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THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN SOUTH KOREA ON MIGRANT WORKERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR VIETNAMESE WORKERS IN HIGH-TECH INDUSTRIES

Abstract. South Korea's demand for migrant labour coexists with partisan conflict and unequal career opportunities. This article examines the institutional channels linking political polarization to migration policy and their implications for Vietnamese workers in high-tech industries. It combines documentary comparison with official multi-year statistics and policy evidence through October 2026. The findings show that selective expansion can coexist with employer dependence, uneven support and contested institutional reform. Vietnam should connect occupational training with appropriate legal pathways, accessible worker protection and opportunities to use acquired skills at home.

Keywords: political polarization; labour migration; migration governance; skilled workers; high-tech industries; South Korea; Vietnam.

1. Introduction

South Korea needs migrant labour, yet the terms on which migrants can build a career remain politically and institutionally contested. Population ageing and competition for industrial capabilities have encouraged policies to attract and retain foreign workers. The Fourth Master Plan for Immigration Policy places economic contribution alongside social integration, safety and human rights, revealing the multiple objectives that migration policy must reconcile [1]. For a Vietnamese worker, these objectives become concrete through eligibility rules, an employer's willingness to recruit or recommend, permission to change jobs and the prospect of using acquired skills over time.

Political polarization matters because it can alter the priorities, bargaining relationships and institutional routes through which those rules are revised. Its meaning nevertheless requires care. Cheong and Haggard find growing divisions among Korean party identifiers and activists, without an equivalent movement across the electorate as a whole [2]. Kang and Lee, using a different longitudinal approach, find no sustained intensification of affective polarization through 2022 [3]. These studies caution against treating every close election, social division or change of president as evidence of a single, continuously rising political variable.

The relationship between partisan politics and migrant-worker policy has already received scholarly attention. Nam's comparison of the Moon Jae-in and Yoon Suk-yeol administrations identifies the importance of executive discretion, competing policy coalitions and legislative constraints [4]. A further question concerns the worker's position within this institutional structure: how does an expansion of access translate into an opportunity to use skills, negotiate employment conditions and pursue a stable career? This question is especially relevant to Vietnam, whose workers may enter Korean production networks through very different occupations and legal statuses.

High-tech production does not make every job highly skilled. A design engineer, a maintenance technician and a routine production worker can

participate in related supply chains while facing different recruitment standards and opportunities. Industry classification, occupational tasks and immigration status must therefore be considered separately. The OECD taxonomy provides an industrial benchmark based on R&D intensity, which does not fully capture technology use or knowledge intensity [5]. The classification also cannot identify the tasks performed by an individual worker. Korea's strategic technology categories provide a complementary policy boundary.

This article asks how political polarization is mediated by migration institutions, which differences in worker opportunities are observable in policy design, and what Vietnam should do in response. Its contribution is to connect political decision making with the economic value of lawful mobility, usable qualifications and a predictable employment horizon. The analysis develops a differentiated account of openness: recruitment can expand while employer dependence persists, and selective settlement opportunities can advance alongside unresolved support needs. The purpose is to explain these institutional channels and derive practical priorities, while keeping their evidentiary limits clear.

2. Methods and analytical framework

2.1. Research design and evidence

The study uses a structured documentary comparison supported by descriptive statistics. The policy record covers 2017 to 22 October 2026, allowing the original introduction of skilled-worker conversion, its subsequent expansion and recent implementation adjustments to be considered together. Documents were selected for their direct relevance to admission, occupational eligibility, workplace mobility, residence or worker support. Official legal texts, ministry releases and plans establish what was adopted or announced; administrative statistics establish magnitudes; original scholarly studies inform the interpretation of political processes. This is a purposive institutional study, rather than an exhaustive systematic review.

Three comparisons organize the analysis. First, policy changes are compared across decision venues: measures available through existing administrative authority differ from reforms requiring legislation or wider organizational agreement. Second, legal pathways are compared by their implications for recruitment, employer attachment and career development. Third, policy capacity is compared with recorded implementation. For each measure, the analysis records its date, responsible institution, target group, stated rationale and relevant conditions. Announcements are distinguished from implemented rules, and historical criteria are dated to the reform being examined.

