

## Japan and India's Soft Power Diplomacy towards Southeast Asia

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to study the soft power diplomacy of Japan and India towards Southeast Asia after 2020, analyzing their foundations of soft power, highlighting their implementations, and giving assessments. Soft power is a mean to leverage rich cultural values, political values, and foreign policies to enhance national images and foster cooperative relationships in international relations. Japan's soft power is characterized by its cultural diplomacy, financial aid, and humanitarian relief, while India utilizes its spiritual and civilizational heritage, such as Buddhism and Yoga, along with Bollywood, to strengthen ties with Southeast Asia. The analysis reveals that the two Asian superpowers have gained the trust and sympathy of ASEAN members as reliable partners, thereby supporting Tokyo and New Delhi's political and economic interests. The findings suggest that although Japan and India have achieved significant success in implementing soft power diplomacy, they still face ongoing challenges, including competition in the soft power domain, a lack of soft power products, and funding limitations to maintain and enhance their influence in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Japan, India, soft power, diplomacy, Southeast Asia

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## **Introduction**

In the post-Cold War, the multipolar order replaced the bipolar world order, which led to changes in the overall development strategies of nations in general and their foreign policies in particular. Asserting a nation's position not only depends on traditional factors such as military power or economy as hard power but is also significantly influenced by soft power's components (culture, arts, movies, education, etc.). Hence, each country is aware of the importance of soft power and uses it to strengthen and enhance national power, representing one of the most significant changes in the concept of power in international relations. Southeast Asia has played an important role today for the international community due to its vital geographical location as a gateway linking many continents across the globe. This region is forecasted to become the world's largest market by 2030 and offer a source of cheap and high-quality labor that can attract foreign investments. Recognizing the potential and crucial role of Southeast Asia in promoting the economic, political, and security interests of nations, both Japan and India use soft power to influence the region. Japan deploys various approaches such as providing Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people cooperation to spread a positive image of Japan and its people to Southeast Asian countries. While, India implements the Act East Policy and considers cultural connectivity to be one of the three pillars (Commerce, Connectivity, Culture) to boost ties with the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN).

From the Southeast Asian perspective, Japan and India are two major partners as they are members of ASEAN+6 and are establishing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with India in 2022 and with Japan in 2023, respectively. Moreover, both nations are also members of QUAD (along with the United States and Australia), which increasingly seeks extensive cooperation with ASEAN on Indo-Pacific issues (freedom of navigation, counterbalancing China, supply chains, and healthcare). Southeast Asian nations receive significant support from Japan in terms of economics, sharing valuable experiences in Sustainable Development Goals-developing the economy alongside conservation, environmental preservation, and community health. India still maintains a traditional friendship with ASEAN due to cultural ties spanning thousands of years and the legacy of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War.

Therefore, Southeast Asia can welcome the “soft power” influence from Japan and India in natural, voluntary, and active ways.

Why do Japan and India use soft power diplomacy towards Southeast Asian countries? What soft power tools do both states use? And how effective is this strategy? These are the questions that need to be answered. The time scope of this research will be after 2020, a period that witnessed many fluctuations in the world situation: the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the US-China trade war, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, causing Japan and India to continue to promote and strengthen relations with the Global South like Southeast Asian countries to adapt to the new context. In terms of methodology, the article mainly uses foreign policy analysis (FPA) to review and evaluate the goals, implementation, and impacts of Japan and India's policies towards Southeast Asia. In addition, the historical methodology reflects the process of using soft power by the two countries before 2020, thereby clarifying the implementation foundation for a five year period. Concerning the literature review, the study draws on the positions of Japan and India, speeches of leaders, government documents, expert interviews, surveys from research institutes, books, journal articles, and online sources.

### **Definition of soft power**

“Soft power” was coined by Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye in the book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*” (1990) that described soft power as the ability to reach outcomes through attraction and persuasion, rather than payment and coercion (Nye 2017, 2). Elements of soft power encompass intangible things (civilizational heritage, tourism, art, sports, and education, and etc.), which contrasts with hard power that uses traditional means (military force, inducements of payment, and economic sanctions) to achieve objectives in international relations. Nye also concludes three pillars of soft power such as cultural value, political value and foreign policy (Bhattacharyya 2023, 1370). A combination between hard power and soft power in a country's international strategy can be called “smart power” which focused on achieving desirable results encourages every nation to maintain a balance of soft and hard power capabilities. Smart power not only mitigates the dangers associated with

relying solely on soft or hard power but also lent more flexibility to the process of making foreign policy decisions. The term has been referred to by diplomats and policy-makers like Hillary Clinton, former Secretary of State under the Obama administration. She argues that smart power contains everything from public diplomacy and new media to development aid and public-private collaboration to protect and advance U.S. interests abroad in ways that U.S. military power can not (Time 2011).

