has exposed the "vulnerability" of foreign workers in Japan specifically, and what this potentially means for the country's policies towards these workers going forward. I aim to go further than these two papers and contribute to the scholarship by comprehensively examining these border measures and how they relate to Japan's immigration policy on a macro level.

Since 1990, policymakers have consistently maintained that Japan does not have an immigration policy, which in their view equates to lower skilled workers seeking long-term settlement – the core characteristic of Japan's titular (non-)immigration policy. Nevertheless, before the pandemic hit, the second Abe administration oversaw a rapid expansion of the foreign workforce, driven by an expansion of so-called "side door" labor recruitment programs such as the Technical Intern Training Program. In 2019, an amendment to the Immigration Control Act that had the potential to further increase low- and medium-skilled labor migration to Japan went into effect. The COVID-19 pandemic and Japan's strict border measures have stalled this trend in the short term.

This paper is structured in the following way: First, I will outline the immigration policy of the second Abe Administration, from 2012 to the onset of the pandemic. Then, I will describe and analyze Japan's pandemic-era border control measures up until their rescindment in 2022. I will show when the various border control measures were enacted, and how they affected the flow of migrants to Japan. In addition, my analysis will focus on the political reasons for why these measures were enacted, as well as how politicians, big business, and the general public reacted to them. I conclude that the effects of Japan's strict border control policy have further validated a skeptical outlook for the political will to undergo major immigration reforms in the short and medium term, especially when viewed in concurrence to other regional macroeconomic factors shaping migrant

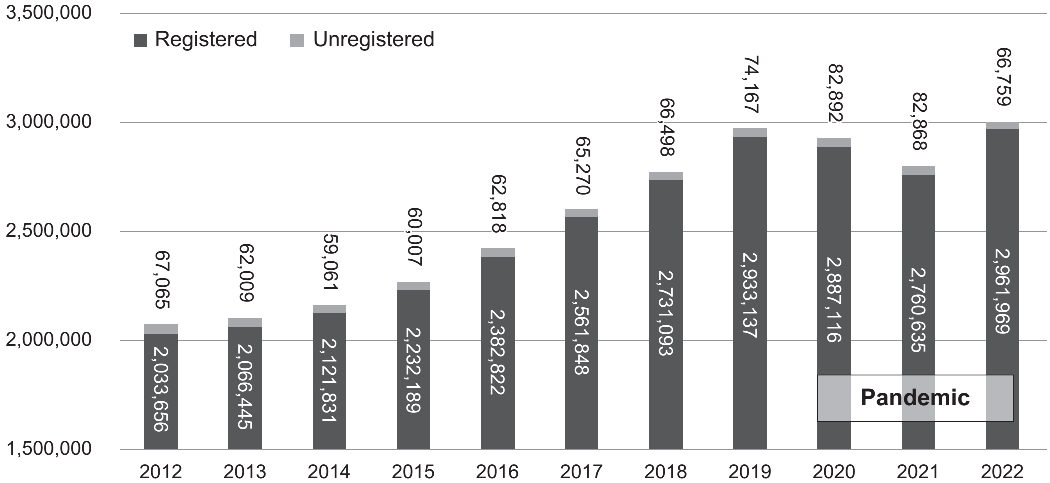

Figure 1: Change in the total number of foreign residents in Japan, 2012-2022

The above figure was created based on MOJ data (Immigration Bureau, Ministry of Justice, 2015; Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Justice, 2020b; 2021; 2022a; 2022c; 2022d).

flows.

Background: Japanese Immigration Policy from 2012-2020

The period immediately before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2012 and 2019, saw Japan's number of foreign residents increase at a rapid and consistent pace (see Figure 1). According to Ministry of Justice (MOJ) data, during this time span, the number of foreign residents increased from just over 2.1 million to about 3 million, when counting both registered and unregistered foreigners. This increase followed a period of stagnation in the number of foreign residents in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis[*1].

To put it simply, this increase has been primarily fueled by the expansion of the foreign workforce, specifically through activities-based visas. There are two main visa categories in Japan, activities-based and status-based visas (Komine, 2018: 109-114). As their name suggests, activities-based visas restrict their holder to a certain activity, and they are most often tied to employment. Status-based visas allow their holder to stay irrespective of employment, for example as permanent residents. From 2012 to 2020, the number of registered foreigners grew by 853,460, and 710,688 (about 83%) of these obtained activities-based visas (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Justice, 2014; 2021).

Aside from making long-term settlement difficult when compared to status-based visas, this trend towards foreign worker recruitment through activities-based visas has also garnered attention for the increased reliance on two specific categories: the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP)

Table 1: Change in the number/percentage of technical interns and working students from 2012-2020

	No. of Foreign Workers, 2012	% Foreign Workforce, 2012	No. of Foreign Workers, 2020	% Foreign Workforce, 2020	Change in No. of Foreign Workers (%)
TITP	134,228	19.7%	402,356	23.3%	300%
Students w. shikakugai	91,727	13.4%	306,557	17.8%	334%
Total No. of Foreign Workers	682,450	100%	1,724,328	100.0%	253%

* *"TITP" refers to participants in the Technical Intern Training Program, while "Students w. shikakugai" refers to international students working part-time.*
The above table was created based on data from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2013; 2021).

and international students, many of which engage in labor. These have seen stark increases: from 2012 to 2020, foreign workers holding visas corresponding to the TITP increased from 134,228 to 402,356 and the number of working international students rose from 91,727 to 306,557 (see Table 1). While some foreign students whose primary purpose is education contribute to the labor force through part-time work, others come for the primary purpose of labor. Indeed, scholars have identified the institutionalization of both the TITP and working international students as *de facto* lower skilled migrant labor procurement systems (Roberts, 2018: 95; Liu-Farrer and Tran, 2019: 242), with some going as far as identifying the exploitative labor practices in these systems as human trafficking (Ayako Sasaki, 2020). Both technical interns and portions of the working student population can thus be classified as side door migrant laborers due to the discrepancy between their nominal goals and actual outcomes.

