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PARTICIPATING IN SANCTIONS REGIMES: A COMPARISON OF JAPAN'S AND SOUTH KOREA'S RESPONSES TO THE 2014 ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA AND THE 2022 RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

RÉSZVÉTEL A SZANKCIÓS RENDSZEREKBEN:
JAPÁN ÉS DÉL-KOREA VÁLASZAINAK
ÖSSZEHAISONLÍTÁSA A KRÍM 2014-ES
ANNEKTÁLÁSA ÉS AZ UKRAJNA 2022-ES
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KKI POLICY BRIEF

Abstract: While the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea posed a significant threat to Japan and South Korea, key US allies in Northeast Asia, their passive responses indicated a reluctance to sacrifice relations with Russia over the conflict. In contrast, reactions to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war have seen a significant change in the level of commitment demonstrated by Japan and the ROK. This paper aims to answer why Japan and South Korea have adopted a different sanctions policy in response to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war than they did in the aftermath of the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Three possible factors are considered in answering this question: the influence of the bilateral level and the much-discussed economic interdependencies related to it, the international level, and the domestic level. It is assumed that the latter two factors were more likely to have determined Japan's and South Korea's decision to take more tangible steps following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, in line with the rest of the West. The paper concludes that it was primarily the deterioration of the regional environment and the related need to meet the United States' expectations that has led to a stronger commitment by both countries.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Japan, South Korea, Northeast Asia, United States, Annexation of Crimea, Russia-Ukraine war

Összefoglalás: Bár a Krím annexiója 2014-ben már jelentős fenyegetést jelentett az USA két kulcsfontosságú északkelet-ázsiai szövetségese, Japán és Dél-Korea számára, passzív reakcióik az Oroszországgal való kapcsolataik feláldozásától való vonakodásukat jelezték. Ezzel szemben Oroszország 2022-ben megindított Ukrajna elleni támadása jelentős változást hozott Japán és Dél-Korea elkötelezettségének mértékében. Jelen elemzés arra keresi a választ, hogy Japán és Dél-Korea miért folytat más szankciópolitikát a 2022-es orosz-ukrán háborúra válaszul, mint a Krím 2014-es annexióját követően. A kérdés megválaszolásában három lehetséges tényező kerül figyelembevételre: a bilaterális szint és ezzel összefüggésben a sokat tárgyalt gazdasági interdependenciák hatásai, valamint a nemzetközi és végül a hazai szint hatásai, feltételezve, hogy az utóbbi két faktor meghatározóbb volt Japán és Dél-Korea a Nyugat többi részével összhangban lévő, kézzelfoghatóbb lépései meghozatalára vonatkozó döntésében a 2022-es ukrain orosz inváziót követően. Az elemzés arra a következtetésre jut, hogy elsősorban a regionális környezet romlása és ezzel kapcsolatosan az Egyesült Államok elvárásainak való megfelelés szükségessége vezetett mindkét ország erőteljesebb elköteleződéséhez.

Kulcsszavak: Oroszország, Ukrajna, Japán, Dél-Korea, Egyesült Államok, a Krím annexiója, orosz-ukrán háború,



Introduction

Both Japan and South Korea are key allies of the United States, and their role has become increasingly important since the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" strategy. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has serious implications for Northeast Asia, but despite the fact that it was [already evident](#) in the annexation of Crimea that the Russian aggression [threatened](#) to divert US attention from the Indo-Pacific and [showed](#) the risks of economic dependence on a revisionist, threatening neighbour, in 2014 neither Japan nor South Korea took firm action against Russia, with Tokyo imposing mostly symbolic sanctions and Seoul not imposing any. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 has prompted a different response from both countries. While Japan, particularly compared to its reactions to the annexation of Crimea, has been seen to be taking a greater role on the side of the West, South Korea has been criticised for its initial hesitancy, although it eventually joined the sanctions regime, albeit to a limited extent compared to Japan.

The research question this paper wants to answer is why Japan and South Korea are pursuing a different sanctions policy towards Russia in the context of the Ukraine crisis in 2022 than they did in 2014. Thus, the paper examines the political processes that led to (non)sanctioning, while other issues related to sanctions, such as their effectiveness and consequences, are beyond the scope of the paper. The paper begins with a summary of sanctions theory, which provides the basis for the analysis. It then examines South Korea's, and Japan's responses to the annexation of Crimea and the Russia-Ukraine war, providing an overview of the measures taken and their possible explanations, considering the role of the international, the bilateral, and the domestic levels of influence on the decision to impose sanctions. This analysis is followed by a conclusion that summarises and compares the findings.