Numerous academics point out that Public Diplomacy (PD) and Cultural Diplomacy (CD) are connected to soft power. Nicholas Cull calls “Public diplomacy” as an international actor’s attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public (Time 2011). Materials of public diplomacy includes the means by which a nation, organization, or person engages and communicates with citizens, public groups, and non-governmental entities of other nations. Main purpose of PD is to foster understanding of its values, ideas, culture, institutions, development objectives, and prevailing policies among these audiences, ultimately impacting their political choices. Ms. Le Thi Thu Hang, Spokeswoman of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, viewed public diplomacy as a component of a nation's soft power as it served as a mechanism for communicating messages and marshaling resources to generate soft power (Thu Hằng 2019). Regarding cultural diplomacy, it is the exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and peoples in order to foster mutual understanding (Cummings 2003, 1). Cultural diplomacy is considered as one of the five elements of public diplomacy after listening, advocacy, international exchange and international broadcasting (Cull 2009).

In terms of Japan’s perspective, the prohibition of military force in the Article 9 of the 1947 Constitution represents Japan's perpetual dedication to avoiding warfare as a method for settling international disputes, encompassing acts of war that breach sovereignty and threats of force (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 1947). Furthermore, the historical issues stemming from Japan's actions in many Asian countries during World War II served as both a catalyst for Japan to forsake military force in its foreign policy and an incentive to choose soft power as a means to improve its relationships with neighboring nations. In “Chapter 3 - Japan’s Foreign Policy in Major Diplomatic Fields” from the Diplomatic Bluebook 2004, it was first

recognized that a state could attract another country by using appealing instruments (such as traditional values or culture) to increase its national image, support diplomacy, and enhance national security (MOFA of Japan 2004, 210). In 2007, Gilbert Rozman mentioned about Japan's significant soft power to the allure of its prosperous and open society, along with the attractiveness of both its traditional and modern culture (Sharma Prachi 2021). Yasuo Kurata (2011) based on Nye's theoretical framework to explain the origin of the Japan's soft power comes from culture; politics; and foreign affairs, thereby concluding that Japan needs to properly position the position and role of soft power in its national strategy (Kurata 2011, 128). In 2009, Yasuyuki Komaki listed many elements of the entertainment industry such as animation, movies, music, video games, fashion, books, newspapers, were seen as main pillars of Japan's soft power (Komaki 2009, 8). İbrahim Akbaş focused on anime and manga as two distinctive elements to study and assess Japan's soft power and he determined that Japan's soft power lay in its cultural diplomacy with “Cool Japan” as the primary tool (Akbaş 2018). Kaneko Masafumi argued that Japan aims to preserve its global influence through soft power, and public diplomacy serving as a method to bolster this soft power. Although the Japanese government succeed to make its culture widely popular, it has yet to substantially enhance Japan's impact or visibility internationally (Masafumi 2014, 39). There were three aspects of Japan's soft power: enhancing popular culture abroad; increasing national influence according to international norms (climate change or freedom of navigation); using military assets (humanitarian assistance) not to threaten but to support Japan's policies (Heng 2017).

Regarding Indian view, there is still no official document from the government to explain soft power, but this concept is mentioned throughout a variety of leaders' speeches and academic works. A former Indian diplomat, Shashi Tharoor argues that the strength of India's soft power encompasses a diversity of caste, religion, language, the democratic value of consensus, and acceptance rather than tolerance (The Economic Times 2017). Tharoor observes that a country wanting to be effective in international relations must possess both kinds of power: hard power without soft power stirs up resentments and enmities, whereas soft power without hard power is a confession of weakness (Tharoor 2012, 287). The origin of India's soft power comes from culture, philosophy, technology, and intellectual property such as Ayurveda,

Bollywood, Buddhism, cinema, cricket, cuisine, the diaspora, fine arts, information technology, arts, and Yoga. The main purposes for using soft power in India is to reinforce hard power, to project a national image of “peaceful emergence,” to honor the legacies of founding fathers (Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru), to attract foreign investment, to connect with the Indian diaspora, to promote tourism, and to clarify its stance on various global issues (Mazumdar 2018, 470). Basing on Nye’s concept, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) defines soft power as the ability to influence others through appeal and attraction, using non-coercive means. According to Foreign Minister, Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, definition of soft power includes crafting narratives, making images, and establishing standards, so the international community can reference those norms (The Print 2022). Nainika Kumari argues that soft power was used more frequently under the Modi government in his foreign policy by focusing on cultural diplomacy with the promotion of Buddhism, Yoga and Indian diaspora (Kumari 2023).

Thus, soft power refers to a state’s capacity to attract others through appealing means to achieve its national interests in international relations. Three underpinnings of soft power are culture, political values, and foreign policy. Japan and India are two typical cases that employ soft power as a complement to their hard power, emphasizing cultural diplomacy to promote their peaceful ascent and boost worldwide collaborations.

### **Prerequisites for Japan and India’s soft power in Southeast Asia**

- From Japan

Firstly, Japan’s adjustment of its foreign policy towards Southeast Asia, aimed at economic and political objectives, has been influenced since the 1970s due to changes in US Asia policy (a normalization of relations with China under the Nixon administration) and negative reactions to Japan’s economic expansion. Originating from the negative impact of mercantilist policy in the 1950s and the 1960s, Japan exploited the raw materials in Southeast Asian countries to the fullest extent to serve its economic goals. This led to a mentality of being exploited and fearing that Japan would dominate and invade again, even if only economically, among the people of these countries. There were even anti-Japanese protests, such as the protest demanding the

