



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Japan is slightly larger than Germany, or just smaller than the U.S. state of Montana. It consists of four main islands: Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku. These are surrounded by more than four thousand smaller islands. Japan's terrain is largely mountainous, and most large cities are positioned along the coasts. The country's wildlife is diverse and includes animals such as bears, foxes, snow monkeys, rabbits, deer, and red-crowned cranes.

The nation has a few active and many dormant volcanoes. Mount Fuji, located west of Tokyo, on Honshu Island, is Japan's highest point, with an elevation of 12,388 feet (3,776 meters). Mild earthquakes are fairly common, and more destructive earthquakes hit every few years. Volcanic eruptions are also fairly common in Japan.

The nation experiences all four seasons. On Hokkaido and in northern Honshu, winters can be bitterly cold. To the south, a more tropical climate prevails. Otherwise, the climate is temperate with warm, humid summers and mild winters. The western side of the islands is usually colder than the eastern side. Japan is subject to typhoons in August and September.

History

Imperial Origins and Feudal Period

Japan is known historically as the Land of the Rising Sun, as symbolized by its flag. Beginning with Emperor Jimmu in 600 BC (according to legend), Japan has had a line of emperors that continues to the present. From the 12th century

until the late 19th century, however, feudal lords (or *shoguns*) held political control. Japan adopted a policy of strict isolation and remained closed to nearly all foreign trade until 1853, when Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy sailed into the harbor of Edo (now Tokyo) to demand a treaty. The shoguns lost power in the 1860s, and the emperor again took control.

Hirohito ruled as emperor from 1926 to 1989. His reign was called *Shōwa*, which means “enlightened peace,” and the deceased Hirohito is now properly referred to as Shōwa. He was succeeded by his eldest son, Akihito, in 1989. Akihito's reign was called *Heisei*, meaning “achievement of universal peace.” In 2019, due to the state of his health, Akihito stepped down as emperor, passing the throne to his eldest son, Naruhito, in Japan's first abdication since 1817. Japan's government chose *Reiwa*, meaning “beautiful harmony,” as the name for the new imperial era.

Japanese Expansion and World War II

Japan established itself as a regional power through military victories against China (1895) and Russia (1905). Involvement in World War I brought Japan enhanced global influence, and the Treaty of Versailles expanded its land holdings. The postwar years brought prosperity to the rapidly changing nation. It soon began to exercise considerable influence in Asia and subsequently invaded Manchuria and much of China.

On 7 December 1941, Japan launched a successful air attack on U.S. naval forces at Pearl Harbor. Its military machine swiftly encircled most of Southeast Asia. But in 1943, the tide of the war turned against Japan. The United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the summer of 1945; complete collapse of the empire and

surrender ensued. A military occupation, chiefly by U.S. forces, lasted from 1945 to 1952. In 1947, Japan adopted a new constitution under U.S. direction, renouncing war, granting basic human rights, and declaring Japan a democracy. The United States and Japan have since maintained close political and military ties.

Liberal Democratic Party Dominance

Japan's postwar focus was on economic development, and the country experienced rapid change and modernization. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) generally controlled politics after World War II, although scandals in the 1980s and 1990s led to high-level resignations and splinter parties. The LDP was briefly the opposition party in 1995, but it regained power in 1996. Facing severe economic woes in 1998, the nation slid into recession. Japan's currency nearly collapsed under the strain of bad bank loans and in conjunction with a wider Asian economic crisis. By 1999, the LDP had to form a coalition government to have the votes necessary to pass legislation.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of the LDP came to office in April 2001. The popular leader forced through major economic reforms and helped restore Japanese confidence in the political system. When Koizumi stepped down in September 2006, Shinzō Abe won the LDP's leadership election to succeed him as prime minister, but scandals and the party's loss of the legislature's upper house forced Abe to resign. The LDP chose Yasuo Fukuda to replace him in September 2007. Less than a year later, Fukuda resigned in the wake of political deadlock and persistently low approval ratings.

In September 2008, Tarō Asō became Japan's fourth prime minister in two years. In September 2009 elections, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) won a majority of seats in parliament, ending 50 years of near-total LDP rule. Three separate prime ministers served during the DPJ's time in power. Abe and his party, the LDP, have been in power since 2012. The LDP's popularity is believed to have stemmed from Abe's successful set of economic policies, including fiscal stimulus and structural reforms, popularly known as "Abenomics."

2011 Earthquake and Tsunami

In March 2011, a massive 9.0-magnitude earthquake occurred roughly 70 miles (113 kilometers) from the coast of Japan, triggering a massive tsunami that washed as far as 6 miles (10 kilometers) inland. Waves from the tsunami reached heights of nearly 128 feet (39 meters). Nearly 16,000 people died, and thousands more were injured. The earthquake was one of the most powerful recorded earthquakes in the world. Extensive damage to several nuclear power reactors resulted in radiation leaks, the most notable of which was the power plant in Fukushima. Japan restarted its first nuclear reactor in 2015, following new safety procedures.

THE PEOPLE

Population

The majority of the population lives in urban areas. Almost half are concentrated in three major metropolitan areas:

Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya. As a result, Japan suffers from a high cost of living and a lack of affordable urban housing. Japan's population is largely ethnically homogenous, with a small number of Koreans and Chinese. The Ainu (an indigenous ethnic group whose habitation of Japan predates the migration of ethnic Japanese) live mostly on the northern island of Hokkaido.

Language

Japanese is the official language. Although spoken Japanese is not closely related to spoken Chinese, the written language (*kanji*) is related to Chinese characters. Each *kanji* has at least two "readings," or ways of pronouncing the word; one based on the ancient Chinese pronunciation, and the other based on the Japanese pronunciation. The Japanese also use two phonetic alphabets (*hiragana* and *katakana*) simplified from these characters. A third phonetic alphabet (*romaji*) uses Roman letters. People are losing their ability to write the complex *kanji* as they rely more on computers. Japanese can be written vertically from right to left, or horizontally from left to right. English language instruction is mandatory for elementary school grades five and six; English is also taught in all secondary schools and is often used in business.

Religion

Japan's two major religion are Buddhism and Shinto. Shinto has no recognized founder or central scripture but is based on ancient mythology. It stresses a person's relationship to nature and its many gods. All Japanese emperors are considered literal descendants of the sun goddess, Amaterasu. Shinto was important historically in ordering social values, as illustrated by the Code of the Warrior (*Bushido*), which stressed honor, courage, politeness, and reserve. Shinto principles of ancestor veneration, ritual purity, and a respect for nature's beauty are all obvious in Japanese culture.

Many Japanese continue to integrate aspects of Shinto and Buddhism into their lives. For example, marriages often follow Shinto traditions, and funerals, Buddhist ones. Additionally, *butsudan* (Buddhist altars used to pay respects to deceased family members) are common in homes, and *kamidana* (small Shinto shrines) are common in homes as well as some shops. For most, however, this is done more out of respect for social tradition than out of religious conviction. A small portion of the population is Christian.

General Attitudes

Japanese society is group oriented. Loyalty to the group (business, club, etc.) and to one's superiors is essential and takes precedence over personal feelings. In business, loyalty, devotion, and cooperation are valued over aggressiveness. Companies traditionally provide lifetime employment to the "salary-man" (full-time male professional) who devotes long hours of work to the company. Devotion to the group is central to the Japanese lifestyle. For example, someone with a cold usually wears a face mask to help ensure nobody else catches their cold. Japanese tend to avoid conversation topics that can be divisive, especially topics such as politics and religion. It is uncommon for people to discuss their personal lives with coworkers, except among those they consider to be

close friends.

Customarily, most Japanese feel an obligation to return favors and gifts. They honor age and tradition. "Losing face," or being shamed in public, is very undesirable. *Gaman* (enduring patience) is a commonly respected trait that carries one through personal hardship. Politeness is considered extremely important. A direct "no" is seldom given, but a phrase like "I will think about it" can mean "no." Also out of politeness, a "yes" may be given quickly, even though it only means the person is listening or understands the speaker's request. One is often expected to sense another person's feelings on a subject by picking up on the person's tone of voice, even if what is being said only hints at the truth (or is the opposite of the truth). Some Westerners misinterpret this as a desire to be vague or incomplete. The Japanese may consider a person's inability to interpret feelings as insensitivity.

Many Japanese feel that consumerism, periods of economic insecurity, less filial piety (devotion to ancestors), and lower moral standards have all damaged social cohesion, and they question the country's future course. Even as many traditions remain strong, Japan's rising generation is revising society's views of family relations, politics, and male and female roles.

Personal Appearance

Conformity, even in appearance, is a common characteristic of the Japanese. The general rule is to act similar to, or in harmony with, the crowd. For youth this includes wearing the latest fashions (U.S. and European).

Businessmen wear suits and ties in public. Businesswomen generally wear pantsuits or blazers with skirts; bare legs are not acceptable, and stockings or knee-high socks are commonly worn.

Proper dress is necessary for certain occasions. Traditional Japanese clothing, or *wafuku*, can be worn for social events or special occasions, but it is equally common for people to wear suits and formal dresses. Traditional clothing includes the *kimono*, a long robe with long sleeves that is wrapped with a special sash (*obi*). The *kimono* is worn by women and men, though most commonly by women. The designs in the fabric can be simple or elaborate. The *yukata* is similar to the *kimono*; it is made of lighter fabric and worn in summer, particularly to summer festivals and parties. Professional entertainers, such as a *maiko* or *geisha*, wear *kimono* as well as *okobo* (tall wooden shoes).

For celebrations, women wear dresses or *kimono*; married women wear muted colors with short sleeves, while unmarried women wear brighter colors with long sleeves. For weddings, men wear dark suits and white ties or, less commonly, *kimono*. To funerals, women wear black *kimono* or, alternatively, simple black dresses with strings of pearls. Men wear black suits with black ties to funerals.

Outside work or formal occasions, Japanese tend to dress casually and conservatively; jeans and T-shirts, button-down shirts worn with slacks or skirts, and dresses are common. Plunging necklines or bare arms are usually avoided, and baring the midriff (even on accident) is taboo. Dressing in multiple layers is very common as well.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

A bow is the traditional greeting between Japanese. A bow is correctly performed by standing with the feet together and arms straight at one's side (women may fold their arms in front of them) and bending at 45 degrees from the waist. While performing a bow, people do not look directly in the other person's eyes. Workers in the service industry may bow with one palm on the stomach and the other on their back, with elbows extending straight out. Persons wishing to show respect or humility bow lower than the other person. The Japanese shake hands with Westerners. While some appreciate it when Westerners bow, others do not, especially when the two people are not acquainted. Therefore, a handshake is most appropriate for foreign visitors.

The Japanese usually greet strangers and superiors formally, and titles are important in introductions. A family name is used with the suffix *-san*. For example, members of the Ogushi family would individually be called *Ogushi-san* in Japan. The use of first names is reserved for family and friends; however, a suffix is still generally used. Close friends and family of children will call them by their first name with a different suffix: *-chan* is used for girls and *-kun* for boys.

The greetings Japanese use depend on the relationship. A worker might greet a superior with *Ohayo gozaimasu* (Good morning), but he or she would greet a customer with *Irasshaimase* (Welcome). When business representatives meet for the first time, they may tell each other *Hajimemashite* (Nice to meet you). Between business representatives, the exchange of business cards (offered and accepted with both hands) most often accompanies a greeting. *Yoroshiku onegaishimasu* (Please consider me favorably) is a common phrase said at the outset of group activities such as a sports match or the beginning of a work project. *Konnichiwa* ("Hello" or "Good day") is a standard greeting. *Ohayo* (an informal "Good morning") and *Genki?* (How's it going?) are common casual greetings among youth.

Gestures

The Japanese regard yawning in public as impolite. A person should sit up straight with both feet on the floor. Legs may be crossed at the knee or ankle, but placing an ankle over a knee is considered improper. One beckons by waving all fingers with the palm down. It is polite to point with the entire hand rather than the index finger. Shaking one hand from side to side with the palm forward means "no." A slight bow accompanied by a chopping motion of the hand in front of the face while walking down an aisle of seats signifies "Please excuse me, coming through."

Making an X with the index fingers at chin level or with forearms in front of the chest indicates "no" or "not allowed." For example, a waiter might make the X sign at closing time, indicating to incoming customers that no more service will be provided that evening. Alternatively, the sign indicating "yes" is made by forming an O with the hands and placing them in front of the face or raising the arms high above the head.

These gestures are used somewhat like the “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” sign is used in the West. People refer to themselves by pointing an index finger at their nose. Laughter does not necessarily signify joy or amusement; it can also be a sign of embarrassment. Chewing gum in public is generally considered ill-mannered.

Visiting

Visits usually are arranged in advance; spontaneous visits between neighbors are uncommon in urban areas. The Japanese remove shoes before stepping into a home. There is usually a small entry area (*genkan*) between the door and living area, where one stands to remove the shoes; shoes are placed together pointing toward the outdoors, or they may be placed in a closet or on a shelf in the *genkan*. Slippers are typically worn inside, but they are not worn in rooms with straw-mat floors (*tatami*). People normally take off their coats before stepping into the *genkan*. Guests usually are offered the most comfortable seat. The Japanese traditionally emphasize modesty and reserve. When offered a meal, they express slight hesitation before accepting it. Light refreshments are accepted graciously. In business settings, the host generally offers either tea or coffee; it is polite to take a sip, but the drink does not have to be finished.

Out of modesty, the Japanese typically demur compliments. Guests avoid excessive compliments on items in the home because they would embarrass the hosts. Guests customarily take a gift (usually fruit or cakes) to their hosts. People give and accept gifts with both hands and a slight bow. Some, especially the elderly, may consider it impolite to open the gift right away. Gift giving is extremely important, especially in business, because a gift says a great deal about the giver's relationship to, and respect for, the recipient.

Food and drink are the most common gifts, as other kinds of gifts would quickly clutter small homes. Sweets or rice crackers are common gifts, as are seasonal fresh fruit, frying oil, or coffee. Gifts of hand towels or cleaning products are commonly given to welcome new neighbors. Gift giving reaches its peak twice a year, in midsummer and at year's end. During these seasons, giving the right-priced present (the price is considered more important than the item) to all the right people (family, friends, officials, and business contacts) sets the tone for the rest of the year.

Eating

Although many young Japanese eat while walking in public, it is generally considered bad manners to do so. Therefore, snack foods sold at street stands are usually eaten at the stand. In a traditional meal, people typically eat from a bowl while holding it at chest level, instead of bending down to the table. It is not impolite to drink soup directly from the bowl or to make slurping sounds. Japanese use chopsticks (called *hashi*) to eat most meals but generally eat Western-style food with Western utensils. The main meal is eaten in the evening. Because many Japanese work late hours, they may eat dinner in office-building restaurants or may grab a prepackaged meal on the way home. The family might also save dinner for the father and sit with him while he eats.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

The family is the foundation of Japanese society and is bound together by a strong sense of reputation, obligation, and responsibility. A person's actions reflect on the family, and as people are often called by their family name, they are continually reminded of that. Affection, spending time together, and spousal compatibility are less important than in other cultures.

Japanese society's emphasis on work and career greatly affects family life. Employers have rigid expectations as to the amount of time employees devote to their jobs, making it difficult for full-time employees to spend time with their families. Parental leave is difficult to take without jeopardizing a career.

Long commutes, long work hours, and business obligations outside of working hours often make it difficult for urban fathers to spend time with their children. In rural families where fathers may not have such obligations, fathers are able to spend more time with their children. Divorce and single parenthood are rare but increasing, and there are economic pressures and social stigmas associated with both. Society, however, is becoming more accepting of single parents.

Parents and Children

Families generally have two children. Before children start school, they are relatively free and are disciplined only gently. As children grow, discipline usually becomes more strict, and children are taught and disciplined to be aware of the collective good. Often the school plays a primary role in disciplining a child and may not refer infractions to the child's parents. Families place great emphasis on their children's education and make it possible for children to entirely devote themselves to their studies. Children are often given only light chores because their primary responsibility is to study. Though rare, some high school students may move into a small apartment closer to their high school. Parents might pay for *juku* (cram schools) to help their children get better scores on the standardized entrance exams. Most parents pay for the entirety of their children's college education. Children tend to move out of the parental home only upon marriage or in the event of a job transfer.

The declining birth rate, coupled with the population's high life expectancy (the longest in the world), is changing the structure of the family. Traditionally, elderly parents were cared for at home, which also enabled them to be an influence in the lives of their grandchildren. Most adult children, especially an oldest son, feel an obligation to live with and take care of their parents as they age. However, many obstacles (including time and ability) pose problems to caring for the elderly, who may live a long time with chronic diseases. The demographic changes are beginning to be a source of tension for individual families and the entire society. Nursing homes are becoming a more viable option for long-term care of the elderly.

Gender Roles

While the father is the head of the home, the mother is responsible for managing household affairs, including finances, and raising children. Traditionally, it was considered improper for a woman to have a job. Today, about half of working-age women work, though their positions are usually lower than those held by men. Young women often quit work after marrying, and those married women who do work outside the home often have part-time or temporary positions as opposed to the full-time permanent positions that men are expected to commit to.

Housing

Urban

Living situations are usually cramped in cities. Many urban residents live in apartments. Apartments come in a variety of sizes and layouts, but a typical urban apartment has two bedrooms. The main room is a combination living room, dining room, and kitchen. Apartment complexes are made with concrete or wooden exteriors of varying design.

Rural

Homes are more spacious in suburban and rural settings, where there might be room for a vegetable garden or a Japanese garden (which often features water, small bridges, rocks or stones, and lanterns) with well-manicured trees. A small plot of land can produce a good deal of rice, so flat land is quite valuable. Rural homes are usually made of wood with tiled roofs and are painted white. They generally consist of an open kitchen and dining area, which is divided from bedrooms and guest rooms by *fusuma* (sliding paper doors). Older rural homes often feature a glass-enclosed veranda, which functions as a sunroom.

Home Life

Many homes feature some elements of traditional Japanese décor, such as a *tokonoma* (a wall alcove in which flowers or hanging scrolls are displayed) and *fusuma* (which can be opened to turn two small rooms into a larger one). A traditional bed, called a *futon*, lies on *tatami* (woven mat) flooring. To increase space during the day, the *futon* is folded up and kept in a closet. While many people still use a *futon*, Western-style beds are becoming increasingly popular, especially in urban areas.

Homes usually contain an entryway, where shoes are removed and stored. Floors are slightly elevated from the entryway, so guests and residents step up when they enter a house or an apartment, after putting on slippers. Bathrooms contain a shower—usually installed close to the ground and used while sitting—and a deep bathtub. Bathtubs are used for post-shower soaking, and a whole family might use the same water. Toilets are located in a separate room, in which one wears a specific pair of slippers. Washers may be located in bathrooms, and clothes are generally hung outside to dry. Most kitchens have gas stoves and a small gas grill for cooking fish. Ovens are rare; instead, people may use toaster ovens or microwaves with an oven function for baking.

Most homes are not equipped with central heat or air conditioning. People purchase their own fans, space heaters, or air conditioners. Rooms may also be heated with a *kotatsu* (a table with an electric heating unit underneath and a duvet that wraps around the table and covers the legs of people

sitting around the table). A room with a *kotatsu* is most likely decorated in traditional Japanese style—that is, having walls with a muted color and furniture that is low to the ground.

Ownership

In cities residents tend to be renters, and in rural areas residents tend to be owners. Roughly half the population owns a home. Many young people save money for a house while living with their parents, and parents often help children pay the large deposits banks require to secure a mortgage. Very often the eldest son inherits his parents' home. The upkeep of older homes can be expensive, and deteriorating materials that are required to meet continually improving earthquake standards make older homes undesirable. Land is worth more than houses, so people tend to either tear down old houses and rebuild or buy new homes.

Japanese companies tend to employ people for life but transfer them to new offices every three to four years. The expectation of constant relocation means that families tend to buy homes where they intend to retire, rather than homes that are close to their places of work. Mothers and children might live in such a house while fathers commute long distances or rent small apartments near the office, coming home only on weekends.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Some Japanese youth begin dating around age 15, though most have little free time or spending money at that age. In college, people have more time and opportunity to date. Couples meet through school, clubs, and friends who set up *gokon*. A *gokon* is a group blind date in which a couple invites a small group of their friends to a restaurant for drinks and to get to know one another. Some people turn to a matchmaker (generally an older female relative or friend) to introduce them to local singles looking to marry. After a series of formal introductions in which parents and the matchmaker are present, couples who like each other continue dating on their own. In the past, people may have met using an *omiai* (introduction service), but today internet dating is becoming more popular. Most couples avoid public displays of affection.

Engagement

A *yuino* (engagement ceremony) involving the couple's parents occurs after the groom has asked the bride to marry him. The groom and his parents visit the bride and her parents at her home or a restaurant. According to tradition, the groom's family offers *yuinomono* (gifts that are decorated with origami turtles and cranes, symbols of eternity and long life) to the bride's family. *Yuinohin* is money traditionally offered to the bride's family during the *yuino*. While some families follow these traditions, more commonly the families share a meal to get to know each other and decide on the details of the wedding. If the families live far apart, they may simply meet the day before the wedding ceremony to have a meal or drinks together.

Marriage in Society

Men and women usually marry in their late twenties or early thirties. Marriages are legalized once the couple submits a marriage certificate at a local municipal government office.

Same-sex marriage is not legal in Japan. In 2015, Tokyo's Shibuya ward (municipality) issued its first certificate recognizing same-sex unions; however, these are not legally binding.

Weddings

A wedding is a serious event that celebrates the joining of two families. Weddings can be elaborate and expensive. The cost of a wedding is usually split evenly between the groom's and bride's families, although guests also contribute cash gifts—presented in elaborately decorated envelopes to the bride—to offset the costs. Some of these cash gifts, especially those given by family members, may be returned to compensate guests for travel costs.

The bride and groom commonly give gifts such as plates or glasses to their guests. Couples navigate complex traditional wedding etiquette and the symbolism of gift giving with the help of wedding planners and etiquette guides. Wedding ceremonies generally consist of three major events: *kekkonshiki* (the wedding ceremony), attended by family and sometimes friends; *hiroen* (the reception party), attended by family, close friends, and selected coworkers; and finally, *nijikai* (the "after party" or "second party"), which includes all wedding guests plus friends and coworkers who could not attend the reception).

Although Western-style white weddings are very common in Japan, many couples are married in Shinto ceremonies, which can take place at temples or, more commonly, at hotels or wedding halls with small Shinto temples built in them. A Shinto priest officiates at the ceremony, which is attended only by close family. The couple is ritually purified, drinks *sake* (a rice-based alcoholic beverage), exchanges rings, and makes a ceremonial offering to the gods. The couple wear traditional *kimono* for the ceremony.

After the ceremony, the couple is announced at the reception, where friends, coworkers, and family have gathered. At the reception, friends and relatives give speeches, sing songs, and enjoy a formal meal. It is common also for the bride and groom to invite their bosses to give a speech about what kind of work they do and what kind of workers they are. Receptions may also include more recent additions such as slideshows of the bride and groom as children and games and prizes for guests. The bride and groom often change outfits several times, including Western wedding outfits for photographs and socializing and different clothing for an evening party. Female guests wear either *kimono* or dresses, and men wear dark suits.

Life Cycle

Birth

During the fifth month of pregnancy, a family might go to a Shinto shrine and ask the gods for a safe birth. The priest presents the mother with a *haraobi* (a long white sash with a picture of a dog on it), which represents an easy birth. The sash is wrapped around and under the pregnant woman's stomach to support her back and keep her belly warm. The sash is replaced or re-blessed every 12 days. Babies are delivered in hospitals and stay with the mother there for about a week. Traditionally, the new mother goes to her parents' house for 20 to 30 days after leaving the hospital. During this

time the baby's grandmother looks after the mother.

On the seventh day after the birth, called *oshichiya*, the baby's name is announced and family and friends gather for a meal. Among more religious families, a plaque with the baby's name written in calligraphy is hung on the wall. Naming a baby in Japanese is complicated because many considerations must be weighed, such as the number of *kanji* (Chinese characters) in the name, their pronunciation (based on the different readings *kanji* can have), the number of strokes in the *kanji*, and how they sound and look with the last name. Some families consult Shinto shrines to determine the most auspicious name for their child. Girls' names tend to be taken from nature, for example, *Yukiko* (child of snow), while concepts like justice, peace, or abundance (*Noboru*) are common for boys. When a newborn is a month to one hundred days old, his or her parents bring the child to a Shinto shrine for a ceremonial blessing. The blessing, called *omiyamairi*, is performed to thank the gods for a healthy birth and to ask the local deity (associated with natural objects like trees, rivers, and mountains) to bless and accept the baby as part of the local shrine.

Milestones

Each year on 15 November, a festival called *Shichigosan* (which literally means "seven five three") celebrates the well-being of young children. Boys take part when they are three and five years old, girls when they are three and seven. Parents dress their children in *kimono* and take them to Shinto shrines, where families pray for the children's good health. Children are given long paper bags filled with candy and decorated with turtles and cranes (which represent longevity). A family portrait is often taken at a photo studio.

Young people are considered adults at age 20. After this age, a person can legally purchase alcohol, smoke, and vote. The second Monday in January is Coming of Age Day, when those who have turned 20 within the last year are honored as becoming adults in a ceremony called *Seijinshiki*. Young women have their hair professionally styled and wear *furisode kimono* (elegant *kimono* with long sleeves). Men wear *kimono* or suits. At the *Seijinshiki*, which takes place at city hall, the new adults listen to speeches by government officials about their responsibility to be proper members of society. Afterward, the young people pose for pictures and attend parties.

One's sixtieth birthday, or *kanreki*, is cause for a special celebration. The person wears a traditional red sleeveless *kimono* jacket and is presented with gifts by his or her children and grandchildren. It is common for a 60-year-old to take a trip or to enjoy a nice meal out with the family.

Death

Traditional funerals are formal affairs, though there is a trend toward more casual gatherings where people reminisce about the deceased. Funeral guests are expected to contribute money, presented in a special black-and-white envelope, to offset the cost of the funeral. The family gives guests a gift in return, usually a household item (such as a blanket or plate) that will remind them of the deceased. The body of the deceased is generally returned to its home, where it remains for one night while a Buddhist monk prays and burns incense. Bodies are cremated, not buried. After a funeral, a Buddhist

monk comes to the home to pray for the deceased weekly for 49 days. After the 49th day, the ashes of the deceased are moved from the home to the graveyard. The family might also clean the grave on the anniversary of the death and on the Obon holiday, in August. White chrysanthemums are commonly used for decorations at funerals. The family generally buys a *butsudan* (altar) for their home, on which they place offerings and a photo of the deceased.

