

## **The Russian Far East's Relations With Japan and South Korea Post-2022**

**A. L. Lukin, V. I. Voloshchak, S. V. Sevastianov**

### ***Abstract***

The article presents a comparative study of the sanctions policy of Japan and the Republic of Korea towards Russia after February 2022 and the assessment of the impact of their sanctions on the development of Russian-Japanese and Russian-South Korean cooperation in the Russian Far East. Based on the results of the study of the economic ties of Russia, Japan, and South Korea (in the areas of trade, investment, finance, tourism, and transport) and their interaction in the educational and cultural-humanitarian spheres under sanctions restrictions, the authors come to the conclusion that the sanctions policy of Japan and South Korea towards Russia has a common basis due to their belonging to the “collective West,” and the anti-Russian measures they take are aimed at weakening the industrial and technological potential of the Russian Federation.

At the same time, like most of their Western partners, Japan and South Korea are not ready to impose such sanctions that could cause significant damage to their own economic and strategic interests. There are important differences in the sanctions approaches of Japan and South Korea – Japan pursues a much tougher policy towards Russia, not only limiting exports to Russia, but also imposing a ban on imports of a number of goods from Russia. South Korea is much more willing to maintain ties with Russia and its Far Eastern territories, despite the unfavorable political situation, which is expressed, in particular, in the ongoing official contacts between Primorsky Krai and Vladivostok and a number of provinces and municipalities of the

Republic of Korea. The authors suggest that ties between the Russian Far East and South Korea can be quickly restored once the situation around Ukraine is resolved, while the prospects for restoring relations with Japan look much less certain.

**Keywords:** sanctions, Russia, Japan, South Korea, Russia-Japan relations, Russia-Korea relations, Russian Far East.

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## **Introduction**

Ties with Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), along with China, have long been Russia's most important bilateral relations in Asia, particularly for its Far Eastern territories. These three Northeast Asian (NEA) countries are in close proximity to Russia's Far East. In addition, China, Japan, and the ROK are the first, second, and fourth largest economies in Asia, respectively, and are among the most technologically advanced nations in the world.

While Russia's bilateral relations with China continue to expand and deepen, the situation with Japan and the ROK has become problematic in recent years, primarily due to their participation in the sanctions regime imposed on Russia after the start of the special military operation in February 2022. Both Japan and the ROK are now officially seen by Moscow as states unfriendly to Russia.

The authors of this article analyze how the sanctions imposed by Japan and the ROK have affected their ties with the Russian Far East, which they understand as the territories that are part of the Far Eastern Federal District. First, we will briefly describe the political relations developing between Moscow and Tokyo, as well as Moscow and Seoul, in the new international political situation. Then, the sanctions policy of Japan and South Korea towards the Russian Federation (RF) will be considered. The main part of the article is devoted to the analysis of how anti-Russian sanctions affect these two countries' relations with Russia's Far East. We focus primarily on economic ties (trade, investment, finance, tourism, transport), and also study the impact of new circumstances on bilateral contacts in the educational and cultural-humanitarian spheres. In the final part, we draw some conclusions and identify similarities and differences in the character of Russian ties with Japan and the ROK under the new political and economic conditions.

This research can be attributed to international political economy, since it examines the issues at the intersection of international relations, geopolitics, and economics. The authors do not claim

to make theoretical generalizations, mostly focusing on the empirical assessment of the sanctions policy of Japan and the ROK against the RF and its impact on their bilateral relations with Russia, and especially its Far East, from February 2022 to September 2025. Methodologically, the work is based on the analysis of media publications and materials of official bodies of Russia, Japan, and the ROK. In addition, the authors used information from conversations with representatives of Primorsky Krai businesses, as well as Japanese and South Korean diplomats and experts.

## **The Political Context of Russia's Relations With Japan and South Korea**

Relations between Russia and Japan are at their lowest point since the end of World War II. Even during the most difficult periods of the Cold War, Japan and the USSR maintained direct passenger service (they currently do not), while Japanese businesses were investing money and technology in resource development and infrastructure in the Soviet Far East (the current Japanese government prohibits new investment in Russia).

It should be noted that the degradation of Russian-Japanese relations did not begin in February 2022, but earlier, with the resignation of Abe Shinzo as Prime Minister in 2020. His successor, Suga Yoshihide, did not continue his predecessor's course of improving relations with Russia. But, whereas the Suga administration was generally indifferent to Russia, the next Prime Minister, Kishida Fumio (2021–2024), could be characterized as an anti-Russian politician even by the standards of Japan, where sympathy towards Russia has never been strong among the ruling elite. One explanation for Kishida's Russophobia may lie in his pro-American and generally pro-Western orientation. Ishiba Shigeru, who succeeded Kishida in October 2024, may be less Russophobic, but, so far, it didn't lead to noticeable changes in Tokyo's relations with Moscow.

After February 2022, Japan acted as one of the main and active participants in the U.S.-led anti-Russian coalition. In addition to the sanctions war against Russia, Tokyo provides large-scale political, diplomatic, material, and financial support to the Zelensky government. In particular, Kishida visited Kiev in March 2023, and, in June 2024, Japan became the first non-NATO country to sign a bilateral agreement with Ukraine on “support and cooperation,” in which “security and defense” issues take priority.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to growing military and political integration with the United States, Tokyo has stepped up policy of strengthening strategic cooperation with NATO and its leading European members. The Japanese prime minister participated in three annual NATO summits (in 2022, 2023, and 2024), and Japan, together with the ROK, Australia, and New Zealand, formed the so-called “Indo-Pacific Quartet” of NATO partner countries. The main foreign policy slogan of the Kishida administration became “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow.”