abolition of the Japanese Yen in Thailand in 1972, and boycotts against Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei's trips to Indonesia and Thailand in Jakarta and Bangkok in 1974. This reaction from Southeast Asian countries alerted Japan and forced it to reconsider its attitude and policies in the region. Therefore, Japan had to develop a more independent policy, emphasizing cultural diplomacy to enhance its regional presence and influence. The Fukuda Doctrine (1977) and the Hashimoto Doctrine (1997-2003) underscored Japan's commitment to ASEAN, promoting peace and prosperity. The inception of the ASEAN Cultural Center and the Asia Center highlighted Japan's role in cultural, educational, and linguistic exchanges, marking a shift towards soft power to improve political relations, regional stability, and address global issues. Japan has effectively used its soft power in Southeast Asia to increase its political influence, despite military limitations. Initiatives like the Miyazawa Initiative, the Special Yen Loan Program, and the Japan-ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, along with efforts to maintain peace in the East Sea and the promotion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, demonstrate Japan's strategic use of soft power to protect and advance its national interests against China's territorial ambitions.

Secondly, there is a significant demand among Southeast Asia in collaborating and embracing any Japanese values because it fits for the practical circumstances and national interests of ASEAN members. In terms of economy, Japan has been a key economic partner with bilateral trade reaching \$241.1 billion USD in 2023 and the 2nd largest investor (after US) in 2022 for Southeast Asia. Japan's financial support has been vital for ASEAN members in developing their economies, infrastructure, environmental standards, and education. This long-standing relationship has fostered trust in Japan, which remains a global economic powerhouse and a primary investor in the region. Despite competition from China and others, Southeast Asia continues to value their economic relationship with Japan to ensure market access, avoid overdependence on China, and maintain a neutral position in regional affairs. In terms of politics, Japan's political influence in Southeast Asia is growing, demonstrated by its active engagement in regional forums, cooperation initiatives, and discussions on security and politics. By promoting peace, stability, democracy, and security, and maintaining strong diplomatic ties with most countries in the region, Japan has positioned itself as a responsible major power.



Southeast Asian countries view Japan's involvement as a positive force that could help resolve regional disputes and conflicts, particularly appreciating its interest in the security issues of the South China Sea. In 2019, Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh not only welcomed Japan for its constructive and positive contributions to regional peace, security, and stability but also expressed hope that Japan would continue to support ASEAN's position on the South China Sea, aiming to foster an environment of peace, stability, cooperation, and development (VietnamPlus 2019). In February 2025, Japanese Foreign Minister Iwata Takeshi expressed that Japan fully supported the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and aligns with its core principles of openness, transparency, inclusivity, and adherence to a rules-based order, principles that were also central to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative promoted by Japan (VietnamPlus 2025). Regarding culture and education, as a unique and creative culture that emphasizes human values and moral education, Japan actively supports education in Southeast Asia through scholarships and cultural exchange programs, fostering a keen interest in Japanese culture and language among the local young people. This interest has led to a growing desire to travel, study, and work in Japan, particularly among youngsters in Asia and Southeast Asia.

- From India

Firstly, the Indian heritage has imprinted across Southeast Asia through spreading its cultural, religious, and spiritual values from ancient times. India has been the cradle for various philosophical and scientific traditions like Yoga and Ayurveda, which have played a crucial role in health and wellness, as well as fostering cultural ties between India and Southeast Asia. Moreover, India's rich literary and artistic heritage, exemplified by epic poems like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, has not only preserved historical and cultural significance but also profoundly impacted the region. Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar adopted Sanskrit, a language they borrowed from India, rather than developing their own. The Hindu epic of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana have had a profound impact not only on linguistic and cultural growth (classical dance, social ceremonies, and folk performances like Indonesia's Wayang Kulit) but also in the realm of architecture and decorative arts (evidenced by statues of Lord



Hanuman in Thailand and Malaysia, and Lord Krishna in Cambodia). Indian traders, disciples, and monks introduced Hinduism to Southeast Asia in the late 4th century and Buddhism in the 12th century. These religions have played a pivotal role in shaping the civilizations of Southeast Asia, both historically (with Hinduism in Vietnam's Kingdom of Champa and Cambodia's Khmer Empire) and in contemporary times (with Buddhism in Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar), blending seamlessly with local traditions and complementing native cultures. According to V. Suryanarayan, a prominent Indian expert on Southeast Asian studies, nine out of the ten Southeast Asian countries acknowledged the Indian cultural influence and felt indebted to India, hence India had to use culture as a foreign policy tool in its engagement with Southeast Asia, as these countries were crucial to New Delhi's ambition to become a global power (Marwah 2019, 1-21). The Indian diaspora in Southeast Asian countries has not only contributed to the economic development of local countries but also acted as a bridge between the two countries. Ministry of External Affairs of India (2025) indicates nearly 6 million people of Indian origin in 11 Southeast Asian countries including Brunei: 15,211; Cambodia: 1,805; East Timor (Timor Leste): 100; Indonesia: 134,817; Laos: 700; Malaysia: 2,914,127; Myanmar: 2,002,660; Philippines: 150,010; Singapore: 650,000; and Vietnam: 8,012 (MEA 2025).

