

# Diplomatic, Educational, and Cultural Relationships between Japan and Sri Lanka

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving diplomatic, educational, and cultural relationships between Japan and Sri Lanka through a multidimensional analytical framework. While existing scholarship has primarily focused on economic cooperation and development assistance, it has given limited attention to the interrelated roles of education and culture in shaping bilateral relations. To address this gap, the study adopts a qualitative desk-based research design, drawing on secondary sources including scholarly literature, policy documents, and institutional reports. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis to identify key patterns across diplomatic, educational, and cultural domains. The findings reveal that educational cooperation, particularly through scholarship programs and academic exchanges, function as a strategic mechanism of influence by facilitating knowledge transfer and long-term institutional linkages. Cultural interactions, including language learning and media engagement, contribute to mutual understanding and enhance people-to-people connectivity. These dimensions collectively reinforce diplomatic relations by fostering trust, shared values, and sustained collaboration. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the post-2022 economic crisis in Sri Lanka has intensified the role of education as a pathway to labour mobility, particularly in relation to Japan's structured migration opportunities. Interpreted through the lens of Joseph Nye's Soft Power theory, the findings highlight how culture generates attraction, education transmits values, and diplomacy institutionalizes these effects within a coherent framework of influence. The study contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive and theoretically grounded understanding of Japan–Sri Lanka relations, emphasizing the importance of non-economic dimensions in sustaining long-term international partnerships.

**Keywords:** Japan–Sri Lanka relations; Soft Power; Education diplomacy; Cultural exchange; Labour mobility; International relations

## INTRODUCTION

Diplomatic ties are important in influencing global collaboration. Historically, diplomacy can be defined as the management of international affairs through negotiation and official representation (Nicholson, 1963). In modern international relations, diplomacy extends beyond the political and economic spheres to encompass educational and cultural exchanges, serving as vital tools for mutual understanding.

The friendship between Japan and Sri Lanka emphasizes a significant bilateral collaboration rooted in historical, cultural and diplomatic relationships. Formal diplomatic relations were established in 1952; the roots of this relationship can be traced to prior religious and cultural exchanges influenced by Buddhism (Attanayake & Kapur, 2019). A key achievement in enhancing relations was Sri Lanka's at the San Francisco Peace Conference, where J.R. Jayewardene's address emphasized the recovery process and support for Japan's normalization (Perera, 2023).

Japan has become an important ally in Sri Lanka's development path, offering assistance through economic aid, infrastructure projects, and the peacebuilding process (Melegoda, 2012). Not only official diplomatic relations, but also educational partnerships, scholarship initiatives, academic exchanges, and institutional

collaborations, have become important in strengthening bilateral ties and promoting human resource development (Gunawardhana & Shanmugarajah, 2014). Cultural exchanges, such as language teaching and cultural celebrations, have improved interpersonal connections and mutual bonds between the two countries (Attanayake & Kapur, 2019).

Although there is a significant amount of literature on Japan-Sri Lanka relations, previous research has focused on economic collaboration, developmental support, and geopolitical factors (Ranaweera, 2024; Potter & Seminar, 2022; Mallempati, 2024). Although these are important insights, there is a lack of comprehensive research that explores diplomatic, educational, and cultural relations as interrelated facets of bilateral interaction. There is little emphasis on educational and cultural exchanges between the two countries, which foster collaboration and mutual trust.

The current research aims to fill this gap by examining the gradual development of diplomatic, educational, and cultural ties between Japan and Sri Lanka through a comprehensive analytical approach. This study explores the historical evolution of diplomatic relations between the two nations, assesses the impact of educational exchanges on strengthening bilateral ties, and analyses the role of cultural exchanges in promoting mutual trust and understanding people-to-people relations.

Through diplomatic, educational and cultural aspects, this research explores a wide area of bilateral relations. Its outcomes offer practical insights for policymakers, educators, and cultural professionals aiming to enhance future collaboration between the two nations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualizing Japan–Sri Lanka Relations: From Diplomacy to Multidimensional Engagement

Academic conversations mostly highlight the bilateral relationships between Japan and Sri Lanka. Conventional definitions depict diplomacy as the conduct of international relations through negotiations and representation (Nicholson, 1963). According to modern viewpoints, non-governmental interactions, knowledge sharing, and cultural involvement are significant in maintaining collaboration. Relations between Japan and Sri Lanka can be described as a multifaceted partnership shaped by historical, political, educational, and socio-cultural exchanges.