Moscow predictably responded to Tokyo’s position by ceasing dialogue on the peace treaty, including on the “territorial issue.” As one of the countermeasures, Russia unilaterally terminated visa-free humanitarian exchanges between the Southern Kuril Islands and Japan, that had been in place since 1992. Russian officials, including the country’s president, clarify that Japan’s policy makes it impossible to continue the negotiation process that began in the late 1980s under M. Gorbachev.<sup>2</sup> Russian diplomats are using very harsh rhetoric toward Japan, in particular, warning that Moscow will respond to the Japanese government’s anti-Russian

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<sup>1</sup> Accord on Support for Ukraine and Cooperation between the Government of Japan and Ukraine. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. 13.06.2024. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100684186.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Meeting of V. Putin with heads of international news agencies. *Kremlin. Ru.* 05.06.2024. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74223> (In Russian).

steps with “the most severe and hurting countermeasures for Tokyo.”<sup>3</sup>

The trajectory of modern Russian-South Korean relations is partly reminiscent of the processes between Moscow and Tokyo. Until the early 2020s, relations between the RF and the ROK developed in a positive direction. The administrations of Presidents Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013), Park Geun-hye (2013–2017), and Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) sought to maintain friendly relations with Moscow, which was especially evident during the presidency of Moon, who viewed cooperation with Russia as an important factor in achieving his main priority – the normalization of inter-Korean relations [Sevastyanov 2020]. Moon’s successor, President Yoon Seok-yeol (May 2022 – April 2025), a representative of the right-wing camp, had a much cooler attitude towards Russia, which can be explained, firstly, by his tough line on North Korea, and, secondly, by his obvious tilt towards Washington and Tokyo. On Yoon’s initiative, an unprecedented rapprochement between Seoul and Tokyo began, which allowed American diplomacy to realize the long-standing goal of putting together a trilateral bloc in Northeast Asia consisting of the U.S., Japan, and the ROK, directed primarily against the PRC, as well as the DPRK and the RF.

Like Kishida, Yoon visited Kiev (in July 2023), but Seoul’s support for Kiev and rhetoric towards Moscow have been more restrained. Unlike Tokyo, which enthusiastically joined the anti-Russian coalition, Seoul imposed sanctions against Russia and provided assistance to the Zelensky government not so much at the call of the heart as under pressure from its senior American ally. This gave Russian diplomats grounds to describe South Korea as “one of the friendliest among the

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<sup>3</sup> On the meeting of the Director of the Third Asian Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry L.G. Vorobieva with the Director of the European Department of the Japanese Foreign Ministry M. Nakagome. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*. 21.06.2024. [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1958611/](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1958611/) (In Russian).

unfriendly countries.” In turn, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the ROK called Russia a potential “strategic partner,” expressing Seoul’s hope that, after the end of the military conflict in Ukraine, South Korean-Russian ties would be restored.<sup>4</sup>

Moscow hoped that the departure of Yoon as a result of his failed martial law gambit would lead to a thaw in the bilateral relations. It was expected that a new president from the progressive camp, represented by the Democratic “Toburo” Party, would be somewhat less enthusiastic about ties with the West and Japan while becoming more accommodating toward China and Russia. However, despite the victory of Toburo’s Lee Jae-myung in the presidential election in June 2025, such a re-orientation has not happened. So far, Lee Jae-myung’s foreign and security policies have been essentially the same as under Yoon.

## **Japan’s Sanctions Policy Towards Russia**

Japan introduced its first sanctions against Russia in 2014, in response to the reincorporation of Crimea. Compared to the anti-Russian sanctions introduced by other G7 members, Japanese restrictive measures were adopted with a delay and were rather soft and symbolic in nature.<sup>5</sup> This was largely due to the desire of then Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to improve relations with Moscow [Panov 2024]. In 2022, Japan’s position changed dramatically when the Kishida cabinet immediately signaled its readiness to act in solidarity and with maximum coordination with Western partners in the G7 (the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the EU) in exerting sanctions pressure on Russia.

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<sup>4</sup> Park, Min-hee. Seoul’s top diplomat says closer North Korea-Russia ties run ‘counter’ to Chinese interests. *Hankyoreh*. 15.07.2024. [https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/1149178.html](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1149178.html)

<sup>5</sup> Japan approved sanctions against Russia. *RIA Novosti*. 05.08.2014. <https://ria.ru/20140805/1018818105.html> (In Russian).

In response to Moscow's recognition of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Lugansk People's Republic (LPR), Japan, along with other G7 members, adopted the first round of restrictive measures against Russia on February 23, 2022. On February 25, the day after Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine, Tokyo announced new large-scale sanctions. The Japanese government, in close coordination with the U.S. and other G7 members, then continued to impose additional sanctions. As of January 2025, the Japanese government adopted over thirty sanctions packages against Russia.<sup>6</sup> The Japanese sanctions are, in general, similar to those imposed by the U.S., the EU, Great Britain, and other members of the Western camp.

The Japanese sanctions lists feature more than 1,000 Russian individuals, including the military-political leadership of Russia, headed by V. Putin, as well as more than 700 Russian organizations and companies. The restrictive measures involve freezing the property of blacklisted individuals and organizations if it is found on Japanese territory. Those on the list cannot enter Japan and are prohibited from conducting banking and credit operations in the country. About 1,000 product items are prohibited from export to Russia. The list of goods and technologies prohibited from export includes, in particular, semiconductors, "luxury goods," equipment for ensuring maritime and aviation security, communications equipment, military products, software, oil refining equipment, trucks, railway locomotives, machine tools and other electrical equipment, cars with hybrid and electric engines, cars with an engine capacity of over 1.9 liter, as well as dual-use goods and other goods "contributing to strengthening the industrial base of the RF."<sup>7</sup> Tokyo imposed sanctions on key Russian financial institutions, including the

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<sup>6</sup> Russia Sanctions Tracker – Japan. *Ashurst*. 17.01.2025. <https://www.ashurst.com/en/insights/russia-sanctions-tracker/japan-sanctions/>

<sup>7</sup> What sanctions Japan imposed on Russia. *TASS*. 01.03.2024. <https://tass.ru/info/20126445> (In Russian).