Sanctions theory

Sanctions as a foreign policy tool have become [more prevalent](#) since the end of the Cold War, but the reasons why some states choose (not) to impose them have received less attention than their consequences or effectiveness. Sanctions can be analysed on [four levels](#): the level of the sender and target states, the interaction between these states, and international coalition politics. At the level of the bilateral relations between the target and sender, economic relations can be decisive: [the standard view](#) is that the higher costs associated with closer economic ties between the sender and the target may discourage the former from imposing sanctions. While this assumption has been challenged, and some research finds [no correlation](#) or [suggests](#) that increased trade raises the likelihood of sanctions, it is worth examining. Nevertheless, there are two factors that may prove to be better tools for explaining the behaviour of South Korea and Japan: the international level, including alliance politics and the regional security environment of Northeast Asia, and the domestic level, which includes the perceptions of Russia held by the leaders and public opinion in Japan and the ROK. A number of influencing factors may be at work at the international level: the [commitment of leader countries](#), [coercion](#) by allies, a [fear](#) of damaging and/or the [hope](#) of gaining a good international reputation may all affect a state's willingness to sanction. Domestic actors



and processes, such as public opinion, [party politics](#), or [elections](#) can also influence whether a state decides to sanction. For example, the public [can undermine](#) international pressure for sanctions, or it can also [motivate](#) governments to impose sanctions.

Japan's response to the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine

Japan, as a member of the G7, was under strong international, mainly US, pressure during the 2014 Ukraine crisis and [could not avoid some sanctions](#), while the weak engagement of other G7 members, e.g. Italy and France, [allowed](#) for a limited engagement to some extent. Japan introduced sanctions largely within the G7 framework, but these were [symbolic, diverging in scope and timing](#) from the measures imposed by the EU and the US: each sanction was introduced late, and they lagged behind those of the leader countries in terms of content and strength. Japan's limited engagement was demonstrated for example when it [decided](#) not to issue visas to 23 individuals [without freezing their assets, as it is usually done](#), or [publishing a blacklist](#) with their names, with which Japan [prevented their public naming and shaming](#), the core purpose of the measure. In another case Tokyo decided [not to target](#) the Russian energy sector, unlike other Western countries. With regard to the [asset freezes](#) of individuals, it was [suggested](#) that it was unclear whether the targeted individuals held any assets in Japan, and the restriction on imports from Crimea could also not be interpreted as a real commitment, as the amount of these was [negligible](#), and therefore came at almost no cost to Japan. Although this attitude also questioned Japan's [proactive contribution to peace](#), a slogan of its first National Security Strategy, maintaining relations with Russia was seen as more important at that time.

In contrast, Japan's response to the 2022 invasion was robust and swift: Tokyo was among the first to condemn Russia's actions, and from [24 February onwards](#), it has introduced increasingly tough measures in cooperation with the G7 countries. Although a focus on cooperation with the G7 can also be observed in this case, protecting relations with Russia has not been an aim in this instance. The Japanese administration's dedication can be seen through such additional steps as deviating from Japan's previous refugee policy to accommodate [Ukrainian refugees](#) and [changing its guidelines](#) to be able to supply defence equipment (e.g. bulletproof vests) to Ukraine.

Throughout his tenure, Shinzo Abe was [proactive](#) in his approach to Russia and refused to sacrifice relations with Russia because of its annexation of Ukraine. This can be attributed to several factors, one being that the Abe administration had been engaged in a process of normalising relations with Russia to resolve the Northern Territories/Southern Kurils issue. The Abe administration [hoped](#) that since Putin had recognised the 1956 Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration in 2000, which stated that Shikotan and Habomai would be transferred to Japan after a peace treaty, it would be feasible to secure these islands, and that some sort of agreement would be possible to reach on Etorofu and Kunashiri. It was thought that the resolution of the Northern Territories/Southern Kurils dispute would achieve two goals, both aimed at countering China, beyond a political victory and the fulfilment of [Abe's personal motivations](#). [On the one hand](#), by ending the territorial dispute, Japan could redeploy its military forces to



parts of its territory located closer to China; [on the other hand](#), the conclusion of the dispute would result in improved Japan-Russia relations, which would entail Russia acting as a deterrent to China.