Current research shows that relations between Japan and Sri Lanka have developed gradually through both official diplomatic channels and cultural ties rooted in Buddhist heritage (Attanayake & Kapur, 2019). These historical ties have laid the foundation for modern collaboration, providing the backdrop for bilateral relations to grow across various fields.

### Diplomatic Relations and Strategic Engagement

Much research has explored the diplomatic aspects of Japan-Sri Lanka relations. Official relations were established in 1952 and have been strengthened through political and senior-level visits and collaborative development projects (Kelegama, 2012; Melegoda, 2012). Japan plays a major role in the peacebuilding process and development projects in Sri Lanka (Fazil, 2010; Melegoda, 2012).

Recent research has examined Sri Lanka's strategic significance within Japan's broader Indo-Pacific policy framework. Ranaweera (2024) highlights maritime security collaboration and geopolitical factors, emphasising Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, and it has strengthened friendship between Sri Lanka and Japan. As well as Mallempati (2024) and Potter and Seminar (2022), who explore Japan's assistance in the development sector in South Asia, highlight Japan as a stable ally of Sri Lanka.

The study examines key facets of bilateral relations, with a primary focus on state-level interactions, economic collaboration, and security issues. The broad socio-cultural and educational aspects of diplomacy are not explored in depth.

## **Educational Cooperation and Human Resource Development**

Cooperation in education is an important facet of Japan-Sri Lanka relations. Current research indicates that Japan has played a pivotal role in enhancing education in Sri Lanka through financial assistance, technical collaboration, and scholarship initiatives (Gunawardhana & Shanmugarajah, 2014). The projects include developing infrastructure, supplying educational tools, and launching training programs to uplift human resources in the industrial sector.

The Monbukagakusho (MEXT) scholarship and the Japanese Grant Aid for Human Resource Development (JDS) have fostered knowledge sharing and academic exchange between the two countries. These initiatives not only support personal educational growth but also enhance the creation of professional networks. Gunawardhana and Shanmugarajah (2014) state that these academic collaborations have opened new paths, fostered goodwill, and created new opportunities for academic involvement.

The linkages between universities and exchange initiatives have expanded educational connections, emphasising joint research and intercultural learning. Although Japan makes a significant contribution to Sri Lanka's education sector, its diplomatic ties have not been theorised within broader evaluations of bilateral involvement.

## **Cultural Relations and People-to-People Connectivity**

Cultural interactions emphasise another key aspect of Japan-Sri Lanka relations, enhancing mutual understanding. Research in this field emphasises the importance of language and cultural initiatives in promoting intercultural understanding (Attanayake & Kapur, 2019). Cultural items such as TV dramas, anime, songs and books depict the way how Japan is influenced in Sri Lankan society.

Academics have pointed out the role of literary figures such as Noguchi Tadashi in connecting the two cultures through translation and literary exchange (Muthumali & Amarasinghe, 2024). These initiatives have laid the path for the sharing of cultural values and stories between the two nations. Furthermore, cultural exchange initiatives have enhanced direct engagement among individuals, especially among students and young people. Through such initiatives, it supports the improvement of intercultural skills, global consciousness, and interpersonal connections.

## **Research Gap and Contribution of the Study**

According to previous research, considerable attention has been paid to diplomatic ties, economic partnerships, and strategic interactions between Japan and Sri Lanka, yet there is a clear lack of comprehensive studies on the interrelated functions of diplomacy, education, and culture. Most of the research takes a sector-specific stance, emphasising political or economic factors while giving little weight to the role of educational and cultural exchanges in shaping bilateral relations.

Current studies emphasize the macro-level analysis without considering interpersonal interactions and knowledge sharing. This gap emphasizes the necessity of an analytical strategy that reflects interactions among diplomatic, educational and cultural relations. With the aim of filling this gap, the current research contributes to the existing literature by highlighting three aspects: diplomatic, educational, and cultural. It offers a comprehensive perspective on Japan-Sri Lanka relations and highlights the importance of non-economic factors in strengthening ties between the two countries.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis to examine the diplomatic, educational, and cultural relations between Japan and Sri Lanka. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this

research as it enables an in-depth exploration of historical developments, policy frameworks, and institutional interactions that shape bilateral relations.

