

**THE SAKOKU POLICY AND ITS IMPACT ON FOREIGN TRADE IN THE
EDO PERIOD: A REASSESSMENT OF JAPAN'S SELECTIVE
DIPLOMATIC STRATEGY**

Sino Habibov

moaaz2277@icloud.com

Abstract *The Sakoku policy of the Edo period (1603–1868) has traditionally been seen as a symbol of Japan's isolationist diplomacy. However, recent studies highlight it as a strategic policy aimed at preserving domestic order and national interests. This article examines the political background of the Sakoku policy, its limited trade structure through Dejima, and regional diplomatic practices, analyzing their multifaceted impacts on foreign trade and knowledge exchange.*

Keyword: *Sakoku, foreign trade, Edo shogunate, Dejima, Rangaku (Dutch studies), selective diplomacy, knowledge transfer*

Main Body

The Sakoku (national isolation) policy implemented by the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868) was not merely a closed-door policy, but rather a strategic diplomatic measure aimed at maintaining order and strengthening sovereignty by placing foreign contact under the shogunate's control. This paper examines the effects of this policy on Japan's foreign trade and intellectual exchange from political, economic, and cultural perspectives.

Political Background and Intentions of the Sakoku Policy

In the early 17th century, Japan faced numerous internal and external sources of instability. In particular, Christian missionary activities and political interference from European countries posed serious threats to the shogunate. The Shimabara Rebellion (1637–1638) was a prime example, after which the shogunate adopted strict policies to eliminate foreign religions and severely restrict the flow of information and people. This allowed the shogunate to reinforce its centralized authority and enforce ideological and religious control.

Limited Trade and Economic Impact

The shogunate did not completely ban trade but restricted it to designated partners—mainly the Dutch and the Chinese—through the port of Dejima in Nagasaki. By doing so, it managed to secure national security while controlling the benefits of trade. Through Dutch trade, Japan imported gunpowder, medical texts, astronomical instruments, and other items that contributed to the spread of Western knowledge and the development of “Rangaku” (Dutch studies). On the other hand, exports such as silver, copper, and lacquerware helped stimulate the domestic economy.

Regional Diplomacy and Selective International Relations

The shogunate maintained limited and geographically specific foreign relations through intermediaries: communication with Korea via the Tsushima Domain, relations with the Ryukyu Kingdom via the Satsuma Domain, and trade with the Ainu people via the Matsumae Domain. These relationships enabled Japan to sustain minimal diplomatic ties while gaining cultural and economic benefits.

Selective Acceptance of Knowledge and Culture

While excluding ideologically threatening elements like Christianity, the shogunate actively welcomed practical knowledge such as medicine, science, and geography. Western knowledge, introduced through the Dutch language, significantly contributed to the intellectual foundations of the country, as exemplified by Sugita Genpaku's *Kaitai Shinsho* (New Book of Anatomy). Furthermore, the development of Neo-Confucianism and *Kokugaku* (National Learning) helped cultivate a uniquely Japanese ideological framework in response to foreign ideas.

Overall Evaluation

Although the *Sakoku* policy appears on the surface to be closed and conservative, it was in fact a form of “strategic diplomacy” in which the shogunate selectively controlled trade and information. As a result, Japan enjoyed over 260 years of peace and stability, laying the groundwork for modernization during the Meiji Restoration.

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