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Understanding Japan's Reputation as Southeast Asia's Most Trusted Partner

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Abstract

Drawing from extensive public opinion polls, including the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's "State of Southeast Asia" survey and Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia's "ASEAN Peoples' Perceptions" survey, this paper examines why Japan is consistently regarded as Southeast Asia's "most trusted partner." The study identifies three foundational pillars that have contributed to this reputation: political reliability, fair and transparent economic practices, and cultural understanding. Japan's evolution to trust in Southeast Asia began from a difficult postwar legacy, with the region still harboring feelings of deep suspicion. A turning point for Japan-Southeast Asian relations came with the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine, which sought to reassure the region that Japan would never again take up the role of a military power, instead pledging a "heart-to-heart" partnership. This formed the basis for Japan's political-security relations with Southeast Asia, now characterized by soft, behind-the-scenes diplomacy that is respectful of ASEAN norms. In terms of economy, Japan was able to outgrow perceptions of being an "economic animal" through human-centered development aid, positive trade relations, and leadership in regional trade frameworks. Culturally, Japan's far-reaching soft power via youth exchanges, pop culture, and daily human interaction, has thoroughly embedded it in Southeast Asian society. The paper concludes with recommendations for Japan to sustain its trusted role amid shifting geopolitical dynamics, emphasizing not only continued dependability and respectful diplomacy, but also the need for deeper engagement, both in the region and at home.

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Introduction: Southeast Asian Public Opinion Polls

In the recent era of shifting geopolitical dynamics and intensifying great power competition, one constant stays true in Southeast Asia: Japan remains as the region's most trusted partner.

Two leading Southeast Asian-born surveys have helped capture this perception: Singapore's *State of Southeast Asia* survey² by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute and Indonesia's *ASEAN Peoples' Perceptions* survey³ by Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia. Conducted annually since 2019 and 2020 respectively, both surveys attempt to measure Southeast Asian public opinion toward ASEAN Dialogue Partners including Japan, China, the U.S., and others.

According to the 2023 FPCI survey, the United States was viewed as the region's most dominant security partner (56.1%), while China is seen as the most economically influential (71.6%).⁴ However, Japan stood out in the socio-cultural category, topping the list at 43.5%.

	Japan	USA	China
Political-Security	10.2%	56.1%	32.1%
Economy	14.2%	12.2%	71.6%
Socio-Culture	43.5%	17.5%	27.7%

ASEAN People's Perception Survey 2023 (Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia)

While the 2024 ISEAS survey presents a different emphasis, it also reveals a key similarity: China ranked first in both political-strategic (43.9%) and economic (59.5%) influence.⁵ Yet once again, Japan takes the lead in soft power, chosen as the top holiday destination by 30.4% of respondents.

² Seah, Sharon. et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report." Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024.

³ Choiruzzad, Shofwan, and Calvin. "Survey of ASEAN Peoples' Perceptions on China, India, Japan, and the USA." Jakarta: Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia, 2023.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Seah, State of Southeast Asia 2024, 35-71.

	Japan	USA	China
Political-Strategic	3.7%	25.8%	43.9%
Economy	3.7%	14.3%	59.5%
Soft Power	30.4%	6.9%	5.9%

The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute)

Although the United States and China hold primacy in terms of political and economic influence, these forms of power do not always translate into trust. Japan, on the other hand, is winning trust through its soft power. Across six consecutive ISEAS surveys from 2019 to 2024, Japan has consistently ranked highest as the “*most trusted partner*” for Southeast Asians, with nearly 59% of respondents in 2024 expressing greater confidence in Japan than in any other player in the region. The same sentiment is also seen in FPCI's 2023 survey. Japan scores an impressive 68.6% in trust, far surpassing China (14.9%) and the U.S (11.4%).

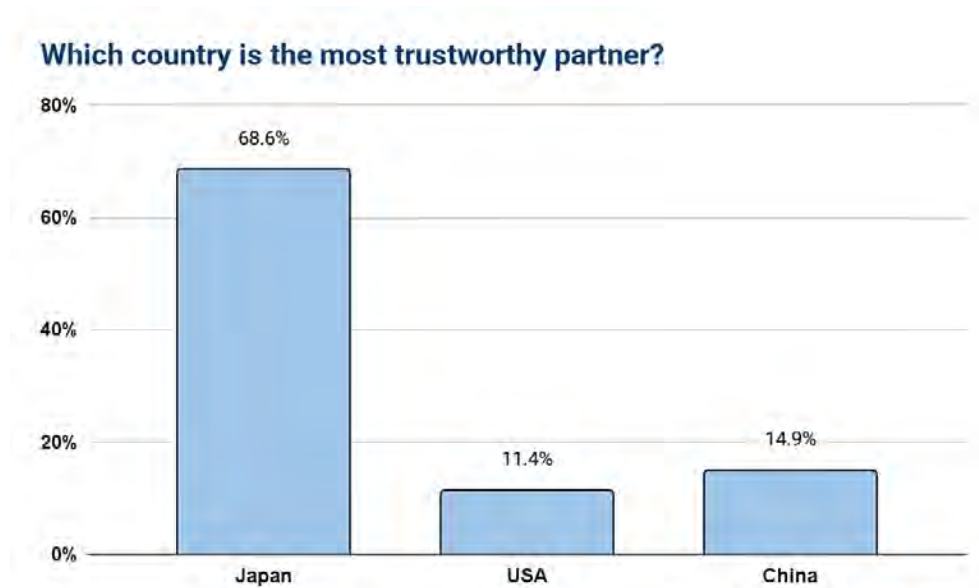
How confident are you that [Country] will ‘*do the right thing*’ in contributing to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance?

	Japan	USA	China
2019	65.9%	27.3%	19.6%
2020	61.2%	30.3%	16.1%
2021	67.1%	48.3%	16.5%
2022	54.2%	52.8%	26.8%

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2023	54.5%	54.2%	29.5%
2024	58.9%	42.4%	24.8%

The State of Southeast Asia: 2019-2024 Survey Report (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute)



ASEAN People's Perception Survey 2023 (Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia)

The ISEAS and FPCI surveys point to a curious outcome. While the U.S. and China are the two major power countries competing for strategic clout in Southeast Asia, neither seem to have completely secured the region's trust. Instead, Southeast Asians are turning to a quieter, less distinctive third option: Japan.

Why is Japan consistently regarded as Southeast Asia's most trusted partner? This paper explores this question by examining Japan's multi-dimensional engagement in Southeast Asia – across politics, economics, and socio-cultural ties. It also seeks to uncover what “*trust*” means in the context of international relations, and why in Southeast Asia, that trust is shown toward Japan.