In March 2022, Russia suspended peace talks on the Southern Kurils/Northern Territories due to Japan's [explicitly unfriendly position](#), and in July it [declared](#) the areas "an inalienable part" of its territory, over which its "sovereignty [...] is beyond doubt". With this, the process for resolving the status of the islands formally collapsed. However, signs that an agreement could not be reached had been visible as early as 2019, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's [statement](#) indicating that Russia continued to hold the view that there could be no transfer of the islands until Japan recognised that they had been rightfully under Russian sovereignty since World War II. Yet it was the [July 2020 amendment](#) of the Russian constitution, which stated that "actions [...] directed towards the alienation of part of the territory of the Russian Federation [...] are not allowed", that has essentially removed any possibility of resolving the issue.

Another aspect of the rapprochement with Russia was the country's [interest](#) in acquiring new energy sources after the nuclear power plant shutdowns following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster. Energy has been a significant factor in Japan's trade relations with Russia: between 2013 and 2020, [80.7%](#) of Japan's imports from Russia were mineral products, of which almost [80%](#) were petroleum oils and gases, mostly crude oil and LNG. Just as the decline in trade relations (see Figures 1 and 2) lends credence to the idea that states are more inclined to impose sanctions when economic relations with the target state are weaker, the higher share of imports from Russia in Japan's energy imports (see Table 1) explains why Japan did not sanction the Russian energy sector and took a more restrained position overall in 2014, while its lower share explains why Tokyo has been more willing to [impose](#) sanctions in 2022. However, the closeness of economic ties is highly relative in this context: it is difficult to assume that a decrease of 0.84 percentage points (in the ratio of Japan-Russia trade volume in Japan's total trade volume, from 2.24% in 2013 to 1.40% in 2021) would be decisive, especially considering that it was already suggested in 2014 that it would be [unconceivable](#) that Japan would not find alternative energy suppliers even in the case of a full embargo on Russian energy.

Thus, economic interdependencies do not have sufficient explanatory power in this case, while the worsening bilateral political ties may have played a role in Japan's inclination to take stronger action against Russia. However, it will be argued below that the main factor has been the change in the regional environment since 2014. While the [expansion and qualitative development](#) of North Korea's nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities play a role in this change, the primary component is undeniably the clear rise of China and the related deterioration of US-China relations, as well as the PRC's increasing [aggressiveness](#) in recent years in general¹, but especially towards Taiwan [since 2016](#). It was also intrinsically linked to China that Tokyo's hope of Russia being a partner against it has been shattered: for example, the increasingly forming Russia-China axis manifested itself in the form of Russian-Chinese navy ships [circling](#) Japan's coast while conducting a joint military drill in 2021. Japanese public opinion, which can significantly [impact](#) its foreign policy, also indicates how a decline in regional security is a key factor in Japan's shift in its sanctions policy. At present, there

1 See, for example, the response to South Korea's THAAD deployment in 2017, the multiplying border clashes with India, a more visible presence in the South China Sea, or the worsening relations with Australia.



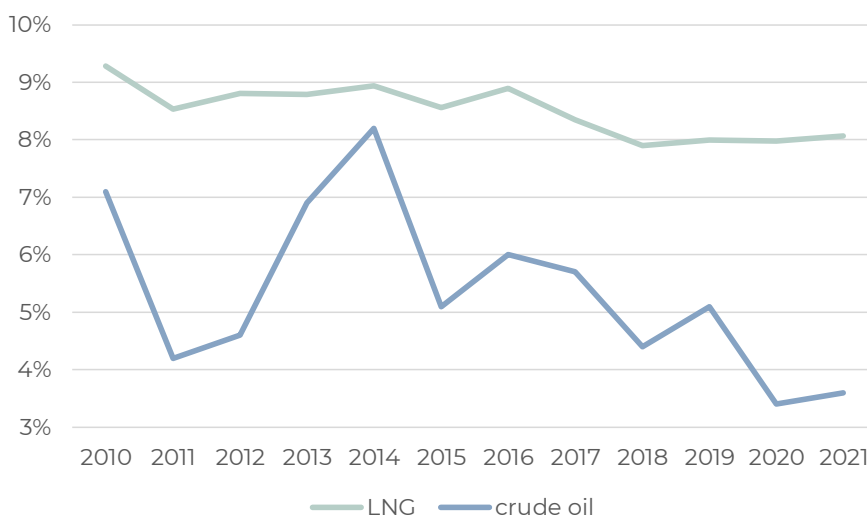
is immense [support for Ukraine and sanctions](#), and [negative views](#) towards Russia (91%). Although it would certainly be more difficult for the government to present fostering relations with Russia to the Japanese public now than it was in 2013-2014, it is important to note that public opinion was also unfavourable towards Russia in 2013-2014 (64-69% viewed Russia [negatively](#)). A telling effect of the Ukraine war is that concerns of regional security have been heightened, with [77%](#) of respondents worried about it spilling over to a China-Taiwan conflict, and [91%](#) believing Japan should prepare for a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