Secondly, soft power is considered an effective strategy for India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia since 1947. During Prime Minister J. Nehru's tenure, India prioritized the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and its significant role in Asia, aiming to lead globally by supporting post-colonial and developing countries, particularly in Asia and Africa. Nehru's approach, which included using soft power to gain trust and mediate conflicts, significantly enhanced India's global position and received strong support from Southeast Asian nations. Despite facing drawbacks due to conflicts with China in 1962 and the Indo-Pakistani war in 1971, which led to a temporary shift towards hard power, India returned to soft power strategies in the 1990s with the Look East Policy (LEP). This policy focused on strengthening ties with Southeast Asia through historical, cultural, and ideological connections, and enhancing bilateral cooperation in economic, political, and security areas. In the speech at Harvard University on September 29, 2003, External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha said, "In the past, India's engagement with much of Asia, including Southeast and East Asia, was built on an idealistic

conception of Asian brotherhood, based on shared experiences of colonialism and of cultural ties. The rhythm of the region today is determined, however, as much by trade, investment, and production as by history and culture. That is what motivates our decade-old 'Look East' policy. Already, this region accounts for 45% of our external trade.” (MEA 2003) Under the Narendra Modi administration (2014-present), the “Look East Policy” was upgraded to the “Act East Policy” (AEP) to continue boosting economic, diplomatic, and security cooperation with ASEAN under new context. The main tool of soft power used by the Modi era is ancient heritage and civilizational linkages (Buddhism and Yoga) in order to deepen the connection among both sides.

### **Implementing Japan's soft power diplomacy towards Southeast Asia**

Japan has continued deploying soft power in its foreign policy towards Southeast Asia that highlighted two domains: cultural diplomacy and financial aid. Regarding cultural diplomacy, since 2012 “Cool Japan” has played a pivotal role in propagating the national image concerning cultural heritage, technology, and pop culture not just to foster goodwill and influence in Southeast Asia, but also to indirectly increase domestic consumption in Japan. Over a decade, ASEAN nations have become a significant market for Japan's cultural products (anime, manga, and J-pop), and this region has emerged as a gathering place for enthusiasts like the Anime Festival Asia 2023 in Singapore which attracted 130,000 visitors and 220 exhibitors (JETRO 2023). A well-known Japanese girl band, AKB48, has a sister band in Indonesia, JKT48, which was formed in 2011 and specializes in translating AKB48's Japanese songs into Indonesian. On December 15, 2024, JKT48 held a concert to celebrate their 13th anniversary outside Jakarta, having 12,000 attendees and 250,000 viewers to watch the live stream (J Trust Bank 2024). The Japan Manga Award has also been actively implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan since 2007 with the aim of expanding international exchanges and mutual understanding through manga culture that is widely accepted around the world. Three of the top five countries in terms of anime popularity located in Southeast Asia (Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia). Recently, in the 19th manga award ceremony on May 28, 2025, two Vietnamese

artists won a bronze trophy, marking the 5th time that Vietnamese citizens have received awards. The year 2023 marked the 50th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan friendship relations (1973-2023), and Japan upgraded its relation status to the comprehensive strategic partnerships with ASEAN (September 06, 2023), with Indonesia (September 07, 2023), Vietnam (November 27, 2023), and with Cambodia (June 28, 2024) respectively. According to the Japan Foundation (2024), various cultural exchange activities were held to celebrate this occasion in both online and offline formats: NIHONGO Partners were organized by the Japan Foundation in Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam, and the Philippines (January 1-December 31, 2023); International Symposium on the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation “ASEAN-Japan Relations: Entering a New Stage toward a Global Partnership” in Tokyo (March 16, 2023); the Japanese Film Festival 2023 in Jakarta and Singapore (September 2023- January 2024); the ASEAN-Japan Youth Forum “Take Actions for Social Change 2023” in Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Japan (July 22-November 26, 2023); the Travelling Exhibition: Yakishime - Earth Metamorphosis in Vietnam (April-May 2023); the 2023 National Seminar on Japanese Language Proficiency Improvement by the Association of Indonesia Japanese Language Education Studies (online) (August 18, 2023); and the 20th Japanese Speech Contest for Secondary Schools 2023 in Malaysia (July 29, 2023); and etc (Japan Foundation 2023).

Concerning financial aid, ODA (Official Development Assistance) funding for Southeast Asia has been maintained and increased by Japan since the 1970s to both achieve economic benefits for Japanese companies and contribute to the socio-economic development of Southeast Asian countries. Currently, Japan is the largest provider of ODA to the ASEAN countries with a total of US\$129 billion to date (Seah 2023). A wide range of Japan's ODA support to ASEAN includes infrastructure development, strengthening connectivity, disaster risk reduction, humanitarian support, and defense support. For infrastructure development, Japan adheres to the “G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment” and continues supporting the Philippines through ODA for the “Technical Assistance Project to Establish the Philippine Railway Institute (PRI)” in Metro Manila since 2018, which concentrates on developing a sustainable human resource system for advanced railway operations and maintenance. Japan's