Diet

The Japanese diet consists largely of rice, fresh vegetables, seafood, fruit, and small portions of meat. Most dishes use soy sauce, fish broth, or sweet *sake* (alcohol made from fermented rice). Rice and tea are part of almost every meal. Western food (such as U.S. fast food) is increasingly popular, especially among the youth. Popular Japanese foods include *miso* (bean paste) soup, noodles (*ramen* egg noodles, *udon* wheat noodles, and *soba* buckwheat noodles), curry and rice, *sashimi* (thinly sliced raw fish), tofu, and pork. *Shabu-shabu*, Japanese hot pot, is a popular meal eaten at a restaurant or home. Sushi is made usually with a combination of fish (cooked or raw) and lightly vinegared rice. Sometimes a vegetable, such as cucumber, or an egg roll is added to the dish or used instead of fish. Sushi wrapped in dried seaweed (*nori*) is called *norimaki*. While sushi can be bought at *kaiten* sushi bars (restaurants that serve sushi from a conveyor belt) for as little as one U.S. dollar, good quality sushi and *sashimi* is expensive and usually reserved for special occasions.

Recreation

Sports

Badminton, soft tennis (a kind of tennis played with a soft white ball), table tennis, soccer, and basketball are all popular sports. Students learn how to play most sports at school. Baseball, brought to Japan in the 1870s by a professor from the United States, is the country's most popular sport. It is highly competitive at all levels. The entire country follows the annual national high school championships. Teams often bow to the field or court at the beginning and end of practice. Hiking and mallet golf (like miniature golf but played with croquet-like mallets and a hard ball slightly bigger than a tennis ball) are popular with retired couples. Golf, while expensive, is popular among men. The Japanese also enjoy traditional sports such as sumo wrestling (a popular spectator sport), judo, *kendo* (fencing with bamboo poles), and karate. Tokyo has been selected to host the 2020 Summer Olympic Games.

Leisure

During their leisure time, people enjoy television, karaoke, movies, video games, and nature outings. Employees with intense jobs might use their leisure to time catch up on sleep or spend time with family. Many enjoy reading books, comics, and magazines; simply standing and reading magazines at the store is a popular pastime. Pachinko parlors can be found in many parts of Japan. Cities usually have community education centers where classes are offered, and elderly people in particular enjoy pursuing artistic hobbies such as ceramics, woodblock print making, painting, calligraphy, flower arranging, and traditional Japanese dance.

Some activities vary according to the season. In the spring, people enjoy picnics under the cherry blossoms in public parks. In the summer, there are large firework displays and festivals. In the fall, people often visit parks to see the leaves changing colors. Winter activities include skiing and snowboarding and regional festivals. During the winter, some schools flood the soccer field to turn it into a skating rink.

Vacation

Because annual school holidays are fairly uniform across the country, most of the country takes vacation at the same time, typically in the summer. Local destinations fill up quickly, and the price of plane tickets increases significantly at this time. Popular domestic destinations include the shrines and temples of Kyoto and package tours of theme parks, such as Tokyo Disney and Universal Studios Japan. Urban families often take trips to the beach or visit relatives.

The Arts

In Japan, Western arts such as symphonic music and ballets are common, but many important traditional arts exist. Older adults favor puppet theater (*bunraku*) and highly stylized drama (*noh* and *kabuki*). *Kabuki* is known for spectacular sets and costumes. Like *noh*, it blends dance, music, and acting. The Japanese also attend musical concerts. *Gagaku* is one of the oldest types of Japanese music. It is played with string and wind instruments and drums. Pop music is a major part of Japanese culture.

Calligraphy (*shodo*) is well respected. Haiku, a form of poetry developed in the 17th century, in which writers portray scenes from Japanese life and nature, is also popular. Flower arranging (*ikebana*) has been evolving since the sixth century. The tea ceremony (*sado*), prescribing precise details of the tea's preparation and serving, is an art form originating in the 16th century. Woodblock printing (*ukiyo-e*) is another traditional art form that has been around since the 17th century. Modern art includes *manga* (comics) and *anime* (animation), both of which are immensely popular.

Holidays

National holidays include New Year's, Coming of Age Day (also called Adults' Day, second Monday in January), National Foundation Day (11 February), Emperor Naruhito's Birthday (23 February), Vernal Equinox (in March), Golden Week (29 April–5 May), Maritime Day (third Monday in July), Respect for the Aged Day (third Monday in September), Autumnal Equinox (in September), Fitness Day (second Monday in October), Culture Day (3 November), and Labor Thanksgiving Day (23 November).

Importance of Holidays

Japan's three major holiday seasons are the New Year, Golden Week, and the Obon festival. Golden Week (29 April–5 May) combines the holidays of Shōwa Day (29 April, honoring Emperor Hirohito), Constitution Day (3 May), Greenery Day (4 May, celebrating nature's beauty), and Children's Day (5 May). Aside from these three major holiday seasons, many national holidays are relatively modern and hold little significance for the average Japanese, besides providing a welcome day off from school or work. For example, few people celebrate Maritime Day or Respect for

the Aged Day.

New Year's

People generally take several days off from work surrounding New Year's. People also visit shrines and relatives during this time. Many people also send out New Year's cards to friends and family. The post office collects these cards and delivers them all on the first of January. Children receive money from their parents or grandparents. Families put up special decorations and eat special foods, such as *mochi* (pounded sticky rice).

Obon Festival

The Obon festival takes place over several days in mid-August, with dates varying by region. Traditionally, Obon is the time of year when the spirits of deceased ancestors returned home. While some families have household shrines for their deceased ancestors where they can make frequent offerings, Obon is important because the family gathers to make an offering at the burial site. The family often cleans the grave and places there incense or an offering of food and drink the deceased liked. Obon is also a time to meet up with friends from childhood.

Other Festivals

In addition to national holidays, hundreds of festivals are held around the country, at which stalls are set up to sell street food and house games for kids. Children's dance troupes are commonly featured as well. During spring there are festivals celebrating the cherry blossoms, and during the summer, those that celebrate the rice harvest. Some festivals include the procession of a Shinto deity in a portable shrine, carried by men wearing jackets called *happi*. Other popular festivals include *Hadaka Matsuri* (Naked Festival, where participants wear a minimum of clothing), *Onbashira* (The Log Festival, during which participants cut down a tree and erect the log near a Shinto shrine), and *Honen Matsuri* (Harvest Festival, celebrating fertility). Some are held yearly, while others (like *Onbashira*) occur only every six or seven years. Most holidays are rooted in religious tradition, but some are modern inventions. Some cities declare days off for the festivals, while other festivals are held on the weekend.

Other Holidays

A growing number of Japanese celebrate Christmas, Valentine's Day, and White Day. Though few Japanese are Christian, it is not uncommon for people to celebrate Christmas by getting together with friends and eating Christmas cake (cream-filled sponge cake decorated with strawberries) and sometimes fried chicken (both of which are viewed as common Western Christmas foods). On Valentine's Day (14 February), girls give chocolates to boys in whom they are interested. Boys reciprocate their interest on White Day (14 March) by giving girls chocolates or decorated boxes of cookies.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

Japan is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary government. Emperor Naruhito is head of state but has no

governing power, though the emperor is deeply respected by the Japanese people. The monarchy is hereditary. Traditionally, the emperor's line was allowed to pass only through men, but in recent years, there have been discussions about amending the succession laws to include women, because the number of men in line for the throne has drastically decreased. The prime minister is head of government. The legislature designates the prime minister, who is usually the leader of the majority party there.

Japan's legislature, called the *Diet*, consists of a 242-seat House of Councilors (the upper house) and a 475-seat House of Representatives (the lower house). Councilors are directly elected to six-year terms; representatives are directly elected to four-year terms. The *Diet* is filled through a combination of majoritarian and proportional representation elections. More than one hundred seats in the *Diet* are held by second or third generations of a family, as voter loyalty to local political families is often stronger than a desire for qualified candidates.

Political Landscape

Several political parties are active in Japan, though the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has maintained firm power in Japanese politics for all but a few years since the end of World War II. The LDP's current major rival is the center-left Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). The DPJ was formed in 1998 with the merging of several other parties.

Party ideologies in Japan are sometimes not very well defined, which means that individuals within a party may share quite different views on how to address important issues in Japanese politics. These issues include the status of Japan's nuclear energy program following the Fukushima disaster; years of slow economic growth; Japan's aging population and low birth rate; and differing interpretations of Article 9 of Japan's constitution, which prohibits Japan from engaging in war.

A major political dynamic of Japanese politics is known as the "iron triangle," which describes the relationship between the *Diet* (practically speaking, the LDP), the government bureaucracy, and Japan's business conglomerates. Close relationships among these three groups have allowed Japan to become an economic superpower but have also contributed to corruption and a lack of transparency.

Government and the People

Japan's constitution protects a variety of freedoms and prohibits many forms of discrimination. The government generally respects constitutional freedoms and combats unconstitutional discrimination. The government is able to provide a range of goods and services to its citizens. Corruption surrounding the relationship between big business and the government in Japan has historically been a problem, though recent efforts have been made to reduce corruption. Elections are generally free, fair, and transparent. In recent years, voter turnout has ranged between 50 and 60 percent. The voting age is 18.

Economy

Japan has one of the world's largest economies even though it has few natural resources and imports most raw materials. Also, because only about 11 percent of the land is suitable for

cultivation, Japan imports nearly half of its food supply. Major local crops include rice, sugar, vegetables, tea, and fruit. Japan is a leading supplier of fish. Nearly all exports are manufactured items, including automobiles, electronic equipment, and televisions. Major industries include machinery, metals, engineering, electronics, textiles, and chemicals. The United States is Japan's biggest trading partner. An economic downturn of the 1990s badly damaged the economy, which has remained largely stagnant ever since. The 2008 global economic crisis led to a sharp decline in world demand for Japan's exports, a factor in pushing the economy into recession. Local and international economic markets were also damaged as a result of the massive earthquake in early 2011. Despite eventual economic growth after the earthquake, the economy again fell into recession in November 2014. The currency is the *yen* (JPY).

Transportation and Communications

A highly developed, efficient mass-transit system of trains and buses is the principal mode of transportation in urban areas. Bullet trains (*Shinkansen*) provide rapid transportation between major cities. Subways are also available. Many people have private cars. Traffic is often heavy in large cities. Japan has five international airports.

Its communications system is modern and well developed. Most people have cellular phones and are regular internet users. Newspapers and magazines are widely read. The press is generally free of direct government interference, though close relationships between media, government, and business sometimes lead to self-censorship.

Education

Structure and Access

Education is highly valued in Japanese society. Students are expected to try their hardest in school and take academics seriously. Primary school begins at age six and lasts six years. At age 12, students enter junior high school, which lasts three years. High school, also three years long, follows. Education is compulsory and free in public schools from ages six to fifteen. After age 15, students must pay tuition to continue their studies in high school. Parents must cover expenses such as uniforms, textbooks, school trips, and, if necessary, fees for private *juku* (cram schools, which focus on making sure individual students perform at their expected level while preparing them for difficult secondary school entrance exams).

Most children attend three years of day care (*hoikuen*) before they enter the official school system. Because education is such a large part of childhood, beginning kindergarten (*yochien*) is a big step in a child's life. Kindergarten students walk to school by themselves and are expected to be responsible for their behavior at school. Once children have entered school, they are expected to be prepared and prompt.

Almost all children go to public schools. Some private schools focus on teaching students who did not perform well on standardized tests. Other students attend prestigious private schools, provided they pass difficult entrance exams (even at the kindergarten level). Some prestigious public or

private high schools are "attached" to competitive universities, which gives graduates from these schools an advantage during the application process (for example, by allowing them to bypass standard entrance exams) and can aid in finding a job in the future.

School Life

The public school curriculum is set at the national level and is generally uniform across the country. This uniformity can lead to inflexibility, preventing teachers from adjusting their teaching for students with different learning styles. In elementary school, much of the focus is on learning the difficult reading and writing system. At all levels, the curriculum stresses math and sciences and places heavy emphasis on standardized testing. Students must pass an exam in order to enter a public high school. Those students who do not pass usually enter a private high school instead. Parents often enroll their children in *juku* schools (which hold lessons after regular schools hours and on weekends) to help them prepare for these tests. While technically it is legal to enter the work force at the end of junior high school, it is virtually impossible to find a job, so the majority of students attend senior high school.

In junior high, students spend much of their time at school participating in clubs and activities intended to foster group spirit. It is not unusual for students to practice sports or attend activities before school, on the weekend, and in the evenings. Elementary schools do not have clubs and a student's extracurricular time during high school is dedicated to preparing for entrance exams, so junior high is the time when life-long friends are made.

Higher Education

University entrance exams are rigorous, and competition among students is intense. Students study for years and cram for months to take them. Getting into the most prestigious schools is more important than one's ultimate performance at that school. Once a student passes the right tests and enters a junior technical college (resulting in an associate-level degree) or university (a bachelor's and advanced degree-issuing institution), the academic expectations are less strenuous. Graduation from the nation's top universities usually guarantees students well-paying jobs.

Health

The Japanese enjoy one of the highest standards of health in the world, with a very low infant mortality rate and a high life expectancy rate. Medical facilities are very good. Companies are generally responsible for providing insurance benefits to employees and their families. In addition to a yearly physical offered by the employer, cities provide screening exams for people based on their age and gender. A government health insurance plan exists for the self-employed and unemployed. Pollution in urban centers ranks among the nation's major health concerns.

AT A GLANCE

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Country and Development Data

Capital	_____	Tokyo
Population	_____	126,168,156 (rank=10)
Area (sq. mi.)	_____	145,914 (rank=61)
Area (sq. km.)	_____	377,915
Human Development Index	_____	19 of 188 countries
Gender Inequality Index	_____	22 of 188 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	_____	\$42,900
Adult Literacy	_____	99%
Infant Mortality	_____	2 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	_____	81 (male); 87 (female)
Currency	_____	Yen

Japan profile - Timeline

- 26 April 2019

A chronology of key events:

1853 - US fleet forces Japan to open up to foreign influence after over 200 years of self-imposed isolation.

1868 - End of centuries of rule by Shogun military caste, Empire of Japan proclaimed, and country enters period of rapid industrialisation and trading dominance over East Asia.

1894-95 - Japan goes to war with China, and its better-equipped forces win victory in just nine months. China cedes Taiwan and permits Japan to trade on mainland.

Capital: Tokyo



Quake-prone Tokyo lies at the intersection of continental plates

- Comprises the 'shi' (inner city) and 'to' (metropolis)
- Population: 12.4 million (2003 estimate)

Japan's 2011 earthquake

1904 - Japan becomes first Asian country in modern times to defeat an European power when it routs Russia in Manchuria.

1910 - Japan annexes Korea after three years of fighting, becoming one of the world's leading powers.

1914 - Japan joins World War I on the side of Britain and her allies, gaining some Pacific islands from Germany at the end of the war.

1918-1922 - Japan tries to establish buffer zone against Bolshevik regime in Russia's Pacific provinces, forced out by British and US diplomatic pressure and domestic opposition.

1923 - Earthquake in Tokyo region kills more than 100,000 people.

British Empire ends 21-year alliance with Japan, signalling Western and US apprehension of Japan's growing power in East Asia.

1925 - Universal male suffrage is instituted. The electorate increases fivefold.

Ultra-nationalism and war

Late 1920s - Extreme nationalism begins to take hold in Japan as world economic depression hits. The emphasis is on a preservation of traditional Japanese values, and a rejection of "Western" influence.

World's oldest monarchy



Emperor Akihito, heads the world's oldest hereditary monarchy

- Until 1945 emperors had the status of living gods
- Currently, only males can succeed to the throne
- Princess Kiko gave birth to a baby boy in September 2006, potentially resolving a succession crisis

Royal birth sparks succession debate

1931 - Japanese army invades Chinese province of Manchuria, installs puppet regime.

1932 - Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi killed during failed coup by nationalist army officers. Military holds increasing influence in the country.

1936 - Japan signs alliance with Nazi Germany.

1937 - Japan goes to war with China, capturing Shanghai, Beijing and Nanjing amid atrocities like the "Rape of Nanjing", in which up to 300,000 Chinese civilians were killed.

1939 - Outbreak of Second World War in Europe. With fall of France in 1940, Japan moves to occupy French Indo-China.

Attack on Pearl Harbor

1941 - Japan launches a surprise attack on US Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. US and main allies declare war on Japan.

1942 - Japan occupies succession of countries, including Philippines, Dutch East Indies, Burma and Malaya. In June, US aircraft carriers defeat the Japanese at the Battle of Midway. The US begins a strategy of "island-hopping", cutting the Japanese support lines as its forces advance.

1944 - US forces are near enough to Japan to start bombing raids on Japanese cities.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki

1945 - US planes drop two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August. Emperor Hirohito surrenders and relinquishes divine status. Japan placed under US military government. All Japanese military and naval forces disbanded.

1947 - New constitution comes into force, establishes parliamentary system with all adults eligible to vote. Japan renounces war and pledges not to maintain land, sea or air forces for that purpose. Emperor granted ceremonial status.

1951 - Japan signs peace treaty with US and other nations. To this day, there is no peace treaty with Russia, as the legal successor to the Soviet Union.

Independence

1952 - Japan regains independence. US retains several islands for military use, including Okinawa.

1955 - Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) formed. Apart from brief interludes, party governs into 21st century.

1956 - Japan joins United Nations.

1964 - Olympic Games held in Tokyo.

1972 - Japanese prime minister visits China and normal diplomatic relations are resumed. Japan subsequently closes embassy in Taiwan.

Okinawa is returned to Japanese sovereignty, but US retains bases there.

1982 - Japanese car firm Honda opens its first plant in the US.

1989 - Emperor Hirohito dies, succeeded by Akihito.

Aum Shinrikyo cult



- 1995 attack on the Tokyo underground claimed 12 lives, injured more than 5,500
- Aum Shinrikyo was founded by Shoko Asahara in 1987 and drew thousands of followers
- Asahara was sentenced to death in 2004 over the Tokyo attack

Aum's lingering legacy

Rise of Japanese cults

1993 July - Elections held against a background of bribery scandals and economic decline see the LDP ousted for the first time since 1955. A seven-party coalition takes power.

1993 August - Government issues historic "Kono statement" apologising for Japanese military's war-time use of sex slaves.

1994 - The anti-LDP coalition collapses. An administration supported by the LDP and the Socialists takes over.

Natural and man-made disasters

1995 January - An earthquake hits central Japan, killing thousands and causing widespread damage. The city of Kobe is hardest hit.

1995 March - A religious sect, Aum Shinrikyo, releases the deadly nerve gas sarin on the Tokyo underground railway system. Twelve people are killed and thousands are injured.

Rape of a local schoolgirl by US servicemen based on Okinawa sparks mass protests demanding the removal of US forces from the island.

1997 - The economy enters a severe recession.

2001 March - A Japanese court overturns compensation order for Korean women forced to work as sex slaves during WW II.

Koizumi at helm

2001 April - Junichiro Koizumi becomes new LDP leader and prime minister.

2001 April - Trade dispute with China after Japan imposes import tariffs on Chinese agricultural products. China retaliates with import taxes on Japanese vehicles and other manufactured goods.

2001 August - Koizumi pays homage at the Yasukuni shrine dedicated to the country's war dead, provoking protests from Japan's neighbours. The memorial also honours war criminals.

Yasukuni shrine

- Remembers Japan's 2.5m war dead
- Monument also venerates convicted war criminals
- Ceremonies at the shrine raise hackles across Asia

Japan's controversial shrine

2001 October - Koizumi visits Seoul and offers an apology for the suffering South Korea endured under his country's colonial rule.

2002 September - Koizumi becomes the first Japanese leader to visit North Korea. North Korean leader Kim Jong-il apologises for abductions of Japanese citizens in 1970s and 1980s and confirms that eight of them are dead. Five Japanese nationals return home.

2003 December - Government announces decision to install "purely defensive" US-made missile shield.

Iraq deployment

2004 February - Non-combat soldiers arrive in Iraq in first Japanese deployment in combat zone since World War II.

2005 September - PM Koizumi wins a landslide victory in early general elections.

2006 July - The last contingent of Japanese troops leaves Iraq.

Abe takes over

2006 September - Shinzo Abe succeeds Junichiro Koizumi as prime minister.

2006 December - Parliament approves the creation of a fully-fledged defence ministry, the first since World War II.

2007 April - Wen Jiabao becomes first Chinese prime minister to address the Japanese parliament. Mr Wen says both sides have succeeded in warming relations.

2007 August - On the 62nd anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II, almost the entire cabinet stays away from the Yasukuni shrine. Prime Minister Abe says he has no plans to visit the shrine for as long as the issue continues to be a diplomatic problem.

Abe steps down

2007 September - Prime Minister Shinzo Abe resigns, is replaced by Yasuo Fukuda.

Shinto religion



Shinto rites are central to the daily life of followers

- Rigidly enforced state religion until the 1950s
- Followers venerate "kami", spirits who number in the millions
- Shinto has no founder, major scriptures or ethical laws
- Tens of thousands of Shinto shrines dot the country

BBC Religion and Ethics - Shinto

2008 June - Japan and China reach a deal for the joint development of a gas field in the East China Sea, resolving a four-year-old dispute.

2008 September - Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda resigns. Former foreign minister Taro Aso appointed as new premier.

2008 November - General Toshio Tamogami, head of Japan's air force, loses his job after writing an essay seeking to justify Japan's role in the second world war.

2009 February - Economics Minister Kaoru Yosano says Japan is facing worst economic crisis since World War II, after figures show its economy shrank by 3.3% in last quarter.

LDP defeated

2009 August - Opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) wins general election by a landslide, ending more than 50 years of nearly unbroken rule by the Liberal Democratic Party.

2009 September - DPJ leader Yukio Hatoyama elected PM at head of coalition with Social Democratic Party and People's New Party.

Futenma: Controversial base

The US base on Okinawa has been a source of friction between the allies

No easy answers in Okinawa debate

Profile: Japan's Okinawa

2010 June - Prime Minister Hatoyama quits over failure to close US military base on Okinawa. Finance Minister Naoto Kan takes over.

2010 July - Ruling coalition loses majority in elections to the upper house of parliament.

Economic woes

2011 February - Japan is overtaken by China as world's second-largest economy.

2011 March - Huge offshore earthquake and subsequent tsunami devastate miles of shoreline. Damage to the Fukushima nuclear plant causes a radiation leak that leaves extensive areas uninhabitable and contaminates food supplies.

2011 August - Following severe criticism of his handling of the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear crisis, Prime Minister Naoto Kan steps down. He is succeeded by Yoshihiko Noda.

2011 December - The government announces a relaxation of Japan's self-imposed ban on arms exports. It says the move will allow the country to supply military equipment for humanitarian missions.

2012 June - The lower house of parliament approves a bill to double sales tax, in order to make up the income tax shortfall caused by an ageing population. The governing Democratic Party splits, but retains its lower house majority.

2012 July - Japan restarts the Ohi nuclear reactor, the first since the meltdown at the Fukushima power plant last year, amid local protests.

Islands rows

2012 August - Japan's economic growth slows to 0.3% from 1% in the second quarter as eurozone crisis hits exports and domestic consumption.

Japan recalls its ambassador to Seoul in protest at a visit to the Liancourt Rocks by South Korean President Lee Myung-bak. Both countries claim the islets, which Japan calls Takeshima and South Korea calls Dokdo.

2012 September - China cancels ceremonies to mark the 40th anniversary of restored diplomatic relations with Japan because of a public flare-up in a dispute over ownership of a group of islands in the East China Sea administered by Japan as the Senkaku Islands and claimed by China as the Diaoyu Islands. Taiwan also claims the islands.

Abe returns

2012 December - Opposition conservative Liberal Democratic Party wins landslide in early parliamentary elections. Former prime minister Shinzo Abe forms government on pledge of stimulating economic growth.

2013 May - Exports rise 10.1% - the fastest annual rate since 2010 - thanks to weaker yen, boosting Prime Minister Abe's economic recovery plan.

2013 July - Prime Minister Abe's coalition wins upper house elections, giving him control of both houses of parliament - a first for a prime minister in six years.

2013 September - Tokyo is chosen to host the 2020 Olympics.

New security strategy

2013 December - Japan approves the relocation of a US military airbase on its southern island of Okinawa. The base, which houses over 25,000 US troops, will be relocated to a less densely populated part of the island.

Japan's cabinet approves a new national security strategy and increased defence spending in a move widely seen as aimed at China.



Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government has approved record levels of defence spending

2014 July - Japan's government approves a landmark change in security policy, paving the way for its military to fight overseas.

A judicial panel recommends that three former executives of the TEPCO utility - which runs the damaged Fukushima nuclear plant - be indicted on criminal charges for their role in the 2011 disaster.

2014 December - The LDP-led government retains its large parliamentary majority in snap elections called by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to seek a fresh mandate for his economic policies, after Japan's economy slips back into recession mid-year.

2015 February - Economy re-emerges from recession in last quarter of 2014, although growth remains sluggish.

2015 July - Lower house of parliament backs bills allowing troops to fight overseas for first time since Second World War, prompting protests at home and criticism from China.

2015 August - Japan restarts first nuclear reactor at Sendai plant, under new safety rules following 2011 Fukushima disaster.

2016 April - At least 44 people die and more than 1,000 are injured as a result of two major earthquakes on the southern island of Kyushu. These and major aftershocks also leave at least 100,000 people displaced.

2016 August - Emperor Akihito indicates his readiness to abdicate in a rare video message to the public.

2017 June - Parliament passes a landmark bill allowing Emperor Akihito to abdicate.

2017 October - Prime Minister Abe's party and coalition partner win snap elections.

2017 November - Japan is to expand its military base in Djibouti, a move observers say may counterbalance China's growing international influence.

