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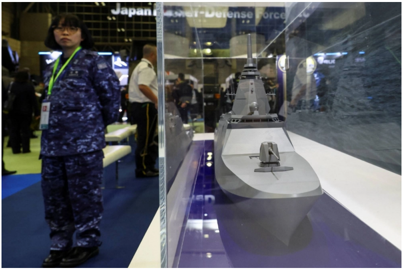
Japan has long had tough rules on arms exports. That may soon change.



A mock model of the upgraded Mogami-class frigate is displayed during the Defense Security Equipment International Japan exhibition in the city of Chiba in May. | REUTERS

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Japan has long had some of the world's strictest restrictions on arms exports. But things are set to change radically — as early as next spring.

Intensifying geopolitical rivalries, a new coalition partner and a winning bid to sell modern frigates have presented the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) with a unique opportunity to scrap a requirement limiting Japan's military exports to five nonlethal categories.

The envisioned policy change, part of a number of defense initiatives stipulated in October's ruling coalition agreement, would pave the way for the export of a much broader range of equipment — both new and used — including lethal systems, at a time of growing security tensions across the globe.

While the move would fall in line with a series of modifications implemented since 2014, some are concerned that without proper oversight, the lifting of these long-standing restrictions could allow Japanese weapon transfers to take place without any debate, a situation that could not only exacerbate a regional arms race but also challenge the country's pacifist principles and identity.

"Postwar pacifism is being replaced with a realistic security outlook, and Japan is for better or worse part of a current circle that adds to security tensions and a militarized foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific," said Sebastian Maslow, a security expert and associate professor at the University of Tokyo.

Both the government and the ruling bloc, which includes the center-right Japan Innovation Party (JIP), have begun making preparations and building internal consensus to abolish the restrictions.

At their first working-level meeting, LDP and JIP lawmakers on Monday pledged to submit a proposal to the government by February. Discussions are still ongoing on weapon definitions and classifications as well as on the need to set up oversight mechanisms, draft a coherent logic so as to limit voter concerns and discuss the possibility of exporting to countries where fighting is taking place.

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Attendees view the Global Combat Air Progra (GCAP) concept model fighter plane at the BAE Systems pavilion during the Farnborough International Airshow, in Farnborough, England, in July 2024. | REUTERS

The government is expected to decide on the revisions in or around April so they can be reflected in the upcoming review of Japan's three key security documents, which is slated for late 2026.

Tokyo's push to broaden military exports, which would remove another self-imposed defense constraint, will be decided by the National Security Council and does not require parliamentary approval as it entails a policy change, not a legal one.

Japan's current principles on the transfer of defense equipment and technology stipulate that the country can only export military gear under strict conditions, such as when it is intended for rescue, transportation, warning, surveillance or minesweeping.

Weapon platforms that are regarded as part of "international joint development and production projects," however, are exempted from these rules.

These principles were first implemented in 1967, revised in 2014 and loosened again in 2023 and 2024 to ease the export of Patriot air-defense missiles to the United States and of upgraded Mogami-class frigates to Australia, as well as to allow for the future sale of the sixth-generation fighter aircraft Japan is developing alongside Britain and Italy under the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP).

With the revision, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's government hopes to shore up the domestic defense industry, stimulate the economy and create a "more favorable" security environment.

But the changes would also have foreign policy implications as arms sales — intended to support the military capabilities of like-minded countries — could also be used to consolidate security partnerships with nations in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi speaks with his Australian counterpart, Richard Marles, in a Self-Defense Force MRPA vehicle at the Ministry of Defense in Tokyo on Dec. 7. | POOL / VIA AFP-JIJI

The abolition of the five categories would allow Japan to not only broaden the range of equipment it can donate under its military aid program, it would also permit the transfer of diverse platforms and systems for commercial and strategic gains.

It could also enable Japan to engage in other collaborative joint development projects beyond GCAP. Joining such multinational endeavors would give the country access to new technologies and manufacturing techniques as well as provide additional international partners to work with on military tech beyond the United States.

At the same time, the changes would open the door for arms transfers to Taipei, a controversial topic especially after Takaichi's recent remarks on a possible Japanese military intervention in a Taiwan contingency.

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“Prime Minister Takaichi's assertion that a Chinese naval blockade of Taiwan could constitute a ‘survival-threatening situation’ for Japan acts as a legal gateway,” said Misato Matsuoka, a defense expert and associate professor at Teikyo University. This classification enables Tokyo to regard the provision of arms or logistical support to Taiwan as a “necessary act of collective self-defense” should it fear for its survival.

Weapons transfers to Taipei are unlikely to take place anytime soon though because of the expected backlash from China, which has already reacted furiously to Takaichi’s remarks and unleashed a diplomatic campaign to isolate Japan.

A political opening

The planned removal of the restrictions is largely a result of shifting power dynamics inside parliament, especially following the LDP’s Oct. 4 leadership vote that resulted in Takaichi’s election and the party’s split after 26 years with Komeito, its dovish coalition partner, over policy and ideological differences.