Two annual series provide the quantitative background. Ministry of Justice statistics report year-end stocks of foreign residents and Vietnamese nationals for 2015-2025 [6, 7, 8]. The National Assembly Budget Office reproduces Ministry of Justice figures for E-7-4 quotas and actual status conversions during 2017-2023 [9, p. 29]. Shares and percentage changes are calculated directly from these published counts, without interpolation. The conversion series ends in 2023 because the corresponding 2024 observation in the evaluation is incomplete.

The units of observation set the limits of inference. Foreign-resident stocks include people with different purposes and durations of stay, including students and family members; they are not employment counts. E-7-4 conversions cover all nationalities and eligible occupations. Neither series identifies Vietnamese workers in high-tech jobs. The study therefore makes no claim to estimate their number, wage effects or an independent causal effect of polarization. Instead, it establishes documented policy differences, assesses their consistency with political and economic explanations, and derives worker-level implications that future linked data could test.

The sectoral scope follows Korea’s strategic technology policy, covering semiconductors, displays, secondary batteries and biotechnology, while using the OECD R&D-intensity taxonomy as an industrial benchmark [10, 5]. These classifications are not identical: electrical equipment, for example, belongs to the

OECD's medium-high category. Within these sectors, the analysis distinguishes specialized professional tasks from routine production work.

2.2. Political institutions and the economic value of worker options

The analytical framework separates political contestation from the demand for labour. Ideological polarization concerns distance in policy preferences; affective polarization concerns the emotional distance between evaluations of one's own political group and rival groups. Institutional conflict concerns how disagreement affects bargaining, legislation and implementation. These dimensions can interact, but they are not interchangeable. Tsebelis's analysis of veto players explains why policy change depends on whose agreement is required and on the distance between their positions [11]. Applied here, it suggests examining the authority behind a particular migration instrument before attributing its movement to partisan conflict.

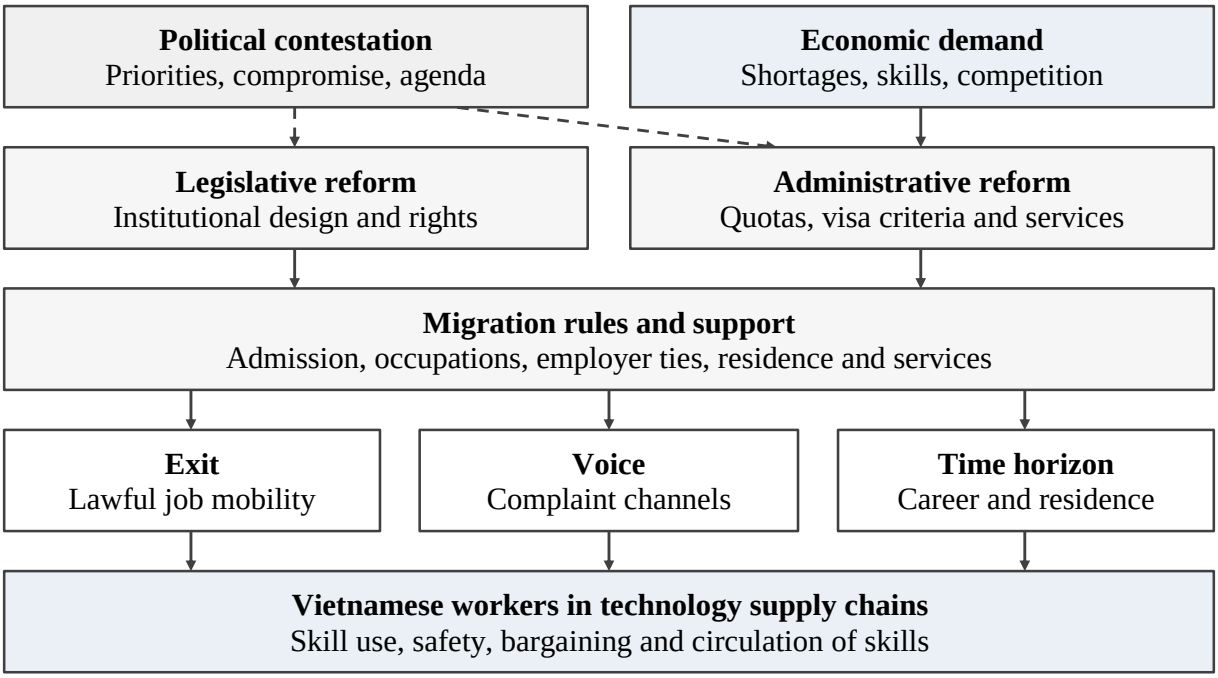
Hirschman's exit-voice-loyalty framework connects institutional choices to the worker's range of action [12, pp. 21-43, 76-105]. Exit includes a lawful change of employer, career redirection or return to Vietnam. Voice includes the practical ability to raise concerns, obtain advice and seek remedies. Loyalty can sustain cooperation when workers expect fair treatment and a worthwhile future. Remaining in a job, however, does not itself demonstrate loyalty: limited alternatives may also explain retention. The possibility of lawful exit can strengthen voice even when the worker prefers to stay.

