

National power and cultural influence in Japan's foreign policy

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Abstract

This paper addresses Japan's emergence as a cultural superpower and its public and cultural diplomacy initiatives in the last two and a half decades from an international relations (IR) perspective. Methodology consists of analyzing a selection of publicized issues in Japan's current policy strategies and considering ways in which its nation branding and diplomatic efforts could be improved amid the geopolitical climate and current security dilemmas of the Indo-Pacific region. Analysis is supported by qualitative theories and commentary drawn from peer-reviewed journal papers, scholarly publications, government archives, technical reports, and newspaper articles. Through discussion of the format and objectives of Japan's foreign policies, as well as Japan's soft power statecraft in general, this paper contributes to discourse on Japan's standing in the global state system and world economy.

Keywords: *international relations, diplomacy, foreign policy, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, soft power, statecraft, nation branding*

Section One: Introduction

Over the 100-year span of the 20th century, Japan transitioned from a largely secluded nation to a military power, and then in the postwar period it became an economic power and later a financial superpower, having been the world's second-largest economy behind the United States for 42 years.¹ Although Japan's GDP (gross domestic product) was overtaken by China's in 2011, since the beginning of the new millennium 25 years ago, Japan has been reshaping its image and accumulating the capacity, know-how, and popularity to emerge as a cultural superpower.

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For Japan, the year 2025 marks 29 years since *Pokémon* was released and went on to become the world's highest-grossing media franchise²; 15 years since the inception of its *Cool Japan* nation branding initiative; 10 years since former prime minister, the late Shinzō Abe, amended security legislation leading to what is being dubbed Japan's 'remilitarization'; 4 years since hosting the Covid-postponed Tokyo Olympics; 3 years of unprecedented defense budget increases; and 2 years since the Tokyo Stock Exchange surpassed its own record set prior to the asset price bubble collapse³ of the 1990s. Japan, now the world's fourth-largest economy⁴, has recovered from three decades of recession and sluggish growth, and is reportedly back to "full capacity"⁵.

International news agency Bloomberg points out that Japan is currently excelling in a wide range of sectors including "global diplomacy, financial and corporate vitality, military strategy, pop culture and even sports" (Bloomberg, 2024), while a domestic newspaper editorial praises Japan's soft power as "a global economic force that entertains and informs multiple generations" (Japan Times, 2023). At Tokyo 2020, karate became the second Japanese martial art to be contested as an Olympic sport⁶, following the success of judo which debuted in Tokyo 1964, the first Games to be held in Asia. In 2023, baseball's Shōhei Ōtani became the highest-paid athlete in the world.⁷ In 2024, Hayao Miyazaki's *The Boy and the Heron* and Takashi Yamazaki's *Godzilla Minus One* both took Academy Awards.⁸

From 2023 to 2024 Japan served as non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for its 12th posting, the most for any non-permanent member state.⁹ Australian think tank, the Lowy Institute, calls Japan a "global diplomatic heavyweight", with its 251 posts placing Japan's diplomatic network in 4th spot globally¹⁰, while its passport, with the Emperor's chrysanthemum seal emblazoned on the cover, was the equal most powerful in the world in the *Henley Passport Index*¹¹ for the period 2018 to 2023 and equal second in 2024.

In a significant development on the aerospace front, Japan's prior space exploration accomplishments and its security alliance with the U.S. brought an offer of a joint project that was publicly announced in April 2024. With a 'new space race' already under way between the U.S. and China, and plans announced by China and Russia to create a joint research station on the Moon's surface¹², two Japanese astronauts will join American astronauts in NASA's Artemis program to launch a Moon-orbiting space station, and to land astronauts and a Japanese-built rover on the Moon.¹³ If successful, one of Japan's two astronauts will land on the Moon's surface, becoming the first non-American to do so.

Nevertheless, despite its numerous achievements and having boosted its national image on the global stage, viewpoints regarding Japan's hard power policy shifts over the past 10 years remain divided. Against a backdrop of changes in defense and security legislation¹⁴ made since the reinterpretation of Japan's constitution in 2016, historian and international studies scholar Kenneth B. Pyle notes that, with motions of assertive independence from the United States, Japan "has begun to pull free from the constraints established after World War II", and is "undergoing a sea change in its foreign policy, returning to an activist, independent role in global politics not seen since 1945" (Pyle, 2018). Previously, Japan's armed forces were not constitutionally permitted to directly engage in conflicts outside of Japan, however, as of 2015, a legislation amendment allowing 'collective self-defense' (*shūdan-teki jie-i-ken*)¹⁵ permits Japan to come to the aid of a foreign ally if there is an imminent danger to Japan or the lives of Japanese people. Amid security concerns regarding North Korea, Russia, China, and Taiwan, and heightening tensions in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan has done away with its pacifist stance and has begun developing 'counterstrike capabilities' (*hangeki nōryoku*), which includes the capacity to engage enemy bases and ships with ballistic missile strikes launched from both fixed land installations and naval vessels.¹⁶

Taking these recent developments into consideration, it is abundantly clear that Japan is reasserting itself in the international community across a wide range of fields, while making decisive inroads into strengthening both its hard and soft power. However, as security policy scholar Nobumasa Akiyama (2018) asserts, "Security issues divide [Japanese] public opinion, which is still searching for a national narrative on Japan's role in the international community" (p. 73). References to hard power, soft power, and smart power in this paper are based on theories conceptualized by political scientist Joseph S. Nye and are addressed in detail in Section Two.

The aims of this paper are as follows:

- address Japan's emergence as a cultural superpower, its public and cultural diplomacy initiatives, and its hard and soft power policymaking trends since the turn of the century.
- analyze a selection of publicized issues in Japan's current policy strategies and consider ways in which its diplomatic and nation branding efforts may be improved amid the geopolitical climate and current security dilemmas of the Indo-Pacific region.
- discuss the format and objectives of these policies, as well as Japan's soft power

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statecraft in general, in order to contribute to discourse on Japan's standing in the world economy and global state system.

Section Two: Nye's conceptualizations of national power

Although political scientist Joseph S. Nye¹⁷ did not develop the concept of 'hard power', he is credited for first coining its antithetical term 'soft power' in his 1990 book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (Nye, 2017, p. 2), and he further developed the concept in his 2004 work, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Nye's discourse on soft power also stimulated renewed attention and analysis of hard power concepts in the academic field of IR (international relations).