Central Bank, banning transactions with them and freezing their assets in Japan.

Japan deprived Russia of its most favored nation status in trade, which led to an increase in customs duties on a number of Russian goods, and also introduced a ban on the import of certain goods from it, including gold, non-technical diamonds, and a number of types of wood products (chips, logs, and veneer). Tokyo imposed a ban on new investments in Russia, as well as on the provision of certain services, in particular, accounting and auditing, consulting, transportation, construction, and engineering. In addition, Japan banned direct flights to Russia. The goal of Japan's current sanctions policy towards Russia is completely consistent with the goals of the U.S. and other Western countries, aiming to inflict maximum damage on Russia's military-industrial potential and the Russian economy as a whole. At the same time, Tokyo openly admits that Russia's importance as a supplier of energy and raw materials for the global economy and for Japan in particular makes a complete trade and financial blockade impossible and requires a nuanced approach to the application of sanctions.

The Japanese leadership wants to inflict maximum damage on the industrial, technological, and financial condition of Russia, but it should be done without creating significant negative effects for the Japanese economy. An important issue in this regard is the degree of dependence on trade with Russia. For the U.S., foreign trade dependence on the RF in 2021 (before the introduction of massive sanctions), was minimal: 0.4 percent for exports and 1 percent for imports. The dependence of the EU countries on Russia in the same year was much higher: 4.1 percent for exports and 6.8 percent for imports. As for Japan, in 2021, only 1 percent of its total exports went to Russia, while 1.8 percent of Japanese imports were sourced from the RF. Thus, Japan's trade dependence on Russia is slightly higher than that of the U.S., but significantly lower than that of continental European countries. However, a number of resources imported from Russia occupy a significant share in Japan's imports. These include natural gas (in 2021,

the RF accounted for 7.4 percent of Japanese gas imports), non-ferrous metals (10.3 percent), coal (9.8 percent), fish and seafood (9.1 percent), and timber (13.1 percent). As for exports, 53.1 percent of Japanese supplies to Russia in 2021 were cars and their components, although Russia's market share for Japanese auto exporters was a non-critical 3.3 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, reducing or even completely stopping Japanese exports to Russia will not cause significant damage to the Japanese economy. As for imports from the RF, Tokyo has less freedom of maneuver, and this primarily applies to supply of Russian hydrocarbons (gas, oil, and coal). Together with other G7 members, in 2022 Tokyo committed to gradually abandoning the imports of Russian coal and oil, and by 2024, Japan had completely stopped purchasing oil from the RF (in 2021, the share of Russian oil and oil products made up 3.3 percent of Japanese oil imports). Also, by 2024, imports of Russian coal (Russia had previously been the second most important supplier to Japan) fell to minimum values.

At the same time, Tokyo has not committed to stopping the import of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Russia, and has refused to withdraw from the Sakhalin-1 and Sakhalin-2 oil and gas projects, in which Japanese companies hold large shares. This decision contrasts with the behavior of the American Exxon Mobil and British Shell, which completely withdrew from the Sakhalin projects after the start of the special military operation. Explaining this difference, Prime Minister Kishida noted that the Sakhalin hydrocarbon projects are extremely important for Japan's long-term energy security.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Yoshida Shigekazu. The Economic Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on Japan and Kansai from a Trade Perspective. *Asia-Pacific Institute of Research*. 2023. [https://www.apir.or.jp/files/whitepaper/2023/part02\\_chapo2\\_clmA.pdf](https://www.apir.or.jp/files/whitepaper/2023/part02_chapo2_clmA.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Japan to slowly phase out Russian oil, keep interests in projects. *Kyodo News*. 09.05.2023. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/05/3936be564dfb-breaking-news-japan-to-maintain-interests-in-russian-oil-projects-kishida.html>

Tokyo's decision to continue importing Russian LNG and remain involved in the Sakhalin projects is dictated by several reasons. Firstly, unlike oil and coal, it is much more difficult for Japanese energy companies to find alternative LNG suppliers. Secondly, Sakhalin LNG, 60 percent of which is exported to Japan under long-term contracts, is the most profitable gas for Japanese consumers due to its geographic proximity. Thirdly, Japanese companies were at the origins of the Sakhalin oil and gas projects, having invested significant financial and human resources in them. Fourthly, unlike the Americans and Europeans, the Japanese may have a historically conditioned emotional attachment to Sakhalin, which makes them more reluctant to leave. Fifthly, Tokyo fears that if they leave, their place on the island, which is strategically important for Japan, could be taken by "third countries," primarily China.

Seafood is another area where Japan is not prepared to impose significant restrictions on the RF. Unlike the U.S., which has imposed a ban on imports of Russian fish and seafood, Japan continues to buy them. According to a spokesman for Japan's fisheries agency, a ban "would have a major impact on Japan's seafood processing industry."<sup>10</sup> Unlike oil, coal, and timber, it is almost impossible to find adequate replacement for crabs, sea urchins, and other delicacies from Russia's Far Eastern seas.

Along with other G7 members, Japan began to strengthen measures to combat "sanctions evasion" in the second half of 2023, actively using the "secondary sanctions" mechanism. A number of third-country companies were blacklisted, including those from India, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, China, and the UAE, being accused of cooperating with Russia. In July 2024, Japan made its first arrest on charges of violating export restrictions against the RF: a Russian citizen was detained in Osaka on suspicion of supplying sanctioned jet skis, boat motors, and used motorcycles to Russia.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Nikkei: Crab price in Japan falls thanks to imports from Russia. TASS. 03.12.2023. <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/19441691> (In Russian).