In the field of International Relations, desk-based research is widely used because it relies on policy documents, official records, and scholarly analyses as primary sources of data. Given the nature of this study, which focuses on long-term relational dynamics and institutional process, a documentary approach provides a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of the subject.

Furthermore, the desk-based design is particularly suitable in situations where access to primary stakeholders, such as diplomats, policymakers, and institutional actors, is limited. By systematically analysing credible secondary sources, this study synthesises diverse perspectives and identifies patterns across multiple domains of engagement.

### **Data Sources and Sampling Strategy**

The study relies on secondary data sources, including: Peer-reviewed journal articles, Academic books, Government and institutional reports, Policy documents and Official Publications. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select relevant materials. Sources were selected based on the following criteria: direct relevance to Japan–Sri Lanka relations; credibility, with priority given to peer-reviewed and official publications; coverage of key dimensions (diplomacy, education, and culture); and recency, ensuring the inclusion of both foundational and contemporary sources. A total of approximately 25–35 sources were analysed to ensure both depth and breadth of coverage.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection followed a systematic document review process. Relevant materials were identified through academic databases, institutional repositories, and official websites. Each selected document was reviewed using a structured protocol to extract key information, including:

Type of bilateral engagement (diplomatic, educational, cultural)

Nature of cooperation (e.g., scholarships, exchanges, policy initiatives)

Historical developments and key events

Reported outcomes and impacts

Extracted data were recorded and organized using coding sheets to ensure consistency and comparability across sources.

### **Data Analysis**

The study employed thematic content analysis to interpret the collected data. The analytical process followed the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, definition of themes, and reporting.

The analysis began with open coding, where relevant segments of text were identified and assigned initial codes based on recurring concepts and patterns. These codes were generated inductively from the data to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in empirical evidence.

Subsequently, related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories through a process of thematic categorization, aligned with the three core dimensions of the study: diplomacy, education, and culture. In

addition, cross-cutting themes such as soft power, knowledge exchange, and labour mobility were identified to capture the interconnections between these dimensions. This iterative process enabled the refinement of themes and supported a comprehensive analysis of both individual dimensions and their interrelationships.

### **Validity, Reliability, and Analytical Rigour**

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. First, source triangulation was used by drawing on multiple data sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports, to cross-validate information.

Second, the study incorporated researcher reflexivity, acknowledging that qualitative analysis is interpretive and may be influenced by the researcher's perspectives. To minimize potential bias, a systematic and transparent coding process was followed, and all interpretations were grounded in documented evidence.

Third, analytical transparency was maintained by clearly outlining the data selection criteria, coding procedures, and thematic framework. This enhances the reliability of the study and allows for replication or extension in future research. The overall research design is consistent with established qualitative research approaches outlined by John W. Creswell (2014), ensuring methodological rigor and coherence.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. As a desk-based analysis, it relies exclusively on secondary data sources and does not incorporate primary data such as interviews or field observations. This may limit the ability to capture contemporary perspectives from key stakeholders.

Additionally, the findings are constrained by the availability and scope of existing literature and official documents. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating primary data collection methods, such as interviews with policymakers, educators, and scholarship recipients, to provide deeper insights into the practical impacts of bilateral engagement.

### **Findings**

#### **Evolution of Diplomatic Relations**

The results show that Japan and Sri Lanka's diplomatic relations have evolved through historical, political and strategic interactions. Official diplomatic relations were established in 1952 after Sri Lanka's support for Japan at the San Francisco Peace Conference. It laid the groundwork for a deep bond between the two countries (Attanayake & Kapur, 2019).

Ongoing events reveal a steady trend in diplomatic engagements, including formal visits, joint statements, and collaborative policy efforts. Japan's involvement in the peacebuilding process demonstrates its position as a development-focused diplomat (Melegoda, 2012; Fazil, 2010). Recent interactions highlight maritime security and regional collaboration (Ranaweera, 2024). Diplomatic relations between the two nations are defined by shared trust and strategic significance shaped by both historical connections and modern geopolitical factors.

#### **Educational Relations as a Mechanism of Cooperation**

This study shows that educational collaboration has been important in strengthening bilateral ties. In particular, Japan has become a key supporter or ally by improving infrastructure, supplying technical resources, and building capacity (Gunawardhana & Shanmugarajah, 2014).