The above trend is particularly noteworthy as initial newcomer migration to Japan, especially since 1990, was driven in large part by the influx of *nikkeijin* from South America – who can obtain the status-based Long-term Resident visa (Iguchi, 2002: 124-125). While *nikkeijin* admission is also oftentimes identified as a side door migrant labor policy, their status-based legality did mean that they have privileges such as unlimited visa renewal not afforded to the activities-based statuses I discussed above. This has led to settlement by the *nikkeijin*, but also serious integration issues (Tian, 2019: 1503-1506). As Table 1 shows, the share occupied by technical interns (19.7% to 23.3%) and working students (13.4% to 17.8%) both rose from 2012 to 2020. In contrast, while the number of *nikkeijin*[*2] workers saw a slight uptick from 125,158 to 158,359 in the same period, their percentage of the total workforce has seen a sharp decrease (from 18% to 9.2%) during the Abe years (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2013; 2021). Therefore, the move towards the latter two activities-based statuses can also be seen as an attempt to subvert these integration issues by prioritizing more rotational systems. The TITP has a maximum length of stay of 5 years, and students must be enrolled to maintain their status. It is possible for those holding these statuses to achieve visa progression. For example, out of 119,001 total international graduates among all levels of tertiary education in 2019, 30,924 achieved progression to a status enabling work[*3]. Nevertheless, in the same year, 90,612 technical interns and 57,003 international students left Japan permanently, forfeiting their residency (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Justice, 2020a)[*4].

Increasing the number of foreign workers was made a policy priority by the late former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and his administration, in office from December 2012 to September 2020. This is true especially as it relates to the expansion of the TITP, which has become the predominant tool for the recruitment of foreign labor. Abe's government reformed the TITP twice, in 2014 and 2016, expanding its maximum length of stay and adding new fields of employment to the program (Tian, 2019: 1508). This was followed by the amendment to the Immigration Control Act that went into effect in 2019. The amendment established the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) visa categories, aiming to admit 345,000 foreign workers within 5 years in fields that the government identified to be experiencing a labor shortage (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Justice, 2020c: 84-89). Despite its name, 12 of 14 fields in which SSW workers can be employed overlap with the TITP, making it another procurement scheme for low- and medium-skilled labor (Rehm, 2021: 153-56).

Why was increasing foreign labor a priority for Abe? Throughout his tenure, Abe has tied his political legitimacy to his plans for the "economic revitalization" of Japan, known generally as "Abenomics" (Song, 2020: 625). Policy documents from the Abe era consistently framed his policies with regards to foreign labor admittance as an economic measure. For instance, the 2015 Basic Plan outlined the need to "proactively accept those foreign nationals who contribute to the vitalization of the Japanese economy" (Immigration Bureau, Ministry of Justice, 2015: 3)[*5]. Migrant workers are structurally needed in certain sectors of the economy due to the country's demographics. As is widely known, Japan is currently confronted with *shōshi kōreika* – the coupling of a low birth rate with an ageing society. This has led to a labor shortage, one that is especially pronounced in rural areas, for smaller companies, and in those fields that generally correspond to lower skilled labor (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2019: 78-90; The Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2020: 3-6). Before the above-mentioned reforms, influential actors representing economic interests such as *Keidanren* consistently lobbied for measures to increase the acceptance of foreign workers (Song, 2020: 624-625).

However, this framing of the increase in foreign workers as an economic measure had another reason. Though undoubtedly with realist strands, scholars generally identify Abe as a conservative and nationalist (Song, 2020: 614). As such, his core base of support comes from an electorate and influential groups with a similar ideology, such as *Nippon Kaigi* (Schäfer et al., 2017: 294-295). This base generally does not favor any immigration reform and maintains that Japan's homogeneity is unique (Burgess, 2020), making Abe susceptible to potential political backlash on this issue (Song, 2020: 631). Indeed, every policy paper, public statement and parliamentary discussion related to these policies made sure to underline that Japan was not accepting *imin* (immigrants): it was consistently stated that Japan was only pursuing "foreign worker acceptance" policies (Roberts, 2018; Endoh, 2019: 324). Abe himself has said on multiple occasions that Japan is "not adopting a so-called immigration policy"[*6].

Japan's recent reforms can thus be understood as a delicate balancing act by the Abe Administration. Confronted with the economic effects of the growing demographic crisis and resulting pressure from the business lobby, Abe took steps to expand the foreign population – all the while carefully avoiding directly acknowledging this fact for fear of political backlash. I would argue that this balancing act simultaneously describes the fundamental flaw of Japan's (non-)immigration policy, which has been maintained since 1990.