2019 April - Emperor Akihito abdicates in favour of his son, Crown Prince Naruhito.

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Country Report

Japan

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Symbols for tables

"0 or 0.0" means nil or negligible; "n/a" means not available; "-" means not applicable

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Briefing sheet

Editor: **Waqas Adenwala**

Forecast Closing Date: **August 27, 2019**

Political and economic outlook

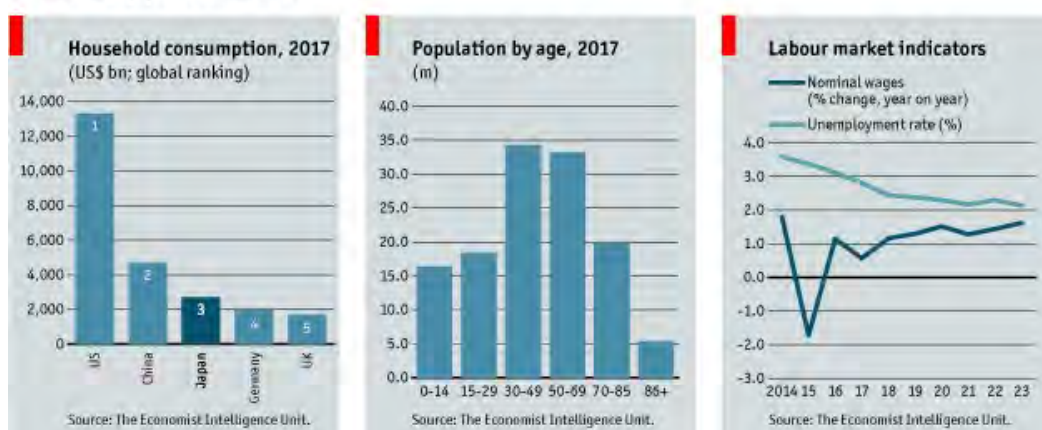
- The Economist Intelligence Unit expects Shinzo Abe, who is on course to be Japan's longest-serving prime minister, to complete his four-year term in 2021. The Liberal Democratic Party will remain the dominant party during our forecast period (2019-23).
- Relations with South Korea will remain frosty for the foreseeable future owing to unresolved historical issues. The countries' deteriorating economic ties will affect global supply chains, especially in the technology sector.
- Japan will seek to engage with North Korea, but progress will be limited, owing to historical issues. Japan will step up co-ordination with the US during the forecast period, while its relations with China will remain fraught.
- We expect the Bank of Japan (BOJ, the central bank) to make preparations to "normalise" its policy settings from 2021, when it is likely to announce a plan to taper its asset purchases. However, it will not raise the policy interest rate above zero until at least 2023.
- We forecast that real GDP will grow by an average of 0.9% per year in 2019-23. This steady performance will be interrupted temporarily in 2020 by softer growth in the US and China and the lingering impact of the consumption tax increase in October 2019.
- Inflationary pressures will pick up in late 2019 and 2020, owing to the increase in the consumption tax. However, inflation will still fail to reach the BOJ's price-stability target of 2% during the forecast period.

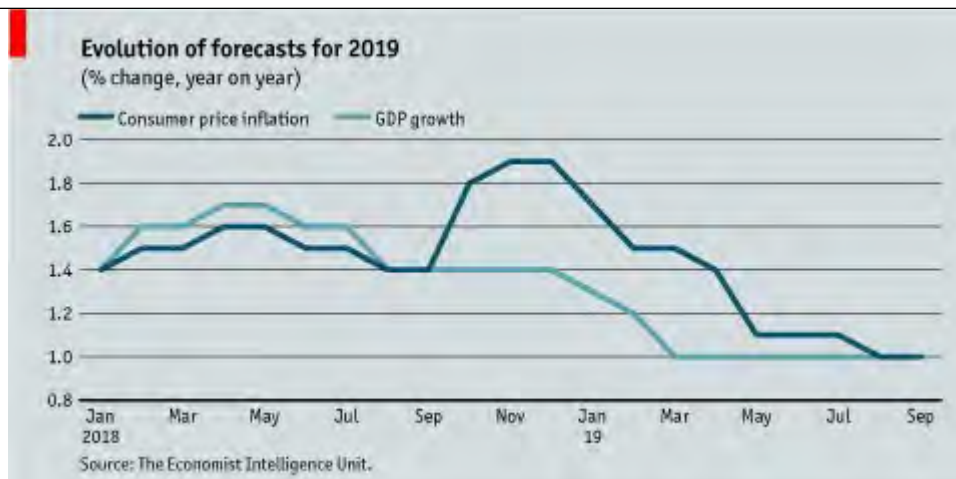
Key indicators

	2018 ^a	2019 ^b	2020 ^b	2021 ^b	2022 ^b	2023 ^b
Real GDP growth (%)	0.8	1.0	0.4	0.9	1.2	1.1
Consumer price inflation (av; %)	1.0	1.0	1.4	0.9	1.1	1.3
Government balance (% of GDP)	-2.5	-3.0	-2.8	-2.8	-2.9	-2.7
Current-account balance (% of GDP)	3.5 ^c	3.3	3.2	3.3	3.5	3.8
Money market rate (av; %)	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3
Unemployment rate (%)	2.4	2.4	2.3	2.2	2.3	2.1
Exchange rate ¥:US\$ (av)	110.4	108.2	107.8	104.9	100.5	96.1

^a Actual. ^b Economist Intelligence Unit forecasts. ^c Economist Intelligence Unit estimates.

Market opportunities





Key changes since July 22nd

- The yen will continue to strengthen due to safe-haven flows. We also expect the Federal Reserve (the US central bank) to loosen monetary policy. We now expect the yen to appreciate to an average of ¥108.2:US\$1 in 2019, from a previous forecast of ¥108.8:US\$1.
- Based on the latest data, we now expect Japan to record a trade deficit in 2019 owing to continued contraction in exports during the year. We expect merchandise exports to contract by 5.3% in 2019, compared with our previous forecast of a 2.4% fall.

The month ahead

- **September 9th—GDP (Q2):** According to the preliminary estimate, real GDP expanded by 1.2% year on year in the second quarter. We expect the revised figures to reaffirm the strong pace of growth as consumers bring forward their purchases ahead of the increase in the rate of consumption tax.
- **September TBA—Meeting between Shinzo Abe and Donald Trump:** The leaders of Japan and the US will meet on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September. With negotiations in their final stages, we expect the leaders to announce the terms of a bilateral trade deal during their meeting.

Major risks to our forecast

Scenarios, Q2 2019	Probability	Impact	Intensity
Japan becomes caught up in a global trade war initiated by the US	High	Very high	20
Foreign firms fail to overcome informal barriers	High	High	16
A strong earthquake hits the capital, Tokyo	Moderate	Very high	15
The increase in the consumption tax, planned for October 2019, is postponed again	Moderate	Very high	15
Corporations ignore government pleas to raise wages	High	Moderate	12

Note: Scenarios and scores are taken from our Risk Briefing product. Risk scenarios are potential developments that might substantially change the business operating environment over the coming two years. Risk intensity is a product of probability and impact, on a 25-point scale.

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit.

Outlook for 2019-23

Political stability

The Economist Intelligence Unit expects the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its junior coalition partner, the Komeito party, to remain dominant in the Diet (parliament) during 2019-23. We expect Shinzo Abe to remain leader of the LDP until his third and final term ends in August 2021, and thus to continue to serve as prime minister. His position is secured through the support he received from five out of the seven major LDP factions in the party leadership election held in September 2018.

The two main opposition parties, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan and the Democratic Party for the People, have decided to form a unified caucus in both houses of the Diet. However, the ruling coalition retains a parliamentary majority. The opposition parties also remain at odds over key issues, such as constitutional amendment. Thus, while the unified opposition will challenge the administration on issues such as recent scandals that have affected the labour and finance ministries, it will fail to pose any significant threat to political stability.

Meanwhile, the leading coalition failed to secure a two-thirds majority in the partial election for the House of Councillors (upper house) in July 2019. Consequently, Mr Abe will be unable to push through his plan of amending the constitution, which focused on legitimising the constitutional status of the Self-Defence Forces. Although a small opposition party, the Japan Innovation Party, supports this goal, Mr Abe faces criticism within the LDP itself. Some LDP factions prefer more far-reaching changes to the constitution at a later date than Mr Abe's proposals suggest. This includes the faction led by the LDP's former secretary-general, Shigeru Ishiba, who was the only candidate to challenge Mr Abe in the LDP's September 2018 leadership election. Most of the population see the current pacifist constitution as the bedrock of Japan's post-war peace and democracy and are wary of changing it. The failure of the LDP-Komeito coalition to secure a two-thirds majority in the upper house is a reflection of the fact that constitutional amendment is not a priority for voters.

Mr Abe remains unchallenged within the LDP. Several senior party officials and cabinet members, who are his close aides, lead their own strong factions. However, assuming that the party's constitution is not altered to extend the term of the party president, these officials will support a candidate from their own ranks to increase the influence of their faction. This will lead to deterioration in political stability towards the end of our forecast period.

Election watch

Following the election for half of the seats in the House of Councillors on July 21st, the ruling coalition now holds 141 of the 245 seats in the chamber. Although it retained its majority, it failed to secure the two-thirds majority required for the passage of key legislation, such as constitutional amendments.

The next poll for the House of Representatives (the lower house) is due in 2021, and we expect the LDP to retain its two-thirds majority. However, there have been numerous snap elections since the current constitution was adopted in 1947; Mr Abe himself called snap polls in 2014 and 2017. If the LDP's approval ratings increase, he may call another snap lower-house election, which would entrench the party's power for at least another four years. However, we do not expect such a poll to take place until 2020.

International relations

Relations with the US, Japan's main security ally and its second-largest trade partner, will remain close. However, volatile foreign policy under the US president, Donald Trump, will test long-established ties. Trade protectionism has become a focal point for Mr Trump, and he is determined to narrow the US's trade deficit with Japan. There is a risk that he could impose tariffs on the automotive sector on grounds of national security; he is expected to make a final decision in November. Although Japan prefers multilateral trade deals, it has engaged in bilateral trade negotiations with the US, as a deal might exempt Japan from the possible imposition of automotive tariffs.

Japan remains cautious about the security threat posed by North Korea and is determined to resolve the issue of the abduction of its citizens by that country's regime in the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, it has recently softened its stance towards North Korea and intends to establish direct bilateral engagement. In March it decided for the first time in ten years not to submit a resolution to the UN on human rights abuses in North Korea. Mr Abe also offered to meet the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, without any preconditions. However, Kim Jong-un will continue to sideline Japan, owing to historical grievances relating to Japan's colonial rule. By contrast, he has already met his counterparts from the US, China, Russia and South Korea.

Relations with South Korea will be frosty. Public sentiment in South Korea remains sour towards Japan, owing to disagreements over historical issues such as "comfort women" (who were forced into sex slavery for Japan's military during the second world war) and Korean labourers forced to work for Japanese firms during the colonial era. Economic ties will deteriorate further, as both countries have removed each other from their "whitelist" of preferred trading partners. Security ties will also suffer, as South Korea has scrapped a bilateral intelligence-sharing accord. A long-running territorial dispute over the Takeshima islets (known as Dokdo in South Korea) will also endure.

Ties with China will remain fraught in 2019-23, but both countries are mutually interested in improving economic ties. They will participate in trilateral trade talks with South Korea, although these will not conclude during the forecast period. Japan and China have opened talks on their dispute over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea (known in China as the Diaoyu Islands). These could yield agreements designed to reduce the risks stemming from potential clashes in the area, but the dispute will not be resolved in 2019-23.

Neither will Japan succeed in resolving its dispute with Russia over the Northern Territories (known in Russia as the Southern Kuril Islands), as Russia will not be keen to cede territory. Meanwhile, Japan will continue to expand its influence in the Mekong region by funding infrastructure development, as highlighted at the tenth Mekong-Japan summit in October 2018. Japan also plans to extend its diplomatic outreach to Africa by focusing on development initiatives; it was due to host African leaders at the end of August for the seventh Tokyo International Conference on African Development.

Policy trends

The government will focus on addressing the issue of demographic ageing. We expect it to introduce social security reforms in 2019-23 to raise the labour participation rate, especially for women and the elderly. Mr Abe has already proposed an extension of the retirement age to 70, and the government has begun to encourage people to delay pension claims.

The administration's "human resources development revolution" forms part of its broader goal of achieving a super-smart society, or "Society 5.0", by promoting the adoption and development of new technologies. Meanwhile, the "productivity revolution" will be pushed into high gear in an effort to boost nominal GDP to ¥600trn (US\$5.5trn) by fiscal year 2022/23 (April-March).

Fiscal policy

The government will struggle to balance the public finances in 2019-23, and we forecast the annual budget deficit to average the equivalent of 2.8% of GDP during that period. We expect the government to raise the consumption tax rate in October, from 8% to 10%. This should not be interpreted as a fiscal austerity measure, as the government intends to increase expenditure until 2028/29. Instead, the government's goal is to stabilise public debt.

Nonetheless, the higher consumption tax will not be sufficient to close the gap on the primary fiscal account (which excludes interest payments), let alone erase the budget deficit. Part of the higher revenue has already been earmarked for services such as improved childcare support. In total, the government will spend more in 2019/20 to support the economy and minimise the impact of the higher tax than it will raise in additional revenue.

Long-established reliance on supplementary budgets also contributes to a fiscal deficit; this will continue in 2019-23. A substantial proportion of the supplementary budget is committed to ongoing infrastructure projects. Such budgets are also used to pay for reconstruction efforts in the wake of the natural disasters that frequently affect Japan. Our forecasts envisage a surplus on the primary fiscal account only towards the end of the next decade; the government itself has delayed its target for achieving a primary fiscal surplus on the combined central and local-government budgets to 2025/26.

Monetary policy

The Bank of Japan (BOJ, the central bank) will keep monetary policy accommodative and will maintain its quantitative easing (QE) programme and ultra-low interest rates until 2021. The negative policy interest rate, introduced in 2016, has contributed to an erosion of banking sector profits, especially among regional banks. However, we believe that the BOJ will withstand calls from the banking sector to normalise policy before 2021, as it accords higher priority to supporting economic growth in the face of rising trade protectionism and the forthcoming increase in the consumption tax.

Financial intermediaries have also expressed concern about the impact of accommodative monetary policy on bond-market liquidity as the BOJ's balance sheet continues to swell. We expect the BOJ to remain committed to expanding the monetary base by ¥80trn each year. However, it has fallen short of this target in the past two years, suggesting that it has already begun—discreetly—to taper the bond-buying part of its asset-purchasing programme. Nevertheless, the level of bond-buying could return to ¥80trn in 2019-20 as the BOJ works to counter the effects of weak external demand. We expect the central bank to alter its current policy settings from 2021, initially by removing its target of keeping the ten-year government bond yield close to zero. It will then raise the policy interest rate from -0.1% to zero, after which it will begin to rein in its bond-buying programme, with targeted purchases coming to an end over a period of 12-18 months.

We expect the BOJ to leave the policy interest rate at zero for some time, as has previously been the case when it has moved away from QE. We do not expect it to sanction any rise until at least 2023. Meanwhile, it will retain a 2% inflation target during 2019-23, despite its failure to engineer a sustainable increase in consumer prices since the launch of ultra-accommodative monetary policy.

International assumptions

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Economic growth (%)						
US GDP	2.9	2.2	1.7	1.9	2.0	1.8
OECD GDP	2.2	1.6	1.6	1.9	1.9	1.8
EU28 GDP	2.0	1.4	1.5	1.8	1.8	1.7
World GDP	2.9	2.4	2.5	2.9	2.9	2.9
World trade	4.4	2.9	3.4	3.7	3.9	4.0
Inflation indicators (% unless otherwise indicated)						
US CPI	2.4	2.0	1.4	2.2	2.1	1.8
OECD CPI	2.5	2.1	1.9	2.1	2.1	2.1
EU28 CPI	1.9	1.6	1.7	1.9	2.0	1.9
Manufactures (measured in US\$)	5.1	0.9	3.1	2.9	3.6	3.3
Oil (Brent; US\$/b)	71.1	67.7	62.0	67.0	73.2	75.0
Non-oil commodities (measured in US\$)	1.8	-4.7	4.0	3.5	1.4	0.7
Financial variables						
US\$ 3-month commercial paper rate (av; %)	2.0	2.4	1.7	1.7	2.2	2.5
€ 3-month interbank rate (av; %)	-0.3	-0.3	-0.4	-0.2	0.1	0.2
US\$:€ (av)	1.18	1.12	1.15	1.19	1.23	1.24
¥:US\$ (av)	110.4	108.2	107.8	104.9	100.5	96.1

Economic growth

The government will maintain its "Abenomics" programme, which focuses on flexible fiscal and accommodative monetary policy and structural reform. It has contributed to a mild economic recovery, spanning seven years to 2018. We expect real GDP to expand by an annual average of 0.9% in 2019-23. Downturn in the global consumer electronics cycle has hit export-oriented industries, but a recovery is due in late 2020. Slower demand growth in China and the US in 2020 and Japan's export restrictions against South Korea will weigh on external demand. However, export growth will recover in 2021-23 as spending on imports in the US accelerates.

An increase in the rate of consumption tax in October will result in strong growth in household spending in the third quarter of 2019, with consumers ramping up their purchases ahead of the tax increase. However, private consumption will contract in the final quarter of the year and remain subdued in the first half of 2020 as consumers adjust their spending behaviour. This will result in a steep slowdown in real GDP growth, to just 0.4%. However, the hosting of the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo in 2020 will provide some support. Investment will be weakened by rising tensions in global commerce, fuelled by disruptive US trade policy. However, investment growth in 2019-23 will be underpinned by continued support from a fairly accommodative fiscal policy stance.

Economic growth

%	2018 ^a	2019 ^b	2020 ^b	2021 ^b	2022 ^b	2023 ^b
GDP	0.8	1.0	0.4	0.9	1.2	1.1
Private consumption	0.3	0.8	-0.7	0.4	0.9	1.0
Government consumption	0.8	1.2	1.0	0.6	0.7	0.5
Gross fixed investment	1.0	1.4	1.2	1.5	1.8	1.6
Exports of goods & services	3.4	-2.7	1.1	5.0	5.2	5.6
Imports of goods & services	3.4	-0.9	0.9	3.1	4.5	5.2
Domestic demand	0.8	0.9	0.1	0.7	1.1	1.0
Agriculture	0.7	0.8	-1.0	0.2	0.2	0.2
Industry	-0.5	1.3	0.5	1.5	1.2	1.2
Services	1.3	0.9	0.4	0.7	1.3	1.1

^a Actual. ^b Economist Intelligence Unit forecasts.

Inflation

We forecast consumer prices to increase by an average of 1.1% a year in 2019-23. The stimulatory effects of the BOJ's loose monetary policy have lost their edge and the central bank's QE programme will struggle to fuel inflation in the forecast period. We assume that wage growth will remain lacklustre and not record a sharp rise in any year of the forecast period.

With an increase in the consumption tax due in October, consumer price pressure will build rapidly in the final quarter of 2019 and into 2020. As a result, we expect inflation to accelerate during the period. The BOJ has retained an inflation target of 2% since it introduced its ultra-accommodative policy measures in 2013. However, we now do not expect this target to be met (on an annual average basis) during the forecast period. The all-items measure of consumer price inflation will decelerate in 2021 as the impact of the rise in consumption tax wanes. We expect inflation to pick up to an annual average of 1.2%, in 2022-23. The yen's appreciatory trend will further dampen inflation by curbing import price growth.

Exchange rates

We expect the yen to appreciate by 2% against the US dollar in 2019, to an average of ¥108.2:US\$1. Fluctuations in financial market risk sentiment will see it rise against the US dollar on the back of periodic safe-haven flows, which we expect to continue in 2020. Additionally, we expect the Federal Reserve (the US central bank) to cut its policy interest rate in September, trimming the federal funds rate by a total of 75 basis points by March 2020. This will support the yen in the coming months, although the BOJ's ultra-loose monetary policy will prevent any strong appreciation of the currency. However, the BOJ now owns nearly 50% of outstanding government bonds and thus has little scope to loosen monetary policy further. Over the longer term, this means that the yen will continue to appreciate against the US dollar in nominal terms. We expect the currency to strengthen significantly in 2021 and to continue to appreciate thereafter as the BOJ normalises monetary policy. It will also maintain its status as a safe-haven currency, supported by Japan's current-account surplus.

External sector

Japan will continue to post annual current-account surpluses in 2019-23, equivalent to 3.4% of GDP on average. Given trade tensions and trends in the economies of Japan's key trading partners, we expect slower export growth over the next five years compared with 2014-18. Subdued external demand will weigh on exports during 2019-20, but it will recover moderately in the final three years of the forecast period.

We expect up to 20 nuclear reactors to resume operation by 2023, which will help to reduce the import bill for fossil fuels. The services account will move into surplus in 2019 for the first time on record, and will remain in the black throughout 2019-23. This will be largely due to increasing tourist arrivals, especially for the 2019 Rugby World Cup and 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The government remains committed to the promotion of inbound tourism, aiming to host 40m visitor arrivals in 2020. A substantial positive balance will be maintained on the primary income account during the forecast period, owing to Japan's large stock of overseas direct and portfolio investment.

The bilateral trade deal with the US is likely to be finalised in September, after which it will be due for ratification by the Diet. Multilateral trade liberalisation will remain a key goal for the government. The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and Japan's Economic Partnership Agreement with the EU have already come into force. The full impact of these agreements will start to be felt by the early 2020s.

Forecast summary

Forecast summary

(% unless otherwise indicated)

	2018 ^a	2019 ^b	2020 ^b	2021 ^b	2022 ^b	2023 ^b
Real GDP growth	0.8	1.0	0.4	0.9	1.2	1.1
Industrial production growth	1.1 ^c	-2.2	1.0	1.0	1.8	2.2
Gross fixed investment growth	1.0	1.4	1.2	1.5	1.8	1.6
Unemployment rate (av)	2.4	2.4	2.3	2.2	2.3	2.1
Consumer price inflation (av)	1.0	1.0	1.4	0.9	1.1	1.3
Consumer price inflation (end-period)	0.3	1.5	1.1	1.0	1.2	1.3
Short-term interbank rate	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5
Government balance (% of GDP)	-2.5	-3.0	-2.8	-2.8	-2.9	-2.7
Exports of goods fob (US\$ bn)	735.8 ^c	711.4	720.4	768.8	837.7	921.0
Imports of goods fob (US\$ bn)	724.5 ^c	726.9	734.9	773.1	830.7	905.1
Current-account balance (US\$ bn)	174.7 ^c	168.6	169.8	180.8	208.2	240.9
Current-account balance (% of GDP)	3.5 ^c	3.3	3.2	3.3	3.5	3.8
Exchange rate ¥:US\$ (av)	110.4	108.2	107.8	104.9	100.5	96.1
Exchange rate ¥:US\$ (end-period)	109.7	107.6	107.1	102.5	97.5	96.3
Exchange rate ¥:€ (av)	130.5	121.4	123.4	124.3	123.1	119.1
Exchange rate ¥:€ (end-period)	125.6	121.1	124.8	123.5	120.9	119.4

^a Actual. ^b Economist Intelligence Unit forecasts. ^c Economist Intelligence Unit estimates.

Quarterly forecasts

Quarterly forecasts

	2018				2019				2020			
	1 Qtr	2 Qtr	3 Qtr	4 Qtr	1 Qtr	2 Qtr	3 Qtr	4 Qtr	1 Qtr	2 Qtr	3 Qtr	4 Qtr
GDP												
% change, quarter on quarter	-0.1	0.4	-0.5	0.4	0.7	0.4	0.2	-1.1	0.1	0.8	0.7	-0.1
% change, year on year	1.3	1.5	0.1	0.3	1.0	1.2	1.8	0.3	-0.3	0.0	0.5	1.6
Private consumption												
% change, quarter on quarter	-0.1	0.4	-0.1	0.4	0.1	0.6	0.4	-1.4	-0.3	0.4	0.3	-0.5
% change, year on year	0.2	0.1	0.6	0.5	0.7	1.0	1.6	-0.2	-0.6	-0.9	-1.0	-0.2
Government consumption												
% change, quarter on quarter	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.7	-0.1	0.9	-1.1	1.6	-0.2	0.1	0.4	0.1
% change, year on year	0.5	0.7	0.7	1.3	0.9	1.9	0.5	1.4	1.2	0.4	2.0	0.4
Gross fixed investment												
% change, quarter on quarter	0.1	1.2	-2.0	1.7	0.6	0.4	0.4	-1.0	0.4	1.1	1.0	0.1
% change, year on year	1.9	2.4	-1.0	0.9	1.3	2.0	3.2	0.4	0.1	0.8	1.4	2.5
Exports of goods & services												
% change, quarter on quarter	1.0	0.8	-2.1	1.2	-2.0	-0.1	0.3	-3.6	1.2	1.9	1.7	0.9
% change, year on year	5.2	5.9	1.7	1.1	-2.2	-2.9	-0.5	-5.2	-2.2	-0.3	1.1	5.8
Imports of goods & services												
% change, quarter on quarter	0.6	0.8	-1.2	3.6	-4.3	1.6	1.5	-2.7	0.4	1.1	1.0	0.2
% change, year on year	3.6	2.9	2.8	4.1	-1.3	-0.4	2.3	-4.0	0.8	0.3	-0.2	2.9
Domestic demand												
% change, quarter on quarter	-0.2	0.4	-0.3	0.8	0.3	0.1	0.4	-0.6	-0.3	0.4	0.8	-0.2
% change, year on year	1.3	1.5	0.1	0.3	1.0	1.2	1.8	0.3	-0.3	0.0	0.5	1.6
Consumer prices												
% change, quarter on quarter	0.3	-0.3	0.5	0.3	-0.3	0.2	0.7	1.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0
% change, year on year	1.3	0.6	1.1	0.9	0.3	0.8	1.0	1.9	2.1	2.0	1.3	0.1
Producer prices												
% change, quarter on quarter	0.5	0.7	0.9	0.1	-0.8	0.4	0.5	0.8	0.0	0.3	0.1	0.1
% change, year on year	2.4	2.6	3.1	2.2	0.9	0.6	0.2	0.9	1.7	1.6	1.2	0.6
Exchange rate ¥:US\$												
Average	108.30	109.14	111.54	112.75	110.18	109.89	106.55	106.05	107.59	108.16	107.81	107.55
End-period	106.20	110.71	113.48	109.70	110.68	107.84	106.30	107.60	107.88	107.98	107.68	107.10
Interest rates (%; av)												
Money market rate	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0
Long-term bond yield	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	-0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1

Data and charts

Annual data and forecast

	2014 ^a	2015 ^a	2016 ^a	2017 ^a	2018 ^a	2019 ^b	2020 ^b
GDP							
Nominal GDP (US\$ bn)	4,854.5	4,390.4	4,928.3	4,861.1	4,970.6	5,144.8	5,270.7
Nominal GDP (¥ trn)	514	531	536	545	549	557	568
Real GDP growth (%)	0.4	1.2	0.6	1.9	0.8	1.0	0.4
Expenditure on GDP (% real change)							
Private consumption	-0.9	-0.2	-0.1	1.1	0.3	0.8	-0.7
Government consumption	0.5	1.5	1.4	0.3	0.8	1.2	1.0
Gross fixed investment	3.0	1.6	-0.3	3.0	1.0	1.4	1.2
Exports of goods & services	9.3	2.9	1.7	6.8	3.4	-2.7	1.1
Imports of goods & services	8.3	0.8	-1.6	3.4	3.4	-0.9	0.9
Origin of GDP (% real change)							
Agriculture	-3.1	-4.5	-7.6	-1.7	0.7	0.8	-1.0
Industry	2.7	1.8	1.1	3.5	-0.5	1.3	0.5
Services	-0.4	1.1	0.5	1.4	1.3	0.9	0.4
Population and income							
Population (m)	128.2	128.0	127.8	127.5	127.2 ^c	126.9	126.5
GDP per head (US\$ at PPP)	38,906	40,130	40,871	41,722	42,568 ^c	44,031	45,203
Recorded unemployment (av; %)	3.6	3.4	3.1	2.8	2.4	2.4	2.3
Fiscal indicators (% of GDP)							
General government budget revenue	34.4	35.3	35.4	35.4	35.4	35.5	35.7
General government budget expenditure	39.7	38.9	38.8	38.3	37.9	38.4	38.5
General government budget balance	-5.4	-3.6	-3.5	-3.0	-2.5	-3.0	-2.8
Public debt	217.9	216.5	222.8	222.5	224.2	226.8	227.5
Prices and financial indicators							
Exchange rate ¥:US\$ (end-period)	119.9	120.3	116.8	112.7	109.7	107.6	107.1
Exchange rate ¥:€ (end-period)	145.5	130.9	123.1	135.1	125.6	121.1	124.8
Consumer prices (end-period; %)	2.4	0.1	0.3	1.1	0.3	1.5	1.1
Producer prices (av; %)	3.2	-2.3	-3.5	2.3	2.6	0.6	1.3
Stock of money M1 (% change)	4.7	5.1	7.0	7.9	6.1	5.2	4.6
Stock of money M2 (% change)	3.4	3.6	3.4	4.0	2.9	2.1	2.8
Money market interest rate (av; %)	0.16	0.19	0.13	0.08	0.05	0.03	0.06
Current account (US\$ bn)							
Trade balance	-99.9	-7.4	51.1	43.8	11.2 ^c	-15.5	-14.5
Goods: exports fob	699.1	622.0	635.9	688.6	735.8 ^c	711.4	720.4
Goods: imports fob	-799.0	-629.4	-584.7	-644.8	-724.5 ^c	-726.9	-734.9
Services balance	-28.8	-15.9	-10.8	-6.0	-7.2 ^c	8.1	18.9
Primary income balance	184.0	175.9	176.3	183.0	189.1 ^c	194.5	183.8
Secondary income balance	-19.1	-16.4	-19.6	-19.0	-18.4 ^c	-18.5	-18.5
Current-account balance	36.4	136.4	197.0	201.6	174.7 ^c	168.6	169.8
International reserves (US\$ bn)							
Total international reserves	1,261	1,233	1,217	1,264	1,270	-	-

^a Actual. ^b Economist Intelligence Unit forecasts. ^c Economist Intelligence Unit estimates.