Human-capital theory adds a temporal dimension. Training requires costs today in anticipation of future benefits, while the distinction between general and firm-specific skills affects where those benefits can be realized [13]. A clearer residence pathway may lengthen the period over which a worker can use acquired skills. Restrictions on mobility may protect an employer's investment in specific training, yet also limit the worker's access to better matches. The relevant policy

question is how to sustain productive training and voluntary retention while preserving credible remedies and lawful alternatives.

Figure 1 combines these relationships. Political conflict can influence the choice and timing of reform; economic demand sustains pressure to recruit and retain. Their interaction produces a bundle of admission rules, employer conditions, residence options and services. These arrangements shape worker options and, through them, the opportunity to use skills. The figure presents the analytical pathways examined in the following sections.

Figure 1. How political institutions mediate migrant career opportunities



Source: authors' synthesis based on [11], [12], [13] and the policy evidence examined below. Dashed arrows indicate conditional political pathways; all links are analytical, rather than estimated causal effects.

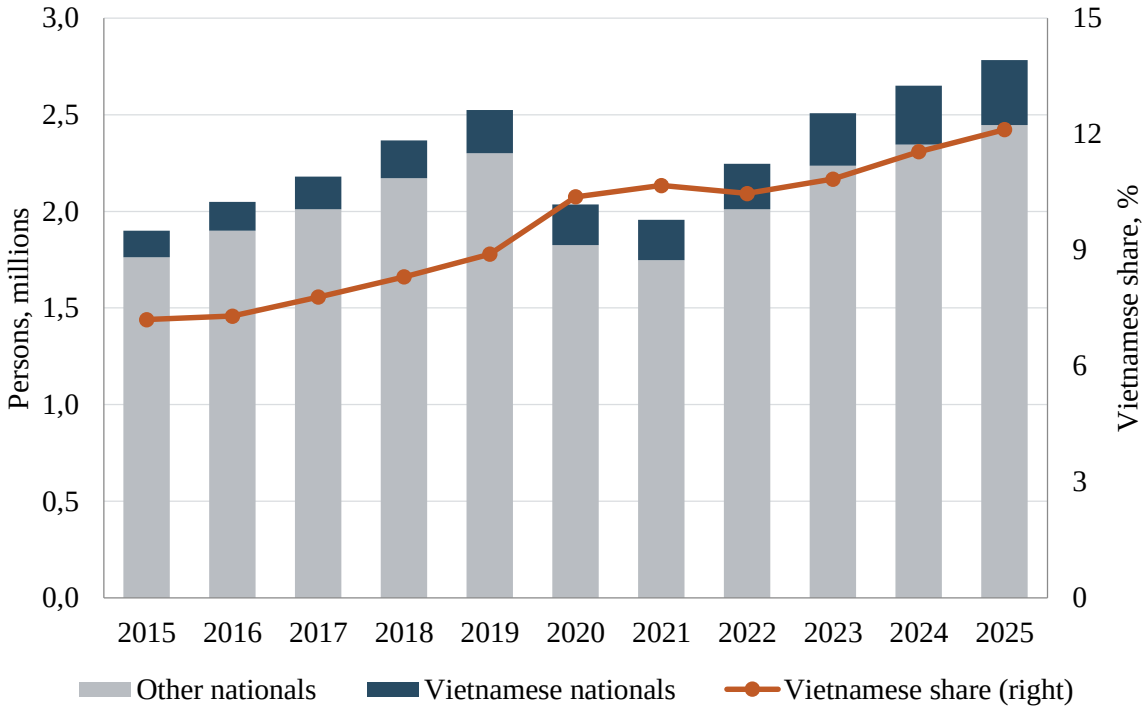
3. Results

3.1. A larger Vietnamese community and variable admission capacity

Vietnam's expanding presence in Korea makes the quality of migration governance increasingly consequential. Vietnamese nationals recorded by the Ministry of Justice rose from 136,758 in 2015 to 337,183 in 2025, an increase of 146.6%. Over the same period, the total foreign-resident stock rose by 46.5%,

from 1,899,519 to 2,783,247. The Vietnamese share consequently increased from 7.2% to 12.1%, a gain of approximately 4.9 percentage points. Figure 2 shows both the growth of this community and the changing composition of Korea's foreign-resident population [6, 7, 8].

Figure 2. Foreign residents and the Vietnamese share, 2015-2025



Source: authors' calculations from [6, p. 47], [7, p. 51] and [8]. Columns show year-end resident stocks in South Korea by nationality; the line uses the right-hand percentage axis. Stocks include different residence purposes and do not measure workers or high-tech employment.

The pandemic interruption is substantial and prevents a simple political reading of the trend. Between 2019 and 2021, the total foreign-resident stock fell by 22.5%, while the Vietnamese stock fell by 7.0%. Subsequent recovery brought both above their earlier peaks. Differences in the composition and duration of stay may matter, but the aggregate figures do not establish the reasons for the unequal declines. In particular, the changing Vietnamese share cannot be interpreted as a gain or loss in access to skilled employment.