Monbukagakusho (MEXT) and JDS serve as essential tools for promoting Sri Lanka's academic development. Through these scholarship programs, many students and professionals have pursued higher education and training opportunities in Japan, thereby strengthening the long-term friendship between Japan and Sri Lanka.

Collaborations between Universities and academic exchange initiatives have supported knowledge sharing and the development of a strong research foundation. These exchanges improve academic capabilities while fostering lasting connections between institutions in both countries. The results indicate that educational connections are a lasting aspect of bilateral interaction, enhancing institutional collaboration.

### **Cultural Relations and People-to-People Connectivity**

Cultural ties between Japan and Sri Lanka have evolved through various interactions. Interest in learning Japanese has increased with the spread of Japanese dramas, anime, and movies (Attanayake & Kapur, 2019). The translation of literary works from Japanese to Sinhala and from Sinhala to Japanese to enhance intercultural understanding (Muthumali & Amarasinghe, 2024). As well as cultural festivals, exchange initiatives and youth projects fostered intercultural communication and shared respect. The results show that cultural interactions are important in promoting connections and enhancing official diplomatic initiatives.

### **Interconnection between Diplomatic, Educational, and Cultural Relations**

The major point of this research is the significant connection among diplomatic, educational, and cultural aspects. Instead of discussing separately, these three areas are linked to each other. Educational exchanges foster diplomatic goodwill by establishing professional and institutional connections. Cultural exchanges improve shared understanding by creating a positive background for diplomatic relations. Diplomatic accords and official statements promote the development of educational and cultural programs. The interconnected structure emphasizes the bilateral relations between Japan and Sri Lanka are maintained not only by political or economic elements but also through a wide web of interactions.

Recent developments following the 2022 economic crisis in Sri Lanka have significantly accelerated skilled migration trends, with Japan emerging as a key destination due to its expanding labor migration policies. Japan introduced the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) visa program in 2019 to address critical labor shortages, initially targeting the admission of over 345,000 foreign workers within five years. Recent data indicate that this system has expanded considerably, with approximately 390,000 workers holding SSW status by 2025, reflecting a rapid increase in foreign labor intake. (Japan Times, 2026)

This expansion in labor migration has directly contributed to a growing demand for Japanese-language education in Sri Lanka, as language proficiency, particularly at intermediate levels, is required for both employment and higher-education opportunities in Japan. As a result, language training institutions and university programs have expanded their Japanese language offerings, demonstrating a clear alignment between educational choices and migration aspirations.

From an analytical perspective, these developments highlight the growing importance of labor mobility as a dimension of bilateral relations, with the movement of skilled and semi-skilled workers contributing to economic cooperation and knowledge exchange. More importantly, they illustrate the emergence of education as a migration pathway, in which language learning, vocational training, and higher education serve as preparatory mechanism for integration into international labor markets.

Institutional support from organizations such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology further reinforces this linkage through scholarships, technical training, and human resource development initiatives.

Within a broader theoretical context, these patterns align with the dynamics of Joseph Nye's soft power framework, as Japan's ability to attract skilled migrants through education-linked pathways strengthens its influence by fostering long-term professional, cultural, and institutional connections. Thus, the post-2022 economic crisis can be understood as a contextual catalyst that amplifies the interaction between education, labor mobility, and diplomacy in Japan–Sri Lanka relations. As illustrated in Figure 1, diplomacy, education, and culture function as mutually reinforcing dimensions within a soft power framework

