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Japan, Germany shake off WWII arms constraints. A cause for concern?

Germany is sending arms to the Kurdish *peshmerga* in Iraq, and Japan is negotiating weapons deals with Australia and India. Their neighbors have very different responses.

By **Peter Ford**, Staff Writer | SEPTEMBER 9, 2014

Beijing

Nearly 70 years after the end of World War II, Germany and Japan are finally loosening the last of the bonds that the victorious allied powers tied to limit their military ambitions.

Germany, for the first time, is sending lethal weapons to irregular forces in a war zone – arming the Kurdish *peshmerga* against Islamic State fighters. On the other side of the world Japan, easing decades-old restrictions on arms exports, is in negotiations to sell submarines to Australia and sea-planes to India.

“As these two powers emerge from the cold war, it is much harder for them to rely on the United States or other allies for their defense,” says Chris Hughes, professor of International Politics and Japanese Studies at Warwick University in Britain.

“They are more exposed to a range of threats...and they are being pushed by similar pressures into more prominent international roles,” Prof. Hughes adds.

Their neighbors are reacting differently, though. There are no hints of any reservations in Europe about the way Berlin is pushing its envelope – except at home. A recent poll found 58 percent of Germans opposed to the Kurdish arms deal.

Most Japanese too are unhappy with their government’s new plans for foreign arms sales; 66 percent opposed them in a poll last February when the new policy was broached. But neighbors China and South Korea, where memories of Japanese wartime occupation have still not been laid to rest, are also alarmed.

Shaking off post-war constraints

Germany has moved much faster and further than Japan in shaking off post-war constraints. Germany has become the world’s third largest international arms dealer, after the United States and Russia, and it sent combat troops to Kosovo and to Afghanistan.

By contrast, the Japanese government has only recently stopped agonizing over whether the country’s US-imposed pacifist Constitution allows Japanese troops on United Nations peacekeeping duty to open fire in defense of endangered soldiers from other national contingents.



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, right, reviews members of Japan Self-Defense Forces at Asaka Base, north of Tokyo on Oct. 27, 2013. Japan relaxed a decades-old ban on military-related exports on April 1, 2014, in a bid to expand joint arms development with allies and equipment sales to Southeast Asia and elsewhere. (Shizuo Kambayashi/AP/File)

But the conservative government led by Shinzo Abe, fearful of China's growing strength, has moved Japan away from its traditional passive pacifism, increasing defense spending and changing the rules governing arms exports among other policy shifts.

That will allow Tokyo to help other countries in the region to boost their military strength too, says Noboru Yamaguchi, a retired general who teaches at Japan's National Defense Academy. "It is important for us to see more capable friendly navies and air forces around our lanes of communications," he argues.

Arms exports to smaller neighbors are "an inevitable step towards the more proactive role that Japan is taking vis-à-vis China and in sharing responsibility for the regional security order with the United States," says Akihisa Nagashima, the ranking member of the Japanese parliament's committee on national security.

From Beijing, this all looks uncomfortably like containment. "Japanese arms exports are not a direct threat to China, but they are a symbol of the way Japan is uniting the so called allies of democracy to combat Chinese influence," says Wang Chong, an expert on Japanese affairs at the independent Charhar think tank outside Beijing.

South Korea, where Japanese occupation troops left a lasting legacy of mistrust, is nervous too.

"As a pacifist nation, Japan is expected to adhere to basic principles and implement them to a direction of contributing peace and stability," South Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman Cho Tai Young said when Tokyo announced its policy change last April. "The principles should be carried out with the maximum level of transparency in consideration of concerns held by neighboring countries," he added.

Global responsibility

No such fears are felt among Germany's neighbors, not least because Berlin is always careful to stay closely in sync with its allies, says Prof. Conrad Schetter, research director at the Bonn International Center for Conversion, a think tank. "Germany's security priorities are strictly in line with those of Europe and the US," he says. "It is quite unthinkable that Germany would embark on a military mission of its own."

In that context, adds Kai Opperman, an expert on German foreign policy at the University of Sussex in Britain, Berlin's dispatch of weapons to northern Iraq is just "another building block in a gradual process towards more global responsibility."

Japan too is seeking more responsibility for security in Asia. But while Germany has reconciled with its neighbors and convinced the world that it has atoned for its Nazi past, Japan has failed to completely clean its slate. The current government has revived regional fears by questioning the gravity of some of the imperial Japanese Army's behavior. "A key missing element for Japan is its lack of effort and opportunity to reassure its neighbors about what it is doing," says Prof. Hughes,

South East Asian nations, where Japan might find customers for its military goods, need less reassuring. A reprise of Japan's militaristic rampage through the region seems a remote possibility; but Chinese patrol vessels are right on their doorstep already, pressing assertive territorial claims.

The threats facing Germany and Japan are very different – Islamist fundamentalism in the Middle East that could endanger Europe, and a rising China in Asia – but they are sufficient to focus peoples' minds on the future, not the past.

“Since international society is so unstable and US influence seems to be diminishing, other countries have to take on responsibilities,” says Mr. Nagashima. “Germany and Japan have finally accepted that kind of security role.”

Julian Bohne in Hamburg contributed to this article.

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