E-9 admission ceilings also vary with labour-market conditions rather than following an uninterrupted expansion. The official EPS series records 56,000 annually in 2017-2020, 52,000 in 2021 and 69,000 in 2022. The 2023 ceiling

reached 120,000 after revision, followed by 165,000 in 2024 [14]. It then declined to 130,000 for 2025 and 80,000 for 2026 [15, 16]. These figures are policy ceilings, including relevant new-entry and re-entry categories, rather than observed arrivals. The 2026 announcement explicitly considered economic prospects, business demand and previous implementation. The reversal cannot by itself identify a change in partisan attitudes toward migrants.

Two implications follow. First, a larger Vietnamese community increases the importance of reliable information and accessible support, but its size does not reveal occupational upgrading. Second, headline quotas describe only one part of the opportunity structure. For a worker seeking a technical career, permitted tasks, recognition of experience and the conditions for continued employment can matter as much as the size of the annual ceiling.

3.2. Political conflict operates through an inherited institutional structure

The policy record contains both continuity and contestation. Preparations for the Fourth Master Plan began with a forum in June 2021 and commissioned research completed in January 2022; consultation continued during 2022 before adoption in December 2023 [1, pp. 9-10]. The process therefore crossed the presidential transition. This sequence makes it difficult to portray the plan as a wholly new partisan invention. Moreover, its stated objectives retain integration and human rights alongside economic contribution and control. A change in emphasis takes place within a continuing administrative framework.

The political distinction is more visible in the route by which reform can proceed. Nam's documented comparison shows that administrative powers allowed changes in migrant eligibility while organizational reforms encountered competing proposals and wider parliamentary conflict. In the immigration-agency debate, the study identifies differing priorities, interruption of deliberation in the Public Administration and Security Committee and bills that failed to progress before the parliamentary term ended [4, pp. 226-228]. This evidence supports a

mechanism of political mediation through decision venues. It does not establish that polarization explains all delays or that a proposed agency would necessarily have improved worker outcomes.