<sup>11</sup> Russian detained in Japan on suspicion of evading sanctions. *Kommersant*. 10.07.2024. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6821475> (In Russian).

## Russian-Japanese Interaction in the Russian Far East Under the Sanctions Restrictions

In 2021, the volume of Russian-Japanese trade amounted to \$19.9 billion. By 2023, it had halved, amounting to \$9.6 billion.<sup>12</sup> In the 2024 financial year (April 1, 2024 – March 31, 2025), trade turnover between Japan and Russia further fell by 9.41 percent to \$8.2 billion.<sup>13</sup> Data on the export and import flows of the Far Eastern Federal District after March 2022 are not available, but it can be assumed that the volume of trade between the Russian Far East and Japan decreased in approximately same proportion as Russian-Japanese trade as a whole, that is, by half.

The sanctions inevitably affected enterprises with Japanese investments located in Russia. The largest Japanese assets in Russia were concentrated in the oil and gas, automobile, tobacco, and forestry industries. However, the complete exit of Japanese owners took place only in the automotive industry. In 2022, the operation of Toyota and Nissan plants in Saint Petersburg was stopped. In Primorsky Krai, Mazda Sollers Manufacturing Rus (a joint venture of Russian Sollers and Japanese Mazda), which assembled Mazda cars at a plant in Vladivostok, as well as Mazda engines at a plant in the suburbs of Vladivostok, ceased operations.

In other industries, the Japanese chose to maintain their presence in Russia. Japan Tobacco, with 33 percent of its shares owned by the Japanese government, decided to keep its business in Russia. This decision was largely influenced by the fact that the Russian market accounts for about 20 percent of the company's total profits.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Trade turnover between Russia and Japan fell by 45.3 percent in 2023. TASS. 01.24.2024. <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/19800797> (In Russian).

<sup>13</sup> Trade turnover between Japan, Russia down 9.4 percent to \$8.2 bln in 2024 financial year. TASS. 17.04.2025. <https://tass.com/economy/1944855>

<sup>14</sup> Japan Tobacco to maintain business in Russia to avoid problems with investors. *Kommersant*. 01.05.2024. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6679695> (In Russian).

Japanese companies also maintain their presence in the forestry industry. Unlike the automotive and tobacco industries, Japanese forestry assets are concentrated in the eastern part of Russia, which is explained by the presence of extensive timber reserves and proximity to the Japanese market, a major consumer of timber. The oldest and largest project of Russian-Japanese partnership in the forestry sector is Terneyles in Primorsky Krai, 45 percent of authorized capital of which belongs to Sumitomo Corporation. In May 2023, a new board of directors of Terneyles was formed, in which three of the seven seats are occupied by representatives of Sumitomo. A large Japanese house-building company Iida Group Holdings also continues operations in Russia. In 2022 it completed the purchase of 75 percent of the shares of the largest Far Eastern timber producer RFP (its main assets are located in Khabarovsk Krai). RFP's management includes a Japanese citizen heading the shareholder relations department.<sup>15</sup>

The bulk of direct Japanese investment in Russia is in the oil and gas sector, namely the Sakhalin-1, Sakhalin-2, and Arctic LNG-2 projects. The Japanese consortium SODECO (50 percent of which is owned by the Japanese government, and the rest by Itochu, Inpex, Japan Petroleum Exploration, and Marubeni corporations) owns a 30 percent stake in the Sakhalin-1 project. In the Sakhalin-2 project, the Japanese own 22.5 percent (Mitsui – 12.5 percent, Mitsubishi – 10 percent). The Japanese shareholders of these projects agreed to transfer their shares to new legal entities, which, under a Russian presidential decree, were appointed to act as the operators of Sakhalin-1 and Sakhalin-2 in October 2022. The Japanese Foreign Ministry's annual Blue Book published in April 2024 stated that, "in light of ensuring stable supplies in the medium and long term," Japan continues to view Sakhalin-1 and Sakhalin-2 as "important energy security projects and intends to maintain stakes in them."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Website of the RFP holding. <https://www.rfpgroup.ru/leaderships> (In Russian).

<sup>16</sup> 外交青書外務省 2024 [Diplomacy Blue Book. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. 2024]. 16.04.2024. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100653233.pdf>

The situation with the newer hydrocarbon project, Arctic LNG-2, which Japan joined in 2019, is different. The Japanese consortium Japan Arctic LNG, consisting of Mitsui and JOGMEC, owns 10 percent of the project. In late 2023, the U.S. imposed blocking sanctions on Arctic LNG-2 and its associated logistics infrastructure, including the transshipment terminal in Kamchatka, through which a significant portion of the LNG was to be delivered to Japanese and other Asian consumers. After that, the Japanese shareholders of the project, Mitsui and JOGMEC, suspended participation in the project, although they retain their shares in the authorized capital. Other foreign co-owners of Arctic LNG-2 (French Total, Chinese CNOOC and CNPC) did the same. The freezing of participation in the project means that Japanese and other foreign shareholders refused to receive the project's products and stopped its financing.