Figure 1.
Japan-Russia trade, 2010-2021. (USD, millions)



Source: IMF.

Figure 2.
Russia's share of Japan's LNG and crude oil imports.



Source: [Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry \(METI\)](#).



Overall, in 2022 Tokyo considered that its relations with Russia could be sacrificed to signal its commitment as an ally to the United States and [out of the fear](#) that China could become encouraged to engage in similar out-of-line actions if it did not take tangible steps against Russia's aggression.

Table 1.
Russia's rank among Japan's import and export partners, and the share of Russian imports and exports in Japan's total exports and imports.

	Imports to Japan		Exports from Japan	
	Russia's rank among import partners	Russia's share of total imports	Russia's rank among export partners	Russia's share of total exports
2010	13	2.33%	20	1.05%
2011	13	2.22%	15	1.44%
2012	13	2.35%	16	1.58%
2013	12	2.83%	14	1.54%
2014	10	3.05%	18	1.34%
2015	13	2.43%	23	0.82%
2016	13	1.96%	23	0.80%
2017	13	2.06%	21	0.86%
2018	13	2.08%	20	0.99%
2019	13	1.99%	21	1.02%
2020	13	1.70%	20	0.92%
2021	13	1.82%	19	1.04%

Source: [IMF](#).

South Korea's response to the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine

South Korea has taken actions against Russia following its annexation of Crimea that could best be described as minimal. The government supported a [UNGA resolution](#) calling for respecting the territorial integrity of Ukraine and issued a [statement](#) in



which the ROK government “expressed serious concerns” and reaffirmed its support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and rejected the possibility of recognising the Crimean referendum and the subsequent annexation. However, it did not impose any sanctions on Russia, and it was [the only US ally](#) to not cancel its visa waiver program with Russia.

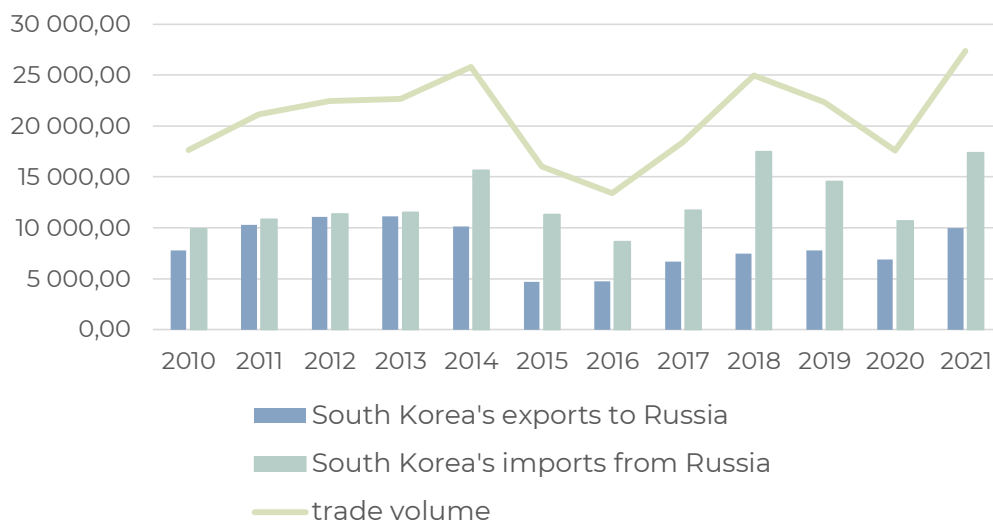
In contrast, South Korea [imposed](#) sanctions in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, with three batches introduced in the period 28 February-7 March, 2022. Introducing these measures was preceded by a long period of hesitation, during which it was unclear whether South Korea would be willing to sanction Russia at all. When the administration did announce that it would join the Western sanctions, it remained ambiguous by stating that the ROK would not impose unilateral sanctions. However, domestic and international criticism, and the fact that the US Commerce Department [omitted](#) South Korea from its list of states exempt from the Foreign Direct Product Rule (FDPR), resulting in South Korean firms needing US approval for products using US technology and software prior to exporting them to Russia, eventually successfully pressured Seoul into introducing unilateral sanctions against Russia. Unlike other countries (e.g. Japan), however, the ROK [has not introduced](#) any measures since 7 March.