Defining a “Trusted Partner”

What does it mean for a country to be “*trusted*”? ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute defines a “*trusted partner*” as a country that would “*do the right thing in contributing to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance*”.⁶ In essence, trust goes beyond formal diplomacy or transactional cooperation – it is about whether a country can act responsibly for the greater good, not merely for its own interests. In contrast, distrust emerges when a country is seen as self-serving, unpredictable, or threatening to the sovereignty and stability of other countries.

The concept of trust is found in existing theoretical frameworks within international relations. Karl Deutsch's theory of “*security communities*” suggests that states can establish trust over time through having shared experiences and engaging in the peaceful resolution of disputes.⁷ Communities of this kind establish a mutual expectation of peaceful relations, where war is considered unacceptable and cooperation is the norm, due to established trust in each other's reliability and commitment. In the same way, Robert Keohane's “*reciprocity*” theory highlights that trust in international economic relations is built on the expectation of states to honor trade agreements and economic commitments in a mutually advantageous manner.⁸ When states reciprocate positive economic actions (such as recognizing trade agreements, upholding intellectual property rights, or providing aid,) trust is built. Meanwhile, Joseph Nye's “*soft power*” theory deals with a country's ability to influence others without coercive means, instead using its culture, diplomacy, or ideological appeals.⁹ Trust is essential because countries that possess strong soft power are seen as reliable and non-threatening, earning the respect and cooperation of other states, making collaboration more likely.

In the ISEAS survey, three main reasons were named when respondents were asked to identify the reasons behind their trust towards Japan: (1) Japan is a responsible stakeholder that respects and champions international law. (2) Japan has vast economic resources and the political will to provide global leadership. (3) Japan is respected and admired for its civilization and culture.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Deutsch, Karl. “Political Community and the North Atlantic Area.” *The European Union: Readings on the Theory and Practice of European Integration* 3rd ed (1957): 121–43. https://www.lsu.edu/faculty/lray2/teaching/7971_1s2009/deutsch1957.pdf

⁸ Keohane, Robert. “Reciprocity in International Relations.” *International Organization* 40, no. 1 (1986): 1–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706740>

⁹ Nye, Joseph S. “Soft Power.” *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153–71. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>.

Together, these reasons indicate that Southeast Asians do not just see Japan as powerful – they see it as principled, capable, and respectable.

FPCI's survey goes further in capturing the depth of this trust. Southeast Asians view Japan as the highest-ranking country to “*have goodwill*,” “*respect national unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity*,” “*treat ASEAN as an equal partner*,” and “*proactively try to defuse geopolitical rivalry and tension in the region*.” These are not just flattering perceptions. They reflect how Japan's policies so far have positioned itself as a uniquely compatible partner for the region.

In stark contrast stands China, which consistently ranks as the least trusted partner among Southeast Asians, both in the ISEAS and FPCI surveys. When explaining the reasons behind this trust deficit, respondents cite the following concerns: (1) “*China's economic and military power could be used to threaten my country's interests and sovereignty*”; (2) “*I do not consider China a responsible or reliable power*”; (3) I am concerned that China is distracted with its internal affairs and thus cannot focus on global concerns and issues. Respondents also view China as “*the most reluctant to cooperate*”, the “*partner with the biggest hegemonic ambitions*”, and the “*partner whose strategic ambition is most detrimental to Southeast Asia*”. On top of this, China is also seen as the “*most likely to use economic tools for political leverage*” as well as the “*most likely to use coercive measures to advance its interests in the region*”. Together, these perceptions paint a clear picture: while China may hold significant influence in Southeast Asia, it is also viewed with looming skepticism.

Based on the above survey findings, distrust often stems from perceived threats, hegemonic ambitions, economic coercion, and a lack of transparency. Meanwhile, it can be deducted that trusted partners possess the following qualities: (1) political reliability, (2) fair and transparent economic practices, and (3) cultural understanding. For Southeast Asia, trust is not built through dominance, but instead through consistency across three key areas: political-security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation.

This brings the discussion to the age-old question: is it better for a state to be feared than to be loved? In Japan's case, the pursuit of fear had already been attempted through imperial expansion, leaving deep regional scars. That path failed. In today's 21st century Asia, perhaps it is not fear, but trust and respect – a kind of *political love* – that offers the more enduring foundation for influence.

From Distrust to Trust: Overview of Japan-ASEAN Relations

In Southeast Asia, Japan is known by many names. Indonesia's Dino Patti Djalal¹⁰ and the Philippines' Richard Heydarian¹¹ call it a “*middle power*”, while Singapore's Joseph Liow places it among the “*major powers*.”¹² Others offer more nuanced praise: Singapore's William Choong and Joanne Lin describe Japan as a “*courteous power*”¹³, Cambodia's Chhay Lim calls it a “*third way*”¹⁴, and one multinational group of Southeast Asian scholars affectionately refer to Japan as a “*cuddly friend*.”¹⁵ These labels may vary, but they all point to the same idea: Japan is not seen as a threat, but as a genuine partner.

These positive attitudes are more than just niceties: they are backed by data. For six consecutive years since 2019, Japan has topped the ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute's annual survey as ASEAN's most trusted partner. In fact, Japan's reputation for trustworthiness may go back even further, as suggested by a 2014 opinion poll conducted by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁶

Trust was not handed to Japan; it had to be earned. Following World War II, Japan's ties with Southeast Asia got off to a difficult start. For decades, the formerly occupied Southeast Asian countries remained guarded towards Japan, given their historical baggage. This skepticism continued into the 1970s, a time in which trade was geared mainly to serve the interests of the Japanese economy, with severe trade imbalances between Southeast Asia and Japan. Southeast Asians were heavily dissatisfied with Japan while antipathy increasingly grew, to the point where

¹⁰ Djalal, Dino Patti. “Middle Powers Are the New Architects of the World Order.” *Nikkei Asia*, July 3, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Middle-powers-are-the-new-architects-of-the-world-order>.

¹¹ Heydarian, Richard. “Japan Leads the ‘Middle Powers’ in Shaping Asia's Future.” *The Japan Times*, May 17, 2021. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/05/17/commentary/japan-commentary/japan-a-leader-in-shaping-asias-future/>

¹² Liow, Joseph. “A Southeast Asian Perspective on Japan's Role in the Region.” *Japan Up Close*, April 10, 2023. https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20230410_1.html

¹³ Choong, William, and Joanne Lin. “Japan, the Courteous Power, Bares Some Teeth for Regional Stability.” *Fulcrum*, August 8, 2024. <https://fulcrum.sg/japan-the-courteous-power-bares-some-teeth-for-regional-stability/>

¹⁴ Lim, Chhay. “As US-China Tensions Intensify, Is Japan a ‘Third Way’ for Southeast Asia?” *YL Blog #72 – As US-China Tensions Intensify, Is Japan a ‘Third Way’ for Southeast Asia?* (blog), June 28, 2024. <https://pacforum.org/publications/yl-blog-72-as-us-china-tensions-intensify-is-japan-a-third-way-for-southeast-asia/>