2.1 Hard power and soft power in foreign policy agenda

Hard power refers to coercive or aggressive tactics in diplomatic relations. Nye explains: "Military power and economic power are both examples of 'hard' command power that can be used to induce others to change their position. Hard power can rest on inducements ('carrots') or threats ('sticks')" (Nye, 2004a, p. 5). By this definition, military power can be an inducement (as in offers of aid or protection) or as a threat (as in intimidation through armed action), and likewise, economic power can be an inducement (as in preferential trade and tariff policies) or a threat (as in trade sanctions, embargos, and asset freezing).

In contrast, soft power refers to co-optive tactics such as persuasion, or "getting others to want the outcomes that you want" (Nye, 2004b).

Soft power is also more than persuasion or the ability to move people by argument. It is the ability to entice and attract. And attraction often leads to acquiescence or imitation. (Nye, 2002, p. 9)... A country may obtain its preferred outcomes in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. (Nye, 2004b)

Soft power stems from "intangible power resources such as an attractive culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority" (Nye, 2004b). Essentially, a country's soft power and diplomatic influence are enhanced when the legitimacy of its policies is apparent to the international community.

Naturally, Nye does not claim that the basic principle or tactic of employing soft power is his brainchild: “Though the concept of soft power is recent, the behavior it denotes is as old as human history” (Nye, 2008).

Another notable difference between coercive hard power and co-optive soft power strategies is that a hard power approach is generally ‘unilateral’ and aims for an immediate and decisive result, whereas a soft power approach may be ‘bilateral’, but the intended results may not necessarily be achievable in the short term. Hence, although soft power approaches are generally critiqued as being preferable to those of hard power, the results of a co-optive soft power strategy run the risk of being inopportune, unfavorable, or indeterminable.

2.2 Smart power as the balanced leveraging of hard and soft power

Although an oversimplification, the interplay of hard and soft power can be likened to the ‘push and pull’ approach in human interactions, with the push of hard power and the pull of soft power reinforcing each other. Nye coined the term ‘smart power’ in 2004 and defined it as “the ability to combine hard and soft power resources into effective strategies”, further noting that his motivation was to “counter the misperception that soft power alone can produce effective foreign policy” (Nye, 2011, pp.22-23). He posits Norway, with its modest population of 5 million (5.5 million as of 2024¹⁸), as an effective wielder of smart power, having acquired a reputation for balancing its hard power military role as a founding member of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) with its soft power humanitarian contributions through foreign aid (Nye, 2011, p. 23).

Crocker et al. (2007) acknowledge the increasing importance of smart power and refer to it as a “new kind of strategic political resource in international relations”. They note that smart power “effectively engages the multiple assets and instruments of official and nonofficial diplomacy *and* military power”.

Smart power involves the strategic use of diplomacy, persuasion, capacity building, and the projection of power and influence in ways that are cost-effective and have political and social legitimacy (p. 13)

International political economy scholar Stuart S. Brown (2013) presents a succinct and tongue-in-cheek overview of the three powers. Hard power is “the use of military weaponry or coercive economic instruments”, while soft power is “reliance on cultural-

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cum-ideological attractiveness and diplomacy”, and the tactful leveraging of “some optimal combination” of both approaches gives us “predictably labeled smart power” (p. 36).

2.3 Global soft power rankings

For the purposes of this paper, the Global Soft Power Index (GSPI) has been chosen to illustrate a typical international soft power ranking. The GSPI is authored by Brand Finance, a brand valuation and strategy consultancy based in the United Kingdom.¹⁹ The *GSPI 2024* ranks all 193 member states of the United Nations, with Japan's soft power ranked 4th in the world, as outlined in the top-10 placings in Table 1. Japan and Germany's 'nation brands' were marginally overtaken by China's, which has grown quickly, rising from 5th to 3rd place.

In the *GSPI 2024*, Japan received the world's highest score for the two metrics 'high ethical standards and low corruption' and 'sustainable cities and transport'.²⁰

TABLE 1 Top-10 placings in Brand Finance's *Global Soft Power Index 2024*

| | | | | |
|---|--|---|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1 = United States Score 78.8 (+4.0) | 2 = United Kingdom Score 71.8 (+4.5) | 3 ▲ China Score 71.2 (+6.2) | 4 = Japan Score 70.6 (+5.4) | 5 ▼ Germany Score 70.6 (+4.0) |
| 6 = France Score 67.3 (+4.9) | 7 = Canada Score 64.4 (+3.7) | 8 = Switzerland Score 62.9 (+4.4) | 9 = Italy Score 62.0 (+5.4) | 10 = United Arab Emirates Score 59.7 (+4.5) |

Source: Press releases - Brand Finance website²¹

As China did in the *GSPI 2024*, Japan also jumped up two spots previously, becoming the top-performing Asian nation and second globally in the *GSPI 2021*, the year in which Germany took first place.²²

Japan continues to reap the rewards of its strong brands, solid consumer spend, and high levels of business investment, again ranking first [globally] in the *Business & Trade* pillar. Additionally, Japan has seen an improvement in its *Education & Science* score, now ranking first [globally] in this metric too. (GSPI, 2021)

The GSPI is based on international surveys of specialists and the public and calculated using the criteria: *Awareness and Familiarity, Overall Influence, Overall Reputation, Business and Trade, Governance, International Relations, Culture and Heritage,*

*Media and Communication, Education and Science, and People and Values.*²³

Table 2 compares Japan’s positions in several international soft power rankings over time:

TABLE 2 Various international soft power rankings for Japan

| | '15 | '16 | '17 | '18 | '19 | '20 | '21 | '22 | '23 | '24 |
|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| <i>Global Soft Power Index</i> Brand Finance - UK | 5 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 4 |
| <i>Soft Power 30</i> Portland PR Ltd. - UK | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 8 | - | - | - | - | - |
| <i>Global Presence Index</i> R.I. Elcano - Spain | 6 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | - | - |
| <i>Soft Power Survey</i> Monocle - UK/Switzerland | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | - | 4 | 6 | - | 4 |
| <i>Nation Brands Index</i> Anholt-Ipsos - France | 6 | 7 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | - |
| <i>World Soft Power Index</i> ISSF - India | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 4 | 4 | - |