Under the "1990 system", Japan states that it does not accept lower skilled foreign labor (Komai, 2016: 14), which was at the time linked to the undesirable consequences of European guest worker settlement (Yamanaka, 1993: 72-73). This core belief, that lower skilled workers lead to long-term settlement and that this should not be a policy goal, is equated both with the word "immigrant" and therefore "immigration policy" – leading policymakers to avoid such wording when discussing their so-called "foreign worker acceptance" policies. This is also the reason why Japan has relied on the side door policies discussed above – technical interns and international students, for instance, do not constitute economic migrants *de jure*. The naming of the new visas introduced in 2019 (Specified *Skilled* Worker) is a continuation of this trend (Oishi, 2020: 14).

The largest problem with Japan's (non-)immigration policy does not lie in semantics, but rather that the country has institutionalized numerous policies that, as Endoh (2019: 326) put it, allow for "labor inclusion but human exclusion". Abe's administration has not only maintained this status quo but doubled down on it, focusing specifically on activities-based visas that are arguably more rotational in nature and have been identified as the most problematic for workers, as a replacement for the *nikkeijin* who can settle more easily. The framing of foreign workers in economic terms also sidesteps key issues such as labor protection, access to social entitlements, and broader integration policy.

Despite the maintenance of the fundamental principle governing Japan's modern immigration regime, Abe's seemingly proactive stance on immigration reform has also spawned optimism that the country will resolve some of the core issues facing foreigners in general and foreign workers specifically. Hollifield and Sharpe (2017: 371) argue that Japan is making "halting moves towards a national immigration policy" in its trajectory as an "emerging migration state". Such optimism only increased in the immediate aftermath of the 2019 reforms, both from general media outlets within the country[*7] and some scholars. For example, Song (2020: 634) described the 2019 amendment as a "historic shift", while Oishi (2020: 13) declared a "new era for immigration and integration" in Japan.

In terms of immigration policy, it is within this context that Japan entered the COVID-19

Table 2: Japan's major COVID-19-related border measures, April 2020-April 2022

Date	Measure	Source
	First Major COVID-19-related Border Measure	
March 9 2020	Entry of visitors from South Korea and China barred	(Kyodo News 2020a)
	First Entry and Re-entry Ban	
April 3	Barred new entry and re-entry of most foreign residents from 73 countries (eventually expanded to a total of 159 countries)	(Kyodo News 2020b)
August 5	Easing of re-entry restrictions from 12 Asian countries	(Regalado 2020)
September 1	Re-entry ban lifted	(Kyodo News 2020c)
	Entry Ban Rescinded Completely	
October 1st	All new foreign residents allowed to enter Japan in principle, provided they undergo strict entry screening and quarantine	(Osumi 2020b)
	Second Entry Ban	
December 27	New entry of foreign nationals banned, excluding 10 Asian countries part of a special bilateral schemes	(Kyodo News 2020e)
January 14 2021	Second entry ban put in place fully, targeting all new foreign entries from 152 countries and suspending previously excempt programs	(Osumi 2021a)
May 20	Second entry ban expanded further to cover 159 countries	(Osumi 2021b)
November 8	Entry ban lifted for most new entries, including foreign students and technical interns	(Nagata 2021)
	Third Entry Ban	
November 30	Third entry ban put into place, barring all new entries worldwide	(Kyodo News 2021b)
March 1 2022	Gradual easing of border restrictions for new entries; daily cap for new and returning entries increased from 3,500 to 5,000	(Kyodo News 2022a)
March 14	Daily cap increased to 7,000 entries, priority program for international students enacted	(The Japan Times 2022c)
April 8	Entry ban lifted in principle for new entries from 106 countries	(Kyodo News 2022b)
April 10	Daily cap increased to 10,000	(Kyodo News 2022b)
June 1	Daily cap increased to 20,000	(Kyodo News 2022c)

induced global pandemic.

Japan's COVID-19 Border Control Policy

Japan's strict *mizugiwa taisaku* (border control measures) during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the pandemic-era policy that has attracted the most national and international attention. I will begin this section by outlining the major border control measures Japan instituted, which are summarized in Table 2 below. If not otherwise specified, the sources for the following sections concerning Japan's entry-ban correspond to those cited in Table 2. Furthermore, Figure 2 describes the outcomes of the policy, as measured in the monthly arrivals of foreigners into Japan across three categories: new entries, re-entries, and short-term visitors.

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Japan on January 16th, 2020. With the onset of the pandemic, Japan's major border control measures included the imposition of three separate entry