¹⁵ *The Economist*. “Japan Is a Cuddlier Friend to South-East Asia than America or China.” December 14, 2023. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/12/14/japan-is-a-cuddlier-friend-to-south-east-asia-than-america-or-china>

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. “Summary of the Results of an Opinion Poll on Japan in the Seven ASEAN Countries.” March 2014. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000036100.pdf>

Japan was labeled as an “*economic animal*.”¹⁷ This frustration eventually reached its tipping point in 1974, when anti-Japanese riots erupted during the visit of Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka to Bangkok and Jakarta.¹⁸ Even Japanese scholars called for a reset, urging Tokyo to shift from prioritizing trade to a more grounded approach through development cooperation and a genuine “*respect for human beings*.”¹⁹

The Japanese government, sensitized to the region's growing discontent, began reshaping its reputation for the better, starting in 1977 with a bold diplomatic reset. That year in Manila, Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda met with ASEAN leaders and delivered what would later become a diplomatic landmark: the Fukuda Doctrine. It marked the first time since World War II in which a Japanese leader publicly presented views regarding Southeast Asian relations.²⁰ In his speech, Prime Minister Fukuda gave reassurance that Japan would never become a military power, pledging equal partnership and heart-to-heart trust. This moment set the tone for a new era in Japan-ASEAN relations: one built not on dominance but on mutual respect.

It was only five years after the Fukuda Doctrine that Southeast Asia began to perceive Japan in a new light. Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir declared the Look East Policy in 1982, which took Japan as its role model for national development. Prime Minister Mahathir admired Japan's prosperity and development. He wished to emulate the same in his own country by sending thousands of Malaysian students to Japan to learn about its work culture, discipline, and technical skills. This signaled a powerful endorsement, one in which Japan had progressed from being viewed with suspicion to becoming a blueprint for progress.

Admiration of Japan took place not only at the government level, but also in people's everyday lives. The 1980s and 1990s marked the rise of Japanese popularity across the region, from anime and manga to fashion and music. Japanese pop culture was especially favored among the youth who were too young to possess post-war antipathy towards Japan. At the same time, Japanese electronics and cars also became household staples – symbols of reliability and modernity.

¹⁷ Onishi, Akira. “Japanese Interests in Southeast Asia -- A Japanese View” 11, no. 4 (1971): 413–21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2642698>

¹⁸ Halloran, Richard. “Violent Crowds in Jakarta Protest the Visit by Tanaka.” *The New York Times*, January 16, 1974 <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/01/16/archives/violent-crowds-in-jakarta-protest-the-visit-by-tanaka-thousands.html>

¹⁹ Onishi, Japanese Interests in Southeast Asia, 418.

²⁰ Yano, Toru. “The ‘Fukuda Doctrine’ and Its Implications for Southeast Asia: A Japanese Perspective.” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1974): 60–64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27908336>

A combination of these cultural and technological waves throughout the following decades eventually led to the growing acceptance of Japan in Southeast Asia.

In 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe introduced a new chapter in Japan-ASEAN ties with the launch of the Five Principles of Japan's ASEAN Diplomacy. Complementing the previous Fukuda Doctrine, these updated foreign policy guidelines built on the trust and friendship that had grown over the years. These two diplomatic milestones paved the way towards the present Japan-ASEAN relationship, which is constantly defined by terms such as “*equal partners*” and “*heart-to-heart friendship*.”

Japan's “Political Reliability”

Southeast Asia sits at the center of the geopolitical chessboard known as the Indo-Pacific, being constantly courted by powerful players with competing agendas. In this crowded game of influence, the most valued partners for ASEAN are not simply those with strength, but those that are politically reliable and are respectful of international law. Japan distinguishes itself in this regard. Through its steady diplomacy, consistent support for ASEAN centrality, and strong commitment to the rules-based international order, Japan's relations with Southeast Asia has demonstrated qualities that political theorist Karl Deutsch identified as the foundation of “*security communities*” – relationships defined by trust, mutual respect, and peaceful resolution of disputes.²¹ As a result, Japan has not only emerged as a capable actor, but as the most trusted partner in Southeast Asia's evolving security environment.

Japan's admired reputation is a product of its distinct diplomacy style, sometimes referred to as “*ninja diplomacy*.”²² They keep a low profile but are consistently engaged; they appear soft in nature but provide commendable leadership behind-the-scenes. While terms such as “*cowboy diplomacy*” to describe the United States or “*wolf warrior diplomacy*” to describe China come to mind, Japanese foreign policy avoids coming off as preachy or pushy.²³ Instead, Japanese diplomats are known for their grounded, hands-on approach. They coordinate across ministries,

²¹ Deutsch, Political Community, 121–143.

²² Schoff, James. “U.S. Political Decline Means More ‘Ninja Diplomacy’.” *Carnegie Endowment*, September 22, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/09/us-political-decline-means-more-ninja-diplomacy?lang=en>.

²³ *The Economist*, Japan Is a Cuddlier Friend.

think tanks, businesses, and institutions to push their outcome of preference into existence. This constructive style resonates with Southeast Asia's own diplomatic culture dubbed "*the ASEAN way*", which favors discussion, consensus and non-interference in domestic affairs. Ultimately, Japan's deference to these norms has secured itself a valued seat at ASEAN's table.²⁴

Japan's unwavering support for ASEAN centrality is one of the clearest demonstrations of this trusted partnership. Since the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced his vision of the Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP) in 2016, the following administrations ensured that the FOIP did not undermine ASEAN's own Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) which came into existence three years later. In fact, Japan even chooses to provide support for Southeast Asian Track 2 dialogues such as the AOIP Vision Group Conference, reinforcing its commitment to ASEAN-led regionalism.²⁵ During the 50th anniversary of Japan-ASEAN relations, Prime Minister Kishida further underscored this commitment by announcing a contribution of USD 100 million in support of the AOIP.²⁶

Although initially driven by the rise of China and the desire to contain its reach in the maritime domain, the FOIP has gradually evolved to reduce its confrontational tone towards China. As Hidetaka Yoshimatsu argues,²⁷ the evolution from FOIP 1.0²⁸ (2016) to 2.0²⁹ (2018) and 3.0³⁰ (2023) reflects Japan's efforts to downplay explicit security concerns, in favor of development cooperation and inclusive diplomacy, largely in response to ASEAN's skepticism on FOIP. Prime Minister Abe himself later acknowledged in his memoir that ASEAN was uncomfortable with the term "*strategy*," which risked signaling an anti-China military alignment. In response, Japan adopted a more flexible posture, referring to the FOIP as a "*vision*" instead.³¹ This move

²⁴ Acharya, Amitav. "Imagined Proximities: The Making and Unmaking of Southeast Asia as a Region." *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 27, no. 1 (1999): 55–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24492980>