support includes loan aid for constructing the PRI facility, grant aid for training equipment, and technical cooperation for institutional and capacity development. For strengthening connectivity, Japan supports the enhancement of ASEAN connectivity following the “Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025” that focuses on physical, institutional, and people-to-people connectivity. In September 2023, Japan introduced the “Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Connectivity Initiative” to further strengthen connectivity, including in transport, digital, maritime, supply chains, electricity, and human and knowledge areas. Japan has been planning to develop human resources for 5,000 people over three years through technical cooperation. In terms of disaster risk reduction, Japan has significantly contributed to improving disaster management and response in ASEAN since 2009, particularly through the support of the AHA Centre with the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF). Efforts include the establishment of DELSA, capacity building for ASEAN-ERAT, and the ACE-LEDMP. The “Project for Strengthening the ASEAN Regional Capacity on Disaster Health Management” (ARCH) from 2016 to 2021, and its subsequent phase (ARCH2), have focused on enhancing disaster health management coordination, including hosting academic conferences and promoting peer support. Additionally, Japan has supported the creation of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases with a 5.5 billion Yen (50 million USD) contribution to JAIF on 20 July 2020 (Japan-ASEAN Cooperation 2020). The main purpose is to bolster the region's ability to manage public health emergencies and infectious diseases, including conducting online training for ASEAN public health officials and planning to send experts to the Centre. During the outbreak of Covid-19, Japan collaborated with ASEAN to tackle the crisis by strongly supporting the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED) and contributing to the “COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund”. Whereas, Japan has supported ASEAN by donating over 16 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, providing financial support through loans totaling 195 billion yen (approximately 1.8 billion USD), and grant aid amounting to approximately 32 billion yen (~ 296.3 million USD). It included the “Last One Mile Support” initiative, which allocated over 2.5 billion Yen (~ 23.1 million USD) for cold chain equipment to ensure vaccines reach vaccination locations (MOFA of Japan 2021).

For humanitarian support, the coup d'état in Myanmar occurred in February 2021, the Government of Japan has called on the Myanmar military to end violence, release detainees such as State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, and reinstate democracy, while halting new Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects with the military regime. Despite these challenges, Japan has provided over 109.5 million USD in humanitarian aid through international organizations, NGOs, and other entities to mitigate the worsening situation. In February 2023, Japan pledged support for those impacted by the coup, offering services like food, medical supplies, and education. After cyclone “Mocha” in May 2023, Japan contributed Emergency Grant Aid for basic needs. Through initiatives like the Japan Platform (JPF) and the Grant Assistance for Japanese NGO Projects, Japan continues to support health, education, and socio-economic development in Myanmar and Thailand. On March 13, 2024, Japan further committed an additional 37 million USD through many organizations like UNICEF, WFP, UNHCR, ICRC, UN Women, the AHA Centre, and other NGOs, reinforcing its dedication to humanitarian efforts in Myanmar (Mizzima 2024). For defense support, in April 2023, Japan initiated its Official Security Assistance (OSA) program to support ASEAN countries (Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia) amidst territorial disputes with China in South China Sea, by providing non-lethal military equipment and enhancing maritime security. It includes training from the Japan Coast Guard and supplying hardware like patrol vessels and surveillance radars through Official Development Assistance (ODA). Japan signed agreements to provide the Philippines with coastal surveillance radar systems and boats worth 600 million Yen (4 million USD) in November 2023, and Malaysia with rescue boats and supplies for 400 million Yen (2.8 million USD) in December 2023. However, the only deal between Japan and Philippines was reached to provide 4 air defense radars valued at 16.3 billion yen (103 million USD) (Bradford & Yamamoto 2025). This is an example of how Japan uses smart power by utilizing elements of hard power (military assistance) to reinforce soft power to support maritime safety in Southeast Asia.

### **Implementing India's soft power diplomacy towards Southeast Asia**

The Modi administration places significant emphasis on leveraging the nation's soft power assets, utilizing India's cultural diplomacy to enhance its global standing and image. Since 2014, Prime Modi has introduced a shift in India's foreign policy from “Panchsheel” to “Panchamrit,” which refers to five main principles: (1) Dignity and honor (Samman); (2) Greater engagement and Dialogue (Samvad); (3) Shared prosperity (Samriddhi); (4) Regional and Global security (Suraksha); (5) Cultural and civilizational linkages (Sanskriti evam sabhyata) (Business Standard 2015). This shift is also reflected in the pillar “Culture” among 3Cs (Culture, Commerce, and Connectivity) of the Act East Policy (AEP) towards Southeast Asia over the decade, emphasizing the revival of cultural connections from the past between India and Southeast Asia. From 2020 to the present, India has continued promoting Buddhism, Yoga, and Bollywood connections to this region.

Regarding Buddhist diplomacy, the Indian government has placed Buddhism in a central role for a policy centered to foster connections and relationships between India and Buddhist nations in Southeast Asia like Thailand and Vietnam. Prime Minister Modi once said, “From the Legend of Rama to the Wisdom of Buddha, our ties are founded on a shared cultural heritage” (India Tv 2016). Modi spent time visiting major Buddhist pagoda “Wat Phra Chetuphon Wimon Mangkhalaram Rajwaramahawihan” (Wat Pho) in Bangkok, Thailand in April 2025. From October 15-18, 2023, India's External Affairs Minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, visited Tran Quoc Pagoda in Hanoi, Vietnam, where a Bodhi tree presented by the President of India to the Vietnamese President was planted in 1959, symbolizing the shared heritage of Buddhism between the two countries. Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar also visited “Phat Tich” Pagoda, dating back one thousand years, which was one of the centers for Buddhist exchanges with India and other countries. Recently, during the state visit of Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh to India in August 2024, Prime Minister Modi extended a heartfelt invitation to Vietnamese citizens to participate in pilgrimages to sacred Buddhist sites in India, thereby highlighting the spiritual and cultural connections between India and Vietnam as both sides continue to strengthen their comprehensive strategic partnership. Furthermore, significant religious exchange activities are also taking place like exhibition of the Holy Relics of Gautama