Source: IMF, International Financial Statistics.

Quarterly data

	2017		2018				2019	
	3 Qtr	4 Qtr	1 Qtr	2 Qtr	3 Qtr	4 Qtr	1 Qtr	2 Qtr
Output^a								
GDP at chained 2011 prices (¥ trn)	532.3	533.9	533.5	535.7	533.2	535.3	539.1	n/a
Real GDP (% change, quarter on quarter)	0.7	0.3	-0.1	0.4	-0.5	0.4	0.7	n/a
Real GDP (% change, year on year)	2.2	2.4	1.3	1.5	0.1	0.3	1.0	n/a
Industrial production index (2010=100)	102.6	106.1	104.2	102.4	102.7	107.5	102.4	100.0
Industrial production index (% change, year on year)	2.5	3.1	1.6	1.2	0.1	1.4	-1.7	-2.3
Employment, wages & prices								
Employed (m)	65.77	65.58	65.87	66.85	66.86	66.97	66.57	67.29
Unemployed ('000)	1,900	1,777	1,660	1,687	1,680	1,633	1,653	1,677
Unemployment rate (% of labour force) ^a	2.8	2.7	2.5	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.4
Real gross earnings in manufacturing (2010=100) ^a	103.1	120.1	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Consumer prices (2015=100) ^a	100.3	100.9	101.2	100.9	101.4	101.8	101.5	101.7
Consumer prices (% change, year on year) ^a	0.6	0.6	1.3	0.6	1.1	0.9	0.3	0.8
Corporate goods prices (2010=100) ^a	98.8	99.7	100.3	101.0	101.9	102.0	101.2	101.6
Financial indicators								
Exchange rate ¥:US\$ (av)	111.0	112.9	108.3	109.1	111.5	112.8	110.2	109.9
Exchange rate ¥:US\$ (end-period)	112.6	112.7	106.2	110.7	113.5	109.7	110.7	107.8
M1 (period average; ¥ trn)	717.2	729.8	739.8	750.0	761.9	770.6	779.6	792.1
M1 (% change, year on year)	7.5	7.2	6.4	6.3	6.2	5.6	5.4	5.6
M2 (period average; ¥ trn)	978.3	987.0	992.3	999.9	1006.3	1011.2	1015.9	1024.7
M2 (% change, year on year)	4.0	3.9	3.3	3.1	2.9	2.5	2.4	2.5
Discount rate (end-period; %)	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30
Call money rate (end-period; %)	-0.05	-0.04	-0.05	-0.06	-0.06	-0.07	-0.05	-0.06
3-month CDs rate (av; %) ^b	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Nikkei 225 stock average (¥)	20,356	22,765	21,454	22,305	24,120	20,015	21,206	21,276
Sectoral trends^a								
Mining & manufacturing production (2011=100)	102.3	103.9	103.0	103.8	103.1	104.5	101.9	102.5
Investment goods production (2011=100)	108.3	111.0	108.2	109.8	107.9	n/a	n/a	n/a
Consumer goods production (2011=100)	97.5	98.1	97.4	99.1	97.7	n/a	n/a	n/a
Producer goods production (2011=100)	101.9	103.4	102.4	103.2	101.6	n/a	n/a	n/a
Machinery orders, net new, incl ships (¥ bn) ^c	7,322	7,315	7,203	7,331	7,453	7,636	6,844	6,916
Total construction starts (m sq metres)	33.5	33.2	32.5	32.3	32.8	33.6	32.4	31.9
Residential construction starts (m sq metres)	19.1	18.9	18.3	19.0	18.6	19.1	19.1	19.0
Retail sales (2010=100)	101.2	102.5	102.1	102.5	103.5	104.2	102.8	103.3
Foreign trade (¥ bn)								
Exports fob	19,584	20,917	19,931	20,203	20,153	21,192	19,162	19,080
Imports cif	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Trade balance	1,157	740	-193	771	-551	-1,251	-563	-327
Foreign payments (US\$ bn)^d								
Merchandise trade balance fob-fob	15.75	10.03	6.61	9.80	0.49	-5.70	1.94	0.09
Services balance	-2.24	-1.48	2.42	-5.46	-1.49	-2.72	3.23	-1.13
Primary income balance	56.50	34.06	51.88	45.40	56.99	34.80	52.44	43.82
Net transfer payments	-5.12	-4.69	-6.13	-3.99	-4.94	-3.31	-3.57	-1.70
Current-account balance	64.88	37.92	54.78	45.75	51.05	23.08	54.04	41.07
Reserves excl gold (end-period)	1,234.6	1,232.2	1,235.6	1,227.8	1,230.2	1,238.9	1,259.3	1,286.9

^a Seasonally adjusted. ^b Certificates of deposit. ^c 280 firms. ^d Bank of Japan.

Sources: OECD, Main Economic Indicators; Statistics Bureau, Government of Japan, Monthly Statistics of Japan; IMF, International Financial Statistics.

Monthly data

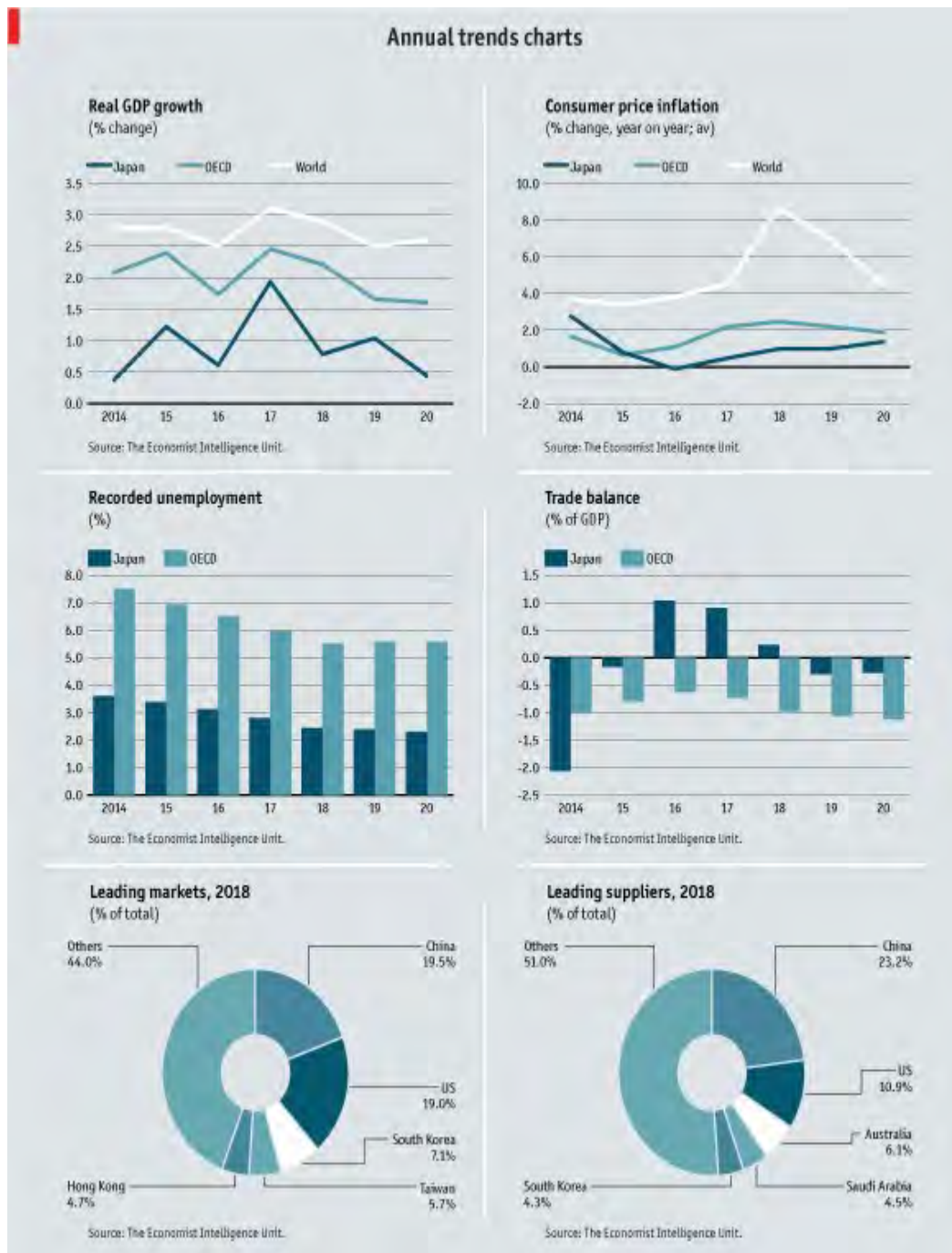
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Exchange rate ¥:US\$ (av)												
2017	114.9	112.9	112.9	110.1	112.2	110.9	112.4	109.8	110.8	112.9	112.8	112.9
2018	110.9	108.0	106.1	107.7	109.7	110.1	111.5	111.0	112.1	112.7	113.3	112.2

2019	109.0	110.4	111.1	111.6	110.0	108.1	108.3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Exchange rate ¥:US\$ (end-period)												
2017	112.7	112.1	111.4	111.4	110.7	112.4	110.4	110.1	112.6	113.6	112.3	112.7
2018	109.3	106.6	106.2	109.3	108.7	110.7	111.9	111.0	113.5	112.9	113.5	109.7
2019	108.8	111.4	110.7	111.4	108.7	107.8	108.6	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Real effective exchange rate (2010=100; CPI-based)												
2017	75.6	76.2	76.0	77.8	75.8	76.1	74.5	75.3	74.1	73.0	73.1	72.8
2018	72.8	74.1	75.3	74.0	73.6	74.1	74.4	75.5	74.9	74.7	74.4	74.6
2019	76.5	75.2	74.4	74.1	76.2	77.1	76.7	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Budget revenue (¥ bn)												
2017	4,461	3,614	4,471	5,954	4,866	7,572	4,631	5,335	4,105	3,630	4,775	7,454
2018	5,302	3,827	4,442	5,982	5,452	7,909	5,274	5,220	4,116	3,989	4,979	7,680
2019	5,337	4,023	4,402	6,833	5,346	6,809	5,073	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Budget expenditure (¥ bn)												
2017	2,635	2,298	8,949	10,446	3,076	6,703	3,819	2,592	6,120	3,748	7,050	3,937
2018	2,537	2,706	9,406	11,252	2,897	6,629	3,902	2,477	5,985	3,193	6,785	3,967
2019	2,343	2,261	9,116	10,870	2,902	6,690	4,312	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Budget balance (¥ bn)												
2017	1,825	1,316	-4,478	-4,492	1,791	869	812	2,743	-2,015	-118	-2,275	3,517
2018	2,765	1,121	-4,964	-5,270	2,555	1,280	1,372	2,743	-1,869	796	-1,806	3,713
2019	2,994	1,762	-4,713	-4,037	2,444	119	761	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Money supply, M1 (period average; % change, year on year)												
2017	9.5	9.5	8.8	7.8	7.6	7.6	7.5	7.4	7.6	7.4	7.3	6.9
2018	6.7	6.4	6.3	6.3	6.2	6.5	6.3	6.3	6.1	5.8	5.5	5.4
2019	5.2	5.4	5.5	5.8	6.0	5.1	4.9	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Money supply, M2 (period average; % change, year on year)												
2017	4.0	4.2	4.2	4.0	3.8	3.9	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.6
2018	3.4	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.2	3.1	2.9	2.9	2.8	2.6	2.3	2.4
2019	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.3	2.4	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Industrial production (seasonally adjusted; % change, year on year)												
2017	2.6	2.9	1.7	4.0	5.3	4.2	2.6	3.6	1.3	4.0	2.2	3.2
2018	1.4	0.9	2.5	1.9	3.5	-1.5	2.4	0.6	-2.5	4.2	1.9	-2.0
2019	0.7	-1.1	-4.3	-1.1	-2.1	-3.8	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Retail sales (% change, year on year)												
2017	1.2	2.3	2.1	2.7	2.1	2.4	1.1	2.3	2.4	0.1	1.8	3.5
2018	1.6	1.6	1.4	1.1	1.3	1.9	1.7	2.9	2.3	3.0	1.2	0.9
2019	0.6	0.7	1.0	0.3	1.4	0.5	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Deposit rate (av; %)												
2017	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
2018	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
2019	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Lending rate (av; %)												
2017	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5
2018	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5
2019	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Nikkei 225 stock average (¥)												
2017	19,041	19,119	18,909	19,197	19,651	20,033	19,925	19,646	20,356	22,012	22,725	22,765
2018	23,098	22,068	21,454	22,468	22,202	22,305	22,554	22,865	24,120	21,920	22,351	20,015
2019	20,773	21,385	21,206	22,259	20,601	21,276	21,522	20,711	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Consumer prices (seasonally adjusted; % change, year on year)												
2017	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.2	0.5	1.1
2018	1.3	1.5	1.1	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.9	1.3	1.2	1.4	0.9	0.3
2019	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.6	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Nominal monthly wages (% change, year on year)												
2017	0.8	0.5	0.1	0.8	0.8	0.2	-0.1	0.4	1.3	0.3	1.0	0.9
2018	-0.3	0.2	1.8	-0.1	1.2	2.5	1.1	0.8	0.3	1.2	1.9	1.7
2019	0.2	-0.1	-1.1	0.1	0.0	1.4	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Unemployment rate (% of workforce)												
2017	3.0	2.9	2.8	2.8	3.1	2.8	2.8	2.7	2.8	2.7	2.7	2.7
2018	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.3	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.5	2.4
2019	2.5	2.3	2.5	2.4	2.4	2.3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Total exports fob (US\$ bn)												
2017	47.2	56.2	64.0	57.5	52.1	59.6	57.8	57.2	61.5	59.3	61.3	64.7
2018	54.9	59.9	69.6	63.4	57.7	64.1	60.5	60.3	59.9	64.3	61.1	62.6

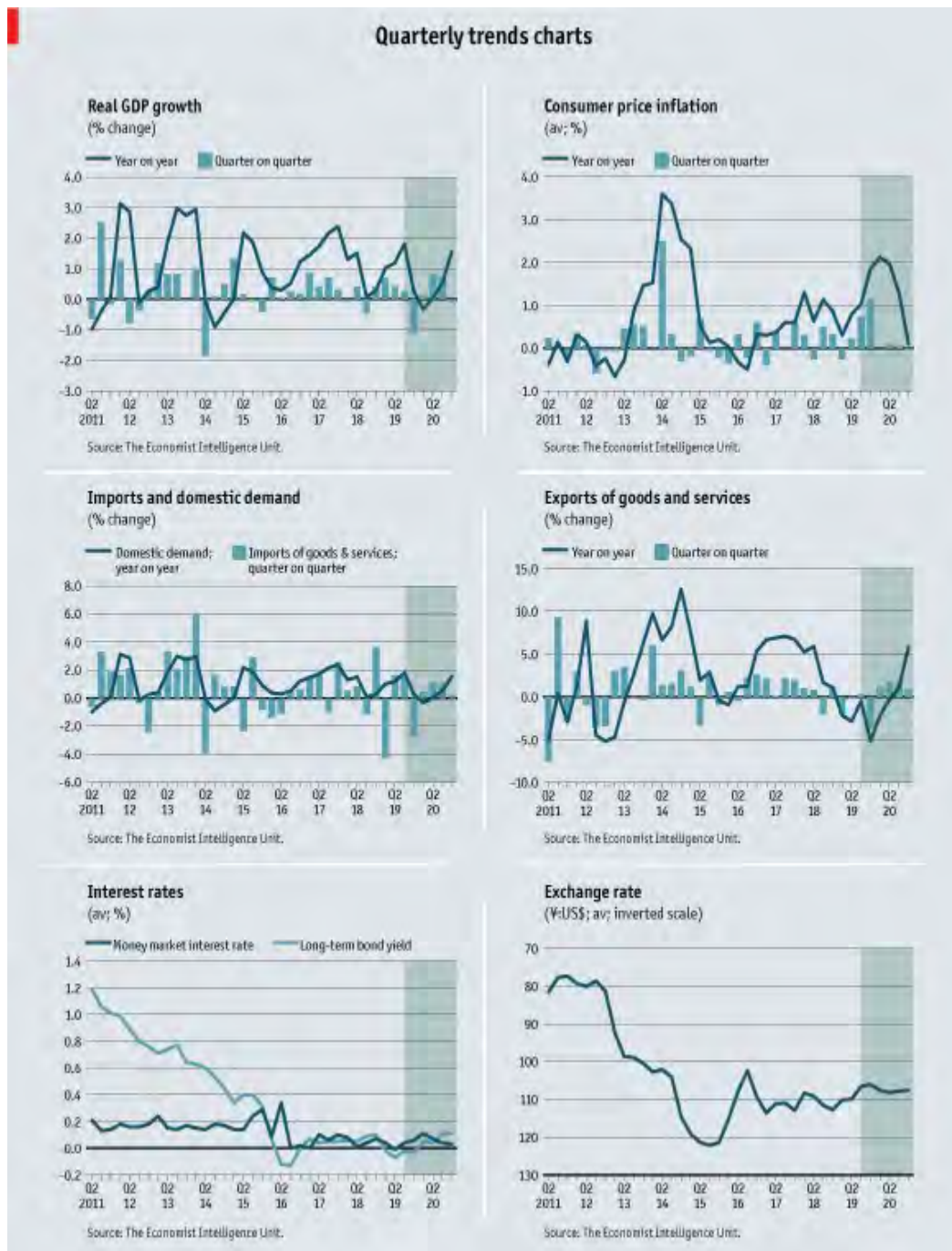
2019	51.2	57.8	64.8	59.6	53.1	60.9	61.3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Total imports cif (US\$ bn)												
2017	56.8	49.1	58.7	53.2	54.0	55.7	54.2	56.3	55.6	56.8	60.4	61.5
2018	63.6	60.0	62.2	57.6	62.9	57.5	62.5	64.3	58.8	68.3	67.6	63.1
2019	64.2	54.8	60.1	59.2	61.9	55.5	63.7	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Trade balance fob-cif (US\$ bn)												
2017	-9.6	7.1	5.3	4.3	-1.8	3.9	3.6	0.9	5.9	2.5	0.9	3.2
2018	-8.7	-0.1	7.4	5.8	-5.3	6.6	-2.0	-4.0	1.1	-4.0	-6.5	-0.5
2019	-13.0	3.0	4.7	0.5	-8.8	5.5	-2.3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Foreign-exchange reserves excl gold (end-period; US\$ bn)												
2017	1,201.6	1,201.3	1,199.6	1,211.0	1,220.6	1,219.2	1,228.7	1,235.6	1,234.6	1,229.5	1,229.6	1,232.2
2018	1,235.3	1,229.2	1,235.6	1,223.6	1,222.2	1,227.8	1,226.0	1,229.5	1,230.2	1,222.7	1,228.0	1,238.9
2019	1,246.2	1,248.9	1,259.3	1,261.3	1,275.4	1,286.9	1,280.5	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Sources: IMF, International Financial Statistics; Haver Analytics.

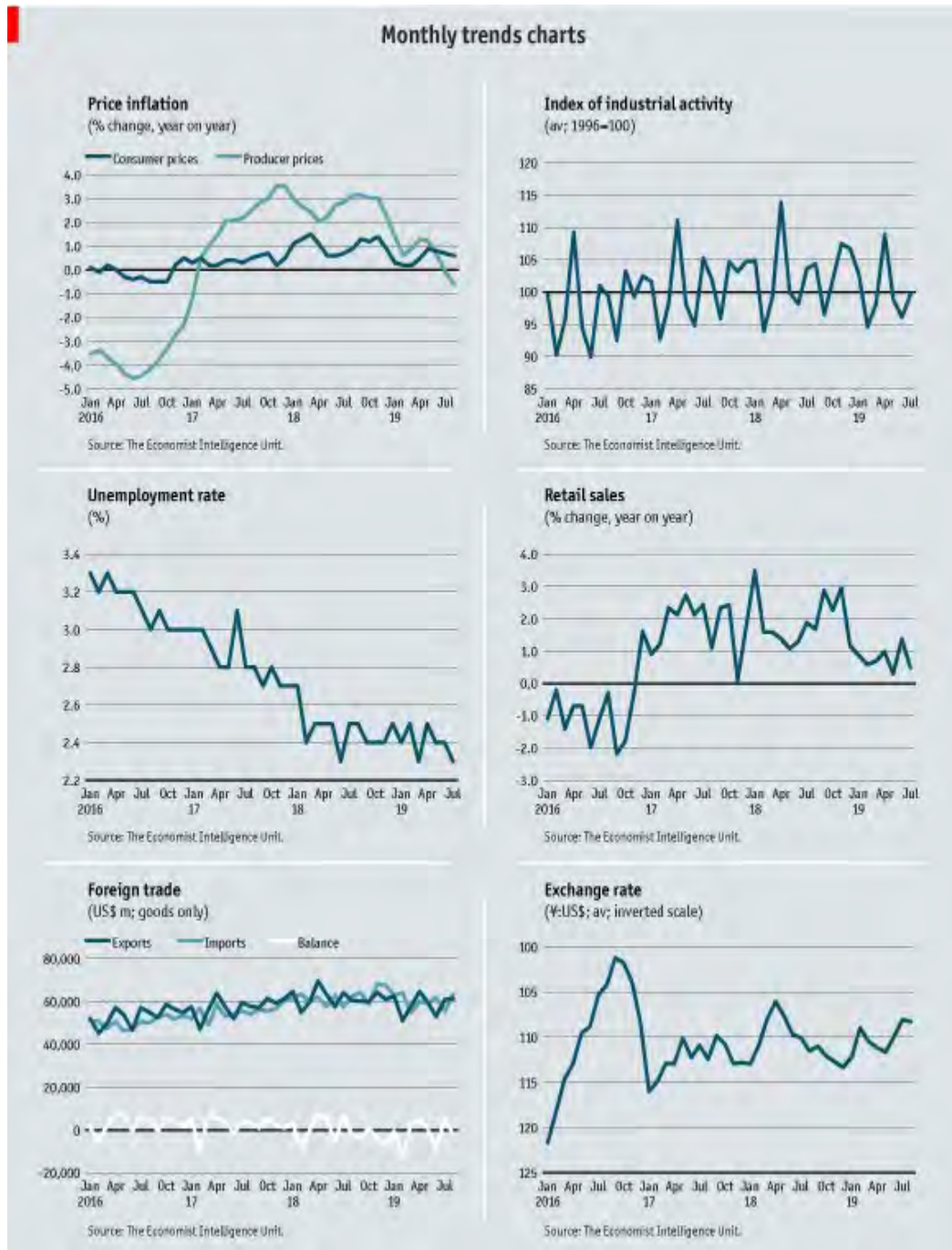
Annual trends charts



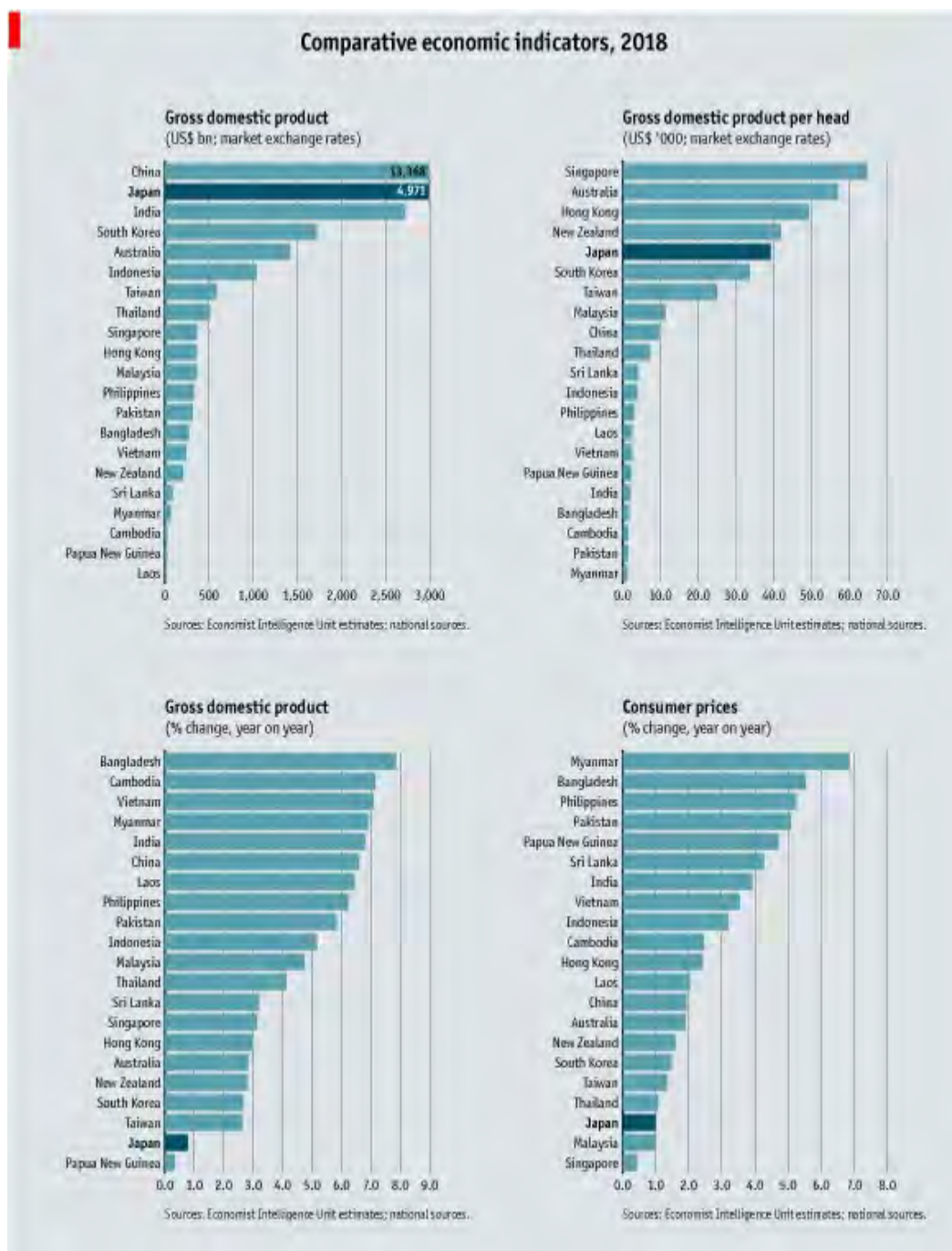
Quarterly trends charts



Monthly trends charts



Comparative economic indicators



Basic data

Land area

377,899 sq km

Population

127.2m (2018; UN)