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation of the Kingdom of Cambodia. "The 2nd ASEAN Outlook on Indo Pacific Vision Group Conference." March 4, 2025. <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/Posts/2025-03-04-News-The-2nd-ASEAN-Outlook-on-Indo-Pacific-Vision-Group-Conference-18-58-04>

²⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "The 26th ASEAN Japan Summit." September 6, 2023. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page6e_000382_00001.html

²⁷ Yoshimatsu, Hidetaka. "The Development of Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Security Concerns and Instrumental Principles." *Global Policy*, April 17, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70006>

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "A New Foreign Policy Strategy: Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy." 2016. <https://www.asean.emb-japan.go.jp/files/000352880.pdf>

²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "Towards Free and Open Indo-Pacific." 2019. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000407643.pdf>

³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)." 2023. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100477660.pdf>

³¹ Abe, Shinzo. *Memoir of Abe Shinzo*. Chuo Koron Shinsha, 2023.

underscores Japan's understanding that antagonizing China would only alienate ASEAN, and that trust must be maintained through co-creation rather than competition. Through this approach, Japan has reaffirmed to ASEAN that the FOIP seeks to reinforce, not disrupt, the region's inclusive architecture.

Japan sits in a unique position. Politically, it is aligned with the West, but geographically and culturally, it is very much Asian. This dual identity gives Japan a bridge-building potential that few other countries possess. It is the only Asian member of the G7, which makes its role even more distinct. Japan has the credibility to speak to both sides, to connect the Global South to the institutions of the Global North. A good example of this is in 2023, when Japan invited Indonesia and Vietnam to the Hiroshima Summit.³² This gesture was appreciated by Indonesia, Vietnam, and other Global South countries, as it gave them a voice in global governance forums where they are often overlooked.

Amid the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, Japan has emerged as a credible and appealing third option, a power that offers partnership without pressure. In a region wary of great power dominance, whether due to Beijing's maritime assertiveness or Washington's unpredictable behavior, Japan's principled and restrained approach has earned regional trust. In the 2025 ISEAS survey, when ASEAN respondents were asked "*which third party they would prefer ASEAN to hedge against the uncertainties of the U.S.-China strategic rivalry,*" Japan ranked second with 29.6% – just behind the European Union, located geographically far removed from the region.³³ While the EU was praised for its multilateralism and its rules-based approach, Japan's high ranking highlights that it, too, is a credible alternative. This role is not accidental: it is explicitly set out in Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy, with its call for "*a new balance in international relations*" and the prevention of "*situations where any one state can unilaterally change the status quo,*" – a principle that aligns closely with ASEAN's own preferences for strategic autonomy and inclusive regional order.³⁴

³² Tanikawa, Kojiro. "Japan to Invite Global South, South Korea to G7 Summit." *The Japan News*, March 21, 2023. <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/politics-government/20230321-98706/>

³³ Seah, Sharon. et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report." Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025.

³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "National Security Strategy." December 16, 2022. <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>

As ASEAN countries are divided on their response to the U.S.-China competition (with Cambodia and Laos leaning towards China; the Philippines aligning closely with the U.S.; and other countries unclear), Japan avoids forcing binary Cold War-style choices upon the member states. On sensitive matters such as democratic backsliding or governance issues in the region, Japan does not follow the Western method of public condemnation. Instead, it prefers to voice its concerns behind closed doors and supports reform through capacity-building, not through lectures. It maintains aid flows and dialogue, even with difficult governments. Accusations of appeasement may be hard to ignore, but in Southeast Asia, it is seen as respectful and realistic. This discretion has earned it the nickname, “*the courteous power*.”³⁵

Japan's shift from a post-war pacifist to a contributor in regional security is one of the most significant shifts in Southeast Asia's security landscape. While Tokyo has reinterpreted Article 9 of its Constitution, doubled its defense budget, and acquired counter-strike capabilities, these moves have not stirred alarm in the region. Rather, it is able to maintain its top position in public opinion polls, with 89% of Southeast Asians viewing Japan as a “*peace-loving nation*.”³⁶ This is because unlike the military posture of other powers, Japan's hardening role is not seen as a threat, but as a calibrated response to an increasingly volatile Indo-Pacific. Straits Times columnist Ravi Velloor recounted that just 25 years ago, a loud *bang* in Singapore would send people scrambling to shut their windows, haunted by wartime memories.³⁷ Yet when the Japanese helicopter carrier JS Kaga docked in Singapore in 2018, it was met with calm, not concern. Japan has carefully cultivated this trust by aligning its security efforts with local sensitivities: framing its security policies not as power projection, but as capacity-building and maritime support.

Japan has shown that it is possible to be a security partner in Southeast Asia without appearing as dominating. Japan does not operate any permanent military bases, nor does it deploy troops in Southeast Asia – unlike the U.S. (which has bases in the Philippines) and China (accused of militarizing disputed areas in the South China Sea). In the eyes of ASEAN, these activities are often equated with foreign control and the loss of autonomy, which can ultimately lead to resentment. Japan avoids this altogether. Japan's commitment to non-coercive security

³⁵ Choong and Lin, Japan the Courteous Power.

³⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. “Opinion Poll on Japan in ASEAN Countries.” 2023. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100635560.pdf>

³⁷ Sekretariat FPCI. “Sesi B3 Who is Southeast Asia's Most and Least Favorite Launch of FPCI ERIA Survey [Video],” February 4, 2024. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PZ4M3jP5q8>

engagement is embodied in Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA) program. Launched in 2023, OSA supports Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia with non-lethal security aid in domains such as maritime surveillance, disaster relief, and search-and-rescue.³⁸ Through OSA, and other platforms like cadet exchanges and coast guard training, Japan helps ASEAN build capacity from within, enhancing maritime domain awareness and defensive preparedness without relying on external muscle. Through its non-coercive security policies, Japan ensures that Southeast Asian countries remain the central actors in their own security.

Japan's participation in joint military exercises like Cobra Gold and Super Garuda Shield further underscore this respectful approach. These exercises are not bilateral shows of force, but multilateral, transparent exercises open to observers, designed to foster interoperability and trust. More importantly, Japan's security cooperation with Southeast Asia is often initiated by ASEAN countries themselves, not Japan. In 2023, Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong, in his speech to the Japanese Diet, stressed the need for political trust-building, through working together on maritime security.³⁹ Similarly, then-Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, looking to the success of Japan's military exercises with the Philippines and its coast guard cooperation with Vietnam, proactively approached Japan to request cadet exchange opportunities. *"I met with the Japanese Minister of Defense and asked to send cadets from Indonesia,"* Prabowo shared.⁴⁰ This demand-driven nature of cooperation reflects Japan's sensitivity to the region's emphasis on autonomy and non-interference. Prabowo, now President of Indonesia, is not alone in his confidence in Japan. Earlier in 2022, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made a rare public statement: encouraging Japan to take a larger role in regional peace and stability.⁴¹ In a diplomatic culture that seldom offers open endorsements, such a remark signals the depth of trust Japan has earned – by aligning its security posture with ASEAN values.