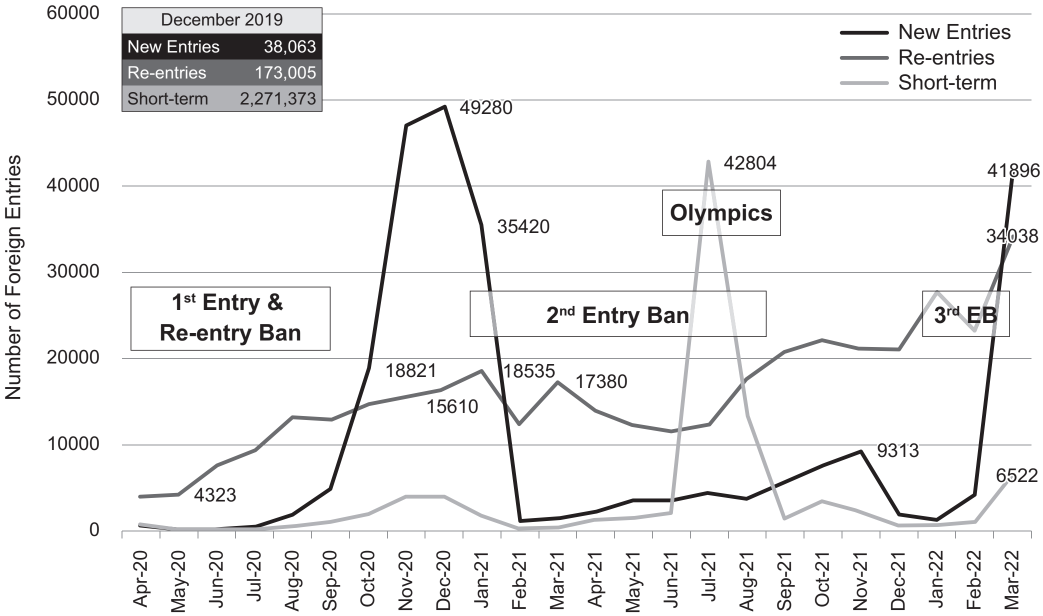

Figure 2: Monthly Arrivals by Foreigners to Japan, April 2020 to March 2022

* New entries refer to foreigners who have received a valid visa and Certificate of Eligibility (COE) to study or work in Japan but have not entered the country yet, i.e., future foreign residents of Japan. Re-entries are foreigners living in Japan and returning from a trip abroad, i.e., current residents of Japan. Foreigners who enter Japan that are not residents generally receive short-term visitor status.
New Entries were calculated by taking total arrivals of foreigners and subtracting re-entries and short-term visitors. This table was created based on the MOJ's data on monthly foreigner arrivals (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Justice, n.d.).

bans. The 1st entry ban targeted both the new entry and the re-entry of foreigners, with subsequent bans only taking the former measure. Irrespective of whether an entry ban was in place or not, short-term visitors have only been granted highly limited entry to Japan during the pandemic. Over the time period shown in Figure 2 below, tourists have been barred throughout, with some artists, performers and business travelers being allowed to enter at times. The largest such group were athletes, staff and journalists related to the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, held in the summer of 2021. However, in the context of Japan's immigration policy, it is more relevant to focus on how Japan's border measures targeted new and returning foreign resident entries, which will be the focal point of the outline below.

Following the spread of infection in neighboring countries, Japan barred the entry of visitors from China and South Korea on March 9th, 2020 – the first major border measure during the pandemic. This measure was gradually expanded to include other countries that saw a rise in infection rates, eventually comprising 73 countries (and including most of Europe, Southeast Asia, and North America) by April 3rd. This date marks the beginning of the first major entry ban instituted by the Japanese authorities, which would be gradually expanded to a total of 153 countries before being fully rescinded on September 1st of 2020. The entry ban covered not only short-term visitors and newly entering foreign residents, but also many foreigners already living permanently in Japan. Only Japanese nationals, Special Permanent Residents (the status granted to immigrants from the colonial era) and those with "special exceptional circumstances" were initially exempt. It was thus an entry *and* re-entry ban. The fact that this ban specifically targeted foreigners, even those that were living in Japan permanently and merely happened to be out of the country when it was implemented, was the primary reason it received media attention.

During this time, the media reported on numerous stories of foreign residents either being stranded outside the country and thus unable to return to their jobs and families (Osumi, 2020a; South China Morning Post, 2020) or being effectively barred from leaving the country to attend to family members in their home country (Watanabe, 2020). Foreign business lobbies identified the measures as out of line with other G7 countries (Smith, 2020), while some academics proclaimed them to be "outdated" and "discriminatory" (Kasahara, 2020).

The Japanese government did respond to the criticism it received concerning its re-entry ban. First, Japan clarified and expanded its definition of "special exceptional circumstances" on June 12 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2020). Next, re-entry restrictions were loosened for some Asian countries in August before being lifted across the board starting on September 1st, 2020. As Figure 2 shows, this gradual softening of the re-entry ban did lead to an increase in re-entries even before the policy was abandoned wholly. While there were only just over 4,000 re-entries in April and May 2020, this number increased to 13,289 by August. Furthermore, the Japanese government avoided another blanket re-entry ban as part of its subsequent border measures. Despite this, a combination of factors meant that re-entries were significantly lower than before the pandemic: in December of 2019 there were a total of 173,005 re-entries. These factors included daily entry caps and strong entry screening/quarantine regulations at Japan's border in addition to a general downfall in nonessential travel during the pandemic.

Japan's 2nd and 3rd entry ban were significant as they reimposed restrictions on the new entry of foreign residents for a long period. When including the 1st entry ban, this means that the only period where new foreign residents could enter the country with limited restrictions was between October 2020 and January 2021 – as Japan temporarily rescinded the entry ban for all visa statuses from October 1st. The subsequent spike in new entries, from 18,821 in October all the way to an early pandemic high of 49,280 in December of 2020, reflects this. On December 27th, amid rising infections at home and the spread of a new variant in the UK and other countries, Japan reimposed the entry ban. Initially with some exceptions for Asian countries, it was fully put into place on January 14th, 2021. Subsequently, new entries plummeted to 1,177 in February[*8] and remained extremely low until November 8th, when Japan lifted the ban on new entries for some visa categories in limited numbers, including international students and technical interns. This was almost immediately backtracked on November 30th, when Prime Minister Kishida instituted a third entry ban following detection of the Omicron variant. Therefore, this short reopening only led to a total of 9,313 new entries in November 2021 before dropping again the following month. It was not until March 1st of 2022 when the Kishida government began to gradually rescind the entry ban. Throughout March and April, Japan upped the daily entry cap twice while introducing a new program to prioritize the entry of international students. This led to 41,896 new entries in March of 2022, and new entries topped 80,000 in both April and May – suggesting that the policy of significantly curbing new resident entries at the border had been stopped in earnest.