Except for projects in the energy and raw materials sector, the few remaining enterprises with Japanese investment in the Russian Far East had been modest in size. These include the JGC Evergreen greenhouse complexes in Khabarovsk and the Sayuri greenhouse complex in Yakutsk, built in the second half of the 2010s using Japanese agricultural technologies. The greenhouses continue to operate, and the Japanese investors have not announced withdrawal from these projects. According to a Japanese source, the Japanese government does not put pressure on companies that have decided to stay in Russia. They can work with Russia on the condition that they comply with the current sanctions regime. At the same time, there are said to be debates within the management of some Japanese companies still operating in Russia between those who are in favor of continuing presence in the country and those who want their companies to leave.<sup>17</sup>

Since the early 1990s, one of the pillars of Russian-Japanese economic cooperation in the Far East has been the import of Japanese used cars. Japan's ban on the export of cars with gasoline and diesel

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with a Japanese official. July 2024.

engines over 1.9 liters, hybrid cars, and electric cars to Russia from August 2023 (in December of the same year, South Korea banned the export of cars with an engine capacity of 2 liters to Russia) dealt a blow to this business. However, it managed to adapt, to a large extent, and, after the initial sharp decline, the volume of car imports from Japan and South Korea began to grow again. According to Vladivostok Customs, in mid-2024, the import of Japanese and South Korean cars by individuals approached pre-sanction volumes. Moreover, cars of sanctioned categories continue to enter the Russian market using bypassing schemes, with deliveries through third countries such as Malaysia, China, or Mongolia. Private car dealers in Vladivostok offer to buy “sanctioned cars from both South Korea and Japan,” promising delivery within 20 days.<sup>18</sup> There have been no significant disruptions in the supply of spare parts for Japanese cars too. As one car owner notes, “prices for Japanese auto parts in Vladivostok have remained stable and there are no problems with their delivery to the city.”<sup>19</sup>

Although Japan has blocked transactions with major Russian financial institutions, some smaller and regional banks remain an option for Russian-Japanese commercial transactions. One example is Vladivostok-based Solid Bank, which is co-owned by Japan’s HS Holdings Co. Ltd, holding a 46 percent stake.<sup>20</sup>

Critical infrastructure in the Russian Far East relies little on Japanese technology. The only exception is the thermal power plant on Russky Island in Vladivostok, which was built in the early 2010s and is equipped with seven Kawasaki gas turbines. Since the introduction of sanctions, their maintenance has become problematic,

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<sup>18</sup> “ChesAuto – custom-delivered autos”. 29.02.2024. <https://t.me/chesauto/3151> (In Russian).

<sup>19</sup> Interview with a Vladivostok owner of a Japanese car. July 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Bank with Japanese capital is growing in the Russian Federation. *Kommersant*. 11.04.2024. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6636989> (In Russian).

and RusHydro, which operates the Far Eastern energy grid, plans to replace them with indigenous ones.<sup>21</sup>

The introduction of sanctions blocked plans for Japanese shippers to use transport and transit corridors passing through Russia and its Far East. In 2020, Japanese businesses, with the support of the Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, tested transit routes via the Trans-Siberian Railway as part of the Trans-Siberian LandBridge service organized by Russian Railways and the shipping company FESCO.<sup>22</sup> However, after February 2022, Japan completely abandoned the Trans-Siberian Railway as a transit artery and stopped considering the NSR as a potential alternative to the Suez Canal route.<sup>23</sup>

For several years prior to the coronavirus pandemic, tourism was perhaps the fastest growing sector of Russian-Japanese cooperation in the Far East. Many Far Easterners went on vacation or even long weekends to Japan, where Russian airlines flew direct flights, while the flow of travelers from Japan to the Far East, primarily to Vladivostok, was growing (in terms of the foreign tourists' number, the Japanese ranked third after the Chinese and South Koreans). Counting primarily on the growing tourist flows, the largest Japanese air carriers, JAL and ANA, planned to launch regular flights to Vladivostok in 2020, but these plans were crossed out first by the pandemic and then by the sanctions.

There is currently no direct passenger connection between the Russian Far East and Japan. The best alternative route is China, such as Harbin or Beijing. An attempt to organize direct passenger service by sea was unsuccessful. In October 2023, the Russian shipping company Vostok Tour announced the launch of regular sea passenger services between Vladivostok and the Japanese port of Nanao in Ishikawa Prefecture.

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<sup>21</sup> Gigawatts are being connected to the Far East. *Kommersant*. 06.05.2024. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6687420> (In Russian).

<sup>22</sup> Russian Railways sent the first container train with Japanese cargo to Europe via the Trans-Siberian Railway. *Russian Railways*. 18.11.2020. <https://cargo.rzd.ru/ru/9433/page/2452802?id=256996> (In Russian).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a Japanese expert. April 2024.

However, after only four voyages, the company was forced to cease the project, faced with the unfriendly attitude of Japanese authorities, who subjected the ship to extremely rigorous inspections.<sup>24</sup> Tourism between the Russian Far East (and Russia as a whole) and Japan is also almost non-existent at the moment. Tourist trips, in principle, remain possible, but are associated with a number of difficulties. For Russians, this is primarily the lack of direct flights and the inability to use international payment systems, while, for the Japanese citizens, this is exacerbated by the Japanese government's "recommendation" not to visit Russia.

One of the few areas that has so far been relatively unaffected by the deterioration of bilateral relations is consular ties. All three Japanese Consulates General in the Far East (in Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk) continue to operate, while Russia and Japan have also managed to avoid mutual expulsion of consular personnel. The only exception was the incident in the fall of 2022, when Russian authorities declared the consul of the Japanese Consulate General in Vladivostok persona non grata, and Tokyo responded by expelling an officer of the Russian Consulate General in Sapporo.

While actively discouraging their citizens from coming to Russia, the Japanese authorities do not prevent Russian citizens from entering Japan. Unlike many of its Western partners, Tokyo has not significantly limited the issuance of visas to Russians. Thus, the Consulate General of Japan in Vladivostok issues visas to almost everyone wishing to visit the country. Every month, the consulate issues Russians 400–500 visas, of which about 70 percent are visas for tourist trips. For comparison: before 2020, the number of visas issued reached 2,000 per month.<sup>25</sup>

Bilateral educational contacts have been significantly reduced, though Russian students studying Japanese still have the opportunity

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<sup>24</sup> Sea voyages from Vladivostok to Japan were cancelled after an intensive inspection at a foreign port – a commission from Tokyo examined the Russian vessel. VL. RU. 11.22.2023. <https://www.newsvl.ru/vlad/2023/11/22/220681> (In Russian).