## Conceptual Map

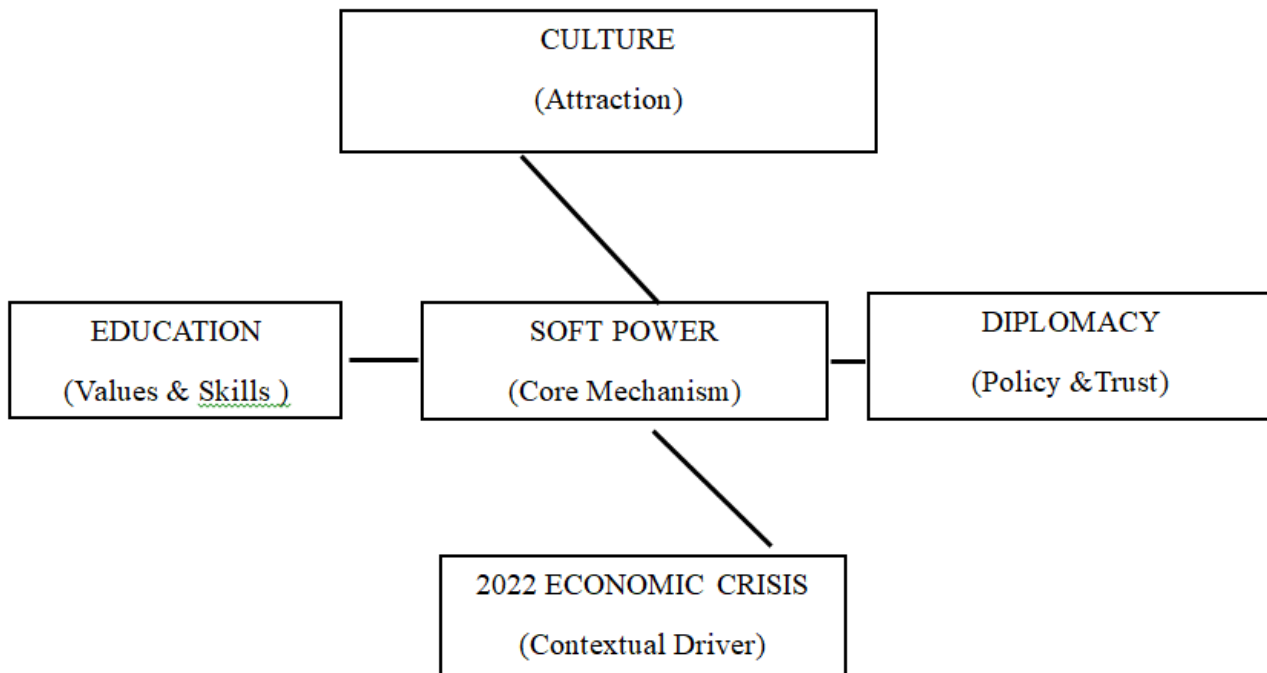


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Japan–Sri Lanka Relations within a Soft Power Perspective

This figure illustrates the interrelationship between culture, education and diplomacy through soft power. All elements reinforce each other, while the 2022 economic crisis as a contextual driver.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a more nuanced understanding of Japan–Sri Lanka relations by demonstrating that bilateral engagement extends beyond traditional diplomatic and economic interactions to include education and culture as central components. While previous studies have largely emphasized Japan’s role as a development partner and strategic ally (Melegoda, 2012; Kelegama, 2012), the present study extends this perspective by illustrating how non-material dimensions contribute significantly to sustaining long-term bilateral relations.

In particular, the findings suggest that educational cooperation functions as a strategic mechanism of influence, rather than merely a developmental initiative. Scholarship programs, academic exchanges, and institutional collaborations not only enhance human resource capacity but also facilitate the transmission of professional norms, values, and knowledge systems. This supports and extends earlier research by Gunawardhana and Shanmugarajah (2014), while reframing education as an instrument that contributes to long-term relational influence.

Similarly, cultural exchanges emerge as a critical factor in shaping perceptions and fostering mutual understanding at the societal level. Consistent with previous findings (Attanayake & Kapur, 2019), the spread of Japanese language learning, media, and cultural practices in Sri Lanka reflects the growing appeal of Japanese culture. However, this study goes further by demonstrating that such cultural interactions are not merely symbolic but actively strengthen interpersonal connections and enhance receptivity to deeper bilateral engagement.

The integration of these findings can be more effectively understood through the theoretical lens of Joseph Nye’s Soft Power framework. Within this perspective, the three dimensions examined in this study, education, culture, and diplomacy, can be conceptualised as interrelated components of a broader influence mechanism. Cultural exchange generates attraction, educational cooperation facilitates the transmission of values and knowledge, and diplomatic engagement institutionalizes these effects into formal partnerships. This

interpretation moves beyond descriptive analysis by providing a structured explanation of how influence is generated and sustained in international relations.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the growing importance of education as a pathway to labour mobility, particularly in the context of Sri Lanka's post-2022 economic crisis. The increasing demand for Japanese language skills and professional training reflects a shift in which education is closely linked to migration aspirations. This aligns with emerging global patterns where education and migration are interconnected processes, contributing to both individual mobility and bilateral engagement. In this context, Japan's structured migration pathways and educational opportunities enhance its attractiveness, thereby reinforcing its soft power influence.