Source: compiled by the author from the official website for each index

The *Nation Brands Index 2023*, authored by France-based Anholt-Ipsos, offers glowing appraisal of Japan’s rising global popularity and soft power:

Japan has surpassed Germany and ranks 1st out of 60 nations becoming the first nation from the Asia-Pacific region to top the NBI.... Its reputation remains strongest on the Exports Index, where it now holds 1st place on all three attributes: contributions to science and technology, being a creative place, and product appeal. Japan also finds reputational strength on the People and Tourism Indices, where the nation receives high ranks for employability of its people and vibrancy of its cities. (NBI, 2023)

Japan is recognized as a cultural superpower, as are countries such as the U.S., France, the U.K., Italy, China, and South Korea. In addition, the various indexes outlined in this paper attest to Japan’s soft power influence with consistent top-10 global placings over the last decade. These results justify the designation of Japan as a “soft power superpower” (e.g. Watanabe & McConnell, 2008). Nevertheless, any single study on a

ubiquitous yet nebulous concept like soft power may be subject to methodological or contextual flaws, bias or subjectivity, inconclusiveness, or even corporate or political compromise. Due to its abstract nature, there are no rigorous standards for measuring soft power or its outcomes, thus, any soft power index or ranking requires the caveat that it be utilized only for reference or comparison purposes.

2.4 Nye's three powers as yardstick in analyzing Japan's foreign policy

By the turn of the 21st century, Japan's reputation as a cultural powerhouse had already taken hold, prompting academic and media discourse such as journalist Douglas McGray's famed article, "Japan's Gross National Cool", in the journal *Foreign Policy*, in which he observed the metamorphosis of "Japan, Inc." into "Japan, Chic".²⁴ During the same period, Nye's theories of soft power were gaining both academic and political momentum and, with the advent of the world wide web and social media, methods of traditional and public diplomacy began to transform, with their effects becoming more expeditious and globally visible. Nye proposed that the ability to influence using soft power consists of employing three intangible resources: cultural appeal, sound political and institutional values, and legitimate or moral policies (Nye, 2004b).

Nye's concept of soft power began to feature in Japan's domestic political discourse, perhaps aided by McGray's journal entry, along with the numerous other appraisals of Japan's culture and lifestyle that featured in international media at the time. Policymakers were aware of the growing market for Japan's cultural appeal but, in this trend, they also saw the potential for further improving Japan's national image and widening its diplomatic sphere of influence. Accordingly, as Asian studies scholar Nissim Otmazgin (2018) notes, "As part of the excitement over the diplomatic possibilities brought about by

TABLE 3 Selected hard power strategies in Japan's diplomacy

| | 'carrots' inducements / incentives | 'sticks' threats / penalties |
|----------------|--|--|
| economic power | ▶ financed and built the Jakarta Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), Indonesia's first subway service, operating from 2019 ²⁵ | ▶ banned entry to North Koreans and sanctioned vessels and exports after missiles and nuclear test in 2006 ²⁶ |
| military power | ▶ Air and Maritime Self-Defense Forces provided volcanic eruption and tsunami relief to Tonga in 2022 ²⁷ | ▶ Maritime Self-Defense Forces fights piracy in Somalian waters and the Gulf of Aden, 2009 - present ²⁸ |

Source: compiled by the author based on Nye's hard power discourse

contemporary Japanese culture, the term ‘soft power’ has gained strong ground in Japan” (p. 57).

A selection of potential soft power and diplomatic influence sources of Japan is shown in Table 4. Compiled by the author, this inexhaustive list features efforts from both state and non-state actors, with categories based on Nye’s three soft power determinants of ‘cultural appeal’, ‘political and institutional values’, and ‘foreign policy’:

TABLE 4 Soft power and diplomatic influence sources of Japan

Table 4-a: Cultural appeal (government-led activities and diplomacy initiatives)

Mayor of Tokyo gifts 3000 cherry trees to Washington, D.C. in 1912²⁹
 MEXT Scholarship program for foreign students since 1954³⁰
 Japan-U.S. Cooperation and Security Treaty ongoing since 1960³¹
 Nippon Budōkan Foundation promotes Japan’s *budō* arts worldwide since 1964³²
 Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) worldwide since 1984³³
 Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme since 1987³⁴
 MOFA International Manga Award since 2007³⁵
 Manned space module, Kibō, part of the ISS from 2009³⁶
 World first: robotic spacecraft Hayabusa returned asteroid matter to Earth in 2010³⁷
 Cool Japan Strategy and creative industries promotion by METI since 2010³⁸
 Mt. Fuji inscribed to World Heritage List in 2013³⁹
 Abe Fellowship Program, in memory of Shintarō Abe, since 1991⁴⁰

Table 4-b: Cultural appeal (corporate-led cultural promotion)

Shinkansen: world’s first high-speed railway built in 5 years for Tokyo Olympics 1964⁴¹
 Japanese architects have designed buildings in Paris since the 1980s⁴²
 Multiple whisky World #1s: beating Scotland in global contests since 2003⁴³
 Annual international World Cosplay Summit since 2003⁴⁴
Doraemon becomes international Anime Ambassador in 2008⁴⁵
 Media franchises: *Pokémon* is World #1, and five of top-10 are Japanese in 2023⁴⁶
 Academy Awards: *The Boy and the Heron* and *Godzilla Minus One* in 2024⁴⁷
Super Mario Bros. Movie (2023): 17th highest-grossing film to date as of 2024⁴⁸
 Travel & Tourism Development: ranked World #1 in 2021, and #3 in 2024⁴⁹

Table 4-c: Cultural appeal (public-led culture and social strength)

US-Japan baseball diplomacy: 153-year history since 1872⁵⁰
 Judo first contested as Olympic sport in Tokyo 1964, and karate in Tokyo 2020⁵¹
 First Asian woman in space: Chiaki Mukai in 1994⁵²
 Karate is practiced by 100 million people in 192 countries in 2017⁵³
 “Greatest figure skater ever”: Yuzuru Hanyū in 2018⁵⁴
 First Asian #1: Naomi Ōsaka, ranked #1 in women’s tennis in 2019⁵⁵