Beyond Asia, Japan's approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict exemplifies its image as a consistent, law-abiding actor that respects the feelings of the Global South. Though not all ASEAN states are on the same page, Muslim-majority nations like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei

³⁸ Choong and Lin, Japan, the Courteous Power.

³⁹ Nitta, Yuji. "Vietnam President Calls for Deeper Security Ties in Japan Speech." *Nikkei Asia*, November 30, 2023. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Vietnam-president-calls-for-deeper-security-ties-in-Japan-speech>

⁴⁰ Sinaga, Yuni Arisandy. "Indonesian Air Force Discusses Joint Training with Japan." *Antara News*, May 10, 2024. <https://en.antaranews.com/news/313071/indonesian-air-force-discusses-joint-training-with-japan>

⁴¹ Liow, A Southeast Asian Perspective.

Darussalam have been particularly vocal in their support for Palestine and have taken note of Japan's refusal to blindly follow its allies. Unlike the United States, which faces criticism for its continued support of Israel despite the latter's known human rights violations, Japan does not endorse any military actions and instead promotes a peaceful two-state solution through diplomacy and development aid.⁴² Initiatives such as the Conference on Cooperation among East Asian Countries for Palestinian Development (CEAPAD), along with Japanese-funded industrial projects in Jericho and the opening of two Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) offices in the West Bank are practical demonstrations of this approach.⁴³ In a world that is becoming ever more frustrated by Western double standards, Japan's approach in this case demonstrates its willingness to chart an independent course on the global stage – earning respect from those in the Global South as a responsible and thoughtful actor.

Japan's carefully sustained reputation of political reliability has offered Southeast Asia something invaluable: a sense of calm, predictability, and control in a geopolitically turbulent region. Japan understands the correct posture that is needed to not provoke concern amongst Southeast Asians. Instead, it listens, supports and aligns itself with ASEAN's core values of consensus and non-intervention. It has shown diplomatic restraint where others have sought confrontation, engaging with Southeast Asia in a way that is deferential, behind-the-scenes, and focused on practical outcomes over optics. From its practice of “*ninja diplomacy*” and its role as a third choice within the US-China competition, to its capacity-building efforts in the South China Sea and principled support for Palestine, Japan has proven that it can act as a leader without the need for coercion or intimidation. In every respect, Japan has exemplified the qualities that Karl Deutsch envisioned in a true “*security community*”, and in doing so, it has secured something far more enduring than influence: trust.

Japan's “Fair and Transparent Economic Practices”

⁴² Mahari, Hakim. “Malaysia Pledges Support for Japan's CEAPAD Initiative.” *New Straits Times*, January 10, 2025. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2025/01/1158955/updated-malaysia-pledges-support-japans-ceapad-initiative>

⁴³ Imura, Yutaka. Interview by Cindy A.F. Mandagi, October 17, 2024.

Japan's reputation of trustworthiness in Southeast Asia is not solely the result of its diplomatic finesse or reserved security posture, it also rests in the way it does business. In a region where economic cooperation often comes with political strings, Japan stands out for being fair, transparent, and dependable. In fact, when survey respondents were asked who the “*go-to partner for quality investment*” is, Southeast Asians consistently point to Japan.⁴⁴ This perception was formed due to Japan's commitment to fair and transparent economic practices, which refers to policies that are open, rules-based, and mutually respectful. The Japanese are seen as “*fair*” (ensuring mutual benefit, avoiding coercion, and respect for sovereignty) and “*transparent*” (having open processes, clear terms, and long-term consistency.)

This is in line with Robert Keohane's theory of reciprocity, which states that trust between nations is earned through repeated and mutually beneficial interactions.⁴⁵ With time, these practices mature into stability, habit, and finally: trust. Malaysian economist Jayant Menon concurs with this, noticing that while trust is not necessarily a prerequisite for trade, it often develops with continued cooperation.⁴⁶ For example, despite its position as ASEAN's top economic partner, China continues to face challenges in translating economic ties into broader trust.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Japan has been able to transform post-war reparative aid into decades of trade and investment. In doing so, Japan exemplifies the reciprocity theory into practice: by consistently showing up and delivering fairly, trust follows.

Japan's economic engagement in Southeast Asia stands out compared to the other powers. While China is often perceived to use “*economic tools for political means*,” Japan's engagement is marked by transparency.⁴⁸ The United States, though one of ASEAN's largest trading partners, is frequently criticized for its inconsistent regional presence and unstable trade policies, which are all dependent on who is in charge. Japan's economic approach, on the other hand, is never seen as overly politicized nor heavily transactional. Instead, it is pragmatic, consistent, and strategic, possessing qualities that ASEAN nations value deeply.

⁴⁴ Choiruzzad and Calvin, Survey of ASEAN Peoples' Perceptions, 34.

⁴⁵ Keohane, Reciprocity in International Relations, 1–27.

⁴⁶ Sekretariat FPCI, Who is Southeast Asia's Most and Least Favorite.

⁴⁷ Choiruzzad and Calvin. Survey of ASEAN Peoples' Perceptions, 28.

⁴⁸ Yusof, Amir. “China Power: White Elephants or Lifelines? Southeast Asia Weighs Beijing's Investments and Intentions.” *Channel News Asia*, April 9, 2025. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/china-power-infrastructure-projects-belt-road-philippines-malaysia-railway-port-debt-5030216>

Japan's role in key regional economic frameworks is one of the biggest reasons it maintains trust in Southeast Asia, not simply as a reliable partner, but as a stabilizing presence in a growingly unstable global economy. Right from the early days of ASEAN, Japan has been a crucial pillar in furthering the economic development of the region. As noted by Prof. Dewi Fortuna Anwar, friendly ties between Japan and Southeast Asia progressed after the war primarily because Japan emerged as the key financial backer of ASEAN, which included early support for ASEAN's institutional capacity.⁴⁹ This legacy still continues today, through Japan's consistent leadership across the region's most important economic platforms, including the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF).

This leadership role is especially evident in Japan's participation in regional trade agreements. When the U.S. abruptly pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017, many thought the deal would fall apart. But Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, stepped in to revive the deal, rounding up the other members and reconstituting it as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2018. This was the moment when the world understood that Japan was ready, willing and able to lead. Japan also has a crucial balancing role to play in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which includes China in its membership, but not the U.S. Instead of dominating, Japan offers a stabilizing presence, which is something that the 10 ASEAN members welcome as they try to row between the two big reefs: Washington and Beijing.