The 2014 Ukraine crisis [came at a bad time for South Korea](#): Park Geun-hye’s Eurasia Initiative, part of a broader Trustpolitik, which placed Russia-ROK relations at its very centre, had been introduced only a few months before. The aim of this initiative was to create a truly ‘one’ Eurasia, and Russia was meant to play a decisive role in this process, [if only](#) because it facilitated South Korea’s geographical access to other parts of Eurasia. However, the most important aspect of the program was the development of inter-Korean relations: North Korea, located between Russia and South Korea, was both its [prerequisite and its main objective](#). Despite [pressure](#) from the US, South Korean leaders [hoped](#) that there was potential in ROK-Russian relations and therefore [feared](#) that opting for sanctions against Russia would jeopardize the whole Trustpolitik.

Under the Moon Jae-in administration, Russia returned as a priority: the previous Trustpolitik was replaced by the New Northern Policy, which Moon announced in May 2017, the first month of his inauguration. The President also declared that Russia was a [prerequisite](#) for this policy, as best reflected in the [9-Bridges strategy](#), which set out goals directed towards stronger energy, logistics, and agricultural cooperation with Russia. Most of the ideas were strongly linked to fostering inter-Korean relations as well (for example, the project linking the Trans-Siberian railway with the Trans-Korean railway).

Two claims can be made in the context of South Korea’s bilateral economic relations with Russia and its willingness to sanction. First, the fact that the reluctance to sacrifice relations with Russia was equally present under Moon Jae-in suggests that the higher inclination to sanction was not due to a significant deterioration in the Russia-ROK bilateral relations. Second, the standard assumption that the propensity to impose sanctions is higher when economic relations are weaker with the target state is not applicable in the case of the ROK, thus it does not explain the research question, as trade between South Korea and Russia had expanded by 2021 compared to 2013/2014 (see Figure 3 and Table 2), although not remarkably (the ratio of South Korea-Russia trade volume in South Korea’s trade volume increased by 0.06 percentage points, from 2.12% in 2013 to 2.18% in 2021).

Figure 3.
South Korea-Russia trade, 2010-2021. (USD, millions)



Source: IMF.

Table 2.
Russia's rank among South Korea's import and export partners, and the share of Russian imports and exports in South Korea's total exports and imports.

	Imports to South Korea		Exports from South Korea	
	Russia's rank among import partners	Russia's share of total imports	Russia's rank among export partners	Russia's share of total exports
2010	12	2.33%	12	1.69%
2011	13	2.07%	11	1.88%
2012	12	2.19%	10	2.04%
2013	12	2.23%	10	2.02%
2014	11	2.98%	12	1.80%
2015	9	2.59%	23	0.90%
2016	10	2.13%	22	0.98%
2017	9	2.49%	17	1.19%
2018	8	3.28%	16	1.23%
2019	9	2.90%	15	1.44%
2020	9	2.30%	13	1.35%
2021	9	2.84%	12	1.55%