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Female life expectancy highest in world, male second in world in 2019⁵⁶
Nobel Prizes: world rank #7, with 29 Japanese-born winners as of 2021⁵⁷
Haruki Murakami's works are translated into 50 languages as of 2022⁵⁸
World's highest-paid athlete: baseball's Shōhei Ōtani in 2023⁵⁹
Lowest obesity in the developed world: 4.5% (U.S. rate is 42%) in 2023⁶⁰
Peacefulness rank #9 of 163 countries in the *Global Peace Index* for 2023⁶¹
Michelin stars: rank #2 after France, but Tokyo's city rank #1 as of June 2024⁶²

Table 4-d: Cultural appeal (general innovation, financial wealth, and influence)

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Australia, India, and the U.S. since 2007⁶³
Member of the Atlantic Council's *D-10 Strategy Forum* since 2014⁶⁴
Member of the U.S. and OECD-led *Blue Dot Network* since 2019⁶⁵
Japan: world's 11th largest population: roughly 125.12 million as of 2022⁶⁶
UN Regular budget contribution: world #3 after the U.S. and China in 2022⁶⁷
Number of patent filings: ranked #3 after China and the U.S. in 2022⁶⁸
192 companies in the *Forbes 'Global 2000'*: world rank #3 for 2023⁶⁹
41 companies in the *Fortune 'Global 500'* for 2023⁷⁰
Fashion's UNIQLO *Fast Retailing*: Asian #1 and global #3 in 2023, aims for #1⁷¹
World's megacities by population: Tokyo #1 (37.1 m) and Osaka #10 (19 m) in 2023⁷²

Table 4-e: Sound domestic political and institutional values

Imperial Family: oldest continuous hereditary dynasty in the world⁷³
Shintō: ancient nature-worship religion with no central god, founder, dogma, or scripture⁷⁴
Seven decades in the United Nations in 2026: joined in 1956⁷⁵
First Olympics in Asia: Tokyo 1964, then Sapporo 1972, Nagano 1998, and Tokyo 2020
First World Expo in Asia: Osaka 1970, then Aichi 2005, Osaka 2025, and 3 special Expos⁷⁶
United Nations University (UNU) based in Tokyo: established in 1972⁷⁷
Japanese nationals in top postings: International Court of Justice, UNESCO etc.⁷⁸
World #3s for Tokyo in economic influence, quality of life, and competitiveness in 2020⁷⁹
Covid-19 success: no domestic lockdowns, enforcements, or vaccine mandates⁸⁰

Table 4-f: Fair, legitimate, and multilateralist foreign policies

Dialogue (now including FTA and EPA) partner of ASEAN since 1977⁸¹
Egypt-Japan University of Science and Technology (E-JUST) since 2009⁸²
Resumption of 'shuttle diplomacy' visits with South Korea in 2023⁸³
G7 Presidency 7 times (including G8): recently Ise-Shima 2016, and Hiroshima 2023⁸⁴
ODA foreign aid provider ranked 3rd globally after the U.S. and Germany in 2023⁸⁵
Global diplomacy rank #4: 251 missions in 156 countries in 2023⁸⁶
Most powerful passport in the world: equal 1st for 194 destinations in 2024⁸⁷
Non-permanent member of U.N. Security Council for 12th posting (2023–2024)⁸⁸

Source: Table 4 (a-f) compiled by the author based on Nye's soft power discourse

International relations scholar Yee-Kuang Heng (2018) points out that the term

'smart power' has not gained significant official usage in political documentation in Japan, but suggests that "smart power can, above all, help establish the legitimacy of foreign policy actions" (p.203). He considers the ongoing friction between China and Japan as a contest for legitimacy between superpowers and proposes that, "Beijing's ultimate aim is to frustrate Tokyo's attempts to enhance its security role in the region by driving a wedge between target ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] states, such as the Philippines or Vietnam, that have appeared receptive to Japanese overtures" (p.203). If Japan leveraged smart power and presented an improved image of itself in Southeast Asia that is impervious to criticism from China, Heng advises that it could better forge "new relationships whereby Japan is seen as an indispensable and trustworthy security partner for ASEAN states, in addition to existing relationships built on trade, aid, economic and financial linkages" (p.204).

Section Three: Analyzing Japan's diplomacy and foreign policy strategies

Recent cultural promotion and nation branding efforts of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) have mainly focused on Japan's pop culture, therefore it is necessary to first consider the concepts of 'public diplomacy' and 'cultural diplomacy' to better visualize the broader framework in which Japan's current foreign policymaking strategies are situated.

3.1 Defining public diplomacy

International relations scholar Nancy Snow (2009) succinctly notes that diplomacy has traditionally encompassed government-to-government relations (G2G), whereas the focus of public diplomacy lies in governments talking to global-publics (G2P), and continues by elucidating how public diplomacy has evolved over time: "More recently, public diplomacy involves the way in which both government *and* private individuals and groups influence directly and indirectly those public attitudes and opinions that bear directly on another government's foreign policy decisions (P2P)" (p.6). In this more contemporary description, public diplomacy, a role that was traditionally performed by politicians, statespersons, ambassadors, consuls, and diplomats, is now also being played by non-state actors (NSA) such as private individuals, entrepreneurs, corporations, and non-governmental organizations.

Scholar of international cultural exchange policies, Tadashi Ogawa (2009), explains

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that 'public diplomacy' is not a common term in Japan, and that its use has generally been restricted to diplomatic circles. He also points out that, in 2004, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) underwent a structural reshuffling in which its Overseas Public Relations (*Kaigai Kōhō-ka*) and Cultural Affairs (*Bunka Kōryū-ka*) sections were moved to the jurisdiction of its Public Diplomacy Department (*Kōhō Bunka Kōryū-bu*) (p. 270).⁸⁹ The major state and non-state entities involved in Japan's postwar public diplomacy were the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Gaimu-shō*), formed in 1869, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (*Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*), founded in 1926, the International Cultural Promotion Society (*Kokusai Bunka Shinkō-kai*), formed in 1934 and later to become the Japan Foundation (*Kokusai Kōryū Kikin*) in 1972, and the Agency for Cultural Affairs (*Bunka-chō*), formed in 1968 under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbu kagaku-shō*) (Ogawa, 2009, p. 271).⁹⁰

Japan's own domestic cultural policies, heritage preservation, and ultimately the significant role it plays in promoting and financially supporting the World Heritage efforts of other countries through UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) have also had a marked influence on its relations with and approaches to cultural diplomacy with those nations.

