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Dmitry Streltsov: "Tokyo is not ready to completely sever ties with Moscow"

The sanctions imposed by Tokyo on Moscow appear much milder than those from the US and Europe. Japanese companies Mitsui and Mitsubishi continue to participate in the development of the Sakhalin gas field. Finally, in May 2026, representatives from Japan's Ministry of Economy and several major trading companies visited Moscow. It might seem that Moscow has good prospects on the Japanese front. But what is the actual state of relations between the two neighboring countries today? Dmitry Streltsov, Head of the Department of Oriental Studies at MGIMO University and Professor, answered this and other questions in an interview with the BM.Moscow Foresight magazine.

President Vladimir Putin recently stated that, for the first time in modern history, Japan has classified Russia as one of its primary security threats. Meanwhile, experts note that Tokyo maintains a pragmatic approach in its economic relations with Moscow. How is this possible?

Tokyo’s current course should be viewed in the context of the confrontation between the collective West and Russia. Japan stands on the opposite side of the barricades, so it is logical that it considers Russia a threat to its national security.

Immediately after February 2022, more than 60% of Japanese companies partially or completely suspended their operations in Russia. As a result, trade turnover in 2025 dropped below $8 billion, compared to $233.2 billion in the peak year of 2013.

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Japan has almost completely halted imports of Russian oil, which accounted for about 4% of its total consumption before 2022. In September 2025, it joined the decisions made by the European Union and the United Kingdom in July to lower the price cap on Russian oil from $60 to $47.6 per barrel.

Although Russia represented a significant market for the Japanese automotive industry, the export of cars with an engine capacity exceeding 1.9 liters, as well as hybrid and electric vehicles, to Russia was banned in 2023.

At the same time, one cannot discount the fact that in recent years, the Japanese leadership has become deeply concerned about the expanding cooperation between Moscow and Beijing in sensitive areas such as space, missile technology, and aircraft engines—fields where Russia holds highly dominant positions and remains technologically ahead of China.

The Japanese also reacted with extreme irritation to the signing of the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and the DPRK in June 2024. Tokyo was alarmed by the deployment of more than 11,000 North Korean troops to the Kursk Oblast.

At the same time, many experts believe that the Land of the Rising Sun maintains a pragmatic approach to the economy. Despite participating in anti-Russian sanctions, Tokyo is not ready to completely sever ties with Moscow, particularly in the energy sector. Suffice it to say that, unlike its Western partners, Japan did not withdraw from the Sakhalin-2 project and continues to receive liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Russia.

The Sakhalin-2 contract is set to expire by 2033. In your view, does Japan intend to renew it?

A lot can still happen in the time remaining. Nevertheless, an opinion is frequently voiced within the expert community that Japan, following Europe's lead, should withdraw from Russian energy projects so as not to undermine solidarity on the Ukrainian issue. However, if this happens, domestic prices for gas and electricity will inevitably rise in Japan, and inflation—the fight against which the Tokyo government has declared a priority of its domestic policy—will accelerate.

Could you remind us how much did Japan invest in the Sakhalin projects?

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First of all, I would like to clarify a point: the Japanese consortium Sakhalin Oil and Gas Development Co. Ltd. (Sodeco) effectively exited the Sakhalin-1 project in October 2022 following the start of the special military operation in Ukraine. Experts estimate the total cost of expenditures for this project at around $9.2 billion.

However, the Japanese maintained their stake in Sakhalin-2. This project develops two fields on the northeastern Sakhalin shelf: Piltun-Astokhskoye and Lunskoye. Its infrastructure includes three offshore platforms, an onshore processing facility, an oil export terminal, and an LNG plant operating entirely on Japanese technology with a design capacity of 9.6 million tons per year.

According to official reports, Japanese companies Mitsui and Mitsubishi invested $1.7 billion in the Russian Sakhalin-2 project.

As for Japanese specialists, I believe there are practically none left in Sakhalin. Nevertheless, the LNG plant was built by the Japanese, and they still keep an eye on it. Russia remains dependent on these technologies since they are purely Japanese know-how.

Is it true that Japan was one of the first countries to introduce anti-Russian sanctions following the reunification of Crimea with the Russian Federation?

The Japanese government imposed its first sanctions in March 2014. However, after the start of the special military operation, various restrictions against our country tightened significantly. In many instances, Japanese authorities even launched their own initiatives, urging "hesitant nations" of the Global South to join the anti-Russian sanctions.

By the end of 2025, according to Nikolai Nozdrev, the Russian Ambassador to Tokyo, Japan had adopted more than 25 packages of restrictive measures in total. The sanctions affected over a thousand individuals and 120 legal entities in Russia, including government officials, individual employees, and entire companies across key economic sectors—such as finance, defense, metallurgy, energy, mining, and mechanical engineering.

