

# A Study on Japan's Soft Power Policy in Northeast Asia from 2012 to 2020

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## Abstract

This paper analyses Japan's soft power policy in Northeast Asia during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's second administration (2012–2020), within the theoretical framework of soft and smart power. Constrained by its pacifist constitution, Japan has historically favoured non-military diplomacy. Under Abe, this tradition evolved through strategic initiatives such as the “Abe Doctrine,” the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, and leadership in regional economic frameworks like TPP-11 and RCEP.

The study highlights Japan's use of cultural diplomacy, Official Development Assistance (ODA), and alliance-building—particularly with the U.S. and South Korea—to address regional security challenges. Institutional reforms, including the establishment of a National Security Council, marked a shift toward a more coordinated and strategic foreign policy.

Japan's soft power, reinforced by its economic cooperation, especially with countries like Mongolia, demonstrates a broader move toward smart power. The paper offers insights into Japan's evolving diplomatic posture in a complex regional landscape.

**Keywords:** Japan's Soft Power, Smart Power Diplomacy, Shinzo Abe Administration, Northeast Asia, Foreign Policy Strategy, Regional Security

**JEL Classification Codes:** F50, F59, O53, Z18

## I. Introduction

Today, nations reinforce their positions, protect their interests, and expand their spheres of influence by combining tangible factors such as geography, population, military, politics, economy, and culture. This collective capacity is defined as “power.” Until recently, international relations largely focused on “hard power”—military strength and economic coercion. However, in the era of globalization, relying solely on military force or economic pressure is increasingly criticized and financially burdensome. Thus, more countries are embracing the significance of soft power, which relies on attraction and persuasion. Soft power achieves foreign policy goals through admiration of a country's economic development, scientific and technological innovation, lifestyle, cultural heritage, arts, and national values.

Japan's constitution renounces the use of force in international relations. As a result, Japan has pursued foreign policy through non-military means, particularly economic cooperation and diplomatic engagement. By leveraging soft power, Japan has achieved remarkable success in its regional relationships. It is valuable for Mongolia to study the foreign policy of Japan—a major player in international relations and the first among its

“third neighbours” to become a “special strategic partner”—to apply the insights gained to future actions and ensure the continuity of bilateral relations. Therefore, it is highly significant to study Japan's foreign policy—particularly its soft power diplomacy in Northeast Asia during the years of the administration led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who served the longest term as Japan's head of government.

## II. Soft Power in Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Hard power refers to the use of coercive means such as military force, economic sanctions, trade tariffs, and diplomatic pressure to achieve political objectives and influence outcomes. While it can be effective in stopping aggression, enforcing compliance, or achieving short-term goals through direct or indirect pressure, excessive or mismanaged use of hard power may lead to resistance, backlash, or unintended consequences.

Soft power, on the other hand, is the ability to influence and attract others through non-coercive means such as persuasion, diplomacy, cultural appeal, and the promotion of values and norms.

Table 1. Hard and Soft Power

Hard power:	Soft power :
Military	Culture(N)/ Culture(McClory)
Resources	Political values(N)/ Government(McClory)
Population	Foreign policies(N)/ Diplomacy(McClory)
Geography/ territory	Education(McClory)
Economic strength	Business/ Innovation(McClory)

Notes: 1. N - Nye, Joseph S.- a political scientist and scholar; 2. McClory - Jonathan McClory- a specialist in soft power;

Source: <https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/content/pdf/participant-papers/>

However, the term “soft” should not be understood as the direct opposite of “hard,” as the two are interrelated. Soft power is not aimed at countering hard power; rather, it can enhance the effectiveness of hard power on the international stage. Conversely, hard power can also serve as a source of soft power. Depending on how economic power is used, it can function as either hard or soft power. In other words, economic cooperation can be employed to attract others (soft power) or to exert pressure (hard power). In some cases, it can be difficult to distinguish which aspects of economic relations constitute hard power and which represent soft power.