Japan's influence in the region stems not just from prestige, but from its readiness to act when it matters most. Japan, one of only two Asian members in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), helped to mediate between Western economic norms and Asian economic views. It takes up that position without preaching to other countries outside of the OECD, but rather to protect their interests within it.⁵⁰ Japan's support for ASEAN through JAIF, its grant aid of ¥38 billion during the COVID-19 pandemic,⁵¹ and its massive \$80 billion dollar

⁴⁹ Anwar, Dewi Fortuna. "ASEAN 'Centrality' and China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Co-Operation." *Global Asia*, September 2024. https://www.globalasia.org/v19no3/cover/asean-centrality-and-china-japan-south-korea-trilateral-co-operation_dewi-fortuna-anwar

⁵⁰ Kamikawa, Yoko. "Why Engagement with Indo-Pacific Region Is Important for OECD, Europe's Future." *Euractiv*, May 2, 2024. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/opinion/why-engagement-with-indo-pacific-region-is-important-for-oecd-europes-future/>

⁵¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "White Paper on Development Cooperation 2022." December 26, 2023. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/white/2022/html/honbun/b3/s1.html>

assistance⁵² during the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis are further examples of how Japan shows up for its partners in times of need. This reliable track record further contributes to the perception of Japan as a committed economic partner for Southeast Asia.

Japan's economic presence in Southeast Asia can further be seen in its extensive foreign direct investment and deep integration into key industries. Over the past decade, Japan has invested \$198 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) into ASEAN, surpassing China and second only to the U.S.⁵³ Beyond this, there are over 15,000 Japanese businesses spread across Southeast Asia, integrating Japan into the region's industrial fabric.⁵⁴ Japan leads supply chains for the region's automotive and electronics sectors, where it is estimated that they control 80% of ASEAN's auto industry market share.⁵⁵ But rather than being purely extractive in nature, Japan's economic presence is developmental: providing technology transfer, employment, and skills upgrading that directly benefit Southeast Asian economies. An interview with workers at a Mitsubishi truck manufacturing plant in Jakarta revealed how the Japanese management model emphasizes localization – featuring an Indonesian CEO, an entirely local workforce, active knowledge transfer, and a deliberate choice to prioritize human labor over automation, despite having the technological capacity.⁵⁶

Japan's economic engagement goes beyond investment: it actively supports ASEAN's industrial and social capacity. Through frameworks such as the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP), Japan provides technical assistance and empowers local industries, for instance, through helping Thai firm Somboon Advance Tech train its engineers to become self-reliant and reduce dependency on external technical support.⁵⁷ Japan also places strong emphasis on digital innovation and entrepreneurship, as shown in initiatives like the Digital Innovation and Sustainable Economy Centre, which aims to bridge digital gaps and build resilient economies. Furthermore, its commitment extends to future-oriented initiatives, such as Smart JAMP for smart cities, circular economy programs, and green energy transitions, all tailored to

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "Asian Economic Crisis and Japan's Contribution." October 2000. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/economy/asia/crisis0010.html>

⁵³ Lim, As US-China Tensions Intensify.

⁵⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, White Paper on Development Cooperation 2022.

⁵⁵ Shinoda, Kunihiro. Interview by Cindy A.F. Mandagi, October 17, 2024.

⁵⁶ PT. Krama Yudha Ratu Motor. Interview by Cindy A.F. Mandagi, February 7, 2025.

⁵⁷ Oikawa, Keita, and Fusanori Iwasaki. "ASEAN-Japan Economic Partnership for a Sustainable and Resilient Future." Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, August 2023. https://www.eria.org/uploads/ASEAN-Japan-Economic-Partnership-for-a-Sustainable-and-Resilient-Future-rev3_.pdf

ASEAN's specific development needs. In contrast to neo-colonial economic models, Japan's approach emphasizes equal partnership, local ownership, and sustainable growth.

While foreign investment builds economic ties, it is Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) that has left the biggest mark on Southeast Asia's perception of trust. Over the past few decades, Japan has provided nearly \$130 billion in ODA to the region.⁵⁸ It is an impressive figure, but what distinguishes Japan from the rest is not the amount, but its transparent and non-coercive approach. Projects like the Jakarta MRT, where Japanese workers were deliberately limited to promote employment of local workers, reflect Japan's philosophy of empowering partners rather than creating dependence. *"In the future, it will be the local staff of Jakarta MRT who will have to manage this railroad. For these reasons, we placed an importance on their autonomy when transferring the technology and operation know-how to the local staff,"* says Adachi Hiroaki, Senior Representative of JICA Indonesia office.⁵⁹ But the same rings true for other projects, from the Sihanoukville Port in Cambodia, the Metro Manila subway, and the Nhat Tan Bridge in Hanoi, to improvements to the Vientiane International Airport and Bangkok MRT's Purple Line. Japan creates infrastructure built not only for growth, but for long-term, locally driven sustainability.

Japan's development assistance extends beyond building ports and railways, it also invests in people, communities, and the environment. Its support for activities such as a domestic violence hotline in Vietnam or mutual learning on aging societies with Thailand, reflects a holistic approach to development, one that prioritizes dignity just as much as economic growth. Through Japan's climate cooperation initiatives such as the Asia Zero Emission Community (AZEC) and the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), it helps ASEAN countries decarbonize while still respecting their development needs. AZEC supports over 350 clean energy projects with a focus on technology transfer, while JETP channels \$20 billion toward coal transition. Despite criticisms, AZEC for favoring corporate interests and JETP for its top-down approach, both show Japan's willingness to invest in the region's future.

This commitment has not gone unnoticed, 77.47% of ASEAN respondents say they welcome Japanese ODA, a higher rate than for any other external power. As another JICA official

⁵⁸ Chanlett-Avery, Emma. "Japan's Close Ties with Southeast Asia Hold Lessons for U.S." *Nikkei Asia*, December 8, 2023. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Japan-s-close-ties-with-Southeast-Asia-hold-lessons-for-U.S>

⁵⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "White Paper on Development Cooperation 2019 Japan's International Cooperation." March 2020. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/files/100161448.pdf>

aply put it, Japan's credibility in Southeast Asia was not "*intentional*", nor was it manufactured through branding; instead, it was the result of transparent practices and trusted quality investment.⁶⁰

Japan's fulfillment of the prerequisite of "*fair and transparent economic practices*" has thus become a lived reality, built steadily over decades. Its consistency across trade, investment, development aid, international leadership, and climate cooperation reflects exactly what Keohane's reciprocity theory predicts: when states engage in repeated, mutually beneficial exchanges, trust becomes a natural byproduct.

"Cultural Understanding" of Japan

In Southeast Asia, Japan's greatest influence is not its military or economic might, but its far-reaching cultural power. Through many years, trust has been built not just through official channels, but through everyday human connections, via shared meals, academic exchanges, and a regional love for Japanese culture. This form of diplomacy has become central to Japan's image as ASEAN's most trusted partner; not because it demands attention, but because it resonates on a personal level. As former Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas once said, "*Diplomacy is too important to be left in the hands of diplomats alone.*" For the case of Southeast Asian-Japan relations, it is often the artists, students, chefs, athletes, and anime fans that do the real, on-the-ground diplomatic work.