Source: IMF



This leaves domestic policy factors and international effects to explain the shift in South Korea's sanctions policy. The [argument](#) that domestic policy plays a secondary role in South Korea's foreign policy compared to international factors seems to be confirmed², and it can be stated that geopolitical considerations triumph over the need to satisfy public opinion. [In contrast](#) to 2014, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has generated both considerable public interest and [support for Ukraine](#) in South Korea (with [66%](#) following the events of the Russia-Ukraine war, and [92%](#) perceiving it as a serious risk to the world). Most South Koreans ([84%](#)) also held unfavourable views of Russia in 2022, especially in comparison to 2014, when only [48%](#) regarded Russia negatively. Consequently, the Moon Jae-in administration faced harsh domestic criticism over its reluctance to impose sanctions. However, this was not the factor that changed South Korea's calculus, it was the US move not to grant the ROK an exemption from the FDPR, as evidenced by the fact that South Korea has not imposed any sanctions since it was granted this exemption. This assumes an increased need for the strengthening of the US-ROK alliance, stemming from the deterioration of the regional environment. What was outlined in the section on Japan on the changing regional environment also applies to the ROK, although there are two important things to add. First, South Korean public opinion of China had never been as negative in the past twenty years as it was in 2022, with [80%](#) of respondents perceiving the country as unfavourable. Second, the DPRK is seen as a more existential threat in South Korea than in Japan (in South Korea, one of the primary effects of the war in Ukraine was [heightened fears](#) of North Korean nuclear capabilities and a possible attack).

Overall, South Korea did not take steps against Russia because of the deterioration of their bilateral relations, nor due to the pressure it received from its public, but it was successfully pressured by the United States into imposing sanctions, and it ultimately sought to meet US expectations in the face of a worsening regional environment.

Conclusion

This paper set out to answer the research question why Japan and South Korea are pursuing a different sanctions policy towards Russia in the context of the Ukraine crisis in 2022 than they did in 2014. To answer this question, three factors rooted in sanctions theory were considered: the international level, the domestic level, and the level of bilateral relations between the sender and target states. The initial assumption was that bilateral relations and the possible correlation between economic interdependencies and the willingness to sanction would be the factor least likely to explain the research question. This hypothesis was confirmed: in the case of South Korea, the idea that economic interdependencies between the target and sender reduce the propensity to

- 2 A noteworthy addition is that the [observation](#) that whether a conservative or progressive party is in power in the ROK determines attitudes towards the United States does not hold true in this context, as progressives tend to emphasise South Korea's autonomy in foreign policy decision-making and are more open to cooperation with states outside the US alliance system, while for conservatives the main consideration is maintaining the US-ROK alliance: under the progressive Moon Jae-in administration, Seoul aligned with the US and the West more closely than under a conservative Park Geun-hye, and the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol's entry into office in May 2022 has not led to the imposition of new sanctions, either.



sanction was not supported, since economic ties with Russia had expanded by 2022. As for Japan, although the assumption was confirmed, it had little explanatory power due to the small differences between 2013-2014 and 2021.

In terms of the domestic and international levels, a key finding is that for both Seoul and Tokyo, the international level had a stronger impact than the domestic one, although the latter also played a role, albeit to varying degrees. In Japan, a deterioration of the perceptions of Russia among both the public and the leadership can be observed, while South Korea's initial hesitation in reactions suggests that foreign policy thinking towards Russia has not changed fundamentally. While in both cases the worsening regional environment and the need to signal commitment to the United States was the primary factor, there is a noteworthy difference between the influences that were also prevalent. In Japan's shift in its sanctions policy, the deteriorating bilateral relations with Russia prior to the war has played a part in Japan abandoning cooperation with Russia in the short term and taking swift and robust measures, but in the case of the ROK it appears that in the absence of worsening relations, South Korea initially sought to protect its ties with Russia and only imposed sanctions against it under pressure from the United States.

It can also be concluded that Japan has made more considerable efforts in the context of the Ukraine-Russia conflict than South Korea in both 2014 and 2022. This, on the one hand, may be because Japan is under greater international pressure due to its G7 membership. On the other hand, the observation that South Korea is more prone to applying a hedging strategy in its foreign policy than [Japan](#), often [delaying](#) or [avoiding](#) important decisions to [minimise its risks and losses](#), may also explain this phenomenon. While the fact that both countries reacted more strongly in 2022 than in 2014 is explained well by the deteriorating regional environment in Northeast Asia, future research could examine the role that the changed "audience costs" (i.e. "[the domestic political costs or loss of reputation in international settings that \[the country\] would have to bear if it failed to make good on threats or promises](#)") have played in this owing to the differences in the nature of the annexation of Crimea and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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