Joseph S. Nye, a U.S. geopolitical expert and the originator of the concept of “soft power,” brought together the ideas of soft and hard power, stating that the most effective foreign policy strategy today requires a combination of both. In other words, he emphasized the concept of *smart power*—the ability to successfully use both hard and soft power to achieve foreign policy goals. Smart power represents the most cost-effective strategy for attaining political and social objectives by integrating the strengths of both approaches.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, American scholar Joseph S. Nye introduced the concept of soft power into modern political science, particularly into the theory of international relations. He defined soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment.” Nye elaborated on this idea in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (Nye, 1990a, Ch.2). Later, in his influential 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, he not only deepened the theoretical foundations of soft power but also provided practical guidance on how to effectively apply it in foreign policy, making it a highly significant work (Nye, 2004).

In his scholarly article on *Soft Power*, Joseph S. Nye raised the question of whether Japan could become the main rival of the United States if economic capability were considered the principal measure of national power. He concluded that Japan lacked the capacity to surpass the U.S. in terms of military strength and global ideological leadership. Nye argued that a return to a multipolar international system could become possible

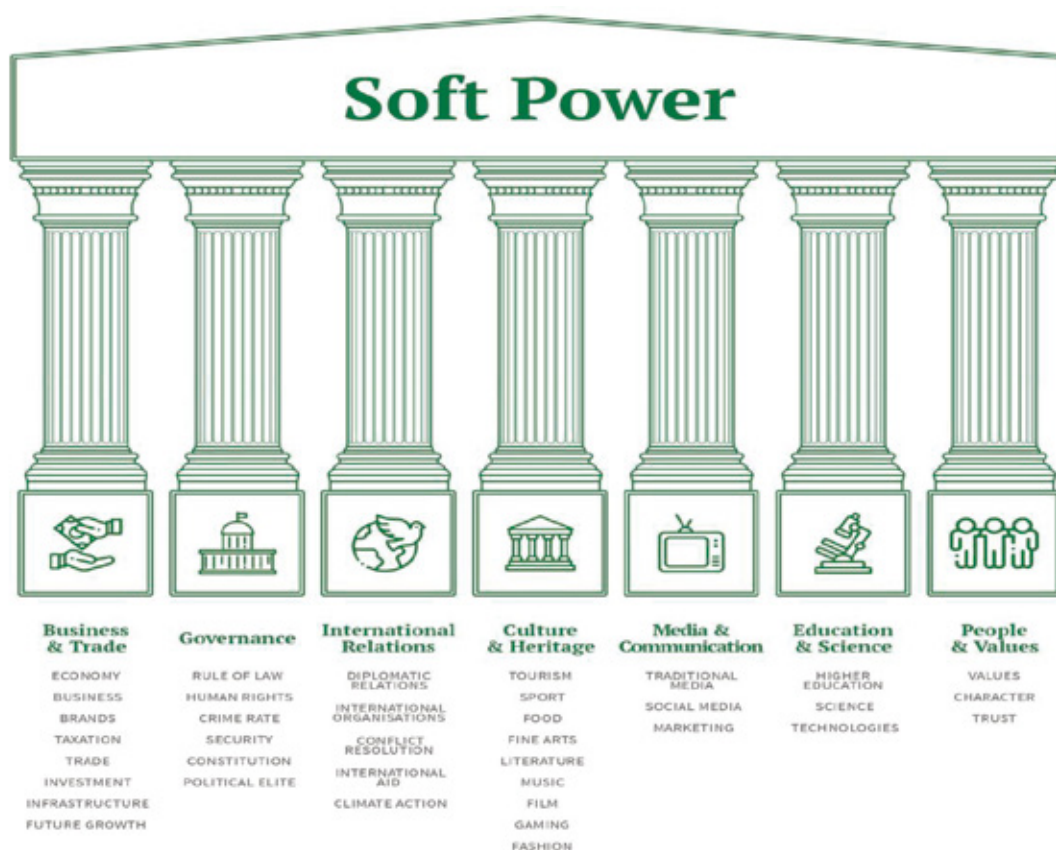
only if the Soviet Union improved its economic performance, Japan enhanced its nuclear and military capabilities, and European integration became a concrete reality. However, in the absence of such developments, he asserted that the United States would remain the only superpower that meets all the criteria of power. (Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 1990b, p.55).