Like the re-entry ban, the prolonged entry ban received widespread national and global media attention. Reporting specifically focused on the plight of foreign students (McCurry, 2022; Nakamura, 2022) and technical interns (The Asahi Shimbun, 2022a; So, 2022), many of which were stuck in limbo after having gone into debt to finance their new life in Japan and waiting up to 2 years to enter the country. Other articles discussed the economic impacts of the travel ban on Japan's economy (Nikkei Asia, 2021), or highlighted the irony that Japan was barring the entry of potential new residents while welcoming tens of thousands of people into the country for the Olympics (Borpujari, 2021). Based on survey results from foreign students currently residing both within and outside of Japan, Murata (2022: 7) found that those that had not been able to enter Japan were more likely to exhibit strong feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Overall, these reports indicate that Japan's border measures resulted in a human and economic toll. This begs a simple question:

Why Was Japan's Border Policy Enacted?

The nominal reason for Japan's strict border policy was to limit the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, it is first prudent to look at the effectiveness of this policy in achieving this objective. Both at the beginning of the pandemic (The World Health Organization, 2020) and in subsequent announcements, the WHO has urged that strong border measures only result in delaying the spread of COVID-19, stating that "blanket travel bans will not prevent the international spread, and they place a heavy burden on lives and livelihoods" (The World Health Organization, 2021). According to the WHO, border controls should thus only be used in a time-limited manner, to allow the local health infrastructure to prepare for a new variant, for instance. This "delaying effect" has been confirmed in a major 165-country cross analysis on the effectiveness of travel controls to limit local outbreaks (Yang et al., 2022). In this sense, Japan's border controls have been effective, delaying both the Delta and Omicron waves when compared with North American and European countries. At the same time, there is no scientific basis for the prolonged institution of strict border controls, especially considering that Japan tailored some of its measures specifically at foreigners. It goes without saying that COVID-19 is not more or less infectious based on nationality. Criticizing Japan's approach, a WHO expert pondered whether "the virus know(s) your nationality or where you are legally resident?" (Yamamoto and Novytska, 2021).

Japan's decision to pursue strict border control policies thus were likely to have reasons beyond public health. Specifically, I want to highlight the political dimension of these policies. While it is beyond the scope of this piece to analyze the coronavirus policy response aimed at foreigners living within Japan in detail, the politization of foreigners is important to understand in the context of border measures. In Japan, foreigners have been consistently highlighted as potential carriers of the virus (Burgess, 2020: 8). For instance, this included detailed reporting of foreign infection clusters in the Japanese media, and even the MHLW separating infection statistics by Japanese and foreign nationality (Arudou, 2021: 149). In June of 2020, former Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso alluded towards Japanese superiority by contrasting the *mindo* (level of the people) between Japan and other countries as a prime reason for Japan's low COVID-19 mortality rate (Wingfield-Hayes, 2020). The framing of foreigners as unable to follow the country's mostly voluntary COVID-19 measures resulted in reports of discrimination targeting foreigners within the country (Kyodo News, 2020d), including a local health center warning the community "not to eat with foreigners" to prevent infections (The Asahi Shimbun, 2021b).

Academics have begun to study these trends more systematically, with Akedo (2021) classifying incidences of hate speech and discrimination such as the ones I have referenced above in three categories: scapegoating, direct discrimination, and institutionalized discrimination. Considering the increase in the number of such events since the onset of the pandemic, Yamagata et al. (2020; 2021) and Wakayama and Tawara (2022) have begun to examine and quantify how the pandemic has influenced attitudes among the Japanese public. Both of these studies founds that exclusionary attitudes towards foreigners increased in Japanese nationals that were more likely to be cautious about contracting the virus, with xenophobic tendencies manifesting themselves towards Chinese nationals more than other ethnic groups (Yamagata et al., 2021: 456-460; Wakayama and Tawara, 2022: 82-84). In addition, I would also add that the high levels of uneasiness[*9] with regards to holding the Olympics was at least in part related to the large amounts of foreigners that would consequentially enter the country. The then-unprecedented ban on foreign spectators (Arudou, 2021: 150) was an early indicator of this (the competition was eventually held without spectators anyway), and incidents such as one Tokyo hotel that hosted foreign Olympic guests creating a separate "Japanese only" elevator underscored this trend (Kyodo News, 2021a). Overall, foreigners were inextricably linked to the virus, and it is very likely this played a role in the continued public and political support for strong border measures, which is the next dynamic I wish to discuss.

When discussing the political environment that led to the prolonged adoption of strict border measures targeting foreigners, it is important to note that the coronavirus response by the ruling

LDP-Komeito coalition has, in general, been seen as lacking by the Japanese public. In one of the most detailed books on early pandemic-era Japanese politics, Harukata Takenaka posits that one of the reasons for this was the pro-active and outsized role (both in shaping policy and public perception) of prefectural leaders such as Tokyo's Governor Yuriko Koike when compared to the central government (Takenaka, 2020). Indeed, when former Prime Minister Abe resigned in late August 2020 due to health concerns, his overall approval ratings were among the lowest of his long tenure, with 66% disapproving of his handling of the pandemic (Takenaka, 2020: 12-14). His successor, Yoshihide Suga, was then forced to resign amid low approval ratings that stemmed primarily from his coronavirus policies in September of 2021. At the time he stepped down, one opinion poll showed an approval rating of only 26%, with 70% disapproving of his handling of the coronavirus (The Mainichi Shinbum, 2021). Specifically, his perceived reactive policymaking was constantly a topic of debate. This criticism extended to Suga's approach to the border.