This form of influence is precisely what Joseph Nye described as soft power: the ability of a country to attract and shape preferences through culture, values, and policies.⁶¹ Japan has been able to fulfill all three. Its culture, both traditional and pop, is admired across the region. Its values of peace, respect, and humility are deeply appealing in an increasingly polarized world. And its policies closely align with ASEAN's own diplomatic norms which favor non-interference, gradualism, and harmony. In this context, Japan's influence is not just attractive, it is congruent with Southeast Asia's worldview.

⁶⁰ Japan International Cooperation Agency. Interview by Cindy A.F. Mandagi, November 6, 2024.

⁶¹ Nye, *Soft Power*, 153–71.

Japan's evolution from a symbol of military aggression to one of Southeast Asia's most admired nations is an astonishing feat. Only 50 years ago, Japan was among the least-liked countries in the region, yet today, it consistently tops trust surveys. A key driver of this transformation has been Japan's cultural diplomacy. In the decades following World War II, Japan approached cultural diplomacy with caution, driven by lingering sensitivities to its imperialist past and the fear that active cultural promotion could be misinterpreted as a form of neo-imperialism. This cultural avoidance meant that, for a time, Japan hesitated to aggressively promote its national identity or pop culture abroad, opting instead to maintain a subdued presence. However, as Japan's post-war pacifist identity took hold and its global image began to shift, Japan grew confident in the use of its soft power. Recognizing the growing global appeal of its culture, especially among the youth, Japan began actively promoting its pop culture through initiatives such as Cool Japan, alongside increasing people-to-people exchanges. This marked a new chapter in Japan's diplomacy, one where cultural connection became a cornerstone of international engagement rather than a risk. As Singapore's Lam Peng Er notes, "*Time does not naturally heal, but common interests, patience, goodwill, and political wisdom on both sides helped to eventually overcome this problem of the heart.*"⁶²

In Southeast Asia, Japan's cultural presence today is undeniable. In surveys, Southeast Asians cite anime, games, food, and architecture as their top cultural interests from Japan, with 63% saying they admire Japan's "*lifestyle and way of thinking.*"⁶³ From a Muji store in a Singaporean mall, to a bowl of ramen on a Bangkok street, or a trending anime series on Netflix, Japanese influence has become part of the region's cultural fabric. Furthermore, the integration of culture feels organic. ASEAN youth are not just consuming Japanese culture, but they also take part as co-creators, through localized activities like hijab cosplay in Malaysia and Duterte-themed anime in the Philippines.⁶⁴ This demonstrates that Japan's cultural products are inherently open-ended, not designed to impose values, but to invite local adaptation, allowing Southeast Asian

⁶² Lam, Peng Er. "Japan's Postwar Reconciliation with Southeast Asia." *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 3, no. 1 (2015): 43–63. <https://doi.org/10.18588/201505.000035>.

⁶³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Opinion Poll on Japan 2023, 7.

⁶⁴ Hoang, Thi Ha, and Thi Phuong Thao Pham. "Japan and Southeast Asia Set to Co-Create an Interwoven Future." *ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective*, April 3, 2024. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2024_24.pdf

audiences to engage creatively and produce ‘*glocalized*’ content that reflects their own cultural contexts.

Generational change is another factor to the reshaping of Southeast Asian perceptions of Japan. While older generations may still carry feelings of suspicion towards the Japanese, younger Southeast Asians, who grew up with Crayon Shinchan, Naruto, and Sailor Moon, see Japan through a completely different lens. This appeal is not merely passive consumption; in Thailand, 71.2% of university students studying Japanese cite manga and anime as their gateway to learning the language.⁶⁵ For them, Japan is not only a source of admiration, but also trust: trust that the culture is safe, engaging, and worth investing in.

Japan's cultural outreach is supported by a vast network of state and semi-state actors. The Japan Foundation (which has implemented over 2,500 projects in ASEAN) is responsible for bringing cultural diplomacy to the masses through calligraphy exhibitions, traditional music performances, Japanese literature translations, and film festivals.⁶⁶ Its efforts are complemented by initiatives like JENESYS (which has hosted over 39,000 youth exchanges)⁶⁷, the Nihongo Partners program (with nearly 3,000 language teachers dispatched across the region)⁶⁸, and the Japan-ASEAN Jita-Kyoei program (which sends young Japanese judo coaches to Southeast Asia,⁶⁹ prioritizing people-to-people exchanges and highlighting a need for shared experiences. These efforts reflect less a grand strategic design, and more a flexible, human-centered diplomacy that values authenticity and mutual growth.

One widely admired example is former Japanese Ambassador to Indonesia Masafumi Ishii, who won over Indonesians not through official speeches or press releases – but through warm, light-hearted Instagram videos of himself trying local foods, speaking casually in Bahasa Indonesia,

⁶⁵ Tajima, Kazuyoshi. “Motivational Factors of Manga and Anime for Thai Learners of Japanese in Thailand.” *Veridian E-Journal Silpakorn University: International* 11, no. 5 (July-December 2018): 231-247. <https://he02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/Veridian-E-Journal/article/view/157410>

⁶⁶ Hayashi, Yoshimasa. “ASEAN and Japan: Golden Friendship, Golden Opportunities.” *The Jakarta Post*, July 13, 2023. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2023/07/12/asean-and-japan-golden-friendship-golden-opportunities.html>

⁶⁷ Government of Japan. “Southeast Asia and Japan: Linked by Ties of Cultural Exchange.” November 24, 2023. https://www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/2023/11/ties_of_cultural_exchange.html

⁶⁸ Hayashi, ASEAN and Japan.

⁶⁹ The Japan Foundation. “Judo Exchange Program Japan-ASEAN Jita-Kyoei Project.” January 9, 2025. <https://asiawa.jpf.go.jp/en/culture/projects/jita-kyoei/>

and celebrating local traditions.⁷⁰ His posts did not come off as staged diplomacy, they felt genuine. According to Ambassador Ishii, these videos became an entry point for many Indonesians who felt that Japan had become more accessible and relatable.⁷¹

Beyond individual gestures, events like Japan Expo Thailand and Anime Festival Asia in Indonesia and Singapore regularly attract tens of thousands of attendees. These large-scale cultural festivals not only showcase Japan's creative industries but also facilitate grassroots interactions: locals meet Japanese guests, attend language classes, try Japanese food and experience cultural activities, which humanizes Japan beyond its political and economic image.