This research article by Joseph S. Nye gained significant importance by highlighting what countries must focus on to become influential powers in 21st-century global politics. In his concluding remarks, Nye emphasized that the concept of “power” has evolved considerably from its traditional understanding. In the age of interdependence, he argued, key indicators of power will no longer be limited to military strategy, raw materials, mineral resources, or financial capacity. Instead, factors such as *knowledge and education, information technology, forms of governance and models of economic development, urbanization and modernization processes, and culture and the arts* will become the primary determinants of national power Joseph. This reinforced the conclusion made by U.S. geopolitical strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski (S. Nye, Jr., 1990c).

In his work *The Grand Chessboard*, political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski provides a detailed discussion of the United States’ compelling cultural appeal. According to Brzezinski, the U.S. possesses an extraordinary ability to attract others in four key domains: first, military power; second, economic strength; third, scientific advancement; and fourth, cultural influence. He argued that no other country currently rivals the United States in all these areas, and that the combination of these four factors is what truly makes America the world’s only global superpower. In this work, Brzezinski introduced a novel perspective by explaining—using the example of Japan—that the traditional understanding of power is changing. He highlighted that rapid economic development and technological advancement have become the new fundamental criteria of national power, replacing older measures rooted primarily in military strength (Brzezinski, Zbigniew K., 1997).

The research organization *Brand Finance* evaluates countries’ soft power capabilities and indexes based on seven dimensions.

Figure 1 Seven Dimensions of Soft Power



Source: <https://brandfinance.com/insights/soft-power-why-it-matters>

These include: foreign policy, governance, culture, education and scientific resources, media reach and influence, and business friendliness. Scholars have noted that among these dimensions, economic tools play a particularly important role as a key criterion of soft power.

### III. Japan's Tradition of Soft Power Policy

Japan, on the one hand, is the world's fourth-largest economy and a member of the G7; on the other hand, it is a major donor of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to poor and developing countries. As a key sponsor of international financial institutions and the United Nations, Japan has significantly enhanced its reputation and prestige on the global stage.

After its defeat in World War II, Japan renounced the use of military force and proclaimed a policy of peace to the world, as enshrined in Article 9 of its Constitution, which came into effect on May 3, 1947. This article declares Japan's permanent renunciation of war, forming the foundation of the country's postwar foreign policy.

With U.S. support, Japan embarked on a new path of development in the postwar years. Under the so-called *Yoshida Doctrine*, Japan prioritized becoming an economic power and began actively engaging in economic diplomacy. By placing

its national security and defence under the U.S. nuclear umbrella through a bilateral security alliance with the United States, Japan was able to focus its full national capacity on postwar reconstruction and economic revitalization. As a result, beginning in the 1960s, Japan entered a period of rapid economic growth and, within less than three decades, rose to become the world's second-largest economy.

Japan's rapid economic growth transformed it into one of the leading economies of the world and a major shareholder in international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank. This economic success established Japan as a key influential power in Asia. As one of the world's top economies, Japan's economic strength became the foundation for the implementation of its soft power strategy.

Although Japan's economy later entered a period of stagnation and its status as an economic superpower was somewhat shaken, Joseph S. Nye noted that this did not diminish Japan's soft power, which is rooted in its cultural values and appeal (Nye, 2004, p.86).

The *Fukuda Doctrine*, announced in 1977, is widely regarded as a foundational basis for Japan's soft power policy (JIIA, 2007). Today, Japan's traditional arts, culture, sports, design, technology, and culinary traditions are admired and respected around the

world. On this point, Joseph S. Nye emphasized that “Japan has a significant advantage in attracting others through the spiritual depth of its traditional wisdom” (Nye, 2004, p.85-86).