3.2 Defining cultural diplomacy

Political scientist Milton C. Cummings (1933-2007) defined cultural diplomacy as "the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding". However, he elaborated that even with a 'two-way exchange' of cultures, there exists an inherent risk of descent into a 'one-way street' of language promotion, policy agenda, or a nation 'telling its story', thereby foregoing genuine exchange with the other (Cummings, 2003). One U.S. government advisory committee (ACCD, 2005) went as far as to dub cultural diplomacy the 'linchpin of public diplomacy', and emphatically stated that "cultural diplomacy reveals the soul of a nation" (p.7), because "it is in cultural activities that a nation's idea of itself is best represented" (p. 4).

Notable examples of cultural diplomacy by state actors (SA) include: China's *panda diplomacy*⁹¹ dating back to the Tang Dynasty, and its worldwide *Confucius Institute* schools⁹² teaching Chinese culture and language since 2004 | France's *Fondation Alliance française*⁹³ teaching French internationally and in its colonies around the world since 1883, and its *Institut français*⁹⁴ promoting French culture globally since 1907 | and the United

Kingdom's *British Council*⁹⁵ providing education in the arts, culture, and English language since 1934.

Notable examples of cultural diplomacy by non-state actors (NSA) include: English band *The Beatles* inadvertently sparking a socio-political-cultural revolution and destabilizing communism in the Soviet Union through *music diplomacy*⁹⁶ in the 1960s, and American basketball celebrity Dennis Rodman visiting and striking up a publicized friendship with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un through *sports diplomacy*⁹⁷ in 2013.

Truly international examples of both public and cultural diplomacy efforts led by both SAs and NSAs include: the International Space Station (ISS) operating since 1998, which was constructed and orbits the Earth with ongoing cooperation from the U.S., Russia, Europe, Japan, and Canada | the summer and winter competitions of the modern Olympic Games⁹⁸ since 1896 | and World Expos⁹⁹ (world fairs and exhibitions) under various auspices and titles since 1851.

3.3 Public and cultural diplomacy in Japan's foreign policy

Every year since 1957, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has published and archived its *Diplomatic Bluebook (Gaikō Seisho)*. In recent years, with a seemingly high level of transparency, this document has come to outline Japan's yearly diplomatic outlook, policy objectives, foreign affairs, and lists of enacted diplomatic and humanitarian efforts. The original Japanese version of this publication is available on the MOFA website in April each year, however a full translation into English and summarized translations into French and Spanish are not uploaded until September each year.¹⁰⁰

According to the original Japanese version of *Diplomatic Bluebook 2024*¹⁰¹, the following institutions oversee the general functioning of Japan's public and cultural diplomacy:

- Cabinet Office - *Cool Japan* under the Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters
- Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI)
 - Creative Industries *Cool Japan* Division, and Media and Content Industry Division
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA)
 - The Japan Foundation (JF)
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)
 - Cultural Affairs Agency, and Japan Sports Agency
- Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO)

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- Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO)
- Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO)
- Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)

The following is a summarized list of diplomacy efforts by MOFA as outlined in the *Culture, Sports, and Tourism* section of the *Diplomacy Bluebook 2024* (list categories added by author):

“Language education and study programs”

- Student exchange programs and promotion of the MEXT Scholarship program.
- Support the JF in running the Japanese Language Proficiency Test at home and abroad.
- Support for studying in Japan and events such as speech and essay contests.
- Developing alumni networks for foreign nationals who have studied in Japan.
- Sending language teachers abroad via the JF for individuals who will work in Japan.

“Intellectual and cultural exchange”

- Cooperating with the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme.
- Holding exchange programs for youth and adults from Asia and the U.S.
- Running grassroots programs such as the Japan Outreach Initiative (JOI).
- Conferences, forums, and projects through JF Global Partnerships Programs.
- Supporting the Japan-U.S. Fulbright Program.
- Hosting overseas researchers of Japanese politics, economy, society, and culture.
- Holding two-way exchange programs in fields of arts and culture.
- Commemorating anniversaries of economic and cooperation partnerships abroad.

“International cooperation”

- Assisting with the promotion of culture, sports, and education in developing countries.
- Cooperation with UNESCO to protect global cultural and natural heritage.
- Cooperation with the Tokyo-based United Nations University.

“Sports initiatives”

- Sending sports coaches abroad, sports exchanges, and equipment donations.
- Grassroots projects for sports promotion, including judo, karate, aikido and kendo.

“Traditional culture and pop culture promotion”

- Promotion of the Tokyo International Film Festival.
- Running the Japan International Manga Award.
- Assisting with the World Cosplay Summit.

- ・ Funding cultural exchange conferences: e.g. International Seminar of Budō Culture.
- ・ Supporting the JF in coordinating overseas seminars, workshops, performances, and demonstrations of Japanese lifestyle, culture, fashion, tea ceremony, flower arrangement, *taiko* drumming, architecture, carpentry, origami, handicrafts, film, anime, manga, music, calligraphy, martial arts, and cuisine etc.

3.4 Defining nation branding

Diplomacy and security scholars Pauline Kerr and Geoffery Wiseman (2018) offer a succinct description of nation branding as “an approach that focuses on nation-states and other territorially defined actors in terms of their competition with each other” (p.208). Nation branding is effectively the overlap of corporate public relations and diplomacy by combining commercial marketing strategies and foreign policymaking to strengthen a country’s marketability and economic standing. One common strategy is to promote positive images of a country through association with its successful products and exports, making use of the concept known as the country-of-origin effect (COE). Originally employed in the corporate and financial sectors, this marketing technique is now also being applied to the policy strategies and publicity campaigns of sovereign nations.