Southeast Asia also now hosts booming Japanese stores like Uniqlo, Don Quijote, and Muji, which are spread across thousands of Southeast Asian shopping centers. The rapid expansion of these brands reflects not only consumer enthusiasm, but also a high degree of trust in Japanese quality and business ethics. For instance, Uniqlo collaborated with UNHCR Indonesia to donate 2,400 clothing items to over 1,500 refugees across the country.⁷² This initiative provided essential support to displaced communities, and reinforced Japan's image as a socially responsible and community-oriented partner.

Tourism is usually deemed as a soft metric, but in the case of Southeast Asia-Japan relations, it is an extremely insightful one. For multiple years, according to the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Japan has been chosen by Southeast Asians as the most popular travel destination, ahead of other countries such as the U.S., China, the UK, South Korea, the EU, and others.⁷³ The appeal goes farther than tourism. Japan is also cited as the top country which ASEAN nationals most prefer to live and work in – a testament to the feeling of safety, lifestyle and everyday familiarity that it has cultivated in Southeast Asia.

One important factor contributing to this perception is Japan's progressive easing of visa requirements. In 2015, Japan waived short-term visa requirements for Indonesian citizens holding e-passports, a policy that not only facilitated travel but also symbolized a deeper level of trust. In fact, Japan remains the only G20 country to grant this visa-free entry for Indonesians. Such visa

⁷⁰ The Jakarta Post. "Sayonara, Ambassador Ishii! [Video]." December 19, 2020. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOHlUHLTeRk>

⁷¹ Ishii, Masafumi. Interview by Cindy A.F. Mandagi, October 18, 2024.

⁷² S, Katherine. "A Partnership for Hope: UNIQLO and UNHCR Joined Hands to Bring Comfort to Refugees across Indonesia." UNHCR Indonesia, April 16, 2025. <https://www.unhcr.org/id/en/stories/a-partnership-of-hope-UNHCR-and-UNIQLO>.

⁷³ Seah, The State of Southeast Asia 2025, 73.

exemptions are rarely granted without careful consideration; in this case, they reflected Japan's confidence in Indonesian governance and its institutions' ability to issue secure documentation. Beyond the government, Japan also demonstrates trust in Indonesian society, deeming them as having low risk of overstays or violations. One Indonesian respondent, who had spent eight years living in Japan, expressed strong support for the policy, noting that it would be highly beneficial for deepening cultural understanding.

The cumulative effect of all these efforts are profound. Today, Southeast Asians no longer view Japan through the lens of wartime trauma, but through the warmth of people-to-people connections. This shift aligns with Joseph Nye's soft power theory: the ability to influence through culture and values rather than force. From anime and fashion to cuisine, Japan's cultural presence has become deeply integrated into the everyday lives of Southeast Asians, fostering a sense of familiarity that eases geopolitical anxieties. This cultural closeness reinforces Japan's image as a peaceful and approachable partner and helps strengthen public trust in Japan's actions and intentions on the global stage. In this way, Japan fulfills the final trust criteria: cultural understanding.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Japan's reputation as Southeast Asia's most trusted partner was not an overnight occurrence, it was earned carefully, over decades of quiet diplomacy, ethical economic engagement, and cultural closeness. In a region wary of big powers and allergic to hegemony, Japan has succeeded by aligning itself with ASEAN values and aspirations. It has fulfilled all three of Southeast Asia's prerequisites for trust: political reliability, fair and transparent economic practices, and cultural understanding. All in all, Japan has embodied Prime Minister Fukuda's vision for Southeast Asian-Japan relations, through rejecting the role of a military power, fostering "*heart-to-heart understanding*" and treating ASEAN as an equal partner.

In the political-security field, Japan has proven to be politically reliable over the decades. Its behind-the-scenes, practical leadership together with its principled commitment to ASEAN centrality, have provided reassurance for Southeast Asia that Japan is here not to dictate, but to

⁷⁴ Priyambodo, RH "Indonesians Back Japan's Free Visa Policy" *Antara News*, September 16, 2014. <https://en.antaranews.com/news/95686/indonesians-back-japans-free-visa-policy>

collaborate. Furthermore, its participation in joint military exercises, funding of OSA programs, and principled stance on global issues have all contributed to a perception of Japan as a calm, soft-spoken, and predictable presence in an increasingly volatile region.

Economically, Japan's credibility is hard-earned and well maintained. Unlike other powers who are known to be more transactional in its economic engagements, Japan's practices are long-term, transparent, and integrated with ASEAN's growth. From decades of ODA and quality infrastructure to leadership in regional frameworks like the CPTPP and RCEP, Japan shows up when it matters. Its infrastructure projects prioritize local hiring, its investments give mutual benefit, and its consistency across political transitions demonstrate a rare dependability that is strongly valued in Southeast Asia. As ASEAN economies mature, Japan's willingness to treat them as equals cements its status as the *"go-to partner"*.

Culturally, Japan has mastered the art of influencing through soft power, turning historical suspicion into admiration and everyday connection. From anime to youth exchange, Japan's cultural diplomacy feels organic and human, not strategically staged. Initiatives like JENESYS and organizations like The Japan Foundation have made Japan relatable, while the growing interconnectedness of people-to-people exchange have made it personal. Through the above, Japan has transformed cultural familiarity into lasting trust, placing itself in the hearts and routines of Southeast Asians.

While much of international relations discourse focuses on power, whether hard or soft, Japan's experience in Southeast Asia suggests that trust operates on a different register. Trust is not just about strength or attraction, but about restraint, reliability, and respect. Japan's ability to be seen as a consistent, understanding partner offers a model of influence beyond traditional power structures.

Yet, in the current Asian Century, Japan must not only be the trusted friend, but it must also grow into a deeply engaged one.

Even the most trusted partner can lose its footing if it mimics the missteps of others. China's trust deficit in Southeast Asia is a cautionary tale: one where Southeast Asians worry of its growing economic dominance and political influence, strong-arm tactics in contested territories, and interference in domestic affairs. The wrong move in any of these areas could potentially unravel years of trust-building. Japan must continue to be a partner that adds harmony, not noise; that strengthens ASEAN's voice without speaking over it.

Looking ahead, Japan should double down on what makes it trusted, instead of what makes it powerful. While China may be the “*most relevant*” power in the region, Japan remains the “*most trusted*,” a distinction that will matter more in the long run. But trust, while stable, is not permanent. It must be actively sustained. Japan must remain present and principled, but also agile in a fast-changing region. This includes filling in the gaps left by a retreating U.S., whether through diplomatic negotiations, economic leadership, or security cooperation, while avoiding entanglement in the current U.S.-China rivalry. Japan must remember that its strength lies in offering a third option, a power that works with the region, not above it.

Equally important is what happens at home. If Japan wants to lead in the region, it must also learn from and connect with it. Curiosity must flow both ways. While millions of Southeast Asians study, work, and travel in Japan, far fewer Japanese people are engaging with the region in return. In the spirit of co-creation, Japan should deepen its commitment to two-way engagement that cultivates not just mutual understanding, but an awareness of the vibrant, growing region next door.

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