Main towns

Population in millions (2014):

Tokyo (capital; 23 central wards): 9.1

Yokohama: 3.7

Osaka: 2.7

Nagoya: 2.3

Sapporo: 1.9

Kobe: 1.5

Fukuoka: 1.5

Kyoto: 1.5

Climate

Temperate, with the monsoon season in June, seasonal winds and typhoons in August-September, and heavy snow in December-February on the Japan Sea side

Weather in Tokyo (altitude 5.3 metres)

Hottest month, August, 29°C; coldest month, January, 7.6°C; driest month, August, 9.5 mm rainfall; wettest month, September, 319.5 mm rainfall

Language

Japanese

Measures

Mainly metric system; local measures include: 1 tsubo = 3.3 sq metres; 1 sun = 3 cm; 1 ri = 4 km; 1 kairi = 1.8 km (used for sea distances)

Currency

Yen (¥); ¥1 = 100 sen. Average exchange rates in 2018: ¥110.4:US\$1; ¥130.5:€1

Fiscal year

April 1st-March 31st

Time

9 hours ahead of GMT

Public holidays

January 1st (New Year); January 14th (Coming of Age Day); February 11th (National Foundation Day); March 21st (Vernal Equinox); April 29th and May 3rd-6th (Golden Week holidays); July 15th (Marine Day); August 11th-12th (Mountain Day); September 16th (Respect for the Aged Day); September 23rd (Autumnal Equinox); October 14th (Sports Day); November 3rd-4th (Culture Day); November 23rd (Labour Thanksgiving)



Political structure

Official name

Japan

Form of government

Representative democracy

The executive

The prime minister is chosen by a ballot of the Diet (parliament) and appoints a cabinet, the majority of whom must also be members of parliament

Head of state

Emperor Naruhito

National legislature

Bicameral Diet, comprising the House of Representatives (the lower house), which has a total of 465 seats, most of which represent geographical constituencies, with the remainder filled by proportional representation, elected every four years; and the 242-member House of Councillors (the upper house), half of which is elected every three years for six-year terms

Legal system

A Supreme Court, appointed by the cabinet, presides over a legal system of lesser courts divided into four arms: the High Court, district courts, family courts and summary courts

National elections

The last election for the lower house was held in October 2017; the next poll is scheduled for 2021. A poll for half of the seats in the upper house was held in July 2019; the next election, also for half of the seats, is due in 2022.

National government

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was re-elected in the October 2017 lower-house election, winning 284 seats; its coalition partner, the Komeito party, won 29 seats. The coalition has a two-thirds majority in the lower house and a majority in the upper house

Main political organisations

Government: coalition of the LDP and Komeito

Opposition: Constitutional Democratic Party; Kibō no Tō (Party of Hope); Japan Communist Party; Initiatives from Osaka; Liberal Party; Social Democratic Party

Main members of the cabinet

Prime minister: Shinzo Abe

Deputy prime minister, minister of finance: Taro Aso

Chief cabinet secretary: Yoshihide Suga

Key ministers

Agriculture, forestry & fisheries: Takamori Yoshikawa

Defence: Takeshi Iwaya

Economy, trade & industry: Hiroshige Seko

Education, culture, sports, science & technology: Masahiko Shibayama

Environment: Yoshiaki Harada

Foreign affairs: Taro Kono

Health, labour & welfare: Takumi Nemoto

Internal affairs & communications: Masatoshi Ishida

Justice: Takashi Namashita

Land, infrastructure, transport & tourism: Keiichi Ishii

Reconstruction: Hiromichi Watanabe

State ministers

Disaster management: Hachiro Okonogi

Economic & fiscal policy: Toshimitsu Motegi

Promoting dynamic engagement of all citizens & “Cool Japan” strategy: Masaji Matsuyama

Regional revitalisation & regulatory reform: Satsuki Katayama

Tokyo Olympic & Paralympic Games: Yoshitaka Sakurada

Central bank governor

Haruhiko Kuroda

Recent analysis

Generated on September 17th 2019

The following articles have been written in response to events occurring since our most recent forecast was released, and indicate how we expect these events to affect our next forecast.

Politics

Forecast updates

Japan concludes TICAD7 summit

September 3, 2019: International relations

Event

The prime minister, Shinzo Abe, hosted numerous leaders from Africa for the Seventh Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) conference in Yokohama on August 28th-30th. Japan led the development conference, which is the cornerstone of its ongoing engagement efforts on the continent.

Analysis

The TICAD summits have been the main focus of Japan's development efforts in Africa for over two decades. They have been organised since 1993 in collaboration with international partners such as the US, the World Bank and the African Union. In the latest summit, Mr Abe pledged to continue working with African countries and highlighted that Japanese investment on the continent had reached US\$20bn since the last TICAD conference was held three years ago in Kenya. Over the past two summits, Japan has been looking to transition its traditional role as a donor country of overseas development assistance (ODA) to a more partnership-focused model. Mr Abe's vision is to build development through public-private partnerships that can strengthen African businesses and also contribute to sustainable development on the continent.

In the latest TICAD summit, Mr Abe was also able to secure recognition of Japan's [Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#) (FOIP) vision. Under his administration, Japan has made reforms to its provision of ODA, ensuring that it is more directly linked to its core foreign policy interests, such as FOIP. Despite this, African countries remained tepid in their support of FOIP. In the final communique, the 53 African states taking part in the TICAD process "took note" of FOIP but refrained from endorsing the initiative.

Japan remains deeply concerned about China's growth and push outside its borders through the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Regarding Africa, China continues to dominate trade and investment flows in recent years and recently surpassed US\$200bn in annual trade with the continent. Through the TICAD process and FOIP, Japan is looking to provide another alternative for sustainable development and the provision of quality infrastructure in the region.

Impact on the forecast

We expect that the TICAD summits will continue to be the cornerstone of Japan's engagement in Africa as it pushes for its regional strategy goals such as FOIP.

Prime minister reshuffles his cabinet

September 12, 2019: Political stability

Event

On September 12th the prime minister, Shinzo Abe, reshuffled his cabinet, in a move that was widely expected following the [upper-house elections](#) in July. Besides retaining key loyalists and factional supporters from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Mr Abe also appointed some new members to the cabinet.

Analysis

There are two significant elements to Mr Abe's reshuffle. First, he stressed the importance of stability within the LDP and rewarded his top political aides by renewing their roles. In this light, Mr Abe predictably kept Yoshihide Suga as chief cabinet secretary, Taro Aso as deputy prime minister and finance minister and Toshihiro Nikai as LDP secretary-general. This emphasises that the prime minister wants to continue to work with key factional backers, including Mr Nikai and Mr Aso, to push forward his political agenda in his third—and potentially final—term as the president of the LDP.

After introducing his new cabinet, Mr Abe indicated that this stability was important and noted a desire to press forward with a debate in the Diet (parliament) to make the first amendment to Japan's current pacifist constitution. In order to pursue this elusive agenda, he needs strong support from the various factions within the LDP, as well as from its coalition partner, the Komeito party, and other pro-revisionist parties in the Diet.

Second, a key feature of the new cabinet is the promotion of Shinjiro Koizumi to the position of environment minister. This will be Mr Koizumi's first cabinet post, making him—at 38—one of the youngest cabinet ministers in post-war Japan. He is the son of a former LDP leader and Japanese prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi. His promotion has fuelled speculation that Mr Abe is fielding a range of internal party candidates as his potential successor. Despite his promotion, Mr Koizumi is unlikely to succeed Mr Abe in 2021, as most LDP factions favour candidates with more experience.

Impact on the forecast

We believe that Mr Abe's renewed cabinet highlights his focus on maintaining political stability, as he has been careful to not move key factional backers, such as Mr Aso and Mr Nikai. However, this will still not be helpful in giving Mr Abe additional leverage, and we maintain our forecast that he will be unable to push through his constitutional proposals.

Economy

Forecast updates

Industrial activity marginally recovers in July

September 3, 2019: Economic growth

Event

On August 30th a preliminary data report from the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) showed that industrial production rose by 0.7% year on year in July, after declining for the past five months.

Analysis

The rise in industrial activity in July was mainly led by increased production in the automotive, petroleum, plastic, paper, and food and tobacco categories. However, of the total 14 categories, six still declined on a year-on-year basis in July, with most types of machinery and electronic parts leading the fall during the period. On a monthly basis, industrial production rose by 1.3%, after declining by 3.3% in June—the sharpest decline since January 2018.

Meanwhile, shipments rose by 1.8% year on year in July, representing the strongest rate since October 2018 and reflecting a recovery in export demand. Interestingly, inventories also rose, for the ninth consecutive month. This suggests that manufacturers are likely to have ramped up production to cater to a potential rise in consumer demand in the third quarter, ahead of the consumption tax increase in October from 8% to 10%.

The recovery in industrial activity is still weak. According to survey forecasts published in the METI's June preliminary report, industrial production had been expected to rise by 2.7% year on year in July, which is far stronger than the actual figures. The latest survey shows that industrial activity will continue to rise in August as machinery and chemical production increases. However, activity is expected to fall again in September as manufacturers scale back production ahead of the October consumption tax increase, which will result in lower consumer demand.

Impact on the forecast

Despite the latest data being positive, our forecast of industrial output falling by 2.2% on average in 2019 remains appropriate.

FSA seeks to reform regional bank regulations

September 4, 2019: Policy trends

Event

The Financial Services Agency (FSA), the industry regulator, has issued policy outlines that include an increased push for the consolidation of regional banks.

Analysis

Regional banks have remained one of the weakest links in Japan's financial system, as they continue to suffer because of an ageing population and a general decline in local economic activity. In addition, ultra-loose monetary policy, as well as competition from postal banking and insurance, has taken a toll on the profit margins and balance sheets of regional banks. According to data from the FSA, 46 of the country's 105 regional banks lost money on core business operations earning interest and fee income in the fiscal year ending March 31st 2019. A total of 27 regional banks have remained in the red for five or more consecutive years.

The worsening financial state and business outlook of regional banks has added urgency to the sector's reform, but the pace of consolidation has remained very slow. The recent major regional bank merger between Fukuoka Financial Group and Eighteenth Bank took more than three years to complete because of a lengthy competition review by the Japan Fair Trade Commission. The FSA's regional bank reform plan includes the removal of this red tape through an amendment of the Antimonopoly Act. The proposed amendment, which will be submitted to the Diet (parliament) in 2020, will allow regional banks to combine operations regardless of market-share concentration.

The FSA will also focus policy support on a sustainable business model for regional banks. To that end, the regional banks will no longer be required to limit their investment in domestic nonfinancial companies to a shareholding of just 5%. This will effectively allow regional banks to establish themselves as regional trading companies and will therefore help to vitalise local economies.

Impact on the forecast

The latest development reaffirms our view that consolidation and reform efforts for the regional banks will not make headway in 2019-20.

Typhoon highlights vulnerabilities in infrastructure

September 10, 2019: Economic growth

Event

Typhoon Faxai passed through the Tokyo region on September 9th and severely disrupted industrial activity, as well as transport links in the region.

Analysis

Typhoon Faxai was the 15th typhoon to hit Japan this year. It caused the train system in the region around Tokyo to come to a halt, leaving thousands of people stranded at stations, airports and seaports. East Japan Railway stopped all train lines in the Tokyo metropolitan and surrounding areas. At Tokyo's Narita International Airport, nearly 14,000 arriving passengers were stranded throughout the day owing to subway outages. Extensive power failures were also reported in areas serviced by Tokyo Electric Power, putting many factories and businesses out of operation.

Although natural disasters of this magnitude are not uncommon in Japan, Typhoon Faxai has hit the country just ahead of the Rugby World Cup. The sporting event is scheduled to take place from September 20th to November 2nd and the tourist arrivals were expected to increase consumer spending. However, the impact of the typhoon is likely to discourage some foreigners from organising a trip to Japan given the disruptions at the airport. Strength in private consumption will also face a major test ahead of the looming consumption tax increase from 8% to 10% from October 1st onwards. Ahead of the previous consumption tax increases in 1997 and 2014, consumers brought forward their purchases to benefit from the existing lower consumption tax. However, the impact of Typhoon Faxai is likely to adversely affect consumer spending in September.

Impact on the forecast

The impact of the typhoon reinforces our forecast that industrial production will decline by 2.2% on average in 2019.

Cabinet Office revises down Q2 GDP

September 11, 2019: Economic growth

Event

On September 9th the Cabinet Office released revised GDP data for the second quarter, which showed that economic performance was weaker than originally reported. Real GDP increased by 1% year on year in April-June, in contrast to a [preliminary estimate](#) of 1.2% growth.

Analysis

Although private consumption remained the primary driver of the economy in the second quarter, growth in the component was revised down marginally from 1.0% to 0.9%. In addition, the increase in private non-residential investment was revised significantly to an increase of just 0.4% year on year, compared to the original estimate of 2.4%.

By contrast, private residential investment was revised up to reflect stronger growth in the sector. An upward revision was also made to government consumption. Meanwhile, it was reported that public investment recorded an increase in the second quarter, reversing the decline reported in the preliminary estimate.

According to the revisions, the contribution from a surge in inventories was also reported to be more significant. This does not bode well for the economy, as a build-up in inventory levels suggests that production levels were higher than consumer demand. At the same time, the revisions to the external sector were limited.

Household spending is set to accelerate in the third quarter as consumers ramp up their purchases of durable goods ahead of the planned consumption tax increase on October 1st. In addition, an increase in tourist arrivals ahead of the country's hosting of the Rugby World Cup will support the economy. However, the impact of [Typhoon Faxai](#), which struck the country in September, is likely to cause disruption during the quarter.

Impact on the forecast

Despite the downward revision, the data are in line with our forecast that the economy will be more resilient in 2019 and will expand by 1%, a faster pace of growth than in 2018.

Analysis

EIU global forecast - Trade war drags down global growth

September 17, 2019

The threats facing the global economy are growing. In mid-September drone attacks severely damaged a Saudi oilfield and its largest oil processing centre. Saudi and international officials estimate that this will take about half of Saudi Arabia's oil production offline for several weeks. Although both Saudi Arabia and the US promptly offered to increase supplies to the market from their reserves, the strikes have further inflamed tensions between the US and Iran (which Saudi Arabia blames for the attack) and exposed how vulnerable Saudi Arabia's energy infrastructure is to attack. If Saudi Arabia does manage to restore output within weeks (as we currently expect), and if geopolitical tensions die down, oil prices should ease back to an average of US\$65/barrel in the final three months of the year (from about US\$70/b just after the attack). If the repairs drag on longer than this, depleting available crude oil stocks, or if there were to be direct military engagement in the region (not our core forecast), prices could rise well above US\$70/b. This seems unlikely, however, given that neither the US nor Iran stands to gain much from such a conflict, but the risk that a policy miscalculation will lead the US and Iran into conflict has risen.

The US government continues to flirt with trade war escalation

Meanwhile the US government continues to flirt with an escalation of the trade war with China.

On August 23rd the US president, Donald Trump, announced that all tariffs on imports from China would be raised by an additional 5 percentage points. The resulting tariff of 15% (rather than 10%) was placed across targeted Chinese items worth US\$125bn on September 1st; a second round of tariffs, also at 15%, will come into effect on another US\$175bn worth of Chinese goods in December. The US also plans to increase existing tariffs on US\$250bn worth of Chinese goods to 30% in October, after a period of public comment.

Despite this latest round of tariff increases, there are signs that both sides would prefer to avoid escalation. In a break from the tit-for-tat cycle of retaliation, China did not increase its tariff plans following the US's latest announcement. For his part, Mr Trump has indicated that both sides plan to resume trade negotiations in the US in September, although dates remain unconfirmed. Nonetheless, given the slim likelihood of a deal being reached before the US presidential election in November 2020, it cannot be ruled out that Mr Trump will raise tariffs further as his attempts to seek a win on trade are frustrated.

Trade policy risks are morphing into financial risks

Regardless of how the tariff war evolves, we expect the crux of the dispute to shift away from merchandise duties and on to technology, security, investment and finance. This will have a much longer-lasting negative effect on both the US and China, and will create additional risks for the global economy. The financial risks are a particular cause for concern. We believe that Chinese policymakers will refrain from purposefully weaponising the renminbi (by letting it depreciate sharply against the US dollar), as this would raise the risk of a financial crash in China's real estate sector. However, stemming the pace of depreciation of the renminbi will require China to offload a portion of its holdings of US Treasuries. There is a significant risk that Mr Trump will view this as justification for further punitive action.

One option open to the US would be to restrict Chinese access to the dollar-dominated global financial system. Voices in the US Congress are considering how to restrict US pension funds and venture capital (VC) firms from investing in Chinese technology companies, and US regulators have already moved to prevent Chinese VCs from investing in Silicon Valley. Meanwhile the US is also considering sanctions against Chinese banks that allegedly violate North Korea-related sanctions. This could set in motion steps to cut off the bank's access to the US financial system. Given the shocks that indiscriminate sanctions would send through the global financial system, we expect the US to avoid anything other than surgical strikes, as even targeted moves are likely to rattle global financial markets.

Consumer confidence is starting to buckle

Even if the worst-case scenarios are avoided (as we expect), these risks will continue to weigh on financial market and economic sentiment, dampening business investment and investor demand for risky assets. Even consumers are starting to feel nervous. Consumer confidence has eased markedly this year in Japan and parts of Europe, and even in the US the picture has become less rosy in recent months, with the University of Michigan's measure of consumer sentiment falling sharply in August and failing to recover in September. This will translate into a less positive outlook for the services sector, which has been propping up the global economy over much of 2019 as manufacturing has stalled.

World economy: Forecast summary

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Real GDP growth (%)										
World (PPP^a exchange rates)	3.4	3.3	3.7	3.5	2.9	3.2	3.5	3.6	3.5	-
World (market exchange rates)	2.8	2.5	3.1	2.9	2.3	2.5	2.8	2.9	2.8	2.7
US	2.9	1.6	2.4	2.9	2.2	1.6	1.9	2.0	1.8	1.9
Euro area	2.0	1.9	2.6	1.9	1.2	1.3	1.6	1.7	1.7	1.5
Europe	1.9	1.9	2.7	2.1	1.3	1.6	1.9	2.0	1.9	1.8
China	6.9	6.7	6.8	6.6	6.1	6.0	5.8	5.5	5.2	4.6
Asia and Australasia	4.5	4.5	4.9	4.5	4.1	4.1	4.3	4.3	4.1	3.7
Latin America ^b	0.1	-0.3	1.8	1.6	0.9	1.3	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6

Middle East & Africa	2.3	4.8	1.4	1.2	1.2	2.3	2.9	3.2	3.3	2.7
Sub-Saharan Africa	2.7	0.8	2.3	2.3	2.2	2.6	3.6	4.2	4.4	4.5
World inflation (%; av)^b	3.0	3.1	3.2	3.5	3.7	3.4	3.2	3.2	3.0	3.2
World trade growth (%)	2.2	2.1	5.6	3.9	2.2	2.8	3.5	3.7	4.0	3.9
Commodities										
Oil (US\$/barrel; Brent)	52.4	44.0	54.4	71.1	65.0	63.0	67.0	72.5	75.0	72.5
Industrial raw materials (US\$; % change)	-15.2	-2.2	20.2	2.2	-8.0	2.2	4.3	0.1	0.8	–
Food, feedstuffs & beverages (US\$; % change)	-18.4	-3.5	-0.9	1.6	-5.7	0.7	4.1	1.7	0.9	–
Exchange rates (av)										
¥:US\$	121.0	108.8	112.1	110.4	108.2	107.8	104.9	100.5	97.0	0.0
US\$:€	1.11	1.11	1.13	1.18	1.12	1.13	1.18	1.23	1.24	1.24

^a Purchasing power parity. ^b Excludes Venezuela.

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit.



Korea

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U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Korea

Ambassador Harry Harris



Ambassador Harry Harris was nominated by President Trump on May 23 and confirmed by the United States Senate on June 28 as U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Korea (ROK).

Ambassador Harris commanded the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM), now known as the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), from May, 2015 to May, 2018. He is the first Asian-American to hold four-star rank in the U.S. Navy and the first to head USPACOM. Prior to USPACOM, he commanded the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Other operational commands include the U.S. 6th Fleet, Striking and Support

Forces NATO, Joint Task Force Guantanamo, Patrol and Reconnaissance Wing 1, and Patrol Squadron 46.

From 2011 to 2013, Ambassador Harris served as the representative of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of State. In this role, he traveled to over 80 countries with the Secretary and participated in most of the Secretary's meetings with foreign leaders. He also served as the U.S. Roadmap Monitor for the Mid-East Peace Process.

Ambassador Harris' personal decorations include the State Department's Distinguished Honor Award, the Defense Distinguished Service Medal, three Navy Distinguished Service Medals, three Defense Superior Service Medals, three Legions of Merit, two Bronze Stars, and the Air Medal. He received the Republic of Korea's Tong-il medal in 2014. He has also been decorated by the governments of Australia, France, Japan, Mongolia, the Philippines, and Singapore.

Ambassador Harris was born in Japan and reared in Tennessee and Florida. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1978. He holds master's degrees from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and Georgetown's School of Foreign Service. He also did post-graduate work at Oxford University and completed the Seminar 21 fellowship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Ambassador Harris' father served in the U.S. Navy, and was a veteran of both World War II and the Korean War. He was stationed in Korea and Japan after World War II until he retired in 1958. Harris' mother was Japanese. She moved to Tennessee with her husband and young son in 1958 and became an American citizen in 1974.

Ambassador Harris is married to Ms. Bruni Bradley, herself a career Naval officer.

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U.S. Department of State

Diplomacy in Action

U.S. Relations With the Republic of Korea

Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet

BUREAU OF EAST ASIAN AND PACIFIC AFFAIRS

JULY 17, 2018

U.S.-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

The United States and Korea's Joseon Dynasty established diplomatic relations under the 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, and the first U.S. diplomatic envoy arrived in Korea in 1883. U.S.-Korea relations continued until 1905, when Japan assumed direction over Korean foreign affairs. In 1910, Japan began a 35-year period of colonial rule over Korea. Following Japan's surrender in 1945, at the end of World War II, the Korean Peninsula was divided at the 38th parallel into two occupation zones, with the United States in the South and the Soviet Union in the North. Initial hopes for a unified, independent Korea were not realized, and in 1948 two separate nations were established — the Republic of Korea (R.O.K.) in the South, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North. In 1949, the United States established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea.

On June 25, 1950, North Korean forces invaded the R.O.K.. Led by the United States, a United Nations coalition of 16 countries undertook its defense. Following China's entry into the war on behalf of North Korea later that year, a stalemate ensued for the final two years of the conflict until an armistice was concluded on July 27, 1953. A peace treaty has never been signed. In 1953, at the conclusion of the Korean War, the United States and the Republic of Korea signed a Mutual Defense Treaty, the foundation of a comprehensive alliance that endures today.

