

The Militarization of North East Asia: Japan Acquires US Aegis Ashore BMD Missile Defense System, Bonanza for US Weapons Industry

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Japan's Cabinet on Dec.19 approved a plan to purchase two Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems to add to Japan's current two-step missile defense consisting of Patriot Advanced Capability-batteries and Aegis-equipped destroyers. The government's decision is explained by the "need to drastically improve our ballistic missile defense capability to protect Japan continuously and sustainably." North Korea on Nov. 29 tested a new, more powerful ballistic missile that it says can fly over Japan's current missile defense shield.

Two Aegis Ashore units to be operational by 2023 can cover Japan entirely by using advanced missile interceptors, such as the jointly developed SM-3 Block IIA and SM-6 capable of engaging cruise missiles. The Aegis combat system would start tracking the missile in its ascent phase and launch interceptors before it overflies the Aegis Ashore site. The system would supplement the Patriot batteries capable of engaging short- and medium-range ballistic missiles in their terminal phase and 4 Aegis-equipped guided-missile destroyers. Japan will also acquire long-range offensive strike air-to-surface missiles, one of which being the US-made JASSM-ER, that could be launched at North Korean targets from F-15 fighter planes and, eventually, F-35s, if an attack appeared to be imminent.

Self-Defense Force bases in Akita, northern Japan, and Yamaguchi, in southwestern Japan, are potential sites. The cost for the two Aegis Ashore missile defense systems could exceed \$2 billion. Aegis Ashore was chosen over an option of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) because of its lower cost and versatility. Japan will be the third country to host the system after Romania and Poland (to be deployed in 2018).

Japan has already bought a great deal of defensive equipment from the US. It had already decided to procure an advanced version of the SM-3 Block IIA sea-based ballistic missile system, F-35 fighter aircraft, V-22 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft, and AAV-7 amphibious vehicles ensure a steady income for US defense contractors.

Japan has long been building toward a military capable of more than defense. On the 70th anniversary of that constitution, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe [announced](#) in May for the first time that he planned to revise it to make "explicit the status" of the country's 227,000-strong self-defense force. There are [voices raised](#) in the country, calling for developing a greater capacity to deliver first strikes, if threatened.

Some defense policymakers in Tokyo say it may be time to reconsider non-nuclear pledges

and invite US nuclear weapons to be stationed on its soil. Last year, the government of Shinzo Abe [stated](#) that there is nothing in the nation's constitution that explicitly forbids Japan from using nuclear weapons. Yusuke Yokobatake, the Director-General of the Japanese Cabinet Legislation Bureau, [said](#) last year,

“We don't think that the use of all kinds of nuclear weapons is prohibited under the constitution”.

Shigeru Ishiba, a leading member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), believes Japan needs to discuss its non-nuclear principles, following Pyongyang's nuclear tests.

US President Trump welcomes the trend, calling for more joint military drills and [promising](#) to sell more “sophisticated military equipment” to Japan and South Korea. Donald Trump made headlines as a presidential candidate when he [suggested](#) last year that Japan might do well to pursue a nuclear weapons arsenal. Some American defense experts [have recently made](#) assessments of what exactly a Japan's nuclear arsenal should be like.

The very fact that the problem of North Korea is used for launching discussions of the possibility of Japan hosting US nuclear weapons, or even acquiring the potential of their own, is extremely worrisome. There are a lot of conventional weapons to counter the North Korean threat with but a nuclear deterrent appears to be a great temptation. If South Korea and Japan were to restart its nuclear weapons program, it would mean withdrawing from the [Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) (NPT). Other countries will follow the example to bury the treaty, which has been in force since 1970. There are many nations with technological potential to rapidly join the nuclear club, letting the genie out of the bottle and starting an uncontrolled nuclear arms race. Japan cannot go nuclear without US approval to make the US responsible for consequences.

The constitution renounces the use of force in international conflicts, banning the acts of belligerence. While Article 9 technically bans the maintenance of standing armed forces. It has been interpreted by successive Japanese governments to allow the Self-Defence Forces for exclusively defensive purposes. Historic changes enacted in 2015 expanded that to allow for limited collective self-defense, or aiding an ally under attack. Any change to the constitution requires approval first by two-thirds of both houses of parliament, and then in a public referendum. The party of Prime Minister Abe and its coalition partner together hold such a majority and has a free hand to push legislation.

As is known, Aegis Ashore missile defense systems use Mk-41 launchers that can also fire ground-based intermediate range surface-to-surface cruise missiles. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty ([INF Treaty](#)) is a bilateral agreement between Russia and the US. Japan has decided to buy the Aegis Ashore, not deploy American ones on its soil. So, technically, the system will be Japanese, not the US and there will be no violation of the treaty. But the system will be part of US-Japanese joint planning. It will violate the spirit and emasculate the agreement.

Japan is mulling the acquisition of Tomahawk long-range cruise missiles. Sea or ground-based Tomahawks will give it the capability to strike not only North Korea but also China and Russia. The defensive Aegis Ashore can be easily converted into an offensive weapon; it's

enough to change the software. The concern of Russia and China is well justified. If Japan decides to go nuclear, using the threat coming from North Korea as a pretext, it'll have the means of delivery in service to install nuclear warheads on. The facts adduced above prove that such a possibility is not excluded.

The decision just taken by the Japanese government [will seriously complicate](#) the Russian-Japanese relations. It does not matter if the system is formally Japanese, not America, the threat is there. It will negatively affect the prospects for finding a solution to the Kuril Islands problem as well as the whole range of other issues. It'll be much harder to reach an agreement on a peace treaty between the countries. The planned deployment will be a constant irritant to obstruct cooperation in all areas. And it will make Japan a target for a retaliatory strike, making the country much less safe than it is now.

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