<sup>25</sup> Interview with a Japanese official. July 2024.

to go to this country. A number of Japanese educational and scholarship programs continue to operate for Russians. At the same time, the number of young Japanese coming to study at universities in the Russian Far East is extremely small. As of May 2024, only two Japanese citizens were studying at the largest university in the Far Eastern Federal District, the Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU) in Vladivostok. In fairness, it should be noted that, even before the sanctions and COVID-19, the number of Japanese students was quite small. In 2019, there were only three Japanese students at FEFU.<sup>26</sup> Partly as a result of sanctions, partly due to the long-term trend of decreasing interest in Russia among the Japanese, the only branch of a Russian university in Japan (FEFU's branch in Hakodate, which had been operating since 1994) came on the verge of closing and ceased enrolling new students in 2024. Ultimately, the Russian and Japanese sides decided against a formal shutdown, even though it still remains unclear how the branch will operate.<sup>27</sup>

Cultural and humanitarian contacts between Japan and the Russian Far East have decreased, but not ceased. For example, in March 2024, Japanese conductor and producer Ken'ichi Shimura toured Vladivostok as part of the *Anime Symphony* project.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The largest number of Japanese students in Vladivostok was observed in the 1990s, when Japanese constituted the overwhelming majority of foreigners studying the Russian language in the city. Moreover, as noted by university teachers of Russian, almost all Japanese students were highly motivated. Since the late 1990s, the number of Japanese students has steadily decreased (interview with Associate Professor of the Department of Russian as a Foreign Language at the FEFU Institute of Asian Studies Yu. A. Gunko. July 2024).

<sup>27</sup> FEFU's branch in Japan intends to operate in a new format. *TASS*. 03.01.2025. <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/22816357> (In Russian).

<sup>28</sup> “*Anime Symphony*”. Kenichi Shimura (Japan) in Vladivostok on March 17, 2024. *VL.RU*. <https://www.vl.ru/afisha/vladivostok/event/194273> (In Russian).

## South Korea's Sanctions Against Russia

On February 24, 2022, the government of the Republic of Korea joined the sanctions against Russia and introduced export restrictions at a level comparable to the measures imposed by the Western countries. On February 28, the ROK announced the suspension of transactions with the largest Russian banks, including Sberbank, VEB, VTB. Seoul began consultations with the U.S. Treasury Department to coordinate sanctions policy. The ROK was also affected by the U.S. foreign direct product rule (FDPR), according to which foreign companies which produce goods using American technologies must obtain a license from the U.S. government to export such goods to third countries. During consultations with the U.S. Department of Commerce, it was decided that smartphones, washing machines, cars, and similar non-military goods could be exempted from the FDPR restrictions by the U.S. government.<sup>29</sup> Still, South Korean companies exporting such goods to Russia must obtain permission from their own government [Timofeev et al., 2023, p. 260].

In March 2022, the ROK government announced an embargo on the supply of goods to 49 Russian departments, organizations, and companies. The list of goods subject to export control included 57 items such as electronic devices and software for their development, telecommunications equipment, optical devices, components and technologies, gas turbine and diesel engines for tractors and aircraft, navigation equipment, etc. Seoul also suspended the most favored nation treatment for Russia under the WTO. On April 28, 2023, the second edition of the list of goods restricted for export to Russia came into force, with 741 new items added to it. The new goods subject to export control

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<sup>29</sup> Information on export control measures against Russia, including the U.S. Foreign Direct Product Rules (FDPR). *Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy of the Republic of Korea*. 03.03.2022. <https://www.motie.go.kr/attach/viewer/095a2dda9c864e1d90d751f7668a1117/5b18ed72c204397c60c8a74455bd3423/778bdbf5db9ced7c8fd52756coobfocd>

included industrial equipment, oil and gas processing equipment, cars worth over \$50 thousand and their spare parts, transistors and other electronic components.<sup>30</sup>

On December 26, 2023, the ROK Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy announced new export restrictions against Russia and Belarus. Part of the new list included dual-use items including heavy construction equipment, steel structures, batteries, transport and loading equipment, machine tools and spare parts for aircraft, though these items in the new version of the list are subject to situational permission for export from the ROK government.<sup>31</sup> Another expansion of the list of goods restricted for export was announced by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy on June 28, 2024. The list includes 243 items, including metal cutting machines, parts of optical devices and sensors.<sup>32</sup> Thus, as of the end of June 2024, the total number of items restricted for export to Russia stood at 1402.

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<sup>30</sup> Guidelines for the Implementation of Export Control Measures against Russia Following the Revision of the 31st Notification on the Export and Import of Strategic Materials, 2023. *Yestrade Strategic Materials Management System Portal*. 15.03.2023. [https://www.yestrade.go.kr/common/common.do?jPath=/im/imBm010D&BD\\_NO=1&BBS\\_NO=34710&TOP\\_MENU\\_CODE=MENU0006&CURRENT\\_MENU\\_CODE=MENU0097&CURRENT\\_MENU\\_CODE=MENU0097](https://www.yestrade.go.kr/common/common.do?jPath=/im/imBm010D&BD_NO=1&BBS_NO=34710&TOP_MENU_CODE=MENU0006&CURRENT_MENU_CODE=MENU0097&CURRENT_MENU_CODE=MENU0097) (In Korean).