Administrative adjustment and institutional reform consequently need not move together. Raising a ceiling or revising a points system can change access within an existing framework. Reorganizing responsibilities, guaranteeing support across statuses or altering statutory rights may involve additional actors and resources. The authors' interpretation is that this difference helps explain why selective expansion can coexist with incomplete integration. The comparison locates political influence in the composition and feasibility of reform, with different instruments moving at different speeds.

Economic necessity remains a competing and often more immediate explanation. Employers need workers, ministries respond to shortages, and established procedures reduce the cost of incremental adjustment. Political contestation can influence which demands receive priority and how they are accommodated, while demographic change and production needs generate pressures that extend beyond partisan competition. The evidence therefore favours an interaction between political bargaining and structural pressures, while providing no basis for assigning a numerical share of policy change to either one.

3.3. Wider legal access does not provide the same options to every worker

The clearest policy contrast concerns the conditions attached to different routes. E-9 supplies labour to authorized non-professional occupations. E-7-4 recognizes selected workers already in Korea through a conditional conversion pathway. Professional E-7-1 employment requires an appropriate occupation and qualifications, while the Top-Tier programme launched on 2 April 2025 grants a distinct F-2 resident status to a narrow group of advanced-industry specialists [9, 10]. Table 1 compares these routes without equating a visa label with the technological content of a job.

Table 1. Selected legal pathways and their significance for a technical career

Pathway	Main basis of access	Career opportunity and constraint
E-9 Non-professional employment	Recruitment for authorized sectors and jobs through EPS.	Can provide production experience; does not establish professional status. Workplace changes are regulated.
E-7-4 Skilled-worker conversion	Eligible prior residence and work; points, language and other conditions.	Can extend the horizon for skilled work. The 2023 design tied conversion to employer recommendation and further service.
E-7-1 Professional employment	A designated professional occupation, suitable qualifications and an employment contract.	More directly relevant to engineering and specialized technical work where the specific occupation qualifies.
Top-Tier F-2 resident status	Highly selective specialist profile and employment in designated advanced industries.	Broader economic and family settlement options; cannot be treated as the usual route for Vietnamese workers.

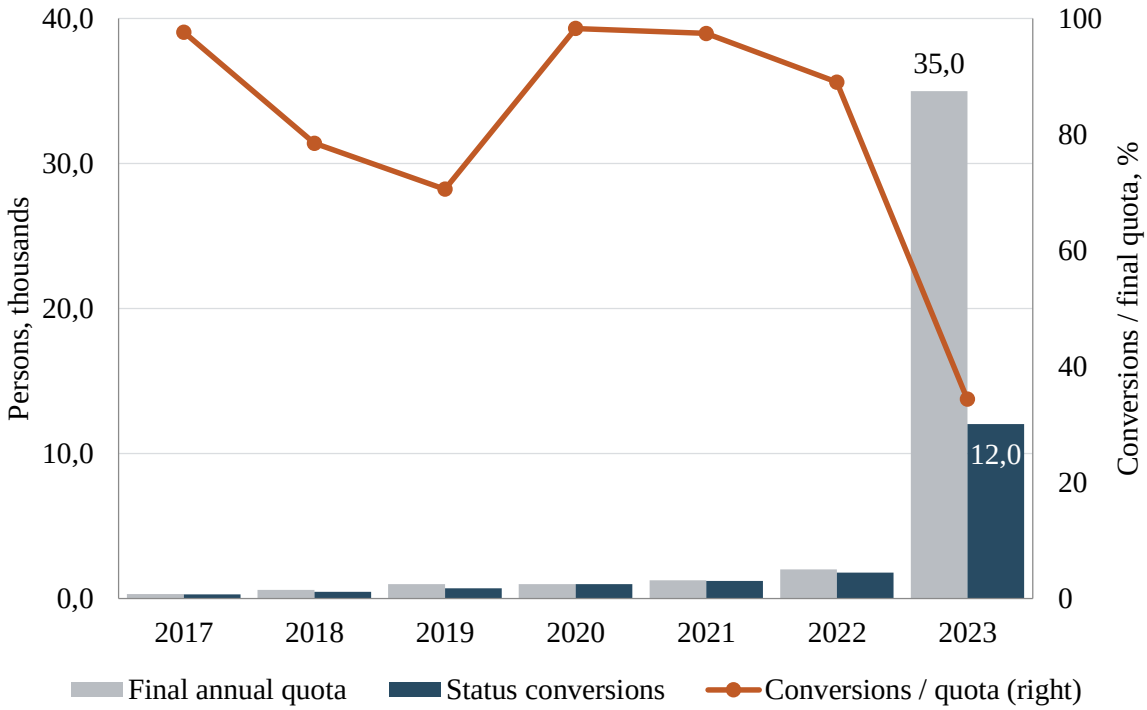
Source: authors' comparison of [17, Art. 25], [18], [9] and [10]. The table compares institutional designs, not complete current application requirements; individual eligibility remains subject to the applicable rules and assessment.