While the LDP has long wanted to build up Japan's defense industry to become a "normal" exporter of defense technology, Komeito’s position had effectively stalled any major decision on the matter.

But with Komeito now out of the government, the LDP has found consensus with the JIP, which has been actively pushing for the revisions, arguing that the five categories undermine deterrence and negatively impact the country’s defense industry.

While the changes will trigger some degree of public outcry, or at least some demands for parliamentary oversight to increase transparency and accountability for arms exports, experts say that the pushback is unlikely to be meaningful enough to force the government to backtrack.

“There should be no real significant political opposition,” said Christopher Hughes, a professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the University of Warwick in England.

A Chinese H6 nuclear-capable strategic bomber flies from the East China Sea over the Miyako Strait into the Western Pacific on Dec. 9. | SELF DEFENSE FORCES / VIA REUTERS

The Japanese electorate may be somewhat uneasy that Japan-made armaments might inflict casualties in other countries, Hughes said, but public opinion has become “increasingly pragmatic” about defense policy changes in the face of the perceived deterioration of the international security environment.

Others argue that the lack of a strong public outcry will likely also be the result of the government framing the envisioned export push as an “economic and strategic necessity.”

The economic rationale, Matsuoka said, centers on revitalizing the domestically constrained defense industrial base, which faces an existential crisis and the exit of suppliers due to a fragile profit structure and lack of scale.

The idea is that by creating customers beyond the Self-Defense Forces, the government may be able to nudge industry into making the major, long-term capital investments needed to expand production capacity and thus generate the economies of scale needed to reduce unit costs.

The argument is that in the event of a conflict, Japan’s defense-industrial capacity must be able to meet a rapid increase in demand, something that can only be done with a robust defense-industrial base.

The strategic rationale is that these changes are needed because the security environment is "more severe and complex" than at any time since World War II, especially as Tokyo fears that a crisis akin to the war in Ukraine could erupt in Asia, whether due to developments in the South China Sea or over democratic Taiwan.

From Tokyo's perspective, this means that Japanese equipment could be used by friendly neighboring states to help repel aggressors and save innocent lives.

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi listens to questions during a session of the Upper House Budget Committee in parliament in Tokyo on Monday. | AFP-JIJI

But the timing is also politically opportune for the prime minister for other reasons.

"Takaichi's polling numbers are at historical highs, and the opposition is in disarray," said Michael Bosack, founder of the Parley Policy Initiative.

"Politically, it is the perfect time to push through a potentially contentious policy change."

The push comes as Tokyo is negotiating its biggest-ever defense contract for the export of upgraded Mogami-class frigates to Australia, a move that is generating momentum for further defense transfers. Both New Zealand and Indonesia have reportedly expressed interest in the Japanese naval assets, and by scrapping the restrictions, Tokyo would ensure there are no policy roadblocks to future sales.

It also comes as Japan deepens military and defense-industrial ties with several like-minded partners, mainly in Southeast Asia, through its military aid program. Japan has already granted loans to a growing number of countries for the acquisition of boats, radars and other systems, with the list likely to expand once the restrictions are further eased.

One of the main beneficiaries will be the Philippines, which is strategically located in the "first island chain" just south of Taiwan. Changes to the five categories will allow Tokyo to transfer more powerful assets to Manila, such as retired Maritime Self-Defense Force Abukuma-class destroyer escorts, which is currently under discussion.

Experts divided

It's unclear what the full consequences of the move will be as much will depend on future government policy and the implemented oversight mechanisms. Another important question is whether the current push would also create room for exports to countries that are already embroiled in conflict, like Ukraine. That is currently a no-go.

Experts are divided on the implications.

Some believe that Japan is unlikely to become a large weapons exporter like South Korea. They argue that Tokyo would prefer to sell equipment in limited quantities, focusing more on the strategic gains this would offer in terms of cementing relations and boosting deterrence alongside key partners such as Australia, New Zealand, Europe, India and countries in Southeast Asia.

Jeffrey Hornung, a senior political scientist and Japan lead at the Rand Corp. think tank, said such an approach could also place Japan in the role of a "proactive" security actor that helps defend its own "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy."

Others disagree, with Matsuoka arguing that the abolition of the five categories would mark a "fundamental shift" in the regional security dynamic. The move would also carry "significant geopolitical risks," she said, as it would inevitably provoke commensurate counterbuildups by China, which already views Japan's military expansion as part of a U.S.-led containment strategy.

Another issue, Matsuoka warned, is that such a policy shift would contribute to the "erosion of Japan's pacifist identity," signaling a comprehensive remilitarization of foreign policy.

"Selling advanced arms to high-friction zones increases the likelihood of Japan's direct or indirect involvement in regional conflicts," she said. "This validates critics who argue that Japan is prioritizing commercial and strategic benefits over its historical ethical stance against participating in the global weapons trade."

KEYWORDS
LDP, NIPPON ISHIN, SDF, DEFENSE, DIET, DEFENSE MINISTRY, NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL, TRADE, CHINA, GCAP, U.S. MILITARY, U.S., SANAE TAKAICHI

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