Japan’s soft power policy can be broadly categorized into four interrelated dimensions: cultural, political, economic, and strategic. These components are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

Harvard University professor Joseph S. Nye noted that Japan’s soft power includes elements such as its high-quality official development assistance (ODA), the highest average life expectancy in the world, the second-largest GDP globally, the largest number of patents and intellectual property rights, and one of the safest public environments among all nations. He also pointed out that Japanese anime, watched by children in every corner of the world, is a prominent example of Japan’s cultural soft power (Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 2004, p.85).

In the realm of political soft power, Japan upholds the democratic values of human rights, freedom, and a market-based economy, striving to promote, strengthen, and disseminate these principles globally. Japan also prioritizes peace and aims to deepen its diplomatic ties with partner countries. Within this framework, Japan focuses its efforts on three key areas: human security, ODA, and international peace and security.

Japan’s economic development and high standard of living serve as key sources of its soft power, attracting admiration and emulation from other countries. Its ODA, aimed at improving the economic and social infrastructure of developing nations, represents a core component of Japan’s soft power diplomacy. Japan currently ranks as the fourth-largest provider of ODA in the world. Between 1954 and 2019, Japan provided a total of USD 550 billion in ODA to 190 countries worldwide (MOFA, 2020, 2022).

Following World War II, Japan became a country that implemented *soft power* in its foreign relations in a quintessential manner. Initially, Japan’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) began as war reparations to countries in East Asia. However, over time, this assistance evolved to focus on sharing Japan’s technological expertise and development know-how with developing nations. Although some scholars have criticized the underlying motives of ODA, the aid has played a significant role in strengthening human resource capacities and supporting the establishment of legal and institutional systems in recipient countries.

According to the 2021 Soft Power Index study conducted by *Brand Finance*, which assessed the soft power and global reputation of 105 countries, Japan ranked second in the world. Despite facing economic stagnation and demographic challenges, Japan was recognized for maintaining a stable and sound economy—an important foundation for its strong soft power. The report also highlighted Japan’s effective governance as a key advantage, noting that this strength provides the country with a significant opportunity to sustain and further solidify its global soft power position compared to other nations (Brand Finance, 2021). Multiple international surveys consistently place Japan among the top ten soft power nations.

Harvard University professor Joseph S. Nye stated that “Japan’s strong international reputation, its influential leadership in technology and business, unique culture, and good governance make it a high-ranking country in terms of soft power” (Nye, 1990a, p.18).

Figure 2 Global Soft Power Index Top 10



Source: Brand Finance (2021).

Table 2. Soft Power Index (Indicators from three international research institutions)

Rank	ISSF's World Soft Power Index 2023	Rank	Monocle's Soft Power Survey 2022	Rank	Portland's The Soft Power 30 Report 2019
1	 United States		 United States		 France
2	 France		 Denmark		 United Kingdom
3	 United Kingdom		 France		 Germany
4	 Japan		 South Korea		 Sweden
5	 Germany		 Switzerland		 United States
6	 Switzerland		 Japan		 Switzerland
7	 South Korea		 Germany		 Canada
8	 Spain		 United Kingdom		 Japan
9	 Canada		 Italy		 Australia
10	 China		 Ukraine		 Netherlands

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft\\_power](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_power)

#### IV. Japan's Soft Power Policy in Northeast Asia (2012–2021)

Among Japan's prime ministers, Shinzo Abe made the highest number of official overseas visits during his time in office—an indication of the great importance he placed on soft power diplomacy. Shortly after being re-elected as Prime Minister, Abe delivered a speech in Jakarta, Indonesia, which came to be known as the “Abe Doctrine”, marking the formal launch of his administration's foreign policy strategy. This doctrine outlined five core principles that became the foundation of Japan's foreign policy under his leadership:

- Upholding universal values, especially the right to freely express one's beliefs;
- Resolving maritime disputes not through force, but in accordance with international law and legal norms;
- Promoting a free, open, and interdependent economy;
- Advancing cultural exchange; and
- Fostering ties among future generations who will shape the world ahead.