The blacklists include representatives of the Russian media, scientists, and cultural figures.

The export of over two thousand types of products to Russia has been banned. These include luxury items, such as jewelry, musical instruments, watercraft, as well as various high-end leisure and entertainment equipment. The export ban also covers medical equipment and a number of expensive medicines.

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The introduction of these restrictions, as far as I know, was received quite painfully by a number of Japanese trading companies. The thing is, the Japanese had signed several lucrative contracts with the Russian side—for example, for the supply of diagnostic equipment to Russian clinics. These shipments had to be frozen.

You often visit Japan on business. Based on your observations, how do the Japanese people view Russia today?

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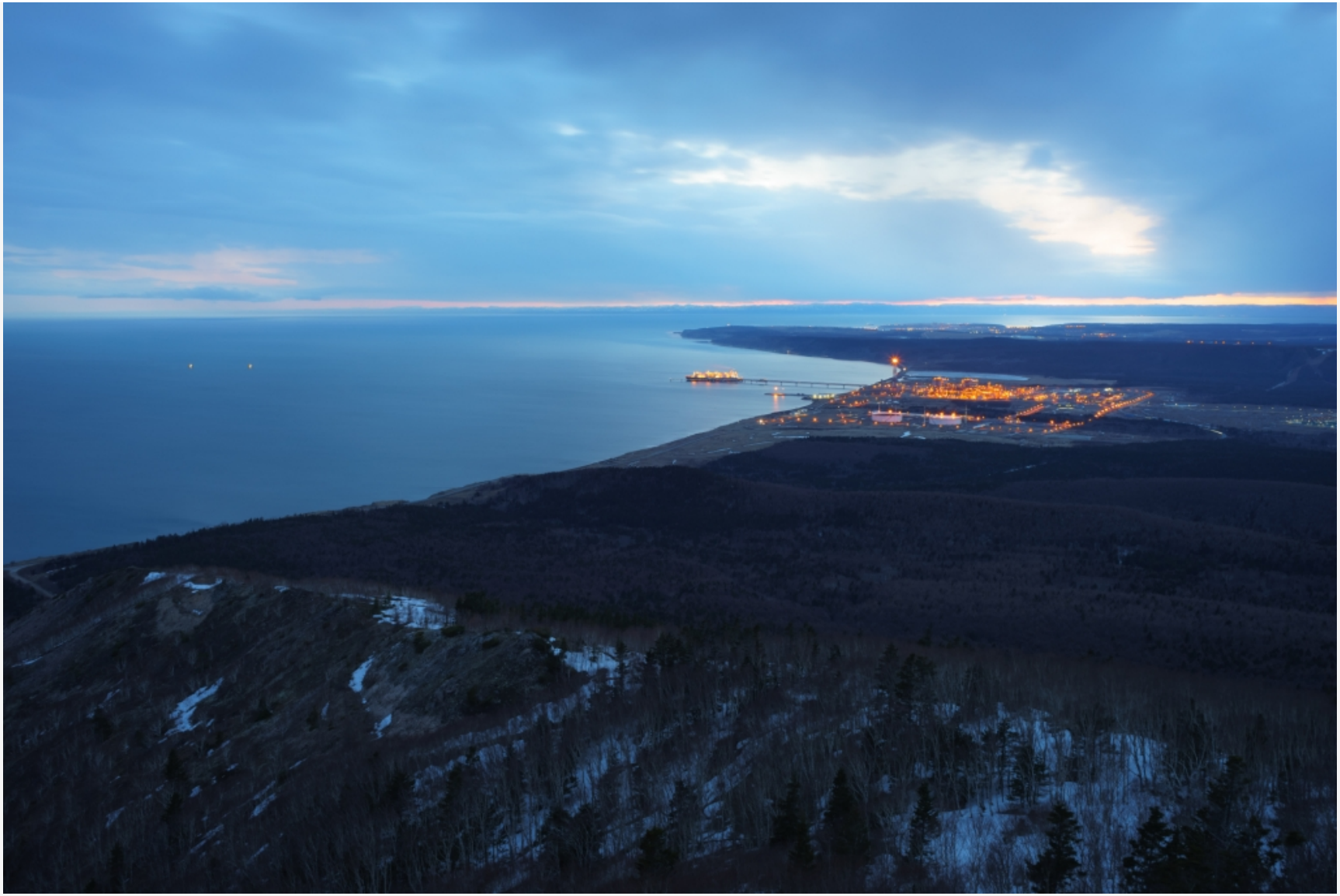

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In his recent speech, President Putin said: "We do not threaten Japan. We have absolutely no claims against it!". Nevertheless, it is no secret that the current generation of Japanese has grown up on the Russophobic idea that Japan is a victim of the Soviet Union, which illegally occupied the Southern Kurils. Of course, the Japanese media played the primary role in this.