In the decades after the war, the R.O.K. experienced political turmoil under autocratic leadership, but developed a vocal civil society that led to strong protests against authoritarian rule. Pro-democracy activities intensified in the 1980s and the R.O.K. began the transition to what is now a vibrant, democratic system. U.S.-R.O.K. ties are based on common values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

The United States and the R.O.K. share a long history of friendship and cooperation based on shared values and interests. The two countries work together to combat regional and global threats and to strengthen their economies. The United States has maintained Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine personnel in the R.O.K. in support of its commitment under the U.S.-R.O.K. Mutual Defense Treaty to help the R.O.K. defend itself against external aggression. In 2013, the two countries celebrated the 60th anniversary of the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance. A Combined Forces Command coordinates operations between U.S. units and R.O.K. armed forces. The United States and the R.O.K. coordinate closely on the North Korean nuclear issue and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. As the R.O.K.'s economy has developed (it joined the OECD in 1996), trade and investment ties have become an increasingly important aspect of the U.S.-R.O.K. relationship.

In recent years, the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance has expanded into a deep, comprehensive global partnership, and the R.O.K.'s role as a regional and global leader continues to grow. The R.O.K. hosted the 2010 G-20 Summit, the 2011 Fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit, the 2013 Seoul Conference on Cyberspace, and the 2014 International Telecommunication Union Plenipotentiary Conference. In 2017, the R.O.K. chaired the Global Health Security Agenda Steering Group. The R.O.K. is a committed member of various international nonproliferation regimes, including the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT). The

R.O.K. has pledged more than half a billion dollars towards development efforts including health security, women's empowerment, and humanitarian assistance.

The emergence of the R.O.K. as a global leader has led to an increasingly dynamic U.S.-R.O.K. Alliance focused on future-oriented partnership opportunities including space, energy, health, climate change, and cyber. The United States and R.O.K. renewed in 2015 the Civil Nuclear "123" Agreement and maintain a High-Level Bilateral Commission to address civil nuclear issues of mutual interest. Our two countries signed in 2016 a Civil Space Framework Agreement to increase cooperation in civil space exploration and we hold biennial cabinet-level Joint Committee Meetings on science and technology. The R.O.K. is an active partner on efforts combat illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing, and is working to establish a World Fisheries University.

People-to-people ties between the United States and the R.O.K. have never been stronger are strong. The R.O.K. is a top three origin country in absolute terms for international students attending U.S. colleges and universities. Educational exchanges include a vibrant Fulbright exchange program as well as the Work, English Study, and Travel (WEST) program that gives a diverse group of Korean students the opportunity to learn more about the United States.

Underscoring the strength of the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance, President Moon's first overseas trip after his inauguration was to the United States in June 2017. In November 2017, President Trump made the first state visit to the Republic of Korea by a U.S. President in 25 years.

U.S. Assistance to the Republic of Korea

The United States provides no development assistance to the R.O.K.. The R.O.K., a recipient of U.S. assistance in the years after the Korean War, is a development aid donor today.

Bilateral Economic Relations

Over the past several decades, the R.O.K. has achieved a remarkably high level of economic growth and is now the United States' sixth-largest goods trading partner with a trillion-dollar economy. Major U.S. firms have long been leading investors, while the R.O.K.'s top firms have made significant investments in the United States. There are large-scale flows of manufactured goods, agricultural products, services, and technology between the two countries. R.O.K. foreign direct investment in the United States has nearly doubled since 2011 from \$19.7 billion to \$38.8 billion in 2016, making the Republic of Korea the second largest Asian source of foreign direct investment into the United States. During President Trump's 2017 visit to the Republic of Korea, R.O.K. companies announced plans to begin a series of projects in the United States over the next four years valued at \$17.3 billion. The Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) entered into force on March 15, 2012, underscoring the depth of bilateral trade ties. In March 2018, the United States and the Republic of Korea reached an agreement on the renegotiation of the KORUS FTA.

The Republic of Korea's Membership in International Organizations

The R.O.K. and the United States belong to a number of the same international organizations, including the United Nations, G-20, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization. The R.O.K. hosts the Green Climate Fund, an international organization associated with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The R.O.K. also is a Partner for Cooperation with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and an observer to the Organization of American States.

Bilateral Representation

The Ambassador-Designate is Harry Harris Jr. The U.S. Chargé d'Affaires ad interim is Marc Knapper; other principal embassy officials are listed in the Department's Key Officers List.

The R.O.K. maintains an embassy in the United States at 2450 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008 (tel. 202-939-5600).



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

South Korea is slightly larger than Hungary or the U.S. state of Indiana. Its only land border is shared with North Korea, roughly along the 38th parallel, where the Korean Peninsula was divided at the end of World War II. At its closest point, South Korea is 123 miles (196 kilometers) from Japan. Around 63 percent of South Korea's territory is forested, and approximately 15 percent is suitable for cultivation. Hills and mountains dominate the east, while plains are found in the west and south. South Korea also has a number of islands, mostly along the southern and western coasts. The largest is Jeju, a popular tourist destination off the mainland's southwest coast.

South Korea's climate is temperate, with hot, humid summers and cold, relatively dry winters. The nation experiences all four seasons; spring and fall are the most pleasant times of the year. The monsoon season is from mid-July to mid-August. During this time, South Korea receives over half of its annual rainfall. Korea is traditionally known as Joseon ("Land of the Morning Calm"). South Korea is prone to typhoons in the monsoon season, and heavy flooding is common in parts of the country, sometimes resulting in fatalities. The country's rapid industrialization and continued high levels of manufacturing have resulted in significant pollution. Deforestation and the resulting soil erosion is another environmental concern.

History

Early Kingdoms and the Yi Dynasty

Powerful kingdoms flourished on the Korean Peninsula more than two thousand years ago. Of particular importance were the Silla (established in 57 BC), Goguryeo (37 BC), and Baekje (18 BC) dynasties. Silla kings united the three warring kingdoms in AD 668 and developed a rich Buddhist culture. By 935, the strong new Goryeo kingdom had established itself on the peninsula. The name Korea comes from "Goryeo." During the Goryeo era, the world's first movable metal-type printer was invented. A coup in 1392 ended the Goryeo kingdom and began the Joseon (or Yi) Dynasty. The Yi ruled for more than five hundred years. During this time, Korean culture was heavily influenced by Chinese culture, and much of this influence can still be felt today.

Occupation and Liberation

In the latter part of the Yi Dynasty, China and Japan sought control of Korea, a struggle the Japanese eventually won. They annexed Korea in 1910. Japanese rule became increasingly heavy-handed and violent, and the social and political effects of this period are still a significant part of Korean society.

At the end of World War II (1945), the Soviet Union entered Korea from the north and the United States entered the south to accept the surrender of Japanese troops. The peninsula was accordingly divided (at the 38th parallel) into two administrative zones. After attempts to hold nationwide elections failed, an independent government was established in the south with U.S. support; Syngman Rhee became president.

The Korean War

In June 1950, North Korean troops invaded South Korea,

triggering a three-year war. The United States and United Nations (UN) sent troops to help South Korea. Concerned that the war might spill into Chinese territory, China sent troops to aid North Korea. The war ravaged the peninsula and ended in a stalemate and a cease-fire agreement (a peace treaty still has not been signed), with the original border virtually unchanged. Violent border incidents have occurred over the years, and South Korea and North Korea continue to have large military presences at the border.

Road to Democracy

Rhee resigned in 1960 after students protested against his authoritarian rule. General Park Chung-hee took advantage of the weakened government and seized power in a 1961 military coup. Under Park's leadership, South Korea's economy began to grow rapidly, leading to an increasingly higher quality of life for South Koreans. However, Park also took away many civil liberties and political rights, usually under the pretense of national security. He was assassinated in 1979.

Another coup in 1980 brought General Chun Doo-hwan to power. Chun's brutal suppression of student demonstrations in Gwangju increased public and international opposition to his government. In the face of growing protests, which had spread to include much of the middle class as well, and with international pressure for reform leading up to Seoul's hosting of the 1988 Summer Olympics, Chun stepped down in 1987. General Roh Tae-woo was freely elected that year, and he began instituting reforms that paved the way for civilian rule. Kim Young-sam won elections in 1992 to become the first civilian to hold the presidency in more than 30 years.

Relations with North Korea

Since the end of the Korean War until the late 1990s, South Korea's relationship with North Korea was very tense and mistrust was high. In 1998, Kim Dae-jung took office as president and implemented a "sunshine policy" of constructive engagement with the North in hopes of eventually achieving reunification. The two countries started a joint industrial park at Kaesong, in North Korea, as a sign of their cooperation. Kim's successor, Roh Moo-hyun, continued diplomacy with North Korea, organizing a historic leaders' summit in Pyongyang in 2007.

North Korea began openly testing nuclear weapons in 2006, and with President Lee Myung-bak, who took office in 2008, promising to take a tougher stance on North Korea, relations quickly deteriorated. 2010 was an especially violent year: a South Korean warship was allegedly sunk by a North Korean torpedo, and North Korea fired on Yeonpyeong, a small island in contested waters of the Yellow Sea, killing four. Tensions rise frequently, and North Korea regularly threatens to destroy South Korea, Japan, and the United States. While the goal of reunification has long been espoused on both sides of the border, different visions and deep suspicions, especially regarding the nuclear issue, keep the two Koreas far apart.

First Female President

Park Geun-hye, daughter of former president Park Chung-hee, was elected president in December 2012, becoming South Korea's first female president. In addition to the continued threat of North Korea, challenges facing Park

included reviving the economy and a variety of social issues. One major challenge President Park faced was the April 2014 ferry incident that killed more than three hundred passengers, including many high school students. Many of the victims' families accused the government of negligence and failing to protect its citizens; Prime Minister Chung Hong-won resigned soon after. In 2017, President Park Geun-hye was impeached and removed from office, following a corruption scandal and several large public protests. Park was also arrested on 13 charges, including bribery, extortion, and abuse of power, and is awaiting trial.

Recent Events and Trends

- **Presidential election:** In May 2017, Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party of Korea was elected president, winning over 40 percent of votes. Moon is the son of North Korean refugees and favors seeking dialogue with North Korea while maintaining sanctions to bring about change. Voter turnout was high, as about 77 percent of South Korean voters participated in the election.

- **Winter Olympics:** In February 2018, South Korea hosted the XXIII Winter Olympics in PyeongChang. As a sign of improved relations, South Korean and North Korean athletes walked together in the opening ceremony under a unified flag. This is the second time South Korea has hosted the Olympics; the first was the 1988 Summer Olympics.

- **Historic meeting:** In April 2018, President Moon met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un for a summit at the Panmunjom border crossing. The meeting marked the first time a North Korean leader has entered South Korea since 1953. Though both leaders agreed to work together toward permanent peace and eventual denuclearization of the peninsula, working out the details of these agreements is expected to be a lengthy process.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Most of South Korea's population lives in urban areas. Seoul is the largest city, followed by Busan, Incheon, and Daegu. Except for small Chinese and Southeast Asian minorities, South Korea is an ethnically homogeneous country. However, regionalism divides the population and creates biases and tensions that have impacted politics and social interaction throughout the nation's history. A person's dialect or accent can be used to identify his or her home region.

Language

The Korean language plays an important role in national identity. It is written in Hangeul, a phonetic alphabet created in 1446 because classical Chinese (the only written language available) was difficult to master. Hangeul made it possible for the commoner to read and write. Hangeul also instilled a national pride in Koreans that helped them preserve their culture during periods of foreign occupation. Hangeul has 24 letters, 10 of which are vowels. While Korean is related to Chinese—many words share a common origin—the pronunciation can be very different. Korean used in South Korea sometimes mixes numerous Chinese characters with

Hangul script in newspapers and government documents; however, media and government are making efforts to reduce the number of Chinese characters used.

An "honorific," or respectful form of address signaled by the addition of a suffix to a noun, is used by younger people when addressing older people, or when one wishes to speak humbly. There are also seven levels of speech, indicated by different forms of verbs that change based on the formality of the situation and the level of respect a speaker wishes to convey. Modern Korean has adopted many English and other foreign terms associated with Western culture. Although Korean has several mutually intelligible regional dialects, the Seoul dialect is the standard taught in school. English is also taught in schools as part of a compulsory education requirement.

Religion

Confucianism permeates all aspects of Korean society, but it is a philosophy and not a religion. Confucianism orders social behavior, stressing virtue, morality, and filial piety (respect for one's parents and ancestors). Children are expected to show deference to their parents and perform certain duties for them in life and after they die. Confucian rites conducted on behalf of ancestors promote this respect and family unity. Even Christians perform these cultural rites in honor of their dead. Christians comprise about 32 percent of the population. Most belong to a variety of Protestant churches, although about 8 percent are Roman Catholic. Roughly 24 percent of South Koreans are Buddhist, and over 40 percent do not claim a particular religious belief at all.

General Attitudes

Korean society is vertically ordered according to tenets of Confucian philosophy. Nearly all interaction is determined by one's place in various social groups or one's status in a relationship. Status is determined by gender, education, family background, wealth, occupation, and/or political ideology. However, age is the primary determiner of status. For example, the elderly are to be respected regardless of socioeconomic status. Success depends on social contacts. Koreans often use extreme modesty when speaking about themselves. They are reluctant to accept high honors and graciously deny compliments.

Giving gifts as a means of obtaining favors is common, especially in the workplace, and accepting a gift carries the responsibility of reciprocity. Open criticism and public disagreement are considered inappropriate because they can damage another person's reputation. Out of respect for the feelings of others, Koreans may withhold bad news or adverse opinions or express them in an indirect way. The hesitancy to criticize and disagree with others is rooted in the cultural importance of "saving face" (avoiding embarrassment, shame, or dishonor). Greater democracy, economic prosperity, and Westernization are changing Korean society for the rising generation and reducing the emphasis placed on traditional Confucian values, though their influence remains strong.

Personal Appearance

Most South Koreans wear Western-style clothing. The youth

wear modern fashions, and Korea has an active fashion industry. Clothing often depends on the event. In public, conservative dress is important. In the business world, Western-style suits and dresses are the norm. On special occasions or holidays, however, some people wear *hanbok*, simple traditional outfits characterized by bright colors. For women, *hanbok* is a two-piece dress with a long skirt. For men, it includes trousers and a loose-fitting jacket or robe.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Within the Confucian social structure, how one is greeted depends on one's age and social standing relative to the greeter. A bow is the traditional greeting, but it is usually accompanied by a handshake between men. As a sign of respect, the left hand may support or rest under the right forearm during the handshake. Women shake hands less often than men do. Among friends and relatives, a simple nod is acceptable. Children bow when greeting adults. Professionals meeting for the first time exchange business cards, presenting and accepting the cards with both hands after a handshake.

A common greeting between peers or for subordinates is *Annyeong haseyo?* (Are you at peace?). Children and very close friends of the same age often greet each other with a simple *Annyeong?* To show respect for a social superior, one uses the honorific: *Annyeong hashimnikka?*

Gestures

Proper courtesy is shown with gestures. Items are passed with both hands or the right hand grasped by the left at the wrist or forearm. Feet are not placed on a desk or chair. When laughing, yawning, or using a toothpick, it is considered polite to cover one's mouth. Koreans beckon by waving the fingers together with the palm down. Beckoning with the index finger is rude. Facial expressions are often more important than body language in communicating unspoken messages. When embarrassed, a person may respond by laughing. People may also laugh if they are uncertain of how to respond. Eye contact is important in conversation among peers, but a person may avoid eye contact in conversation with a person of a different age group to be polite. Couples might hold hands, but kissing in public is not appropriate.

Visiting

Guests invited to a home remove their shoes upon entering. While Western furniture is common, in many homes guests are seated on floor cushions. Men sit cross-legged and women tuck their legs to one side behind them. The guest receives the warmest or best location. When visiting relatives, men and women usually separate to socialize; for example, the women gather in the kitchen. Refreshments usually are served. Guests invited for a meal customarily bring a small gift, often something that can be served at the gathering. Wrapped gifts are not opened in front of the giver. At the end of a visit, the host accompanies the guests to the door or outside. While South Korean men in rural areas used to socialize in *dabang* (teahouses), a *hof* (beer house) is now a more common

gathering place.

Eating

South Koreans eat three meals a day, though busy schedules make it difficult for the family to always dine together. Metal chopsticks and spoons are the most commonly used utensils. At a dinner party, the meal usually is served before socializing begins. People pass items and pour drinks with the right hand. To show respect, the left hand is used to support the forearm or wrist of the right when passing items to older people and those of a higher social class. Eating while walking on the street is not considered appropriate for adults.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

The family is bound by a strong sense of obligation among its members. Though Koreans traditionally lived with members of the extended family, it is now more common to live in nuclear family arrangements, especially in urban areas. As Korean women increasingly delay both marriage and childbirth to establish careers, South Korea's birthrate has fallen to one of the lowest in the world; families with more than two children are considered large.

Because of the Confucian emphasis on family hierarchies (younger family members owe respect to their elders), Koreans keep detailed genealogies. These records date back many centuries and include a person's birth, relations, achievements, and place of burial. At family gatherings, the elderly are treated with greater respect by younger generations.

Parents and Children

Parents go to great lengths to provide for their children, especially when it comes to educational opportunities. Because children are largely expected to have their education be their sole focus, many children do not do much to help around the house. In return for such care from their parents, children are expected to take care of their parents when they are older. An oldest son's aging parents are traditionally cared for by his wife, but this duty, while common, is often privately perceived as a burden. A weakening of Confucian values in society has caused some to claim that parents are increasingly neglected in their old age.

Gender Roles

The father is the head of the family; he and the oldest son receive the greatest respect. Traditionally, men were seen as the primary providers and final decision-makers, and mothers were responsible for supervising the household and children. Today, however, women are generally expected to work outside the home to help support their families and pay for their children's educational expenses, which can be significant given the focus on high-quality education in South Korea. Women have increasingly been able to pursue both higher education and careers. However, broadened opportunities for women have not meant an increase in household responsibilities for men. Working women are still expected to maintain households and rear children—often without help

from their working husbands.

Although women comprise slightly more than half of the labor force, their status is lower than men's in the workplace. Even so, urban women enjoy greater equality with men than do rural women, and women occupy a growing number of high positions in traditionally male-dominated fields. Female politicians are becoming more common, and the first female president was elected in 2012.

Housing

Exteriors

Most Koreans live in high-rise apartment buildings. In smaller towns, buildings may be between 5 and 10 storeys, but a typical city building has 20 to 30. New upscale high-rises may have more than 100. Stand-alone houses are more common in older and rural areas.

Interiors

A typical apartment has a kitchen, a living room, two or three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a small balcony. The family eats at a dining table in the kitchen. In the living room, they entertain guests, relax on the sofa, and watch television or play video games. Most Koreans have Western furniture (considered a sign of affluence), but even families with this type of furniture may also use traditional floor cushions. Some people still use a Korean-style bed, or *yo*, which consists of thick comforter-like bedding that is laid on the floor. Apartments are heated using a modern version of *ondol*, a traditional system for heating floors where fire-burning stoves heated passages beneath a home's floor. Today, heated water pipes or electrical cables warm the floors. No shoes are worn in the house (though slippers are common), so a shoe cabinet is placed next to the entry area.

Ownership

Many families own their apartments, but it is also possible to lease an apartment using the *jeonse* (deposit) system, in which a large deposit is placed with the owner in lieu of rent. The owner profits by investing the *jeonse* money, which must be surrendered at the completion of the lease term (usually one or two years). Paying monthly rent is another possible, but less popular, option.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Young South Koreans enjoy going to movies, shopping, taking short trips, and meeting friends at coffee shops, fast-food restaurants, karaoke rooms, or "video rooms" (establishments that show movies on DVD in private viewing rooms). Few South Korean youth have time for serious dating before they enter college or the workforce. Couples often meet on blind dates, most often set up through acquaintances.

Couples might exchange rings (similar to engagement rings), which signify their commitment, shortly after becoming an official couple. They then celebrate relationship milestones frequently. In addition to Valentine's Day in February, for example, couples celebrate White Day in March, Rose Day in May, and Pepero Day in November. Young women offer chocolates to their partners on Valentine's Day, and young men reply with candy on White Day. Pepero Day is celebrated by exchanging Pepero candy

(chocolate-dipped cookie sticks) as well as other gifts. Additional celebrations occur to mark the 100th, 200th, and 300th day of the relationship. Many establishments and industries cater to couples, and people can buy "couple outfits" (matching items of clothing or entire outfits) or order from a special "couple's menu" at restaurants.

Engagement

Per Korean tradition, before getting married the groom prepares the living arrangements. The bride prepares the furnishings for the home with her dowry. The couple's parents' expectations for the quality of home and furnishings can be a point of contention between families. In recent years, couples have worked to prevent friction between families by openly negotiating the budget and shared expenses.

Marriage in Society

Matchmaking, called *jungmae*, is sometimes used to arrange marriages between wealthy families, though this service is in decline. Today, most Koreans choose their own partners and then discuss their intentions with their families.

While divorce often brings with it a social stigma, the increase of divorce in recent years has made it somewhat more socially acceptable. Remarriage is common.

Same-sex marriage is not legally recognized in South Korea.

Weddings

Wedding ceremonies today often take place in public wedding halls that are designed to accommodate both Western-style and traditional ceremonies, as a typical Korean wedding consists of both. Most weddings occur at lunchtime on a weekday. Guests wear business attire. Wedding guests are greeted at the door by the parents of the bride and groom. They then sign an entry book and present gifts for the new couple, generally envelopes of money, to the parents. The Western-style ceremony typically takes place first. Western wedding clothes are generally provided as part of the services arranged through a wedding planner.

After the ceremony, the bride and groom pose for photos with groups of friends and family. While non-family guests enjoy a meal, the couple changes into traditional wedding attire, which is elaborately embroidered and features unique headwear. The couple and their families then go to a smaller room for a short traditional Korean ceremony. Afterward the couple changes into hanbok (traditional clothing) and mingles with the guests as they eat. Although the wedding is considered finished at the conclusion of the meal, family and close friends may throw a small party after the reception for the couple before they leave on their honeymoon.

Life Cycle

Birth

Koreans tend to celebrate pregnancy individually or among family. After giving birth, women are encouraged to eat seaweed soup and to keep themselves and the baby warm. Family and friends wait about three weeks to visit the baby. This tradition is said to protect the mother's and newborn's immune systems.

Each syllable in a Korean name typically represents a different meaning based on traditional Chinese characters. Generally, family names are one syllable and given names are

two, though they sometimes have one or three. Kim, Lee (Yi), and Park (Pak) are the most common family names. Women retain their maiden names when they marry.

One of the two syllables in the given name is often a generational name. All relatives of a given generation may have the same syllable as part of their full name. This generational name, called a *dollimja*, applies to the entire clan. For example, the Park family's sons may be named Gi Gon and Gi Chul and have a cousin of roughly the same age named Gi Seok. While some families still incorporate this naming system into their family names, in recent years fewer families choose to continue this tradition.

Milestones

After *baegil* (one hundred days) of life, a small party is held in honor of the child's survival to that point (a milestone often not reached in the past). A larger celebration, called a *dol*, is held on the first birthday. The highlight of this event is when several items (such as a book, money, and thread) are placed in front of the baby. The item the child picks up first is thought to signify his or her fortunes in life. For example, if the child chooses a book, it is thought that he or she will become a scholar. Today, some families combine the one-hundred-day and first birthday celebrations, although a first child will likely still have both.

Generally, young people are considered adults when they graduate from high school. Other milestones coincide with the legal ages for drinking alcohol (19) and holding a job (20). People who have recently turned 20 celebrate Adult's Day on the third Monday in May and receive perfumes, roses, or kisses as gifts from friends on this holiday.

All South Korean men between ages 20 and 30 must enlist in the military or work as a civil servant. The length of conscription varies depending on which branch of the military they serve in; however, most terms are roughly two years. Men enrolled in university may defer enlistment but only until they are 24. Young men who refuse to serve or try to evade enlistment can be banned from Korea or jailed. Young women are not obligated to enlist but may volunteer for service if they desire.

On a person's 60th birthday (called *hwangap*), extended family members gather for a grand celebration. Guests enjoy large amounts of food, drink traditional liquor, and perform songs. Families may save money for months to pay for the event. The age of 60 is notable because it represents completing the full 60-year cycle of the traditional Chinese lunar calendar.

Death

Depending on several factors, including the family's social prominence, a three- or five-day mourning period follows the death of a loved one. The family of the deceased rents a funeral parlor (which is usually part of a hospital), where mourners gather to pay respect and offer condolences. Black is usually worn. Funeral customs vary according to the religion of the deceased and the guests. Christian funerals feature a service by a pastor or priest, while Buddhist funerals feature a visit by a monk to the parlor on the last day of the mourning period.

At the funeral, guests are received by the deceased's family in a memorial room featuring photos of the deceased, by

which guests place a white chrysanthemum. Buddhist guests bow two-and-a-half times to the photo, while Christian guests offer a silent prayer in front of the photo. Guests offer their condolences to the family and give them envelopes of money to help support them after their loss. Guests are then served traditional Korean food and drink. Close friends may stay with the family throughout the evening to offer support. The deceased is buried in a family plot, often on a mountainside. The grave is marked with a carved stone and a small earthen mound. After the burial, mourners share a meal. Land for cemeteries is scarce, so cremation is becoming more popular. Mourners usually spread the ashes in the countryside.

Diet

Korean food is generally spicy. Rice and *kimchi* (fermented vegetables, such as cabbage) are staples at almost every meal. Rice is sometimes combined with other ingredients, such as grains, beans, or vegetables. *Bibimbap* is rice mixed with seasoned vegetables; an egg is usually put on top, and sometimes bits of meat are added. *Gimbap* is a popular on-the-go or picnic food made of steamed rice, vegetables, and meat or seafood, rolled in dried seaweed. Favorite delicacies include *samgyupsal* (slices of grilled pork belly), *bulgogi* (strips of marinated and barbecued beef), and *galbi* (marinated short ribs). Various soups are common. Chicken and beef are typical meats. Koreans also eat large amounts of fish, seafood (clams, oysters, squid, octopus, sea cucumbers), and *tteok* (pounded rice cake).