Buddha from India to four Vietnamese pagodas: Quan Su in Hanoi, Thanh Tam in Ho Chi Minh City, Tam Chuc in Ha Nam Province, and Ba Den Mountain in Tay Ninh Province. This event coincided with the United Nations Day of Vesak which represented peace, unity, and the shared spiritual heritage between India and Vietnam as the Holy Relics of Gautama Buddha made its journey from India to Vietnam.

Regarding Yoga diplomacy, this is an ancient Indian tradition symbolizing the unity of mind and body, thought and action, and the harmony between humanity and nature. Numerous scholars regard Yoga as an “immortal cultural crystallization” of India, encompassing a system of various techniques designed to maintain physical and mental health. Nowadays, Yoga has gained global recognition and is increasingly integrated into social practices. In the efforts of Prime Minister Modi's government to rebrand India with its long-standing philosophical and religious traditions through foreign policies, Yoga can become a vehicle to promote the image of the “Vishwa Guru” (world leader). In September 2014, Prime Minister Modi, at the United Nations General Assembly, promoted Yoga as a global phenomenon and India's gift to the world, leading to the UN declaring June 21 as “International Yoga Day” with support from 177 countries, including the US and China. This has transformed Yoga into a significant diplomatic tool for India, significantly boosting its global and Southeast Asian image. Only in 2020 could Yoga ceremony rehearsals not be organized due to the global curfew during the Covid-19 pandemic, and in 2021, they took place online. In 2022, Ha Long Bay of Quang Ninh province, Vietnam was chosen as the venue for the event with the theme “Yoga for Humanity” to remind people of the balanced value of Yoga in the relationship between humans and the world after the pandemic, which attracted 3,000 participants (People's Army Newspaper 2022). Malaysia gathered 5,368 people to practise Yoga at the Malaysia Agro Exposition Park Serdang (MAEPS), therefore it earned a place in the Malaysia Book of Record in 2025 (The Vibes 2025).

In terms of Bollywood, Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh pointed out the role of Bollywood as India's soft power, and the Indian film industry could be used as an important tool of foreign policy (Rediff 2008). In Bollywood cinema, the depiction of Indian rituals, festivals, and the performing arts has played a significant role in disseminating traditional Indian



culture. Indian films have found audiences in numerous Southeast Asian and African nations. Specifically, in Southeast Asia, the penetration of Indian popular culture has been facilitated by television and media networks, making it more accessible to regional audiences. Under the Modi tenure, India has actively promoted cooperation in the field of cinema and television with Southeast Asia. After 2020, many films had shot in several locations across Southeast Asia such as “Premam Poojyam” (2021) and “Love in Vietnam” (2024) in Vietnam, “Jigra” (2024) in Singapore, and “Kanguva” (2024) in Thailand. Furthermore, the Indian TV channel “Vasantham” has been operating in Singapore, providing digital contents in Indian languages like Hindi and Tamil. Adlabs Films Ltd, part of Anil Ambani's group, has collaborated with Lotus Five Star Cinemas to run a 51-megaplex chain in Malaysia, targeting the Hindi movie market there. The 2025 Indian International Film Festivals were also held in several Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam (January 2025), Indonesia (February 2025), and Singapore (January to March 2025) respectively, thereby paving the way for enduring people-to-people bonds and socio-cultural connections between India and these nations.

Besides Buddhist diplomacy, the promotion of Yoga, and the export of films, festival activities, music, art, and tourism are also pivotal elements in the cultural diplomacy strategy with Southeast Asia under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Annual festivals between Southeast Asia and India play a crucial role in sustaining cultural ties and ensuring the stability of India-Southeast Asia cultural diplomacy. Indian festivals, such as Holi and Diwali, are widely celebrated across many Southeast Asian countries. In recent years, tourism, particularly spiritual tourism and pilgrimage, has been areas that the governments of both regions have actively promoted.