The practice of nation branding is not a recent phenomenon and Viktorin et al (2018) highlight its modern re-popularization through the role it played in the *Cool Britannia* boom of the U.K. in the 1990s (p.7). Similarly, France’s Foreign Affairs Ministry is currently renewing France’s nation brand, launching an international communications campaign in 2023 with the slogan, “*Marquez les esprits. Choisir la France*” / “*Make It Iconic. Choose France*”,¹⁰²

The pop culture of South Korea, Japan’s closest neighbor, has recently been enjoying immense global recognition due to K-pop idol groups, K-dramas, and the international acclaim of works such as the film *Parasite* (2019) and the television series *Squid Game* (2021)¹⁰³, all part of the long-running cultural boom commonly known as the “Korean wave”. This K-wave (*Hallyu* in Korean) resonates very strongly in Japan and continues to serve as an effective source of soft power for the Republic of Korea, which, through nation branding, is successfully marketing the Korean language, tourism to Korea, K-cars such as Kia and Hyundai, K-electronics such as Samsung, K-food cuisine and novelty snacks, K-fashion, and K-beauty skincare and cosmetics.

Public administration scholar Kiwon Hong (2014) notes that, despite inherent economic motives, “Korea’s nation branding has very strong cultural aspects to the degree

that it should be seen as an extension of cultural policy” (p. 69). In 2021, Korean boy band BTS addressed the General Assembly of the U.N. at its New York headquarters¹⁰⁴ and, in 2022, the seven-member band paid a visit to President Biden and spoke at the White House about hate crimes targeting Asians¹⁰⁵; proof of Korea's growing cultural influence and an excellent example of both public and cultural diplomacy.

3.5 Japan's nation branding and cultural promotion initiatives

In 2003, a little over a decade after Japan's asset price bubble had burst and its 'financial superpower' status was being called into question, *The Washington Post* exclaimed that Japan was “reinventing itself -- this time as the coolest nation on Earth” (TWP, 2003). This article was one of many international appraisals of Japan's culture at the time, including the aforementioned “Japan's Gross National Cool” by Douglas McGray. Japan's offerings and exports that had to date been praised as cutting-edge, high-tech, trendy, or cute (*kawaii*), came to be branded as “cool” by domestic marketers, businessman, and politicians. Anything in high demand could be “cool”, ranging from traditional culture such as *kimono* textiles, porcelain wares, taiko drumming, or *sake* rice wine, to pop culture such as Akira Kurosawa and *Godzilla* films, Studio Ghibli *anime*, Mario and Luigi, Dragon Ball, or mecha robots, and products such as Hello Kitty merchandise, Tamagotchi toys, Sony Walkmans and PlayStations, or *Pokémon* games.

Asian studies scholar Nissim Otmazgin (2018) observes that “...cultural diplomacy became directed toward economic and diplomatic purposes, designed to produce more export-oriented cultural commodities and present a friendlier image of Japan abroad” (p. 55). ‘Cool’ is a convenient, safe, and flexible label, and if everything from Japan is cool, then by the country-of-origin effect, Japan itself must also be cool. If the international community reaches this consensus, as Japan's nation branding campaign designers hoped, not only will the financial clout of its exports and GDP be enhanced and its inbound tourism bolstered, but a more positive view of Japan can be leveraged by the government as soft power in global politics, easing lingering wartime sentiments and facilitating diplomatic and economic ties in general. This in turn will attract more students, skilled workers, and foreign investors to Japan, and the economies of other nations will be more receptive to proposals from Japanese government institutions and private corporations.

With numerous economic and diplomatic goals in its sights, Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi's administration (2001–2006) launched a series of nation branding projects including the MLIT-led *Visit Japan* campaign from 2003 and the MOFA-supported *Japan*

Brand program from 2004. Later, the *Cool Japan* initiative was established by METI in 2010 just as Naoto Kan's administration (2010–2011) was assuming office.

3.6 The Japanese Government's 'Cool Japan' Strategy

The year 2025 marks 15 years since the institutional beginnings of what is now collectively known as the Cool Japan Strategy (*Kūru Japan Senryaku*). Cool Japan is run by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and the effort was originally instigated by the findings of a pop culture committee for the Overseas Exchange Council¹⁰⁶ in February 2008. In the aftermath of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, while facing increased cultural rivalry from South Korea and China and the rise of social media and mobile devices, Japan moved to harness the potential of globally marketing its pop culture and digital content sectors.

METI established its Cool Japan Office¹⁰⁷ in June 2010, just as Yukio Hatoyama's administration (2009–2010) was stepping down to Prime Minister Naoto Kan (2010–2011). The Cool Japan Office was tasked with promoting popular culture abroad and assisting Japanese firms in gaining a foothold in foreign markets. In 2013, the Cool Japan Fund (*Kūru Japan Kikō*) was established as a governmental and corporate fund to assist in financing firms concerned with the export, import, or overseas provision of “attractive products and services unique to Japanese lifestyle and culture”. Major target sectors are content, food-clothing-housing products, services, advanced technology, leisure, regional products, traditional products, education, and tourism.¹⁰⁸

On first inspection, the entire impetus of Cool Japan appears commercially and financially driven, however the initiative's government beginnings, Ministerial support, extensive personnel network, and considerable budget highlight the diplomatic undertones and agenda at play. Even since its METI inception in 2010, the Cool Japan Strategy has been a 'national policy' under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office (*Naikaku-fu*). Due to the high status and priority that is afforded to the initiative, the Cabinet also integrated Cool Japan into the government's 'intellectual property strategy' policy¹⁰⁹ in 2018.

Cool Japan is now an extensive group of government and corporate entities collaborating within the Cool Japan Public-Private Partnership Platform.¹¹⁰ A minister from the Prime Minister's Cabinet oversees the strategy and is supported by a team of chairpersons, advisors, ambassadors, and producers with connections to a wide range of government bodies and private corporations with various political and financial objectives.

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Projects are often supported by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), national broadcaster NHK, and the Japan National Tourist Organization (JNTO).

The following is a list of government institutions cooperating with the Cool Japan Strategy and broad overviews of the functions they serve as listed in the original Japanese-language version of the Cabinet Office's Cool Japan Strategy website¹¹ (translation by author):

- Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC): supports foreign broadcasting.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA): promotes culture through diplomatic networks.
- Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF): promotes food culture.
- Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI): supports content and media exports.
- MOFA's National Tax Agency (NTA): promotes sales of alcoholic beverages.
- MEXT's Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA): promotes culture and art.
- MLIT's Japan Tourism Agency (JTA): promotes Japan as a destination for travel.