Juk (rice porridge) is the basis for many dishes. Traditionally a food for people with digestive troubles, *juk* is now a popular everyday food. Busy working people often eat it for breakfast. *Juk* is also believed to have certain mystical powers. For example, sweet red bean *juk* is said to chase away evil spirits and ensure a long life. *Soju*, a common alcoholic drink traditionally made from rice, is a popular drink ordered with meals. *Makgeolli*, another rice-based alcoholic drink, is also popular throughout the nation. Fruit is often served as dessert.

Recreation

Sports

The most popular sports in South Korea are soccer, baseball, basketball, and volleyball. People also enjoy badminton, table tennis, swimming, tennis, bowling, and golf. Baseball and soccer are popular among teenage boys, and they play these sports anywhere they can: schools, gyms, or even on the street. Children enjoy *taekwondo* (a martial art), and most men have some experience with it from their two compulsory years of military service. *Jokgu* (a blend of volleyball, tennis, and soccer played across a low net using only the feet or head) is also introduced to men during their time in the military, and many continue playing it in later years as well. Unique to Korea is a form of wrestling called *ssireum*, in which contestants hold on to pieces of cloth tied around their opponent's waist and thighs during their match. Women do not generally play sports as often as men but instead often workout indoors, at gyms or home, participating in activities such as yoga, pilates, aerobics, or dance classes.

Leisure

During college, when young men are legally old enough to do so, they enjoy frequenting billiards parlors. An especially popular game there is *sagu* (also called "four balls," a game played with two cue balls and two target balls). A popular card game called *go stop* is played with *hwatu* cards (a deck containing 12 sets of 4 cards), originally from Japan. *Go stop* is played among family, friends, and neighbors and is also gambled on. Hiking is a popular activity for weekends and vacations.

Young people enjoy music and television, and computer games are extremely popular. Professional gaming competitions have rather large followings. *Noraebang* (karaoke) is enjoyed by people regardless of age or gender. *Noraebang* is a popular activity for groups of friends and coworkers as a way to relax after work or school. Women enjoy going to movies, visiting friends and family, going out for coffee, and shopping.

Vacation

Wealthier Koreans travel abroad for vacations, usually to other East Asian countries or to the United States. Staying at resorts is also popular. For Koreans who do not travel abroad, day trips to the mountains or the beach are also popular. Jeju island, which is sometimes referred to as the "Hawaii of Korea," is a popular destination for all Koreans.

The Arts

Prose, poetry, legends, folktales, and plays were either passed down orally or recorded in the Chinese language until Hangeul was developed in the mid-15th century. Poetry was originally performed through song; *sijo* (an ancient poetic form) has endured in popularity. Themes included Confucian principles, love, and nature, while current renditions also include political topics. Folk music and dance continue to be popular. *Pansori* is sung by a soloist accompanied by drums. Mask dances, drum dances, masked theater (*sandae*), and puppet theater (*kkokdugaksi*) are performed at festivals. Movies, art exhibits, and theaters also provide entertainment. Calligraphy is an important art and has influenced traditional painting. Every brush stroke represents an object in nature. Art forms are distinctly Korean but have been influenced by China as well as Buddhism and Shamanism.

South Korea is increasingly well-known for its popular culture. Korean soap operas (often called dramas) and music groups are the passion of many in South Korea and abroad, especially in other East Asian countries.

Holidays

Public holidays include New Year's Day (1 January), *Seollal* (lunar New Year), Independence Movement Day (1 March), Children's Day (5 May), Buddha's Birthday (in April or May, observed according to the lunar calendar), Memorial Day (6 June), Liberation Day (15 August), National Foundation Day (3 October), and Christmas (25 December).

Other holidays, such as Arbor Day (5 April), Armed Forces Day (1 October), and Korean Alphabet Day (9 October), are marked by various celebrations but are not public holidays. Several national and regional festivals also take place throughout the year.

Seollal

South Koreans celebrate the international New Year and *Seollal* (the lunar New Year), though *Seollal* celebrations are much larger, making it one of the most important holidays of the year. South Koreans celebrate *Seollal* in January or February by visiting their hometowns or vacationing at resorts. Almost everybody takes off work the day before and the day after. On the morning of *Seollal*, families gather and enjoy a meal of *tteokguk* (sliced-rice-cake soup), typically made of *garaetteok*, a long, cylindrical-shaped rice cake. *Garaetteok* symbolizes luck, health, and a long life. *Manduguk* (Korean-style dumpling soup) is also popular. Families also gather to exchange gifts, honor the dead, play games, tell fortunes, and enjoy large meals. People often dress in traditional clothing, though this is becoming less common in cities. To honor deceased ancestors, the family gathers around a table that has food and incense on it. After the male relatives have bowed to pay respect to their ancestors, they make an offering to them by holding a glass of traditional alcohol over the incense and pouring it into an empty bowl. After the ceremony, the family eats the food placed on the table.

Buddha's Birthday

While today only about 24 percent of Koreans consider themselves Buddhist, Buddha's birthday is celebrated by those of all faiths. On Buddha's birthday (the eighth day of the fourth lunar month), temples are decorated with pink lotus-shaped lanterns, and they offer special services and meals. At lantern festivals across the country, people write wishes on paper and attach them to the lanterns. Buddhists also worship Buddha and offer prayers in the temple.

Chuseok

Chuseok (a harvest festival that is often compared to the U.S. Thanksgiving) is an important family holiday, celebrated on the fifteenth day of August on the lunar calendar, though like *Seollal*, celebrations span the day before and after the holiday. Family members visit ancestral tombs to clean the grave sites and leave food offerings in honor of the dead. Large family reunions are common during this festival. People visit their hometowns and enjoy traditional meals such as *songpyeon* (half-moon-shaped rice cakes steamed on top of a layer of pine needles).

Patriotic Holidays

Independence Movement Day recognizes an independence movement in 1919 against the Japanese. Many observe this holiday by placing South Korean flags outside of their homes or businesses.

Memorial Day, observed 6 June, honors those who died during the Korean War and the Japanese occupation. At 10 a.m. on Memorial Day, sirens sound and people stop what they are doing to pay silent tribute to the deceased. Bars and nightclubs voluntarily close on Memorial Day, and people are encouraged to fly their flags at half-mast.

Liberation Day celebrates Korea's liberation from Japanese occupation in 1945. In the past, TV programs aired on Liberation Day focused on the cruelty of the Japanese occupation. In recent years, however, holiday celebrations have focused on building a relationship with Japan as a neighbor and a friend.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

South Korea (officially the Republic of Korea, often referred to as the ROK to distinguish it from North Korea) is an electoral democracy led by a president, who is head of state. The president is directly elected by plurality vote to a five-year term and cannot run for reelection. The head of government is the prime minister, who is appointed by the president and confirmed by the National Assembly (*Gukhoe*). The prime minister has little power independent of the president, making the office of prime minister more like that of vice president in the United States than the office of prime minister in many parliamentary systems.

The country's legislative branch is the unicameral National Assembly. Of the National Assembly's 300 seats, 246 are filled through a majoritarian system, and 54 are filled through proportional representation. All members of the National Assembly serve four-year terms. South Korea has both a Supreme Court and a Constitutional Court; the Supreme Court is the highest appeals court in the country, while the Constitutional Court generally limits its focus to constitutional disputes.

South Korea is divided into nine provinces, though eight major cities (including Seoul and Sejong City) have special status that essentially makes them function as eight additional provinces. Local government officials are usually elected or appointed by local governments. As a result of decades of authoritarian rule, government in South Korea tends to be very centralized, with sub-national governments having relatively little autonomy. However, local autonomy has been increasing incrementally since the mid-1990s.

Political Landscape

While South Korea is a multiparty democracy, only a handful of parties gain representation in the National Assembly. Political parties in South Korea are very unstable, regularly changing names and alliances. Historically only two parties have held power: the center-right party (currently called the New Frontier Party) and the center-left party (currently the New Politics Alliance for Diplomacy). The New Frontier Party and its predecessors have held the presidency in South Korea for about 40 of the past 50 years and have been the largest party in the National Assembly for even more.

As democracy in South Korea has matured, political dialogue has increased and center-left parties have more of a voice. Some political issues highlight regional political rivalries, especially between the Gyeongsang and Jeolla provinces. Voters often prefer to elect someone from their own region, regardless of the candidate's qualifications. Sensitive political issues include reforming government relationships with the major conglomerates (*jaebol*), an aging population, and national security (especially dealing with North Korea). South Korea's lack of gender equality is being discussed more openly since the election of Park Geun-hye as the country's first female president. The future of Sejong City is also at the center of political debate. For decades, reunification with North Korea has been a major political

objective, but support for reunification has decreased in recent years.

A political issue that most South Koreans agree on is South Korea's claim to the Liancourt Rocks (known as Dokdo in South Korea), a group of small islets in the Sea of Japan (which many South Koreans call the East Sea). While South Korea currently has possession of the islets, Japan also claims them, and South Korea has vigorously fought this claim for decades.

Government and the People

South Korea's laws generally allow individuals to enjoy broad freedoms of speech, religion, press, and assembly. A notable exception is South Korea's National Security Law, which forbids engaging in pro-North Korea activities. In the past, the government has used this law as legal cover while silencing its critics, and some claim the government still does so. Corruption is prevalent throughout society. Bribery is especially a problem among government officials who interact with big business.

Elections, however, are not only transparent but also free and fair. Voter turnout for presidential elections generally exceeds 70 percent of registered voters. Turnout in National Assembly elections has decreased significantly since direct elections for the president were implemented in 1987. Since then, voter turnout rarely exceeds 60 percent, while previously turnout regularly exceeded 70 percent of registered voters. The voting age is 19.

Economy

South Korea experienced rapid economic growth after the 1960s to earn a position as one of the Four Tigers of East Asia. In just one generation, South Korea rose from poverty to relative prosperity. Most families came to identify themselves as part of the middle class. In the late 1990s, strikes, a large budget deficit, political scandals, bankruptcies, and foreign competition made South Korea vulnerable to the economic crisis that swept Asia. The nation's *jaebol* (huge conglomerates) had not followed sound fiscal policies and began to fail. The government responded with a campaign that, among other things, sought to make the *jaebol* more responsible.

Since the crisis, the economy has continued to grow, often at a high rate, and its industries have become increasingly high tech. Due to heavy dependence on international trade, the economy is vulnerable to global and regional downturns. Most recently, large amounts of foreign debt and the economy's dependence on exports made South Korea one of the hardest hit by the 2008 global economic crisis, though it rebounded quickly. The South Korean economy remains vulnerable to changes in global demand for its products, however. Other economic struggles include dealing with an aging population and the dominance of the *jaebols*.

Chief agricultural products include rice, barley, vegetables, fruit, and fish. About 6 percent of South Korea's labor force is in agriculture and lives in rural villages, cultivating small plots or collective farms. Around 24 percent of the labor force works in industry (mainly manufacturing). More than two-thirds is involved in service occupations. Major industries include electronics, automobiles, textiles and

clothing, chemicals, steel, and shipbuilding. The currency is the *won* (KRW).

Transportation and Communications

Air, rail, and bus connections provide a good transportation network between cities. A bullet train travels between Seoul and Busan in two-and-a-half hours. Roads are paved and in good condition. Buses, private cars, and taxis handle urban transportation. Seoul has efficient subway and bus systems. Taxis are plentiful and inexpensive. Driving habits are aggressive and accidents are common.

South Korea has many daily newspapers and numerous public and private radio and television stations, allowing for generally free and vibrant public discourse. The government does have some influence over the media with strong anti-defamation laws and legal restrictions on pro-North Korea materials. The government is especially sensitive to online media and activities. The country has efficient postal and telephone systems. Cellular phones are widespread, and South Korea has one of the fastest internet networks in the world.

Education

Structure and Access

Education is greatly valued in Korean culture and is considered a virtue in Confucianism, a philosophy that permeates Korean society. Education is seen as a key to success, respect, and power. Children enter elementary school at either six or seven years old. Elementary school has six grades (ages 6–12), while middle school (ages 12–15) and high school (ages 15–18) each have three. Schooling is compulsory and free for the first nine years, and nearly every child completes primary schooling. Most children continue on to secondary schools.

Though public and private high schools with a general curriculum are available, students can also attend schools that specialize in science and art, or vocational schools for careers that don't require university education. Foreign language and science schools are prestigious due to their competitive application process. Non-specialized high schools function primarily as institutions concerned with getting children into good universities.

School Life

Because academic success is considered so important, middle school and high school often demand long hours and high performance. Core subjects include Korean, English, and mathematics—the subjects of the university entrance exam. Less emphasis is placed on art, music, and physical education. Many students spend just as much time, if not more, attending various types of *hagwon* (private tutoring academies) as they do on their actual schoolwork. Attending *hagwon* to prepare for the extremely competitive and rigorous university entrance exam is especially important. Students prepare intensively for months to pass the exam. The pressure to perform well on entrance exams has moved down to middle school-aged children, who try to get into good high schools from which to apply to universities.

Higher Education

South Korea has a number of well-respected junior colleges

and universities, which offer two-, three-, and four-year degrees. Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University are widely considered the best, and sending a child to a SKY (Seoul, Korea, Yonsei) University is considered a great accomplishment. While most of the top universities are in Seoul, few students in Korea live far from a reputable city or provincial university. Many students choose to study abroad as well; English-speaking countries (especially the United States), China, and Japan are popular destinations.

Health

All segments of the population have access to good health care. The best medical facilities are in Seoul. Traditional Korean medicine remains popular and is often used in conjunction with more modern treatment methods. Life expectancy and the quality of and access to health care have progressed with economic growth. Most people have access to safe water and adequate nutrition. Increased nutrition has resulted in an increase in the average height of the population. Nearly all women receive prenatal care and medical attention during delivery, and most children are immunized. Childhood obesity, partially a result of increased fast-food consumption, is a growing concern. Smoking is a public health concern among adults.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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Country and Development Data

Capital	Seoul
Population	51,418,097 (rank=27)
Area (sq. mi.)	38,502 (rank=107)
Area (sq. km.)	99,720
Human Development Index	22 of 188 countries
Gender Inequality Index	10 of 188 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$39,500
Adult Literacy	98%
Infant Mortality	3 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	80 (male); 86 (female)
Currency	Won

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BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

North Korea occupies more than half of the Korean Peninsula. It is just smaller than the U.S. state of Mississippi and about 20 percent larger than South Korea. Mountains and narrow valleys dominate the landscape. As a result, the majority of the population resides on only about one-fourth of the land. The mountainous interior is isolated and sparsely populated.

The climate is continental, with relatively long, cold winters and hot, humid summers interrupted by a two-week monsoon season. Spring and autumn are more temperate and pleasant. Land continues to be cleared for agricultural production; the resulting deforestation has increased the severity of frequent floods.

History

Early History

North Korea was once part of Koguryō (transliterated as Goguryeo in South Korea), one of the peninsula's three kingdoms, which were united in AD 668 by Silla. A new kingdom called Koryō (transliterated as Goryeo in South Korea) ruled most of what is now North Korea from 918 until 1392, when Yi Sōng-gye took power and established the Chosŏn (or Yi) Dynasty. The Chosŏn kings controlled the entire peninsula for five hundred years, until Japan annexed Korea in 1910.

Separation of North and South Korea

Korea was liberated from Japan at the end of World War II.

The Soviet Union accepted the Japanese surrender in the northern part of Korea (north of the 38th parallel), and the United States accepted the surrender in the south. Former anti-Japanese guerrilla Kim Il Sung, with the full support of the Soviet command, took power in the north in 1948. He remained in firm control until his death in 1994.

The Korean War

On 25 June 1950, the North Korean army invaded South Korea, initiating a war that lasted three years and caused suffering to all Korean people. The United States and a military force from the United Nations (UN) supported the South, while China and the Soviet Union supported the North. In July 1953, a treaty was signed near the town of Panmunjŏm (on the 38th parallel). Part of the truce outlines a demilitarized zone (DMZ), which separates the two Koreas today. The border is the world's most heavily armed, with some two million troops on either side of the DMZ. A peace treaty was never signed.

Northern Isolation

North Korea, though allied with the Soviet Union, became an isolated and almost xenophobic nation under Kim Il Sung. In addition to an extreme policy of self-sufficiency, Kim placed heavy emphasis on reunifying the Korean Peninsula, sometimes sending spies into South Korea or digging invasion tunnels near the border. Talks on reunification were first held in the early 1970s, and again in the 1990s, but little progress was made in an atmosphere of distrust. Neither side was willing to accept the other's vision for the peninsula's future, though in 1991 both signed the Basic Agreement, in which they pledged to avoid aggression and to promote dialogue and cooperation.

North Korea threatened to withdraw from the global Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1993, prompting the United States and others to negotiate a nuclear accord. The agreement called for North Korea to abandon any nuclear weapons programs in exchange for two modern nuclear energy reactors that could not produce weapons. The agreement faltered more than once over delays, suspicions, an economic crisis, and military maneuvers. Talks in 1999 also faltered, although North Korea agreed to stop testing ballistic missiles.

Famine and International Aid

Between 1994 and 1998, North Koreans experienced a devastating famine following poor economic management and floods, droughts, and typhoons that decimated the country's harvests. While still suspicious of outside help, North Korea requested more aid as the severity of the food shortages increased. In 1999, the North received a vital shipment of fertilizer from the South and, in an unprecedented move, signed an agreement with a major South Korean conglomerate (Hyundai) to allow tourism development in the Kūmgang Mountains near the border. The first cruise, though tightly controlled, occurred in 1999.

Warming Relations with South Korea

In June 2000, South Korean president Kim Dae-jung visited Kim Jong Il in Pyōngyang. Kim Jong Il surprised the world by greeting Kim Dae-jung at the airport to begin a friendly three-day summit. The two leaders immediately enjoyed warm relations and soon issued a joint declaration to solve the question of reunification. As part of the historic agreement, both nations agreed to end their bitter propaganda war, sponsor joint sporting teams and events, open communication and economic links, and set a timetable for separated families to be reunited (beginning in August 2000). Soon after, the United States lifted all nonstrategic sanctions against North Korea, and many Western powers established diplomatic ties with Pyōngyang.

Nuclear Tensions

North Korea's improved relations with South Korea and the West were short-lived, however. In December 2002, North Korea expelled UN nuclear inspectors, later announcing it would withdraw from the global Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. North Korea's threat of nuclear weapons development alarmed its neighbors and the international community. Six-nation negotiations (known as the Six-Party Talks) involving North Korea, South Korea, the United States, Japan, China, and Russia began in August 2003. During a round of negotiations in September 2005, North Korea declared that it would eliminate its nuclear program if it received economic aid and security guarantees, but disputes arose over the details of the exchange. North Korea continued to pursue its nuclear program and, in October 2006, announced that it had tested a nuclear weapon.

The Six-Party Talks finally produced an agreement in February 2007. Under its terms, North Korea pledged to end its nuclear activities in exchange for oil and other economic incentives. North Korea shut down its primary nuclear reactor at Nyōngbyōn (Yōngbyōn) in July 2007 and demolished the reactor's cooling tower in June 2008. The UN condemned North Korea in 2009 for attempting to launch a satellite. In

response, North Korea left the Six-Party Talks, expelled nuclear inspectors, and conducted a second nuclear test, in May 2009.

In February 2012, North Korea reached a deal with the United States, in which North Korea would freeze its nuclear programs, halt long-range missile testing, and allow nuclear inspectors to return, in exchange for food aid. However, the deal fell apart after North Korea staged an unsuccessful satellite launch (in violation of agreements) the following April, in celebration of Kim Il Sung's 100th birthday. A successful launch followed in December 2012, and a third nuclear test was held in February 2013. In response to increased UN sanctions following the third test, North Korea withdrew from the cease-fire agreement and disconnected important hotlines between Seoul and Pyōngyang. In October 2013, South Korean intelligence confirmed that North Korea had restarted its nuclear reactor at Nyōngbyōn as well.

Military Threats

Tensions with South Korea remain high. In 2009, North Korea announced that it did not consider itself bound by the 1953 truce. North Korea also declared four areas near its sea border naval firing zones and was accused of sinking a South Korean warship in March 2010. Tensions were elevated further in November 2010 when North Korea shelled the South Korean island of Yōnpyōngdo in response to alleged South Korean artillery fire inside the territorial waters of North Korea. North Korea regularly threatens war with South Korea.

Kim Jong Un

After suffering a stroke in 2008, Kim Jong Il began grooming his son Kim Jong Un as his replacement by appointing him to key military and party positions. Kim Jong Il died in December 2011. Under Kim Jong Un's rule, moves toward economic reform are beginning to show, some observers believe. However, the secrecy of the regime makes it difficult to know for sure what, if any, reforms are on the horizon. In September 2013, China banned exports to North Korea that could be used to develop weapons, a move many saw as a sign that China will be stricter with its ally.

The UN has accused North Korea of crimes against humanity, including torturing, starving, and killing political dissidents in its prison camps. Public executions are aimed at quieting dissent among the population. In December 2013, in what appeared to be an effort to consolidate his power, Kim Jong Un removed his powerful, moderate uncle Jang Song-thaek from the government and had him executed for counterrevolutionary activities, among other charges. Additionally, the country announced in June 2015 that it was facing its worst drought in a century, and although there have been agricultural reforms, food shortages and malnutrition continue to be recurring problems.

Recent Events and Trends

- **North Korea–United States summit:** In February 2019, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met with U.S. president Donald Trump in Hanoi, Vietnam, for a second summit to discuss the lifting of sanctions in exchange for North Korea eliminating its nuclear arsenal. Talks quickly collapsed, as both leaders were unable to reach a deal. The two leaders had a historic first meeting in 2018, which the state-controlled

North Korean media reported to be a great diplomatic feat by Kim Jong Un.

- **Parliamentary elections:** In March 2019, North Korea held elections for its rubber-stamp legislature, the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA). All North Koreans over the age of 17 are required to participate in elections, held every five years. North Korean elections are not internationally recognized as being free or fair. The ruling Korean Workers' Party always unanimously wins.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Ethnic Koreans comprise almost the entire population of North Korea, although there are a few ethnic Japanese and a small Chinese community. Pyŏngyang is the capital and largest city, with a population of about three million.

According to the North Korean class system, called *songbun*, people are divided into several social classes, which determine where a person can live, work, and go to school. Only North Korean elites live and go to universities in Pyŏngyang, while lower class North Koreans live in rural areas and work as farmers and miners. Social class is determined by a family's social position and actions during Japanese rule and cannot be changed much over a person's lifetime.

Language

The Korean language plays an important role in the identity of the Korean people. Korean is written in a phonetic alphabet created in 1446. The alphabet is called *Han'gŭl* in South Korea but is known as *Chosŏn'gŭl* in North Korea. Although the Korean language is replete with words adapted from Chinese, North Koreans, unlike South Koreans, do not use Chinese characters in their newspapers and publications. They prefer to use only *Chosŏn'gŭl*, which is sufficient for most needs.

There are also significant differences in vocabulary between the North and the South, influenced by the total lack of contact between the two halves of the divided nation and somewhat by international politics. For example, North Korea has a policy against adopting Western words, although recently more English words are being used in the context of North Korea's technological modernization. English, Chinese, and Russian are offered as second languages in schools and universities.

Religion

Historically, North Korean religions included Buddhism, Confucianism, and shamanism. Today, the government of North Korea has constitutionally confirmed freedom of religion. In reality, however, the effectual state religion since the 1950s has been the veneration of Kim Il Sung, the first Great Leader. Kim Il Sung was portrayed by the government-controlled media as a highly paternal figure and a near-god. His picture was (and still is) everywhere, and his will was obeyed before any other. The government continues to promote his image and that of his son, Kim Jong Il. Kim

Jong Il (known as Dear Leader, Supreme Commander, and General Secretary) did not officially assume leadership of the country until after a mandatory three-year mourning period following his father's death. In 1998, Kim Jong Il named his father the "eternal" president, and in 1999, his government affirmed Kim Il Sung's place as the nation's "sun" and the source of its great policies.

Despite the personality cult that surrounds Kim Il Sung, the way of life and philosophy in North Korea echo traditional patterns and are based fundamentally on Confucian thought. Roman Catholic and Protestant beliefs were introduced in the 18th and 19th centuries, respectively. *Ch'ŏndogyo* (also known as *Tonghak*) is an indigenous religion founded in 1860 as an eclectic combination of Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, and Christian beliefs. The present government points to this religion, which has organized a political party, as proof that religious and political freedoms exist in North Korea.

Christians are permitted to meet in small groups under the direction of state-appointed ministers. Pyŏngyang has four Christian church buildings (a Catholic church, a Russian Orthodox church, and two Protestant churches) which primarily accommodate foreign diplomats and guests. Shamanism, a native belief in natural and household spirits, gods, and demons, may have limited influence in rural areas, but the government promotes it mostly as an art form.

General Attitudes

The establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea brought about radical changes in the nature of traditional Korean society. The Confucian concept of filial piety and loyalty to one's lineage has largely been supplanted by an intense nationalism that is described as both fiercely proud and excessively paranoid. The interests of the state have taken priority over the interests of the family. Kim Il Sung, through extensive indoctrination, effectively united the North Korean people in the belief that their political system and way of life were superior. In August 2015, North Korean officials announced a new time zone that is 30 minutes behind South Korea and Japan's time zone. The change returns North Korea to the time zone it followed before Japan colonized the country in 1910.

Although contemporary North Korean society is structurally and theoretically socialist, the most important and influential concept is Kim's idea of *Juche* (independence and national self-reliance). *Juche* colors every aspect of life, from popular music to political speeches and everyday conversation. *Juche* gives people a reason to sacrifice and accept difficult times. It also defines North Korea's isolationism and resistance to outside influence. North Koreans know very little about anything that occurs outside of their country, except as it is reported by the government. However, nearly all North Koreans desire reunification with the South.

Personal Appearance

North Koreans wear simple attire when working, often consisting of one-color jumpsuits. Office workers may wear uniforms, and urban professionals wear suits or dresses. The

most common type of formal attire for North Korean men is the Mao-style jacket, known by the Japanese word *sumeru* (literally, "tightly closed"). On special occasions, North Koreans often wear a traditional *chosŏnot*. For women, this is a long two-piece dress that is often very colorful. For men, a *chosŏnot* includes trousers and a loose-fitting jacket or robe.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Confucianism has taught Koreans to behave with decorum and respect. Therefore, greetings and introductions tend to be rather formal. Handshakes are common among men, but a bow is still the most common greeting. A younger or lower-status person always bows until the other returns the bow or offers a handshake. When Korean men do shake hands, they extend the right hand, often supported by the left at the forearm to show deference, and slightly bow the head. When women meet, they usually extend both hands and grasp each other's hands. Children always bow to adults and wave or bow among themselves.