Despite employing one of the strictest border control policies in the world at the time, and indeed throughout his tenure, Suga came under fire in early January of 2021 from both the ruling coalition and opposition lawmakers for his supposed lax approach – with one LDP lawmaker saying that "we cannot gain the understanding from the public if we restrict people's actions under the state of emergency while allowing (foreigners) in" (The Asahi Shimbun, 2021a). A few days later, Suga fully put into place the 2nd major entry ban. Still, he faced fierce criticism in the Diet. At a plenary session of the House of Representatives on January 21st, Democratic Party of the People leader Yuichiro Tamaki blamed lax border control measures for community spread of new variants and demanded an even stricter policy, saying that "border control measures were, as before, non-existent (*izen, zaru jōtai no mama*)" (National Diet Library, 2021a). A few months later, an opposition lawmaker from the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan directly linked the spread of what was to become known as the Delta variant to border control measures that were "weak, naïve, and slow" (National Diet Library, 2021b). Clearly, relaxation of entry restrictions was not a politically viable choice during most of Suga's tenure.

His replacement was keen to avoid the same mistakes. Despite having relaxed new entry regulations just a few weeks earlier, the emergence of the Omicron variant prompted newly appointed Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to institute the 3rd entry ban targeting new foreign residents in late November of 2021. The Asahi Shimbun reported that his swift and strict action at the border was a direct result of Suga's perceived "reactiveness" and here too, some LDP and opposition lawmakers raised concerns about potential exceptions to the measures (The Asahi Shimbun, 2021c). Kishida did face strong backlash over a proposed scheme to curb reservations for flights coming into Japan, almost immediately scrapping the idea due to "consideration for the demand to return home by Japanese nationals" (NHK News, 2021b). The support for strengthening entry regulations thus faced a clear limit as it pertained to measures that would also target Japanese nationals. As a final note, it is important to underscore how popular these policies were: two separate polls by major media organizations conducted in December 2021 found a 89% and 84% public approval rating for Kishida's reinstatement of the entry ban on new foreign residents (The Japan Times, 2021b).

In such a political climate, the numerous national and international news outlets, advocates, and academics covering the problematic effects border controls were having on newly arriving and returning foreigners proved inconsequential in changing policy. Furthermore, and perhaps even more significant, one of the most influential actors in immigration policymaking during the Abe era, big business, adopted a mostly muted approach when it came to border measures. *Keidanren* did urge for a relaxation of border measures, including those targeted at foreigners, following the Olympics in September of 2021 (Keidanren, 2021). However, it was not until early 2022 when the debate on border control measures began to shift in earnest following reports of the decreased severity of the Omicron variant. For instance, a proposal jointly penned by the heads of the influential *Keizaidōyūkai* together with the *Shin keizai renmei* (chaired by Rakuten's Hiroshi Mikitani) called for new foreign residents to be subject to the same regulations as returning Japanese citizens (Sakurada and Mikitani, 2022). Indeed, throughout late January and throughout February, a slew of major business figures that included *Keidanren* chairman Masakazu Tokura expressed their frustration with regards to the border policy (Nishi Nippon Shimbun, 2022; The Asahi Shimbun, 2022b). This pressure, in combination with other political factors[*10], would lead the Kishida government to announce a softening of the policy starting on March 1st (The Japan Times, 2022a).

Japan's COVID-19 Era Border Policy and Immigration Policy

With the third entry ban now lifted and admission of new residents ramping up, it is unlikely that a further batch of border restrictions on new and current foreign residents will be put in place – even tourists were welcomed back with little restrictions on October 11th, 2022. Thus, I now want to begin to tie the first and second parts of this piece together by examining the macro effects of the border control measures and then looking at what Japan's COVID-19 era border control measures mean for its immigration policy going forward.

First, let us look at the effect in terms of the number of foreigners living in Japan, which I have summarized as part of Table 3 below. As is to be expected, limiting the admittance of new foreign residents resulted in the foreign population declining by over 150,000 (about 6%) from December 2019 to December 2021. Unsurprisingly, this decline was due in large part by the decrease in technical interns and international students, the two activities-based visa statuses that were expanded most proactively during the Abe era. Due to their rotational nature, status holders moved out of Japan and forfeited their status, while their "replacements" were not able to enter the country. Technical interns decreased by about 133,000 (~33%) and international students by about 137,000

Table 3: Change in the Numbers of Foreign Residents, Selected Visa Categories (2019-2021)

		December 2019	December 2020	December 2021	% Change, 2019-21
Total Foreign Residents		**2,933,137**	**2,887,116**	**2,760,635**	**-6%**
Total Activities-based		1,435,914	1,388,200	1,247,530	-13%
	Technical Intern	410,972	378,200	276,123	-33%
	International Student	345,791	280,901	207,830	-40%
	Specified Skilled Worker*	1,621	15,663	49,666	2964%
Total Status-based		1,497,223	1,498,916	1,513,105	1%
	Permanent Resident	793,164	807,517	831,157	5%

** These numbers account exclusively for Specified Skilled Worker (1) visa statuses. There were no Specified Skilled Worker (2) visa status holders through December 2021.*

The above table was created based on MOJ data (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Justice, 2022b).