<sup>31</sup> Implementation of the 33rd Notice on the Export and Import of Strategic Materials *Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy of the Republic of Korea*. 20.02.2024. <https://www.motie.go.kr/attach/viewer/095a2dd9c864e1d90d751f7668a1117/66ab579c28cb8665f5194a05962bccb4/9a9db098b587ee18b321c826f3707a49>

<sup>32</sup> 대 (對) 러시아, 벨라루스 상황허가 대상품목 243 개 추가. 산업통상자원부 [243 new items subject to special approval in trade with Russia and Belarus. *Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy of the Republic of Korea*]. 28.06.2024. <https://www.motie.go.kr/kor/article/ATCL3f49a5a8c/169257/view#> (In Korean).

In line with the anti-North Korean stance of the Yoon Seok-yeol administration and as a reaction to the Russian-North Korean rapprochement, Seoul stepped up its sanctions activity against Russian individuals and legal entities accused of collaborating with the DPRK. One example was the inclusion of Vladivostok-registered Alis LLC in the U.S. and South Korean sanctions lists. The company, which engaged in software development, was suspected of having ties with North Korean companies.<sup>33</sup>

### **Russian-South Korean Interaction in the Russian Far East Under the New Conditions**

The volume of RF-ROK trade in 2024 amounted to \$11.4 billion (Russian exports to South Korea – \$6.9 billion, imports from South Korea – \$4.5 billion). The volume of bilateral trade in 2024 fell by more than 58 percent compared to 2021, when trade turnover was recorded at \$27.3 billion.<sup>34</sup> The latest available data on trade between the territories of the Far Eastern Federal District and South Korea is for 2021, when trade turnover amounted to \$10.3 billion (exports from the Far Eastern Federal District to the ROK stood at \$8.9 billion, while its imports from the ROK were \$1.3 billion).<sup>35</sup>

Due to sanctions pressure from Western countries and South Korean export restrictions, many bilateral cooperation projects have been seriously affected or stopped altogether. Since the second half

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<sup>33</sup> Another company from Vladivostok has fallen under U.S. and South Korean sanctions. *PrimaMedia*. 28.03.2024. <https://primamedia.ru/news/1712940/> (In Russian).

<sup>34</sup> Comp. from: *Korea International Trade Association*. <https://www.kita.org/kStatistics/overview/balanceOfTrade/balanceOfTradeList.do>

<sup>35</sup> Comp. from: Statistical information on foreign trade based on the results of the 4th quarter of 2021. *Far Eastern Customs Administration*. 11.03.2022. [https://dvtu.customs.gov.ru/statistic/2021-god/Itogovaya\\_informaciya/document/329535](https://dvtu.customs.gov.ru/statistic/2021-god/Itogovaya_informaciya/document/329535) (In Russian).

of the 2010s, the largest and most high-tech Russian-South Korean project was the participation of Korean leading shipbuilding companies in the construction of oil and LNG tankers at the Zvezda shipbuilding complex in Bolshoy Kamen (Primorsky Krai). The main South Korean partner (Samsung Heavy Industries, SHI) terminated the production of shipbuilding blocks and equipment for 10 out of 15 ice-class LNG tankers being built at Zvezda.<sup>36</sup> Currently, SHI does not directly implement joint projects with the Zvezda complex, while, as of 2024, work on the five remaining tankers was being carried out by Bolshoy KHAN,<sup>37</sup> a branch of the South Korean shipbuilder KHAN in Bolshoy Kamen, which provides agency services for DSME, SHI, and other shipbuilding companies in the ROK.

Unlike Tokyo, Seoul has not officially banned new investments in Russia, but, after February 2022, almost all previously planned South Korean investment projects were halted. These include the construction of an industrial complex in Primorye, which was announced as one of the “bridges of cooperation” under the “Nine Bridges” initiative to develop economic cooperation with Russia announced by President Moon Jae-in in 2017. A similar fate befell Lotte’s plan to build a livestock complex and a dairy plant in Primorsky Krai. At the same time, Lotte-controlled agricultural enterprises continue to operate, growing soybeans, corn, and oats. Lotte also retains control over the hotel of the same name in the center of Vladivostok, one of the largest in the city.<sup>38</sup>

The sanctions disrupted transport and logistics schemes, primarily affecting passenger flights between Russia, including cities

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<sup>36</sup> Buzlaev, P. Samsung Heavy has stopped producing equipment for 10 Zvezda LNG vessels. *Kommersant*. 26.12.2023. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6426798> (In Russian).

<sup>37</sup> LLC “Bolshoy KHAN”. *RBC Companies*. 07.03.2023. <https://companies.rbc.ru/id/1212500012427-obschestvo-s-ogranichennoj-otvetstvennostyu-bolshoj-khan> (In Russian).

<sup>38</sup> Unlike Japan, South Korea has never had direct investments in the Russian Far East comparable in size to the Sakhalin projects.

in the Russian Far East, and South Korea. All flights were suspended indefinitely by the South Korean side. Partial compensation for the interrupted flights was the launch, at the initiative of the South Koreans, of the Vladivostok-Donghae cargo and passenger ferry line in the summer of 2022, which is still operating today. In August 2025, the automobile and passenger ferry service linking Vladivostok and the South Korean port of Sokcho was resumed. As for cargo traffic, two South Korean container carriers (HMM and KMTC) left the Far East, but a large shipping company Sinokor continued to operate. The inclusion of the Eastern Stevedoring Company, which operates the terminal in the port of Vostochny, in the U.S. sanctions list in February 2024 forced Sinokor to stop working with this terminal in the Vostochny port, but the shipping company still maintains its presence in Vladivostok.<sup>39</sup>

Until 2020, tourism was one of the most successful areas of interaction between the Russian Far East and the Republic of Korea. In 2019, the number of Korean tourists visiting Vladivostok reached 300,000. The visa-free regime introduced in 2015 continues to operate between the two countries, but the absence of direct flights and Russia's disconnection from international payment systems have ruled out mass tourism. However, the Korea National Tourism Organization continues to operate in Vladivostok, offering tours and holding promotional events in cooperation with Russian organizations.

