

# Asia Countries Worried About Plummeting Fertility Rates, Impact on Armies

BI [businessinsider.com/asia-countries-worry-fertility-rate-affect-armies-few-soldiers-experts-2024-6](https://www.businessinsider.com/asia-countries-worry-fertility-rate-affect-armies-few-soldiers-experts-2024-6)

Joshua Zitser



- Low fertility rates are challenging military recruitment in countries like South Korea, Japan, and China.
- According to East Asia experts, it's a "big worry" because the demographic situation won't improve.
- In addition to widening their recruitment pools, countries are looking to AI as a solution.

East Asia has some of the world's lowest fertility rates, forcing countries in the region to think hard about how to maintain their military strength.

This is particularly concerning given the rise in tensions between North and South Korea, and between China and the US.

China, Japan, and South Korea have fertility rates below the global replacement rate — resulting in declining populations.

South Korea's fertility rate was 0.72 in 2023, the lowest in the world, compared to the global average of 2.2, according to The Lancet.

On its current trajectory, South Korea's population of 51 million is on track to halve by 2100.

South Korea has military conscription of at least 18 months, but Ramon Pacheco Pardo, KF-VUB Korea Chair at the Brussels School of Governance, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, told Business Insider that the draft "helps, but is not the solution."

The demographic issue is causing significant concern in military circles, he said, particularly given the constant threat from North Korea.

"I think it's a big worry, and I think it will continue to be a big worry because the demographic situation is not going to change dramatically anytime soon," he said.

Pardo said that the South Korean military is trying various strategies to boost enlistment.

These include increasing pay to make it a more viable career option, as well as increasing the number of female volunteer recruits, which is culturally unprecedented.

"There is no military service for women," he said, adding: "Some people say Korea should go down the path of Israel, I don't see this happening anytime soon."

Another strategy, according to Pardo, is utilizing technology.

South Korea is "learning quite a bit from the way Ukraine defends itself against Russia, which includes automation technologies that, in the past, they may have been skeptical about," he said.

The decline in military personnel might also be strengthening the argument for having nuclear weapons, he suggested, as a deterrent against North Korea and possibly even China.

"We need to go nuclear, among other things, because we don't have enough people to, simply put, defend the country," he said of the possible line of thinking.

Japan also has a rapidly declining fertility rate, which sank to a new low of 1.2 in 2023.

Without mandatory military conscription, Japan needs to incentivize people to join its Self-Defense Forces.

Chris Hughes, a University of Warwick professor specializing in Japanese defense policy, said that Japan's aging population is already limiting its recruitment pool.

In 2022, less than 4,000 people joined its Self-Defense Forces, missing the target by more than half, according to the Japan Times.

Hughes said that, like South Korea, Japan has been left thinking about how automation and AI can mitigate the worst effects of a shortage of an army-age population.

"They are automating quite a lot of weapon systems, like destroyers," he said. "They've been able to design more automation in them to reduce the number of crew they need."

Hughes added that AI could be used to reduce the number of people needed to run a weapon system, a command and control system, or to gather information.

"Japan is never going to have a massive population," he said. "It can't compete with China. So, therefore, it's got to compete in terms of having a very sophisticated, technically able military."

Despite these technological advancements, Japan is also making concessions to widen its recruitment pool, Hughes said.

Japan's military has relaxed long-held rules by allowing officers to have longer hair, lifted a ban on recruits having tattoos, and raised the maximum age for new recruits to 32.

China's People's Liberation Army, short on recruits, has also raised its enlistment age from 24 to 26, according to Nikkei Asia.

The news agency said that recruitment efforts in China are now being bolstered through big-budget war movies.

Despite these challenges, China's large population still allows it to maintain the world's largest standing army, with over two million active personnel.

In the meantime, many countries are continuing to try to slow the tides of demographic decline, which is impacting far more than just their military strength.