Several phrases are used in greeting, but the most common is *Annyŏng hasio* (Peace be upon you). The Korean language has different levels of formality, so this and any other greeting will differ depending on the people involved. For example, *Annyŏng hashimnikka?* is used for superiors, while *Annyŏng* is used with children. The variations have the same meaning, but the different endings indicate differing levels of respect. When greeting a superior, one commonly asks about health and parents. When greeting a subordinate, the questions are about the spouse and children.

Gestures

It is not unusual for men to hold hands in public or walk down the street with an arm over each other's shoulder. This is an expression of friendship. Touching between strangers or casual acquaintances, especially between opposite sexes, is considered inappropriate.

In most situations, people maintain good posture to show respect for a host or speaker. Sitting in a relaxed manner is considered an insult. One takes care not to expose the bottom of one's feet to another person while sitting.

People give and receive gifts with both hands. Hands generally are not used much in conversation. The sign to beckon someone is made with the hand at head height, palm down, with the fingers making a scratching motion. Men remove hats in buildings as well as in the presence of an elder or superior. One never looks a superior directly in the eye.

Visiting

North Koreans do not commonly visit one another unannounced, and arranged social visits are infrequent. Generally, people visit relatives for the Lunar New Year, Parents' Day, and Mid-autumn Festival but not often otherwise. Unless special business calls for it, a superior never visits a subordinate.

Traditionally, invited guests are offered light refreshments that might include a drink, fruit, crackers, cookies, or coffee.

It is considered polite and a sign of respect for guests to take a gift to the hosts. The value of the gift is far less important than the gesture of giving it. In most cases, a gift will be fruit, a beverage, or something from one's home region. Food shortages and economic crises have curtailed such practices.

People remove shoes and hats when going indoors. In some cases, they put on slippers, but otherwise they wear only socks in the home. Etiquette requires paying particular attention to the hosts and making sure their feelings are respected. Showing respect for the family and state are of utmost importance for most visits. Koreans view the care of a guest as basic good manners, so visitors are given the best the household has to offer. If there are many guests, then age or status determines who gets the best seat, the best cut of meat, and so forth.

Eating

Families rarely have time to eat daily meals together. Fathers often leave early in the morning and return late at night. Urban workers commonly eat their meals at workplace cafeterias. Koreans consider eating while walking on the street offensive, something only a child is allowed to indulge in. Conversation during meals is limited.

Eating with the fingers is considered impolite. Slurping soup and noodles is accepted; in fact, it is a practical way to eat hot food at the rapid pace Koreans are used to. Spoons are used for soup, but chopsticks are used for all other foods.

Restaurants in North Korea are few and very expensive; however, recent changes in the economy have made them affordable to the wealthy. The average worker eats in a restaurant only on special occasions. Tipping is not allowed, except in restaurants where hard currency is accepted.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

Filial responsibility is an enduring tradition in North Korea, although it frequently conflicts with the ideals of a socialist system. The population is exhorted by the government to love their families and state, but the emphasis is on the state. Since 1948, the government has worked to break down the traditional extended family and clan system. Devotion was redirected toward the country's ruler, whom children were taught to refer to as Father Kim Il Sung.

The government provides incentives for couples to have large families. For example, medals or discounted trips to a seaside resort are awarded to families that have more than three children. The public distribution system provides more food to families with more children, but the family's class and social status also influence the amount of food received. Still, the birthrate has fallen dramatically since the mid-1990s. Today, the average North Korean family has two children.

It is estimated that about 10 million extended families are separated by the border between North and South Korea. Since 2000, roughly 20,000 divided families have been permitted to have brief reunions.

Parents and Children

Children are expected to assist in chores around the home. Although personal austerity was encouraged before recent food shortages, for many families, the average monthly wage sometimes is not enough to purchase daily necessities, and most cannot pay for the luxury of nonessential goods. Due to these difficult economic conditions, both parents usually work and their children go to day care centers (often located at the workplace) or stay with grandparents. It is considered the responsibility of the oldest son to take care of his parents in their old age until he becomes head of the family himself.

Because North Koreans consider their society to be very family focused, sons are often expected to follow in their fathers' footsteps. Therefore, inherited leadership positions, such as from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il, are socially accepted.

Gender Roles

The family is headed by the father, who provides for the family financially. The mother, while often required to work, is responsible for taking care of the home and children.

Despite legal equality, women are generally accorded lower social status than men. However, since 1990s, women have had more opportunities to participate in the economy. Several factors contributed to the raised social status of women, including the 1998 collapse of North Korea's public distribution system for allocating government-controlled food and goods, the simultaneous collapse of heavy industry (a major employer of the male working population), and a famine during the mid- and late 1990s. During this time, women contributed financially to the support of their families through small cottage industries (sewing services or homemade snack sales), which, despite their illegality, were widely tolerated.

Today, women not only help support their families, but many companies and farms are headed by women. Traditional norms have relaxed enough in urban areas that it is acceptable for women to drink alcohol and socialize with those outside of their families.

Despite these changing opportunities and the belief that women "push one wheel of the ox cart" (meaning they are equal to men), most power, influence, and good jobs are held by men. Conservative traditions nationwide remain strong; women are rarely seen driving (except in propaganda pictures) and are expected to be skilled in domestic tasks such as cooking and making handicrafts. Conservative traditions are also institutionalized—for example, women are also forbidden from riding bicycles in Pyöngyang (though the rule is rarely enforced).

Although Kim Jong Il promoted his sister, Kim Kyung Hee, to the rank of four-star general, a member of the Political Bureau of the Korean Workers' Party, and the Director of the Light Industry Department, women are generally absent from higher levels of government or military service.

Housing

A majority of North Koreans live in urban areas. Pyöngyang has modern high-rise apartment buildings, and urban streets, roads, and avenues are broad, tree lined, and well kept.

Many rural inhabitants live in agricultural cooperatives.

By 1958, all farms in North Korea were incorporated into more than three thousand cooperatives, each comprising about three hundred families on about 1,000 acres. Rural homes are generally built using local natural materials, such as thatch used for roofing.

Although property is not privately owned, a kind of inheritance occurs. For example, a family apartment is expected to be inhabited by the oldest son and his family at his parents' death. Younger sons apply to the government for their own housing after marriage or may stay in the family home if there is room. Some men move in with their wife's family, at least for a short time.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Western-style dating is not common but is increasingly practiced in urban areas. The concept of homosexuality is not publicly acknowledged. Couples may meet through work or at university; however, matchmaking is very common, and parents or their friends often suggest potential spouses to their children. Suggested matches are not considered binding and can be rejected. Matchmakers generally arrange matches for friends as a service, but if a match they suggest is successful, they may be given a gift. Though not legally required, in rural areas youth seek their parents' consent to wed. It is unusual to see public displays of affection, but some younger couples may occasionally hold hands while walking down the street. Premarital sexual relations are frowned upon.

Marriage in Society

Love and marriage are considered private matters in North Korea. However, the government has established minimum recommended marriage ages (27 for men, 25 for women, described as "revolutionary maturity") to allow for the completion of military service and university studies. An urban woman who reaches 30 without marrying faces great social pressure to accept a match or risks being considered to be without marriage prospects due to her age. Rural women face similar pressure at an earlier age. Single men are pressured to find a spouse when they reach their mid-thirties.

Marriages often happen very shortly after a couple has met. Married couples are expected to start having children very soon after their wedding, so it is very common for a first child to be born only a year or so into a marriage.

When a woman gets married, she becomes a member of her husband's family and comes under the command of her husband's father (the head of the household) and mother (who is effectively in charge of the women of the house). If her husband is the oldest son, she can expect to live with his parents for the rest of their lives and to inherit what they leave behind.

Divorce is rare in rural areas. Young urban women (typically under 30) may have a chance to remarry following a divorce; older women have less opportunity to remarry.

Weddings

A typical urban wedding ceremony lasts most of the day and involves visits by the bride and groom to the homes of both sets of parents to pay respects. During the visit, the bride and groom present their parents with new clothes and a "wedding table" with specially prepared foods, liquors, and photos. The

legal wedding takes place in a local administrative office and is a civil affair; religious weddings are exceptionally rare due to the very low number of practicing religious people in North Korea as well as the small number of churches.

The couple, along with the best man and maid of honor (and sometimes other members of the wedding party), then take a tour of the city's main landmarks, posing for pictures in front of each. A statue or site associated with President Kim Il Sung is considered an obligatory stop on this tour. After several changes of clothes (from traditional clothing to Western-style clothing) and picture taking, a meal is held in a local restaurant. Friends offer toasts and speeches in honor of the couple and their relationship.

If they can afford it, couples may go on a honeymoon, usually a short domestic trip. Officially, payment of a dowry (money or property brought by a bride to her husband) is an illegal practice held over from feudal times, yet dowries are frequently arranged in the countryside and in some urban areas too.

Life Cycle

Birth

When a woman becomes pregnant, she is likely to continue working for some months, but around halfway through the pregnancy, she stops and spends most of her time at home, where she is cared for by her mother or mother-in-law. Visibly pregnant women are rarely seen in public. Most births happen in hospitals; home births are rare and generally only happen in rural areas.

After a child is born, mother and baby are usually kept in the hospital for three days before being sent home. They then remain in seclusion for a few weeks while gaining strength. They are visited only by members of their family during this time. After this period is over, guests are invited to see the baby; they bring presents for both the parents and child.

High infant mortality in the past kept parents from naming children until they had survived one hundred days. Today, according to this tradition, babies are named on the hundredth day after birth. The name is chosen by the parents (in the past, by the father's parents). The baby, whether boy or girl, takes the father's surname.

Milestones

North Korea is a highly regimented society, and many milestones are marked as children progress through national institutions. Around age seven, exceptional students are invited to join the Young Pioneers Corps, a communist youth group recognizable by its members' red neckerchiefs and badges featuring the red flame of the *Juche* (the political ideology outlined by Kim Il Sung). Other students join the Young Pioneers within a few years.

Around age 14, students join the Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League, at which time the red neckerchief is replaced by a badge with the portrait of North Korean president Kim Il Sung, which they will wear over their hearts at almost all times. These badges come in many designs, and individuals eventually collect many; sailors tend to favor a flag-shaped one, and young women, a small round pin. Gaining a Kim Il Sung badge is an important step toward adulthood.

Males are considered adults at age 17, when they become

eligible for military service. National military service in North Korea is mandatory for 7 to 10 years (depending on the military branch). More than one million North Koreans between the ages of 17 and 54 serve as active military personnel. Women can enter university or the labor force at the same age and are viewed by society as adults.

For older people, age 60 (called *Hwan'gap*) is considered an important milestone. The traditional Korean calendar is based on a 60-year cycle, and at the age of 60, people are believed to have completed one cycle and begin a new one. Celebrations for a *Hwan'gap* are generally prepared by the person's children. The celebrations are focused on wishing the celebrant an even longer and more prosperous life. During a *Hwan'gap*, the family prepares a large table of food; prominent people have received a special birthday table from Kim Jong Il. Sixty is also generally the retirement age for most working Koreans.

Death

When a person dies, a simple funeral where the deceased is eulogized takes place with family and close friends. Traditionally, burial was the norm, hillside graves being considered the best aesthetic option. The grave would be visited every year by relatives for cleaning and remembrance of the departed loved one. Today, cremation is more common, and the ashes are generally kept at a cemetery, although occasionally they are taken home or scattered in a significant area. During the famine of 1995–97 (which is commonly called the Arduous March), many people died away from their homes and were buried in mass graves; the exact locations remain unknown to their relatives.

Diet

Meals usually consist of soup, fish, *kimchi* (spicy fermented vegetables, such as cabbage), and a number of spicy vegetables. Because of the lower economic level of North Korea, traditional Korean delicacies such as *bulgogi* (marinated beef) and *kalbi* (marinated short ribs) are not as common as in South Korea. A favorite food in North Korea is *naengmyŏn*, a cold noodle dish.

A large number of roadside stalls offer snacks, drinks, and other items to passersby; the most common items are domestically produced ice creams, hard biscuits and dough snacks, sodas (including cider, a light, fruity carbonated drink), water, beer, and cigarettes.

Korean food generally is spicy. *Kimchi* and rice are the traditional mainstays of the diet around which most other dishes revolve. Nearly the entire urban population is mobilized for about two weeks twice a year to assist in transplanting and harvesting rice. Recent efforts to diversify food production have focused on growing potatoes, especially in the north, where conditions are ideal. There is growing regional divergence in staple food production and consumption. For example, noodle dishes made in coastal cities in the northeast, like Hamhŭng and Chongjin, are as likely to be made from potato noodles as they are from the traditional buckwheat noodles used in Pyŏngyang. People also consume soybeans, corn, millet, and wheat when available.

Food shortages in North Korea occur to some degree every

year. A famine that lasted for the latter half of the 1990s killed hundreds of thousands of people (estimates range from 800,000 to 2 million). The fear remains that successive poor harvests could return North Korea back to a 1990s-level famine. In food crises, only the governing elite and military personnel have regular access to rice. One or two meals per day are standard during shortages, as rations are often set well below minimum subsistence levels. Hunger is most acute in the spring, when food supplies may run out before the new harvest.

International food donations provide some relief, and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are operational in North Korea. These agencies provide both food aid and developmental assistance to people and institutions in North Korea, and their work is seen as critical to the stabilization of the agricultural system in many areas.

Recreation

Sports

Taking part in sporting activities is encouraged by the government and is also an inexpensive way to pass the time. The most common activities are morning calisthenics, volleyball, and soccer, all of which require very little equipment and involve both men and women. Soccer is the national sport, although volleyball is played more. Urban men prefer to watch local soccer matches. Most popular is women's soccer; the national team is top-ranked internationally. Soccer balls and volleyballs are not cheap, but groups of people may own one collectively. Many people also play table tennis and basketball. Sports facilities are plentiful. Workers often organize sporting events with their co-workers. Older people often attend *ssirūm* (Korean wrestling) events. *Taekwondo*, a traditional martial arts, is also practiced in the country.

Leisure

Sunday is the worker's day of rest, and family outings and picnics to North Korea's many parks and cultural and historical sites are traditional Sunday activities. Television is popular and widely available, but the selection of channels and content is strictly controlled. Even in Pyŏngyang, Chosŏn Central TV broadcasts only one channel on weekdays (during the afternoon and evening hours) and one extra channel on Sunday.

Retired people have the most leisure time, and men and women tend to take part in different activities. Older women generally base their social lives around visiting friends and family members but usually have less free time, as grandmothers are often expected to raise their grandchildren while their children are working. Retired men often play cards or *chang'gi* (a Korean version of Chinese chess) on the streets or smoke cigarettes while observing passersby. Fishing is popular among retired men in Pyŏngyang and other areas, even if the actual fish can be scarce at times. Any fish caught are often very small and are as likely to be cooked over a small fire and eaten on the spot (with some beer or liquor) as to be taken home for later.

Vacation

Each worker in North Korea is entitled to a vacation of varying length in addition to national holidays held

throughout the year. Usually industrial and agricultural workers are given two weeks of vacation time, but agricultural workers are typically unable to afford time away from their fields. When people do take vacations, they tend to spend their time visiting relatives or friends nearby. Another option is to visit a beach or mountain area for a simple holiday spent mainly outdoors. Hot spa resorts are available for the few elites who can afford them.

Travel to other cities is possible, but for the most part, the average North Korean is very limited in the range of vacation options available. Permits are needed to travel even internally. International travel for leisure purposes is something available only to the elite. Most North Koreans who travel abroad do so for work and not out of personal interest or for fun.

The Arts

Music and theater play important roles in North Korea's cultural identity and are closely intertwined with ideological propaganda. Oral histories and national values are transmitted through song, usually accompanied by an ensemble of bamboo flutes, percussion, and stringed instruments. Performances are highly polished, and form is valued over spontaneity or individuality. Movies, plays, and operas, usually with strong political messages, are well attended. The main themes of songs include the homeland, nature, the socialist paradise, and the leaders. Singing styles are conservative with blends of traditional Korean folk music.

Often, literature has strong political undertones as well. Poetry is the principal form; however, North Koreans enjoy literature of many genres. Visual arts and architecture show the influences of traditional as well as Western styles. The Mansudae Art Studio, in Pyŏngyang, is the largest art production center in the country. It employs nearly one thousand artists, most of whom are graduates of Pyŏngyang University. Their artistic works range from traditional Korean ink-on-paper painting, embroidery, and ceramics to oil paintings, bronze sculptures, wood cuts, and charcoal drawings. More modern art forms include *posŏkhwa*, which are paintings made with crushed jewel stones mixed into a paste.

Cinematography is considered the most powerful art. The film industry, which blossomed in the 1970s and 1980s, was supervised for many years by Kim Jong Un (son of Kim Jong Il). The Pyŏngyang International Film Festival biannually showcases films from nations friendly to North Korea. North Korean cinematographers had a brief resurgence in the mid-2000s and, in 2013, coproduced a film with the United Kingdom and Belgium.

Holidays

Official holidays include New Year's Day, the birthdays of Kim Jong Il (16 February) and Kim Il Sung (15 April), May Day (1 May), Victory Day (27 July), Liberation Day (15 August), Independence Day (9 September), Workers' Party Day (10 October), and Constitution Day (27 December).

Holidays are generally marked by having a barbeque and drinking together. Although holidays are state sponsored, people also sing, dance, play sports and games, and turn the

occasion into family time. In addition to national holidays, many commemoration days can be declared holidays if local authorities are satisfied that production will not be significantly disrupted.

Kim Il Sung's Birthday

Due to Kim Il Sung's position as founder of the state and "eternal" president, his birthday on 15 April is considered the most important day on the national calendar and was officially declared the Day of the Sun. To celebrate, many people take part in organized events such as large-scale synchronized dances that take place in cities, in towns, and on farms. These dances generally consist of choreography learned many years previously, set to well-known songs. Occasionally, new songs are introduced, such as the "Song of CNC" (a song dedicated to computer-controlled machining, where CNC stands for Computer Numerical Control) or the song "Steps," about Kim Jong Un—both introduced in 2010. The largest of these events take place in Pyöngyang and are filmed and broadcast on TV in the evening.

People not participating in these dances spend this day relaxing with family and friends. Places associated with Kim Il Sung are frequented on this day, especially his birthplace near Pyöngyang, his mausoleum (where he lies in state), and any of the thousands of places he formally visited across the country. Flowers are laid at the many statues of the leader around the country on this holiday and on others.

Liberation Day

Liberation Day, celebrated on 15 August, commemorates the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945 and is the only official national holiday shared in North and South Korea. It is a significant day for Koreans due to the length and severity of the Japanese presence. During the occupation, use of the Korean language was suppressed and use of Japanese names became mandatory. Therefore, Liberation Day is centered on Korean nationalism. This holiday, like most others, is marked either by taking part in a mass dance, visiting sites associated with the day (generally places Kim Il Sung visited on that day), or relaxing with friends and family. If the anniversary is numerically significant (60th anniversary, for example), larger events are held, such as a military parade in Pyöngyang. Although North Korea is a military state, military parades do not take place very often.

Chusök

Although not official, traditional holidays (which follow the lunar calendar) are still celebrated by many people, particularly in the countryside. The most significant of these is Chusök, a harvest festival held on the 15th day of the 8th month of the lunar year. This holiday is marked by eating traditional foods, such as rice cakes, and taking part in or watching sports events, such as traditional Korean wrestling. Chusök is not an official state holiday in North Korea due to its links to historical feudalism. However, because the state emphasizes the richness and depth of Korean history, people feel justified in celebrating Chusök.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

North Korea is a communist state. At the time of his death in 2011, Kim Jong Il was head of state as the general secretary of the ruling Korean Workers' Party and as head of the military (officially, the chairperson of the National Defense Commission). After his death, he became the "eternal general secretary" of the party and "eternal chairman" of the National Defense Commission. Kim Jong Il's son, Kim Jong Un, is now head of state as the first secretary of the Korean Workers' Party and first chairman of the National Defense Commission. The title of "president" is held permanently by Kim Il Sung. An appointed premier is nominally head of government. The majority of cabinet members are appointed by the Supreme People's Assembly.

The 687-seat Supreme People's Assembly forms the legislature, but it has very little real power, meeting only a few days each year. When elections are held, only a single candidate runs for each office. The candidates are nominated by the Workers' Party or a few minor associated parties.

The judicial system consists of a Supreme Court; judges are elected by the Supreme People's Assembly and serve five-year terms. The legal system was modeled after the Prussian system, with Japanese and communist influence.

Political Landscape

In practice, the only real political party in North Korea is the Korean Workers' Party (KWP). The Chondoist Chongu Party and the Social Democratic Party also exist, but both are effectively controlled by the KWP.

Government and the People

The North Korean government strictly manages nearly every aspect of its people's lives. Freedom of speech and press exist in theory, but in reality all media is tightly controlled by the government. Similarly, the constitution includes freedom of religion, but the people are far more loyal to Kim Il Sung's personality cult than they are to Buddhism or other religions that once existed in North Korea. Because its society is so strictly regulated, North Korea has no freedom of assembly. Citizens are often forced to move to different parts of the country.

Voting is seen as a demonstration of political activity rather than part of a competitive democracy, and turnout usually is reported as 100 percent. Only one candidate runs for each office, and voters can only vote "yes" or "no" for each person; they generally vote "yes." The voting age is 17.

North Korea is considered one of the most corrupt countries in the world by the international community. The country has engaged in currency counterfeiting, human-rights violations, and severe mismanagement of resources.

Kim Il Sung did not hesitate to put political prisoners in labor camps, and today that practice continues. Many North Koreans seek to escape into China, but if they are caught, Chinese officials hand them back to the North Korean government. These refugees and defectors are usually tortured, imprisoned, or killed.

The North Korean government practices collective punishment, meaning that if one individual defects or questions the government, the entire family will be punished. The North Korean government ranks families according to their loyalty in an elaborate system with about 50 levels. The

most loyal are given access to not only better health care, education, and jobs, but also more food and the chance to live in Pyŏngyang.

Economy

As with other key aspects of North Korean society, the government is closely involved in the mobilization of labor. Adults are expected to work at least 40 hours per week and attend various political and production meetings. Technically, workers can earn a variety of supplies, benefits, and gifts from either their employers or the government. However, workers' benefits are constrained by lack of resources. Tightly controlled work teams laboring on farms and in factories are the norm.

Since its inception in 1948, North Korea has changed from an agricultural to a semi-industrialized nation. The means of production are almost completely socialized. Planning for economic development is centralized and set forth by the government in a series of seven-year plans. North Korea has about 80 to 90 percent of all known mineral resources on the Korean Peninsula, and the extraction of coal, iron ore, and other minerals fueled North Korea's past industrial growth. Major industries include mining, steel, textiles, chemicals, cement, glass, and ceramics. However, there is a shortage of light manufactured items (mostly consumer goods).

When China and the USSR stopped subsidizing North Korea at the end of the Cold War, North Korea's economy collapsed. The government was no longer able to provide food through its public distribution system, and the resulting 1990s famine killed over a million people. Hundreds of thousands of North Koreans escaped to China to find food or wages for their families. North Korea remains one of Asia's poorest nations as a result of natural disasters, political isolation, and poor management. It is the recipient of large amounts of foreign aid each year. The currency is the North Korean *wŏn* (KPW).

Transportation and Communications

The rail system is the principal means of transportation in North Korea. The subway in Pyŏngyang is efficient and cheap. Few motor vehicles are available to the general population. Most North Koreans usually walk or ride a bus to their destinations. Bicycles, once rare, are now a principal mode of transport for men. Technically, women are not allowed to ride them, but that rule is often ignored in Pyŏngyang. Ox carts are common in rural areas.

Communications systems and the media are tightly controlled. In December 2009, a new cellular network, Koryo Link, was established with the help of an Egyptian company. The government runs all newspapers and radio and television stations. The internet is not widely available in North Korea, except to certain elites and foreign organizations. However, there is a national intranet system that links all the universities in the country and is used to find and share education-related information.

Education

Structure and Access

Considering the country's level of economic development,

North Korean schooling is comparatively advanced, with well-trained teachers in most areas. An 11-year education program is compulsory and free, and illiteracy has been all but eliminated. Boys and girls have equal access to education.

There is a notable gap in the quality of urban and rural schools. In the countryside, tales of school children being sent out to collect wood and gather food for the benefit of the school are widespread. Dedicated teachers are not enough to overcome problems caused by underfunding, and schools in poorer areas are less likely to produce the educational results of those in urban centers. Schools at every level tend to suffer from shortages of basic goods such as pens and paper. Food shortages also prevent some children from attending.

School Life

The school day in North Korea begins around 8 a.m. and finishes early, around 1 p.m. In the afternoon, students take part in clubs that feature various extracurricular activities. Every school has programs for these clubs, which range from traditional (music, sports, and art), to vocational (automotive maintenance and computers), to the obscure (taxidermy). Students who excel in these clubs can apply to attend specialized institutions known as Children's Palaces. Nearly all North Korean cities have one of these institutions (Pyŏngyang has two), usually located in a central and prominent location. Students who are accepted to these schools receive advanced training in addition to their normal study.

The socialist and nationalist focus of the North Korean educational system, while supplying the state with skilled and compliant workers, aims to produce uniformity in thought and action. School subjects tend to be politicized; for example, history classes are titled "revolutionary history."

Higher Education

There are universities in every city in the country; some are general schools and others are vocational institutions teaching specialized skills such as engineering and construction. Competition is fierce to be admitted to the two most well-known and well-regarded universities, both of which are in Pyŏngyang: Kim Il Sung University (founded in 1946) and Kim Chaek University of Science and Technology (named for Kim Il Sung's second-in-command in the early days of his rule). Kim Il Sung University is a general academic school that boasts Kim Jong Il as a former pupil. Kim Chaek University primarily offers classes in technology-based subjects and has a very well-regarded computer laboratory. Many Eastern Europeans studied at Kim Il Sung University from the 1960s to 1980s, and there remain some foreign students (mainly Chinese, Mongolian, and Russian). Despite the politicization of the curriculum, it is regarded as North Korea's best school.

In addition to universities, each city also has "study houses," which offer adults free courses on a range of subjects. People who attend these classes may be trying to gain skills to make them more employable or knowledge in subjects that interest them personally. Companies also use the study houses to train employees. Foreign language and information technology (IT) courses at the Grand People's Study House, in Pyŏngyang, are particularly popular.