(~40%).

Only the Specified Skilled Worker visa saw a significant increase in status holders to almost 50,000, though this is misleading. As described above, the program aimed to admit 345,000 foreign workers from April 2019 to April 2024, with 47,550 to be admitted in the first year alone (The Japan Times, 2020). At almost the three-year mark, the program has thus significantly underperformed government projections. Undoubtedly, the pandemic and related border restrictions have contributed to this. However, numerous scholars have also pointed out other underlying reasons for this. These include the institutionalization of the TITP both in origin countries and Japan, its relative cheaper cost, as well as its overlap with the SSW system in terms of the industries it serves (Era, 2020; Ogawa and Sadamatsu, 2020; Rehm, 2021). This is underlined when considering that of the more than 400,000 foreigners with valid visas ostensibly waiting to move to Japan as of March 2022, the MOJ estimated that a large majority were international students (153,000) and technical interns (129,000) (Nagata, 2022). This does not suggest a structural move towards the newly established SSW status in the short term.

Overall, even if all the potential foreign residents that have received valid status were permitted to do so in 2022, Japan will see only a slight uptick in the total numbers of foreign residents, and similar numbers of technical interns/international students, when compared to 2019. While there is certainly a cohort of potential residents who have reconsidered their move to Japan during the pandemic border measures, a return to 2019 numbers does look likely now. After the 3rd entry ban was gradually lifted from March to June 2022, a total of 294,875 new foreign residents entered the country – though new entries dropped by almost half when comparing April (108,740) to June (55,297)[*11]. Considering that there were no new border measures taken during that time, this drop suggests that the majority of those waiting to enter the country were able to do so.

Nevertheless, I would argue that the COVID-19 pandemic, and specifically the related border measures enacted by Japan, have resulted in a stagnation of the pre-pandemic policies that resulted in an expansion of the foreign workforce and by extension the foreign population. This is especially notable considering that while many major destination countries enacted strict border control measures that halted migration flows after the pandemic initially broke out in 2020, they reversed course in 2021. In his summation of the situation through December 2020, Korekawa (2021: 299) noted that Japan's response at the border was roughly in line with comparable high-income countries. However, OECD data shows that these countries softened their border measures dramatically in 2021. For example, Canada welcomed over 400,000 new immigrants in 2021 (a 117.3% increase over 2020), while the United States (+43.4%), United Kingdom (+51.4%), and France (+16.1%) also saw year-on-year increases in migration (OECD, 2022: 21-22). While countries in the Asia-Pacific region were generally more hesitant to soften border measures[*12], Japan stood alone in effectively further strengthening such policies, resulting in a marked *decrease* of 37.3% in migration from 2020 to 2021 (OECD, 2022: 22). Japan's border control policies were thus unique in the developed world both for their strictness and for their length.

Secondly, the politization of foreigners during the pandemic, as manifested primarily through Japan's border policies, have resulted in an altered policymaking environment when compared to that of the second Abe administration. Throughout the pandemic, Japanese lawmakers and the public have shown themselves to be extremely skeptical when it comes to the acceptance of foreigners within their borders. This has isolated one of the major drivers of Japan's foreign worker acceptance policies, the business lobby. Even during the Abe administration there was no political will to tackle what I have outlined to be the fundamental problems of Japan's modern immigration regime, including its aversion to accept workers as immigrants. Therefore, it is unlikely that there will be significant progress given this new environment. Kishida's government hinted at expanding the SSW2 visa category, which allows for unlimited renewals and family reunification, to all sectors covered by the SSW1 category (The Japan Times, 2021a). For its part, *Keidanren* has called for improving the TITP, streamlining the acceptance of foreign workers and strengthening integration measures as part of its newest policy paper on foreign workers – though the proposal made it a point to specifically note that it would avoid the use of the word immigrant (Keidanren, 2022). Perhaps responding to this white paper, the government launched a panel including academics and municipal government officials to review both the TITP and the SSW systems, though their findings are not expected until the second half of 2023 (The Japan Times, 2022b). These developments do not suggest that major reforms will occur in the short and medium term.

At the same time, despite a drop in labor demand due to the pandemic-induced economic downturn, the underlying structural issues that drove pre-pandemic demand for foreign workers persist. Japan's demographic challenges have not been addressed in any meaningful way, and a recent study by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) estimated Japan will need to quadruple its foreign workforce to 6.3 million by 2040 to achieve the government's GDP growth targets (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2022: 170). In addition, the strong post-pandemic economic development[*13] in the primary sending countries are a potential bottleneck for foreign labor supply going forward. This phenomenon has already been observed with China, which has seen its share of technical interns drop dramatically: from 73.5% in December 2012 to 13.6% in December 2021 (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Justice, 2014; 2022c). In Vietnam, which has become the primary sending country in recent years, reports of an increasingly high share of technical interns stemming from poorer rural regions as opposed to more economically developed larger cities suggests a similar trend (Teru Sasaki, 2020). The decline in the value of the Yen[*14] has also resulted in media reports suggesting decreased willingness to choose Japan by prospective foreign workers (Reynolds and Tran, 2022) – though it is unclear whether this particular development will hold in the medium term.