In the new circumstances, contacts between the Far East and the ROK have partly shifted to the subnational level. In December 2023, a seminar between representatives of Primorsky Krai and North Jeolla Province was held, during which prospects for cooperation in the fishing industry and trade in fish products were discussed. Official and business contacts between Primorsky Krai and the Gangwon

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<sup>39</sup> The largest sea carrier in the Far East refused to call at the port of Vostochny due to sanctions. *VPost-media*. 04.03.2024. <https://vpost-media.ru/texts/krupneyshiy-morskoy-perevozchik-na-dalnem-vostoke-iz-za-sankciy-otkazalsya-zakhodit-v-port> (In Russian).

province remain. At the meeting of the Association of Northeast Asian Regional Governments (NEAR) in May 2024 in Gyeongju, Action Plan for Cooperation between Primorsky Krai and Gangwon Province was signed.<sup>40</sup> In July 2023, with the support of the Gangwon administration, a container line linking Vladivostok, Donghae, and Busan was opened.<sup>41</sup> Marketing events are also arranged, such as two K-Market festivals in Vladivostok in 2023 and the Russian crab festivals in Donghae in 2023 and 2024. The emphasis on the subnational contacts can be explained by the desire of both sides to depoliticize economic and humanitarian cooperation. In addition, special interest of the Japan Sea provinces of the ROK in maintaining economic ties with the Russian Far East should be taken into account.

Even in unfavorable political conditions, a significant number of cultural, humanitarian, and educational contacts between the Russian Far East and the ROK are maintained. For example, Korean culture festivals are held in Vladivostok with the support of the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea. As of May 2024, 35 students from South Korea were studying at FEFU (in 2019, there were 41), while students of FEFU and other Russian universities still have the opportunity to go to South Korean universities under exchange programs.

## Conclusion

The sanctions policies of Japan and the ROK towards Russia have a common basis, primarily because both of these states are junior allies of America and part of the “collective West.” Their anti-Russian measures

<sup>40</sup> International organizations are an effective tool for developing international cooperation. *Telegram channel of the Agency for International Cooperation of Primorsky Krai.* 05.24.2024. [https://t.me/ams\\_primorsky/741](https://t.me/ams_primorsky/741) (In Russian).

<sup>41</sup> A container line will be opened between South Korea and Vladivostok this month. *Telegram channel “Gorod V”.* 06.07.2023. [https://t.me/gorod\\_vl/13171](https://t.me/gorod_vl/13171) (In Russian).

are aimed at weakening the industrial and technological potential of the RF as much as possible. At the same time, Tokyo and Seoul are not ready to impose on Russia the kinds of sanctions that could cause significant damage to their own economic and strategic interests.

One vivid example of such pragmatism is the Sakhalin-1 and Sakhalin-2 projects, which Tokyo exempted from sanctions. Japan and, to a lesser extent, South Korea, would like to maintain access to Russian natural resources, given the proximity of the resource-rich Far Eastern territories. As for manufacturing and high-tech sectors, Tokyo and Seoul easily sacrificed cooperation with Moscow, since Russia's market share in these areas is not significant for them. Specifically, in the Russian Far East, Japan's participation in the non-resource sector of the region's economy had been limited to Mazda (two car assembly plants in Primorye), while South Korea's only significant industrial project was a technological partnership with the Zvezda shipbuilding complex.

However, there are also important differences in the sanctions approaches of Japan and South Korea. In general, Tokyo pursues a much tougher policy towards Moscow. For example, Japan, unlike the ROK, not only limits exports to Russia, but also banned imports of a number of goods from it. Compared to the Japanese, the South Korean side is more eager to preserve ties with Russia and its Far Eastern territories. This is expressed, in particular, in ongoing official contacts between Primorsky Krai and Vladivostok with South Korea's provinces and municipalities.

Japan's higher degree of confrontation with Russia is explained by both political and economic reasons. Unlike the ROK, Japan is a member of the Group of Seven, which obliges it to comply with the most stringent "standards" of the West's anti-Russian policy. The Japanese political elite is more pro-American and more Russophobic, compared to the South Korean establishment, which includes an influential progressive-nationalist camp, which is more critical of America and counts on Russia's help in the matters of inter-Korean dialogue.

In the economic dimension, the decoupling between Russia and Japan had begun long before 2022, as the two countries needed each other less and less. A country with a shrinking population and stagnating

GDP, Japan's demand for Russian energy and raw materials has long been on the wane. This largely determined the modest results of former Prime Minister Abe's "eight-point cooperation plan" in the second half of the 2010s [Streltsov, Lukin 2017, pp. 55–56]. On the other hand, the era when Japan was a world leader in key areas of scientific and technological progress is gone, which reduces Japan's attractiveness for Russia as a technological and investment partner. South Korea, on the contrary, being at the peak of its economic form, is looking for new markets, while its industrial and technological achievements are of significant interest to Moscow.

There are also some geopolitical and historical nuances. While Japan has a special attachment to Sakhalin, the ROK prioritizes Primorsky Krai that has a common border with the DPRK. One should not discount the emotional and historical connection of the Koreans with the southern territories of the Russian Far East, some areas of which were part of proto-Korean states in the distant past.

Given all this, it can be assumed that the ties between the Russian Far East and the ROK will be quickly reactivated after the situation around Ukraine is resolved. The prospects for restoring relations with Japan look far less certain.

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