### **Assessments of Japan and India's soft power diplomacy towards Southeast Asia**

- Achievements

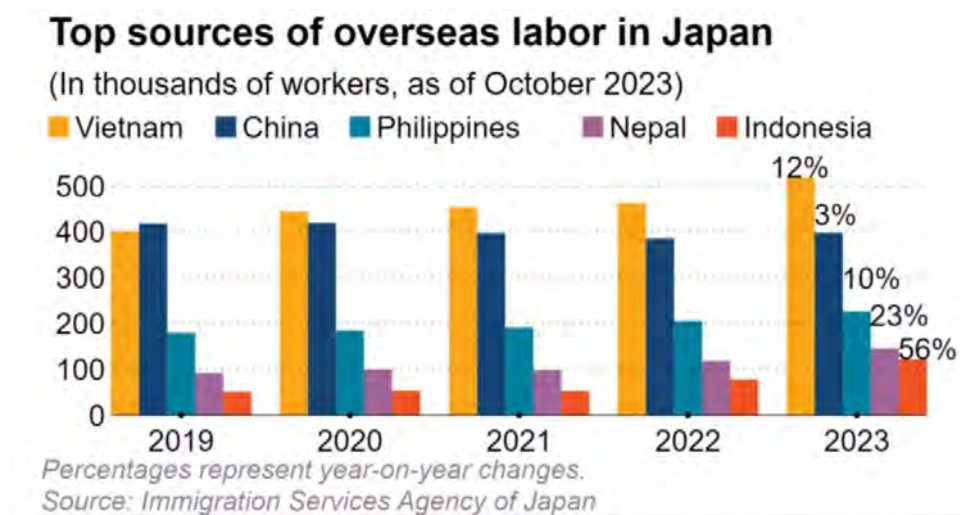
The initial outcomes of Japan and India deploying soft power in Southeast Asia are the enhancement of sympathy, alongside the development and fortification of trust among the peoples of ASEAN towards these two Asian powers. Japan has erased the war aversions from the

Second World War to become the most reliable partner for Southeast Asian nations, while India has built an image of a peaceful rising power and become a responsible resource and stakeholder with the political will to respect and champion global leadership and international law. According to the 2024 survey from the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, Japan was seen as the most trusted partner (58.9%), and ASEAN respected Japanese culture and civilization (21.1%) as well as viewed Japan as a responsible stakeholder that respects and champions international law (36.5%) (ISEAS 2024, 63, 66). ASEAN was interested into the Indian culture and civilization (21.2%), and believed that India as a responsible entity advocating for global leadership and international law (27.4%) (ISEAS 2024, 61). The 2024 survey of the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI) indicated that Japan continued to be positively rated in many aspects: trustworthy partner (41.47%), respecting national sovereignty (69.82%); goodwill (69.13%) and treating ASEAN equally (59.17%) (FPCI 2024, 24). Meanwhile, India's impact on Southeast Asia remained limited in FPCI report, as it ranked low across most survey metrics, including perceptions and initiatives. With this goodwill from Southeast Asian countries, it can become the foundation for both Japan and India to receive full support, especially as the two Asian powers are asking for an increase in permanent seats or running for non-permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The MOFA of Japan has announced that the country will seek candidacy in 2032 for a 2033-2034 nonpermanent membership on UNSC (The Japan News 2024), while External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar also confirmed India's plan to pursue non-permanent membership for the 2028-29 term (The Hindu 2022).

The second result is to boost Japan's and India's national economies and to contribute to promoting tourism. Regarding Japan, the ASEAN-Japan Center illustrated that 25.4% of the total number of foreign visitors to Japan in 2022 were from ASEAN countries, while 31% of Japanese travelers visited ASEAN countries in return (ASEAN-Japan Centre 2025). The success of Japanese culture in Southeast Asian countries has facilitated Japan in attracting a substantial workforce, thereby filling the gap of the labor shortage due to the highest aging population with over 65 and rising to 34.8% by 2040 (Visual Capitalist 2025). The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) indicates that Japan will need 970,000 more foreign workers

than previously forecasted by JICA for 2040 to meet the national economic growth objective, while the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare predicts this nation will require more than 2.7 million nursing care providers by fiscal 2040 (Nikkei Asia 2024).

Looking at the bar chart below, the period from 2019 to 2023 witnessed 3 out of the 5 countries with the largest number of foreign workers in Japan were from Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Philippines, and Indonesia). Vietnamese nationals still was the largest group, but in terms of growth rate, Indonesian workers saw the fastest increase at 56%, compared to a 12% increase for Vietnamese workers.



Source: Nikkei Asia. 2024. *Indonesia reemerges as key labor pool for Japan as Vietnamese migration slumps*. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Japan-immigration/Indonesia-reemerges-as-key-labor-pool-for-Japan-as-Vietnamese-migration-slumps>

Regarding India, the Modi administration's persistent promotion of Indian culture, coupled with its policy of enhancing infrastructure connectivity with Southeast Asia, has fostered conditions conducive to the growth of the tourism industry. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the number of Indian tourists to Southeast Asia has rebounded after the Covid-19 disease from 31,000 visitors (2021) to 3.75 million visitors (2023) (Nikkei Asia 2025). In contrast, around 650,000 ASEAN citizens came to India in 2023. At the 21st ASEAN-

India summit in Laos in October 2024, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced 2025 as the “ASEAN-India Year of Tourism” and discussed plans for holiday cruises linking Indian ports with Southeast Asian tourist destinations. India pledged \$5 million for joint cooperative activities aimed at marketing and promoting tourist attractions, exchanging tourism information, and developing new sectors such as cruise tourism to enhance bilateral travel (VietnamPlus 2024). The relaxation of visa regulations has enhanced Southeast Asia's appeal. Thailand implemented visa-free entry for Indian passport holders in November 2023, followed by Malaysia, which introduced a similar policy one month later. In addition, Vietnam and Indonesia have adopted e-visa systems. Shrabana Barua, an Associate Professor at India's Jindal School of International Affairs, said, “As tourism and cultural exchanges increase, there is also going to be an increase in knowing more about [each other's] culture and businesses, building more networks and ties,” and “it will definitely help the overall India-ASEAN relations.” (Nikkei Asia 2025)