Importantly, this study also demonstrates that the relationship between diplomacy, education, and culture is not linear but mutually reinforcing. Educational exchanges strengthen diplomatic trust by building professional networks, cultural interactions enhance mutual understanding, and diplomatic frameworks facilitate the expansion of educational and cultural initiatives. This interconnected structure provides a more comprehensive understanding of bilateral relations, highlighting the importance of integrating multiple dimensions rather than analysing them in isolation.

Overall, the findings contribute to the existing literature by offering a multidimensional perspective on Japan–Sri Lanka relations. While previous research has focused primarily on economic and strategic aspects, this study emphasizes the significance of soft power mechanisms in shaping sustainable and long-term international partnerships. This broader analytical approach provides valuable insights for policymakers and scholars seeking to understand the evolving nature of global engagement in the contemporary context.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### Conclusion

This research investigated the diplomatic, educational, and cultural ties between Japan and Sri Lanka using a comprehensive analytical framework. The results indicate that the bilateral relationship between the two nations is not only influenced by formal diplomatic efforts but also maintained through vibrant educational collaboration and cultural exchange.

According to Joseph Nye, culture is a main resource of soft power. Japanese learning, anime, cultural festivals, and traditions act as an attractive force that fosters a positive view of Japan. Education spreads values and knowledge. Scholarship and student exchange programs support the sharing of both countries' cultural values and knowledge.

Diplomacy serves as a soft-power tool through policies and agreements. According to this research, cultural exchanges, educational cooperation, and diplomatic engagement between Japan and Sri Lanka serve as interconnected soft-power mechanisms. Culture generates attraction; education shares values and builds long-term relationships; and diplomacy combines these interactions into formal partnerships.

The study indicates that diplomatic ties have gradually improved through historical goodwill, strategic collaboration, and development partnerships, demonstrating a steady pattern of mutual trust and ongoing engagement. Simultaneously, educational efforts, especially scholarship initiatives, institutional partnerships, and academic exchanges, have played a crucial role in developing human resources and enhancing institutional connections. Cultural connections, such as language learning, media impact, and intercultural initiatives, have strengthened interpersonal ties and fostered mutual understanding.

A significant outcome of this research is the recognition of the interconnectedness among these three dimensions. Diplomatic, educational, and cultural interactions function as interdependent forces, together creating a durable and robust bilateral alliance. This multifaceted viewpoint offers a deeper comprehension of Japan–Sri Lanka relations that goes beyond traditional economic and political assessments

## Policy and Practical Implications

The results of this research provide numerous significant insights for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners. Policymakers must acknowledge the strategic importance of education and culture as tools for global interaction. Enhancing scholarship initiatives, academic exchanges, and institutional collaborations can reinforce enduring diplomatic ties by cultivating skilled human resources and professional connections.

Secondly, it's essential to expand access to educational opportunities across Sri Lanka's regions. Enhancing partnerships between Japanese institutions and a broader array of Sri Lankan universities and schools would promote inclusivity and increase the effectiveness of bilateral collaboration.

Third, cultural efforts such as Japanese language instruction, cultural festivals, and exchange programs ought to be strengthened to deepen people-to-people connections. These efforts are vital in fostering mutual trust and cultural awareness, which are key to maintaining enduring collaborations.

Ultimately, the research underscores the necessity of broadening collaboration into new domains, like technology and innovation, to enhance existing diplomatic, educational, and cultural connections and fortify future bilateral interactions.

## Limitations and Future Research

Notwithstanding its contributions, this study has some inherent limitations. The results of this desk-based analysis, which depends on secondary data, are limited by the accessibility and breadth of current literature and official records. The lack of primary data limits the ability to gather contemporary perspectives from key stakeholders, including diplomats, educators, and those involved in exchange programs.

Future studies might overcome these constraints by utilizing primary data collection techniques such as interviews, surveys, and case studies, offering a deeper understanding of the real-life experiences and practical effects of bilateral collaboration. Moreover, comparative analyses of Japan's interactions with other South Asian nations could deepen understanding of Japan-Sri Lanka relations within a wider regional context.

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