These five core principles have become guiding pillars of Japan's foreign policy.

Shinzo Abe's administration came to power during a period in Japanese history when the country had no choice but to focus on national security decision-making. As a result, it became necessary to realign Japan's security policy with its national interests. At that time, two serious and direct threats to Japan's national security had emerged: China's increasingly assertive military activities in the seas and coastal areas, and North Korea's nuclear and missile tests.

In response, Prime Minister Abe not only increased the

defence budget but also refined Japan's defence policy. This led to the development of new air defence tactics and advanced weaponry and marked a significant shift in Japan's foreign and maritime security posture. His government also adopted a National Security Strategy, establishing a clear and long-term vision for Japan's security policy—something unprecedented in the country's postwar history.

The law initiated by Shinzo Abe and passed by the Japanese Parliament, which allows Japan's Self-defence Forces to engage in overseas military operations, marked the first major legal reform in this area since World War II. This legislation represented a historic shift in Japan's postwar security framework.

Japan is surrounded by nuclear-armed states—Russia, North Korea, and China—and in recent years, China has been rapidly expanding its military capabilities. In response, both Japan and the United States have recognized the need to counterbalance China's growing military power. Accordingly, the Abe administration emphasized the importance of close Japan–U.S. cooperation to enable timely and coordinated responses to evolving regional security threats.

The establishment of the National Security Council brought a significant transformation to Japan's foreign policy decision-making process. This body was tasked with formulating medium- and long-term strategies on foreign affairs and national security, and with providing policy guidance to the Prime Minister. As a result, it introduced a more centralized and strategic framework for shaping Japan's external policy direction.

The Abe administration redefined the principles and priorities of Japan's foreign policy, which played a critical role in safeguarding and advancing the nation's strategic interests. One



of its key achievements was the further strengthening of Japan's alliance with the United States—a country with enormous geopolitical influence in Northeast Asia. At the same time, Japan pursued a pragmatic and strategically balanced foreign policy by using this alliance to help manage complex diplomatic issues with China and South Korea.

As a result of the Abe administration's diplomatic efforts, the trilateral alliance among Japan, the United States, and South Korea became stronger and more cohesive than ever before. This approach not only enhanced Japan's international standing but also reinforced its role in shaping the regional security architecture.

By realistically assessing the situation, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe shifted away from the previous approach of leaving all military matters solely to the United States. He declared that Japan must take greater responsibility for peace and stability and emphasized the need for close cooperation with the U.S. to achieve this goal. His administration pursued policies aligned with this vision.

One aspect of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's foreign policy legacy was his establishment of a personal and friendly relationship with President Vladimir Putin, through which he sought to advance economic cooperation and ultimately regain two—or possibly all four—of the Northern Territories that Japan lost to Russia. Beyond Japan's traditional use of soft power, Abe actively pursued an *economy-centered soft power strategy* to deepen engagement with Russia. This approach significantly revitalized bilateral relations and proved to be notably effective. The two countries agreed to move forward on signing a peace treaty and implementing an eight-point economic cooperation plan, while also holding discussions on security, regional stability, and international issues. As a result, bilateral dialogue deepened, joint efforts progressed in several areas, and tangible outcomes began to emerge.

Since 2012, the Abe administration's foreign policy toward China took on a more pragmatic character. Prime Minister Abe made official visits to all ASEAN member states and strategically used platforms such as the 2014 Shangri-La Dialogue to advocate for the establishment of a new maritime order. He also sought to influence regional dynamics—particularly in response to China—by revitalizing and promoting the *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)* among India, Japan, the United States, and Australia. Through these efforts, Japan aimed to strengthen regional cooperation and balance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe enriched Japan's foreign policy toward South Korea by incorporating elements of cultural and sports-related soft power. As a gesture of goodwill, he attended the opening ceremony of the PyeongChang Winter Olympics as

the head of the Japanese government.