The 2023 K-point E74 reform illustrates the economic tradeoff particularly clearly. Its detailed design required a recommendation from an employer for whom the applicant had worked for at least one year and at least two further years of employment there after conversion [18]. Employer participation can help verify experience and protect training investments. At the same time, it gives the incumbent firm influence over the worker's access to a more favourable status. Wider access and continued dependence are therefore compatible features of the same reform.

Recorded conversions expanded considerably, although less quickly than the final ceiling. The E-7-4 quota rose from 2,000 in 2022 to 35,000 in 2023, while actual conversions rose from 1,781 to 12,035. Capacity increased 17.5-fold and conversions approximately 6.76-fold. Figure 3 places this change within the

seven-year series [9, p. 29]. The ratio of conversions to the final quota was 34.4% in 2023; it is an arithmetic comparison of realized activity with available capacity, not an application approval rate.

Figure 3. E-7-4 quotas and status conversions, 2017-2023



Source: authors' calculations from Ministry of Justice data reproduced in [9, p. 29]. Columns use the left-hand axis; the line uses the right-hand axis. The detailed K-point reform began on 25 September 2023. The ratio is not an approval rate or a causal measure of programme performance.

The gap between the ceiling and actual conversions requires an implementation explanation, not an immediate verdict on success or failure. Detailed reform began late in September 2023, leaving limited time under the new design. The number of eligible applicants, their preferences and the distribution of employer recommendations are not identified by the annual totals. The increase in conversions is observable; the contribution of each selection condition is not. Nor does conversion itself establish movement into semiconductor design, research or another advanced occupation.

Top-Tier offers a different balance. The April 2025 design covered semiconductors, biotechnology, secondary batteries and displays, and combined selective qualifications and experience with high-income requirements. It granted

successful applicants and their families F-2 status with broader economic and settlement opportunities [10]. The comparison reveals a differentiated allocation of options: elite specialists receive considerable flexibility, while other skilled workers follow more employer-linked routes. This difference is directly relevant to migration strategy, even though the available evidence does not quantify its distribution among Vietnamese nationals.

3.4. Effective protection depends on mobility and accessible implementation

For E-9 workers, workplace mobility is regulated, rather than wholly absent. Article 25 of the Act on the Employment of Foreign Workers permits workplace changes on specified grounds, including certain circumstances beyond the worker's control. The ordinary numerical limits contain exceptions for qualifying changes not attributable to the worker; the Act also prohibits unfair discrimination [17, Arts. 22, 25]. The relevant question is therefore whether a worker can identify a lawful ground, obtain evidence and complete the procedure in time. Formal rights alone do not describe the cost of using them.

Institutional support can also lag behind a change of status. The National Assembly Budget Office identifies gaps in services available to professional and skilled categories and constraints in access to integration programmes [9]. A worker may thus obtain a longer employment horizon without equivalent improvement in practical assistance. In economic terms, language and administrative burdens increase the cost of exercising an option that exists in law. In Hirschman's terms, usable exit and voice depend on the surrounding institutions, not only on their formal recognition.

