Sakoku (鎖国) is a policy of controlled and very limited external contact, for business or otherwise, imposed by the Edo Bakufu. It consisted of monopoly of external trade by the Bakufu, prohibition of Christianity and the ban on Japanese travel to/from abroad. However, the term sakoku, which implies closing the country with chains, became popular only toward the end of the Edo period. Since then, it has been used widely to illustrate the foreign policy of the Edo period, often with a negative connotation, but some historians propose not to use this term any more. Here is some time lines of sakoku.

<Closing the country>
1612  Christianity banned in Bakufu territories
1616  Nagasaki and Hirado are specified for Western ships
1623  UK drops out of trade with Japan
1624  Japan terminates diplomatic and trade relations with Spain
1633  Only ships with bakufu documents are allowed. Japanese living abroad for five years or more are not allowed to come home
1634  Only Nagasaki Port was allowed for foreign trade. Japanese travel to Southeast Asia and return of Japanese from abroad are prohibited
1637  Christian farmers rise against Bakufu in Shimabara, Kyushu, which is suppressed
1639  Japan terminates trade relations with Portugal. Only China & Netherlands are allowed to trade.

<Re-opening>
Mid 18c- mid 19c  Russian, British, French & American ships approach Japan but Bakufu rejects them
1825  Bakufu orders hans to repel foreign ships by military means
1842  China is defeated by UK and forced to cede Hong Kong, which shocks Bakufu
1853-54  US Black Ships loaded with cannons negotiate and sign a Friendship Treaty with Japan
1858  US demands and signs a commercial treaty with Japan (implemented in 1859)
1866  Japanese overseas travel for business and study is allowed
1873  Christianity is permitted

Historians still debate why this policy was adopted. The main explanation points to the Bakufu's intention to control and monopolize trade and ban Christianity. During the sakoku years, foreign trade was officially permitted only at a tiny artificial island at Nagasaki under authority's strict control, and only with China and the Netherlands.

However, there was also other permitted and unpermitted trade. Tsushima Han was allowed to trade with Korea. Satsuma Han traded with Okinawa and China after it invaded and occupied Okinawa. Matsumae Han, in Hokkaido, was permitted to trade with Ainu people, a native minority people of Northern Japan (who were regarded as foreigners by the Bakufu). These hans often traded illegally by exceeding permitted limits. There were other hans engaged in illegal trade. Such illegal trade was very profitable for violating hans. The Bakufu tried to police and crack down on them, but only unsuccessfully.