The altered policymaking environment that I have alluded to above therefore comes at a time when regional macroeconomic trends are pointing towards a drop in foreign labor supply – despite a well-documented economic necessity for Japan to boost its foreign workforce. The problems with current foreign worker acceptance policies, greater economic opportunities in origin countries, and the weak Yen all suggest a drop in Japan's overall attractiveness as a destination country. Considering this, I would posture that Japan's border policies have potentially negatively affected attractiveness in another way as well. The constant news stories of thousands of new entries putting their life on hold while waiting to enter the country will not have helped in motivating foreigners to choose Japan. Additionally, the treatment of foreigners in Japan during the pandemic have left a "scar" on Japan's foreign community, as the Japan Times put it (Kopp, 2020). The precarious status of technical interns and foreign students that were in a state of limbo – whether it be in Japan or while waiting to enter – has already been well documented by scholars, and these circumstances will have undoubtedly be relayed through migration networks to potential future newcomers in origin countries. At least for international students, there has been some evidence of the effects of this. For example, while admittedly targeting a niche audience, a recent survey of 374 students and researchers in Japanese Studies concluded that the border measures resulted in a "shrinking of general interest in Japan" (Tomoyuki Sasaki, 2022: 5). A non-academic study of over 3,000 potential international students found a similar result in January of 2022, with 67.6% of respondents having either cancelled or considering cancelling their plans to study in Japan[*15].

All these developments suggest that Japan's corona-related policies as they have related to foreigners, and especially the country's exclusionary border policies, have had effects beyond temporary entry restrictions.

Conclusion

Japan's border measures targeting foreigners during the coronavirus pandemic have had three main effects that will have a potentially significant impact on the country's immigration policy going forward.

1. Japan was unique in the world when considering the strictness and length of their border control measures. Subsequent entry bans have led to a prolonged halt on the expansion of the foreign workforce (and by extension foreign population) observed during the second Abe administration.
2. The high political will, backed by strong public opinion, for strict border measures targeting foreigners suggests a changed policymaking environment when it comes to immigration policy moving forward. During the pandemic, skepticism with regards to foreigners has won out over economic interests.
3. Considering the numerous regional macroeconomic developments that suggest a bottleneck in the supply of foreign labor moving forward in combination with the socio-political effects of the prolonged border measures, Japan's attractiveness as a potential destination country has been harmed.

Despite a structural need for foreign workers, and the fundamental principle governing Japan's (non-)immigration policy still unresolved, fundamental immigration reform thus seems unlikely. This is especially significant as an immigration policy with greater positive outcomes for foreign workers could lead to a boost in Japan's attractiveness in lieu of the regional macroeconomic developments I have outlined.

A few years ago, Hollifield and Sharpe (2017: 371) wrote that there were many signs Japan was moving toward a formalized national immigration policy in what they described as a potential "Meiji Moment". Today, Japan's COVID-19 era border policies and its implications for the country's immigration policy suggests that the historical comparison to the Edo-period and its infamous isolationist *sakoku* policy might be more accurate.

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*1 The number of registered foreign residents decreased from 2,144,682 to 2,033,656 from 2008 to 2012 (Immigration

Bureau, Ministry of Justice, 2015: 5).

*2 As the MHLW does not specifically give data for *nikkeijin* workers, I have used their numbers for total Brazilian and Peruvian workers, the two largest nationalities making up the *nikkeijin*.

*3 Data on total graduates was taken from the Japan Student Services Organization, while data on work visa progression comes from the MOJ (Japan Student Services Organization, 2021: 1; Immigration Services Agency of Japan, Ministry of Justice, 2020d: 1). Students who did not find work nor leave Japan were most likely still looking for work or continued their studies at a higher level of education.

*4 This figure was calculated using MOJ data for number of departures by visa status for the year of 2019. To arrive at an accurate number, those who obtained a re-entry permit were subtracted from the total.

*5 See Roberts (2018: 90) for other examples of similar wording.

*6 This specific quote came in response to questioning concerning the expansion of the TITP during a Diet session on the 31st of October 2014 (Roberts, 2018: 89).

*7 Akashi (2020) found a total of 16 separate monthly or weekly Japanese-language magazines with an optimistic strand.

*8 Similar to the re-entry ban, new foreign resident entries during the entry bans were limited to those deemed to have "special exceptional circumstances" and were primarily granted for family reunification purposes.

*9 In June 2021, an NHK public opinion survey showed that 29% of those surveyed supported the banning of spectators at the Olympics, while a further 31% supported cancellation. Only 3% were in support of the Olympic Games being held without pandemic-related restrictions (NHK News, 2021a).

*10 For instance, public opinion support for the border control measures was softening. In a February 2022 NHK public opinion survey, only 57% supported the measures, versus 32% against (NHK News, 2022).

*11 These numbers were calculated using the same methodology and source as for Figure 2 above.

*12 According to the same OECD data, Australia saw an increase of 2.4%, while South Korea saw a small decrease of 5.5% in year-on-year migration from 2020 to 2021.

*13 The Asian Development Bank estimated 5.5% GDP growth for Southeast Asia in 2022, with Vietnam leading the way at 7.5% (Asian Development Bank, 2022: 6).

*14 At time of writing, the Yen has dropped by 20% in value over the past two years when compared to the Vietnamese Dong.

*15 Though the concrete methodology is unclear, this survey found that 38.4% of potential international students surveyed planned to cancel their plans to study in Japan if they could not enter by April 2022, with a further 22.5% considering cancelling and 6.7% having already cancelled (Rossi, 2022). Given the loosening of border measures in early 2022, it is unclear how many students actually cancelled their plans.

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