During his visit to South Korea, he also held a trilateral meeting with U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and South Korean President Moon Jae-in. This move highlighted a key feature of Abe's foreign policy: the strategic use of the U.S. factor in managing Japan's relations with South Korea. By integrating both soft power diplomacy and geopolitical calculation, Abe pursued a multifaceted and pragmatic approach to bilateral engagement.

During Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's tenure, several historic steps were taken in Japan's foreign policy toward Northeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. These can be summarized as follows:

1. Proclaimed the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) philosophy, a vision for establishing a new global order based on openness, rule of law, and regional connectivity.
2. Initiated the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) involving Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, enhancing strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.
3. Played a leading role in launching the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP-11) after the U.S. withdrawal, reinforcing Japan's commitment to multilateral trade.
4. Joined the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), strengthening Japan's economic ties with East and Southeast Asia and contributing to regional economic integration.

Japan continues to face unresolved territorial disputes and historical tensions with several countries in Northeast Asia. However, its consistent use of traditional soft power—particularly through economic cooperation carefully integrated into its foreign policy—has played a significant role in easing these tensions and managing sensitive issues. By leveraging economic engagement as a diplomatic tool, Japan has contributed to mitigating conflict and promoting stability in the region.

In summary, during Shinzo Abe's second term as Prime Minister, Japan's foreign policy in Northeast Asia was characterized by a clear emphasis on soft power. However, given the evolving dynamics of international politics—particularly China's growing military and economic power, its assertive policies in Taiwan and the East China Sea, North Korea's ongoing development of nuclear and missile capabilities, and Russia's increasing military ambitions—it is of considerable interest to examine how Japan's power strategy may shift going forward. Understanding these potential changes will be key to assessing Japan's future role in regional and global security.

While it is clear that Japan's globally proclaimed commitment to a peaceful foreign policy remains unchanged, the policy and legal reforms implemented during Shinzo Abe's

administration suggest a shift toward a more strategic or “smart power” approach. These developments indicate that Japan is increasingly combining soft and hard power in a more calculated and balanced manner to protect its national interests and respond effectively to the changing regional and global security landscape.

It is highly compelling to study former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe—not only as the head of a government that actively employed soft power in its foreign policy, but also as an individual political figure—through the lens of how his personal background and leadership style influenced Japan’s soft power diplomacy. Abe’s upbringing, his political journey to the premiership, and his dynamic leadership reflect a unique blend of traditional conservatism and policy innovation. This positions him as a key architect and influential actor in the advancement of Japan’s soft power.

In short, Abe’s administration and his foreign policy approach represented a multidimensional diplomacy that effectively utilized elements of soft power—particularly in science, technology, culture, and the arts—alongside strategic policymaking.

## V.Conclusion

Alongside the use of hard power—which includes military force and economic sanctions—countries around the world are increasingly turning to soft power to enhance their international reputation and attract future partners. This soft power includes

cultural exports such as the arts, sports, traditional cuisine, and national branding.

Japan stands out as a quintessential example of a nation that has implemented soft power diplomacy in a consistent and sophisticated manner since World War II. Not only does Japan possess a rich and long-standing tradition of soft power resources, but it has also distinguished itself by integrating economic cooperation into its soft power strategy, making its approach both culturally grounded and economically influential.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was a key player in Japan’s soft power strategy. His administration pursued a multifaceted foreign and diplomatic policy that effectively leveraged the country’s strengths in economy, science, technology, culture, and the arts.

The foreign (as well domestic) policies pursued by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s administration consistently upheld Japan’s pacifist foreign policy as enshrined in its Constitution. At the same time, his government introduced numerous initiatives aimed at promoting global peace and unity, while strategically steering the country’s long-term policy direction toward the concept of ‘smart power’. This shift is most clearly reflected in the overall direction and strategic character of his foreign policy initiatives in Northeast Asia.

One important aspect of Japan’s soft power policy—economic cooperation—has had a positive impact on Mongolia’s development and progress. This form of cooperation aligns well with Mongolia’s national interests and supports its long-term goals.

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