Recent official evidence makes these frictions more concrete. A June 2026 Ministry of Justice survey covered 470 employers and 316 E-9 workers. Reported worker difficulties included meeting Korean-language score requirements (53.5%) and complex procedures (18.7%). On 22 October 2026, the ministry announced simpler renewal documentation, an online guidance pilot and stronger

incentives for longer tenure [19]. These findings corroborate the relevance of administrative access and retention. These descriptive results concern the surveyed employers and E-9 workers; they do not identify Vietnamese-specific outcomes. The announced measures indicate a direction of reform, with some steps still requiring subsequent implementation.

Local institutions add another layer. Jeong's analysis of 225 Korean municipalities in 2006-2012 links left-wing local governance to the adoption of foreign-resident support ordinances [20]. Its period and measure differ from those of the present study, so it cannot establish a recent polarization effect. It nevertheless demonstrates why national entry policy and local integration should be examined separately. Workers with the same immigration status may require different practical support depending on where they live and work.

The comparison reveals three separate questions: whether a worker can enter, whether existing skills receive legal and occupational recognition, and whether those skills can be used in suitable employment over time. Progress in one area does not ensure progress in the others. This is where migration governance becomes part of industrial capability: recruitment adds people, while appropriate tasks and institutions determine how their knowledge contributes to production.

4. Discussion and implications for Vietnam

4.1. A differentiated reading of political risk

The findings support a specific interpretation of political influence. Political conflict can change the issues that reach the agenda and the reforms that can secure agreement, while administrative continuity sustains selective recruitment. The outcome is a mixture of expanded access, conditional retention and uneven support. A general claim that polarization makes migration policy uniformly harsher would miss that combination. An equally broad claim that

rising quotas make workers better off would miss the conditions attached to entry and continued residence.

For Vietnamese workers, political risk is consequently mediated by an identifiable legal pathway and an actual job. A researcher recruited to a qualifying professional position faces a different set of uncertainties from an experienced E-9 worker seeking E-7-4 conversion. Differences in bargaining power, recognized qualifications and available alternatives may be more immediate than an election outcome. Monitoring should therefore follow changes in occupational lists, documentation, employer conditions and access to assistance, alongside the broader political context.

This approach also changes the understanding of retention. A stable workforce can benefit both firms and workers when it supports training, accumulated experience and reliable income. Retention becomes less defensible as an objective when it merely reflects the cost of leaving an unsuitable job. The appropriate goal is productive, voluntary continuity: workers should see a worthwhile future in staying while retaining usable protection and lawful alternatives. Policy should make good employment relationships durable, rather than treat duration alone as evidence of success.

4.2. Connect training to distinct occupational pathways

First, Vietnam should organize preparation around actual occupations and legal routes. For prospective engineers and researchers, training and recruitment should establish a direct match between qualifications, technical tasks and the relevant professional category. For experienced production workers, the priority may be documented skills, Korean proficiency and a feasible conversion pathway. Top-Tier should be considered only for the narrow group whose profiles meet its selective requirements. A generic promise of work in a high-tech sector is insufficient for any of these groups.

The distinction is particularly important in recruitment communication. Vietnam's 2024 EPS cycle recorded 44,983 applicants against an announced selection target of 15,734, including 11,246 in manufacturing [21]. These figures demonstrate strong interest in a broad employment channel. They do not measure arrivals or advanced technical placements. Recruitment agencies and training providers should disclose the expected occupation, permitted tasks, selection stage and legal status clearly enough for applicants to assess the return on their preparation costs.

Technical preparation should combine demonstrable competence with occupational Korean, task-specific safety knowledge and the ability to document work. A useful portfolio would record equipment or software used, tasks performed, assessed competencies and recognized qualifications. For example, semiconductor design and equipment maintenance require different evidence of capability; neither can be established by a general certificate stating experience in electronics manufacturing. Such documentation can improve matching in Korea and preserve the value of experience when workers return to Vietnam.