Section Four: Japan's diplomacy problems

As per the various definitions and overviews in Section Three, there is a certain degree of ambiguity and overlap regarding interpretations of traditional diplomacy, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and lobbying or advocacy efforts within Japan's diplomatic framework. This ambiguity and overlap could inadvertently cause jurisdictional and organizational issues potentially impacting on the effectiveness of diplomatic efforts.

4.1 Observed problems in Japan's statecraft and foreign policymaking

Diplomacy scholar Nancy Snow, in her capacity as Strategic Communications Director of Japan's International Security Industry Council (ISIC), made the following observations (selected for relevance to this paper) in 2022 about weaknesses in Japan's strategic communications and public diplomacy: ¹¹²

- lacked a formalized national security apparatus until this century.
- new National Security Strategy is still on the drawing board.
- public diplomacy and strategic communications is conservative and controlled.
- maintains a one-way publicity stance with domestic and foreign publics.
- public affairs and global media relations apparatus is not proactive.

- state-sponsored global broadcasting (NHK) is weak compared to competitors.
- local foreign-press presence and government-press relations are in decline.
- relationship-building and networking lags in comparison to G7 peers.
- global outreach is hampered by poor digital media presence in foreign languages.

As discussed in Section One, Japan has made considerable inroads into building a robust diplomatic network, becoming a “global diplomatic heavyweight” ranked 4th place globally and having the most powerful passport (equal first) in the world for the period 2018 to 2023. Also, its unequaled U.N. Security Council postings and its significant contributions to U.N. agencies, funds, and programmes over the decades has bolstered its diplomatic influence and soft power in the global community. However, as Snow clearly points out, Japan has been reactive and conservative in the handling of its strategic communications and public diplomacy and, despite its rapid economic, financial, and cultural growth, it has been slow to move with the tides of change in numerous regards.

Two decades ago, entrepreneur and bureaucrat Glen S. Fukushima (2006) asserted that, despite having significant economic power, “Japan is deficient in soft power” and that its soft power “needs to be strengthened in part to compensate for its modest arsenal of hard power”. He also argued that Japan is lacking in “intellectual leadership, conceptual discourse and debate, and persuasive power on the world stage when compared to Singapore, Hong Kong, India, and other countries and regions” (p.18). Fukushima continued by concluding that one factor in the receding diplomatic presence of Japan in comparison with China, is “Japan’s continued complacency and unwillingness or inability to explain to others its values, principles, policies, and direction” (p. 19).

4.2 Criticism of the Cool Japan Strategy

Cool Japan has been publicly criticized on numerous occasions over the years. Cultural policy scholar Nobuko Kawashima (2018) considers financial gains as an overriding consideration in the cross-ministerial Cool Japan initiative and describes its policymaking as “patchy and disjointed” (p.19). Japanese celebrity musician and actor Gakuto Ōshiro (stage name: Gackt) spoke bluntly about the METI scheme in a 2015 interview, claiming that the government had not properly informed the tax-paying public of what Cool Japan does and exactly how its considerable budget is being used:

The Japanese government made a new attempt at this in the name of Cool Japan, but

while they have set up a huge budget for it, they have no idea where that money should go. It's no exaggeration to say it has fallen into a downward spiral of wasted tax money flowing into little known companies There still have been almost no tangible results of Japanese culture being exported into foreign countries. I can't help but accuse METI of having no idea how to use this huge budget properly. (Ōshiro, 2015)

On top of these accusations of insufficient transparency and a lack of clearly-defined goals, in 2017 the profitability of the Cool Japan Fund was already being called into question¹¹³ and, in the same year, the Fund made headlines again with a sexual harassment scandal.¹¹⁴ Later, in 2022, it was reported that the Strategy, along with its Fund, had seen total investment losses of 30.9 billion yen (USD \$218 million).¹¹⁵

Benjamin Boas (2022), an ambassador and advisor for Cool Japan, observes that, despite targeting diverse foreign consumer markets, the Strategy to date has been entrenched in a typically “Japanese style” mode of operation (p.152), its branding attempts have been failing (p. 158), and its so-called ‘international’ content and promotions have for the most part been “inward-focused”, catering to Japan’s domestic consumer market (p.200, p. 205). Diplomacy scholar Nancy Snow (2013) denounced the Strategy in an article titled *Uncool Japan*, describing it as “Japan’s Gross National Propaganda” (p. 30), while an online editorial maintained that “Japan is cool but has no clue about selling itself” (Bloomberg, 2019).

In the original Japanese-language version of its Cool Japan website, the Cabinet Office identifies several problems with the Strategy as follows (selected for relevance and translated by the author):¹¹⁶

- insufficient staff collaboration is hampering the success of projects.
- more input is needed from non-Japanese consultants.
- external communications are ineffective.
- the Cabinet Office is not coordinating the strategy effectively.
- Cool Japan objectives have not been sufficiently communicated.
- perspectives of manufacturers tend to be prioritized over those of consumers.
- efforts do not take into account various international perspectives.
- impact of local and overseas efforts is weakened by a lack of networking.

Despite a very questionable track record, the Cool Japan Strategy was given a fresh start or “reboot” by the government in June 2024, and the initiative’s reiteration now shoulders more ambitious targets and profit goals.¹¹⁷

4.3 Discussion and conclusions

Although domestic political and media discourse in Japan tends to focus on budgets, inflation, costs of living, interest rates, annual *shuntō* wage negotiations, and the occasional political scandal¹¹⁸, Japan’s public and cultural diplomacy efforts receive media attention when Japan hosts an international event. Notable events of the last decade include the G7 Ise-Shima Summit (2016), Rugby World Cup (2019), Tokyo Olympics (2021), G7 Hiroshima Summit (2023), and the World Expo Osaka (2025). Unfortunately, tragedies such as the assassination of former prime minister Shinzō Abe in July 2022 for example, often prove the catalyst for renewed focus on unresolved political issues that slowly fade from the spotlight of media attention.