A public opinion poll conducted not so long ago showed that only about 5% of Japanese feel any sympathy toward Russia. Roughly the same amount (4.9%) consider the current state of relations with Russia to be "good" or "relatively good".

There are rumors that Japan is supplying weapons to Ukraine. What do you know about this?

– No, the Japanese do not supply weapons to Ukraine. The ban on weapon exports remains in place in the country—as written in the Constitution.

Tokyo supplies Kyiv with vehicles, reconnaissance drones, demining equipment, thermal imagers, and other non-lethal military equipment.

In 2026, Japan promised to allocate $6 billion to Ukraine for humanitarian and medical support. Kyiv has already received more than 2.5 thousand power generators, over 65 thousand transformers, 10 thousand power generation units, as well as equipment for the maintenance and restoration of the country's energy system. This was stated in Kyiv by the Vice-Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada, Olena Kondratiuk, who has close ties with Tokyo.

Japan openly expresses its solidarity with Ukraine. This has been clearly indicated since the beginning of the SMO (Special Military Operation), and the position of the official authorities has not changed today.

Is it possible that in the highest echelons of power in today's Japan, there are absolutely no supporters left for establishing a peaceful dialogue with Russia?

Let's put it this way: within the country's business elite, there are certain forces interested in resuming economic cooperation and expanding the list of mutually beneficial economic projects. They are not very numerous, but they do exist. For the time being, politicians who are loyally disposed toward our country are also remaining silent.

It is telling that today, even within the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomats are positively disposed toward Russia.

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I cannot help but note the fact that the Embassy of Japan in Moscow, and personally Ambassador Akira Muto, are doing a great deal to continue the dialogue between our countries in the cultural, educational, and scientific fields.

Our country also still has friends in Japan's academic community—scientists, professors, and educators. The Japanese are not refusing humanitarian exchanges with Russia, nor are they restricting Russian tourists from obtaining visas.

It turns out that while politicians are sorting out their differences, the number of Russian tourists visiting Japan is growing almost every month?

If the data from the Japan National Tourism Organization is to be believed, in October 2025 alone, Russians made a record number of visits to Japan—more than 30,000

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And for the entirety of 2025, around 130,000 Russians vacationed in Japan. The increase compared to the previous year was 104.2%. Some companies saw a massive surge in demand for guided tours to Japan, reaching up to 40%.

This "explosion of love" from fans of vacationing in Japan is even more surprising because there are currently no direct flights from Russia to Japan. However, Russian travelers seem completely unfazed by this.

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During her meeting with Donald Trump in Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, according to The Washington Times, risked objecting to the American president when the discussion turned to Japan's continued participation in the Sakhalin projects. Doesn't this suggest that the head of government favors normalizing relations with Moscow?

The ascension of Sanae Takaichi to the premiership in October 2025 provides food for thought regarding the future of Russian-Japanese relations. On one hand, Takaichi resolutely supports Ukraine, condemns Russia, and takes an overtly pro-Taiwan stance. On the other hand, she positions herself as a protégé of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the heir to his foreign policy tradition, which entails a special relationship with Russia.

In her address to parliament after being confirmed as head of government, she acknowledged that "relations with Moscow are in a difficult situation" and stated that she would seek to conclude a peace treaty to once and for all "solve the problem" of the Kuril Islands.

Furthermore, speaking at a rally marking "Northern Territories Day" in February 2026, Sanae Takaichi declared her commitment to signing a peace treaty with Russia, despite the difficulties in their bilateral relations.

At the same time, Takaichi took a number of steps indicating her interest in easing the crisis state of relations with the Kremlin. Takaya Imai, a representative of the economic bureaucracy who served as Abe's key advisor on Russian affairs for nearly nine years, was appointed to the Cabinet Office.

Many also see a positive signal for bilateral relations in the appointment of heavyweight Toshimitsu Motegi as Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, who served as Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry during the early period of Abe's administration and well understands Russia's significance for Japanese economic interests.

Nevertheless, the LDP's crushing victory in the 2025 lower house parliamentary elections means little for bilateral relations with Russia. The election results highlight the rise of nationalism in Japanese politics, as well as the strengthening of right-wing and anti-liberal voter sentiments. Takaichi may adopt a demonstratively tough line on the Russian front to boost her domestic approval ratings.

I also assume that a settlement in Europe and an improvement in Russian-American relations will create favorable ground for positive shifts in Japan's relations with Russia as well.

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