4.3. Make protection and skill circulation part of cooperation

Second, bilateral cooperation should address the usability of rights and qualifications alongside recruitment. The comprehensive strategic partnership established in 2022 provides a diplomatic foundation [22], but practical cooperation requires participating employers, training institutions and support services. Priorities include independent advice before contract signature, accessible interpretation during disputes, transparent documentation of training and help identifying lawful workplace-change options. Complaint outcomes should be followed through; the number of consultations alone does not show whether a problem was resolved.

Third, overseas experience should connect with Vietnam's domestic demand for skills. The K-Trainee pilot announced in October 2025 provides one

concrete model: it includes Vietnam among nine participating countries and links company-supported students and professional staff of overseas subsidiaries to temporary internships in Korea. Its D-4-2K route generally envisages return after training and does not itself confer subsequent employment or settlement rights [23]. Its relevance lies in structured learning between corporate locations; it should not be advertised as a guaranteed migration route.

Vietnam's semiconductor human-resource programme sets a target of at least 50,000 university-level personnel by 2030 [24]. This is a domestic capability objective, not an overseas-placement quota. Migration cooperation can contribute when acquired experience is recognized and connected to suitable employment, teaching, research or supplier development in Vietnam. Return opportunities need to be professionally attractive. Remittances and the duration of overseas work cannot substitute for evidence that knowledge has been retained and applied.

Table 2 translates these priorities into a small set of responsibilities and observable results. The indicators are proposed for future monitoring; the study does not claim that a linked bilateral dataset already exists. Their purpose is to shift evaluation toward skills used, rights exercised and careers sustained, while keeping participation voluntary and collecting only the personal information necessary for those purposes.

Table 2. Priorities for Vietnamese institutions and bilateral cooperation

Priority	Leading actors	Results to monitor
Match training to jobs	Training institutions and employers	Verified occupation-qualification match; completion of occupational Korean and assessed technical competencies.
Support lawful career mobility	Worker-support services and relevant authorities	Status-conversion outcomes among eligible applicants; time to resolve cases; lawful moves into suitable work.
Make protection usable	Employers, worker representatives and support services	Resolution of wage and contract complaints; access to interpretation; task-specific safety preparation.
Connect experience with domestic capability	Vietnamese firms, universities and bilateral partners	Use of acquired skills after return; relevant employment or research links; recognized training portfolios.

Source: authors' recommendations derived from the institutional comparison. These are proposed evaluation measures, not reported programme outcomes.

4.4. Limits and a focused research agenda

The central limitation is the absence of linked nationality, occupation, industry and residence histories. Without that information, the observed growth of the Vietnamese community cannot establish participation in advanced-industry careers. A useful next step would follow workers across recruitment, training, employment and status changes, distinguishing entry into a technology supply chain from movement into tasks that use higher skills. It should record applicants who do not convert status as well as those who do, so that selection and outcomes can be separated.

A causal study of polarization would also require a defined political measure, credible comparison cases and attention to simultaneous economic shocks. The present evidence cannot supply such an estimate. Its contribution is to identify the decisions and worker options that a stronger design should investigate. Future research should link clearly defined political changes to specific reforms and follow their consequences across comparable groups of workers.

5. Conclusion

South Korean political polarization affects the context in which migration reform is negotiated, but its consequences are mediated by administrative authority, inherited institutions and economic demand. The documentary comparison shows that selective expansion can coexist with employer attachment and incomplete support. The contrast between E-7-4 status conversion and Top-Tier residence is particularly revealing: both seek useful skills, yet they offer different degrees of career flexibility and security.

For Vietnam, the strategic priority is to turn access into usable professional opportunity. This requires an accurate match between the job, the worker's qualifications and the legal pathway; language and procedural support that makes rights effective; and credible opportunities to apply acquired knowledge in Vietnam. The appropriate measure of progress is the quality and continuity of careers built through cooperation. Larger migrant stocks and higher ceilings provide context, but they cannot answer whether workers are using their skills, exercising their rights or improving the productive capabilities of either country.

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