In the weeks after Abe’s death, the ensuing media frenzy brought public attention back to issues such as his Abenomics principles, Beautiful Japan campaign, the war-renouncing Article 9 of the Constitution, security legislation amendments, recent unprecedented military spending and rearmament, as well as the issue of political party connections with religious organizations. This unfortunate turn of events is reminiscent of Japan as a “reactive state”, a label attributed to scholar of East Asia, Kent E. Calder, in a journal article in 1988, in which he highlighted the tendency for political framework in Japan to deal with an issue only when prompted to do so by external influence or pressure.¹¹⁹

The Japanese government recognizes the limits of its checkbook diplomacy, which causes resentment¹²⁰, and of its defense diplomacy, which can stir up wartime memories.¹²¹ So, accordingly, policymakers leverage public and cultural diplomacy, nation branding, and pop culture promotion to win the hearts and minds of the international community and avoid hard power confrontations. Unfortunately, however, the various criticisms of its foreign policy agenda, diplomacy, and nation branding efforts outlined in this paper alarmingly indicate that attempts are only being made to win over the wallets of foreign audiences and, embarrassingly, even failing to achieve that.

Now with increasing hard and soft power clashes with China and pop culture export rivalry from South Korea, Japan has been braced with a sense of urgency in its diplomacy and nation branding strategies. Although not a problem exclusive to Japan, its aging

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population and decreasing birthrate are serious sociopolitical issues. Its population is currently shrinking; a trend termed 15 years ago by U.K. newspaper *The Economist* as the “Japan syndrome”.¹²²

In the Asia-Pacific current affairs magazine *The Diplomat*, diplomacy scholar Nancy Snow (2014) offered advice on how Japan might improve its public diplomacy and political messaging to the world (selected by the author for relevance to this paper) as follows:

- Move beyond reliance on the advocacy of individual political figures, such as Shinzō Abe for example; they may be charismatic, but their personal agenda can be divisive.
- Employ more foreign professionals and public intellectuals and utilize their input.
- Invest in training charismatic and multilingual spokespeople for top positions.
- Increase dialogue opportunities with foreign diplomats in Tokyo-based embassies.
- Japanese universities need to become more globally relevant.
- Welcome opportunities to learn languages, study abroad, and experience other cultures.
- Train well-spoken diplomats, be decisive and quicker in policy and decision-making, and do not dwell on the past.

Suggestions to better utilize foreign intellectuals (Snow, 2014) or to increase international perspectives in policymaking (Boas, 2022), inevitably touch a raw nerve in Japan, where immigration and migrant labor policies continue to serve as a point of contention, dividing both public and political opinions on the future of Japanese society. The country is infamously tight-lipped about its stance on fully opening its doors to foreign workers, however the situation is slowly improving.¹²³

Over two decades ago, political scientist Joseph S. Nye (2002) lauded Japan's cultural appeal and soft power yet critiqued its culture as “much more inward-oriented than that of the United States” and continued by noting that “its government's unwillingness to deal frankly with the history of the 1930s undercuts its soft power” (p. 70). Nye's constructive criticism of Japan is based on his experience working in positions such as U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense (1994 to 1995) under the Clinton Administration, where he helped negotiate the terms of Japan-U.S. security relations. He praises Japan's cultural uniqueness and resilience as follows:

The lesson that Japan has to teach the rest of the world is not simply that an Asian

country can compete in military and economic power, but rather that after a century and a half of globalization, it is possible to adapt while preserving a unique culture (p. 97)

Nye, even today, remains an active observer of the Japan-U.S. alliance, and describes concerns of Japan's remilitarization and militarist posturing as "alarmism", adding that, for Japan to ensure its security, strengthening its alliance with the U.S. and utilizing America's 'extended deterrence' is "by far the safest and most cost-effective option", even if that does include Japan acquiring "the kind of long-range missiles that it had previously foresworn" (Nye, 2023). Even after 30 years, Nye still stresses the importance of smart power as the calculated and balanced leveraging of both hard and soft power.

The Israel-Hamas conflict, ongoing since October 2023, seems a far-removed war from the perspective of Japan, yet it was reported that Japanese defense officials keenly observed how Israel managed to intercept 99% of approximately 300 incoming Iranian missiles and drones.¹²⁴ There has been much speculation and controversy through the decades about plans to implement missile defense systems for Japan, however, President Biden announced in April 2024, that "for the first time, Japan and the United States and Australia will create a networked system of air, missile, and defense architecture", while also speaking about potential trilateral military exercises with Japan and the United Kingdom.¹²⁵ Despite long-running missile and nuclear belligerence from North Korea and a missile incident with China, for the sakes of all concerned, it is hoped that this new military hardware of 'deterrence' does not instead prove to be a source of escalation. A modern Asia-Pacific missile crisis, like the heated stand-off of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, is not in the interest of any party in the region.

Returning to the domestic front, despite having recovered from 3 decades of recession and sluggish economic growth, a rocky road still lies ahead for Japan with inflation and tighter consumer spending¹²⁶, in part due to increases in the cost of living, and labor shortages caused by its shrinking population and comparatively strict immigration laws. A newspaper editorial in 2024 proposes five consolations, noting that: "Even amid [Japan's economic] decline, the country managed to retain and maintain its high quality of life: affordable housing, universal healthcare, cheap and nourishing food, unparalleled infrastructure, a commitment to law and order". Also, on the topic of Japan's demographic problems, the editorial continues, "The population might be aging rapidly, but its birth rate looks healthy compared with neighbors such as South Korea or China"

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(Bloomberg, 2024).

Furthermore, despite the many negative critiques of Japan's three-decade old pop culture promotion as being 'uncool' propaganda, its neighbors in Asia, who are also some of its largest trade partners, continue to consume a steady diet of *manga* comics, *anime* cartoons, *kawaii* merchandise, video games, electronics, appliances, automobiles, motorcycles, cuisine, fashion, and holiday visits to Japan.

Japan's influence seems an enigma; intangibly powerful yet simultaneously powerless from different perspectives. Perhaps this paradoxical nature, that often defies attempts to be analyzed, is part of Japan's appeal: the puzzle of its power adding to its attraction and intrigue.

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