- Shortcomings

Japan and India have soft power competitors like China, South Korea, United States, and the United Kingdom. According to a survey by ISEAS (2024), China is believed to be the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia with 59.5%, and the largest impact was in Laos (77.5%), Thailand (70.6%), Malaysia (66.7%), and Brunei (63.6%) (ISEAS 2024, 35). In 2023, China was the largest foreign investor and top export market for Laos, maintaining its significant economic influence in the region. Other key economic players, ASEAN (16.8%) and the US (14.3%), also held prime positions with a moderate increase in positive perceptions from the previous year. However, this tendency has led to a decrease in perceived economic influence for middle power countries and regional groupings such as Japan (3.7%), the EU (2.8%), South Korea (3.7%), the UK (0.8%), India (0.6%), and Australia (0.5%).

A lack of new soft power products (film and music) to Southeast Asian countries also makes both countries lose advantage in comparison with South Korea. Japan and India have few famous entertainment stars coming to interact with fans in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, Korean bands (Blackpink, G-Dragon, Super Junior, and BTS), American singer (Taylor Swift),

British and Irish singers (Ed Sheeran and Westlife) have all toured across Southeast Asia since 2020. The author interviewed Professor Ken Jimbo from Keio University concerning that issue, he said, “The first issue is that GDP and the economy are declining, leading to Japan losing a relatively significant percentage of its regional influence in that regard. A low rating in the polls also reflects the high economic competition between Japan and other major powers like China. They are cooperating effectively with Southeast Asia on future technology, electric vehicles (EVs), drones, and logistic services. The second aspect is that the Japanese government now realizes ASEAN nations have more choices for cultural attractions from America, China, and Korea.”<sup>2</sup>

The relative closed nature of Japanese society and a certain conservative thought in order to maintain ethnic homogeneity and social order, also partly impact the cultural exchange process between the Japanese people and Southeast Asian citizens, and vice versa. Regarding India, the lack of funding for cultural diplomacy remains a drawback for this South Asian power in increasing the influence of soft power on the world in general and on Southeast Asia in particular, in comparison with others. China spends about 10 billion USD per year on its Confucius Institutes, while India's budget for the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and other cultural agencies is just about 300-400 crore rupees (~ 3-4 billion USD) (Livemint 2022).

## **Conclusion**

The soft power diplomacy of Japan and India towards Southeast Asia after 2020 is a strategic approach that focuses on cultural diplomacy, economic assistance, and historical connections. Two powers in Asia recognize the importance of soft power as a complement to traditional hard power, leveraging their unique cultural heritage and values to enhance their influence in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. Japan's initiatives, such as “Cool Japan” and Official Development Assistance (ODA), highlight its commitment to promoting goodwill and

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<sup>2</sup> The interview was conducted by the author on October 15, 2024 during the visiting scholar program at JIIA.

mutual understanding in the region. India's cultural diplomacy concentrates on the promotion of Buddhism, Yoga, and Bollywood to evoke its historical connections and cultural similarities in Southeast Asia. Boosting engagement with ASEAN nations helps Japan and India not only to strengthen bilateral ties but also to address emerging challenges from President Donald Trump's second term and to contain the rise of China. Indeed, as Japan and India continue to shape their roles on the global stage, their soft power diplomacies will play an important role in shaping perceptions, fostering economic ties, and building a framework for cooperation to address common challenges in Southeast Asia and in the broader Indo-Pacific.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I extend my sincere thanks to The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) for their generous and invaluable support throughout the three-month Visiting Research Fellowship program in Tokyo, Japan, which was sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. In particular, I would like to express my sincere and deepest gratitude to the Managing Director of the Center for Territory and History and Senior Research Fellow, Mr. Masao Kochi, for his leadership, expertise, and guidance, which were fundamental and integral to the realization of the goals of the fellowship program.

I wish to express my profound thanks to the individuals who constitute the JIIA, with particular acknowledgment to Mr. Leo Tamamizu, Mr. Yuito Kimijima, Ms. Chikako Kozuma, Ms. Satoko Owada, and Mr. Kotaro Tsukahara, who significantly assisted Mr. Masao Kochi in making this fellowship program both transformative and impactful for my personal and professional development during the various tasks I undertook, the interactions I engaged in with governmental and military officials, scholars, and diplomats during numerous trips I took throughout Japan.

My sincere gratitude is extended to my co-visiting research fellows Dr. Arnab Dasgupta, Dr. Lan Anh Nguyen Dang, and Ms. Cindy A.F. Mandagi for their constructive help and assistance in the formulation of this research paper, along with the wonderful time and joyful moments we shared during my stay in Japan. Additionally, I am very grateful to the Institute for South Asian, West Asian, and African Studies (ISAWAAS), Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) for giving me this great opportunity to attend this program.

Finally, the completion of this paper would not have been feasible without the invaluable guidance and insights offered by my esteemed mentors, Dr. Robert Eldridge, Dr. Monika Chansoria, Dr. Ryoko Nakano, and Dr. Valerie Niquet, for which I express my heartfelt appreciation.



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