

Japan: US-NATO Gateway Into the Asia-Pacific Region

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On Tuesday, the Japanese government has decided to partially lift a self-imposed 40-year ban on arms exports, which prohibited Japanese arms makers from joint development and export of military technology. Until now the US has been the only country with which Japan cooperated on military technologies. Now, the Land of the Rising Sun has decided to expand its military cooperation which experts see as a bid to join the European ABM project.

The ban imposed in 1967 provided that Japan could not buy weapons from countries governed by Communist regimes and countries which were involved in military conflicts. Gradually Japan stopped military cooperation with all countries except the US.

But cooperation with Washington has never stopped. Back in the 1980s, Japanese companies supplied the US with 15 new technologies for their Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). At present Tokyo, in partnership with Washington, is developing a unit for an upgraded SM3 ship missile. This missile is expected to become one of the key components in the European anti-ballistic missile system. But the ban which prohibited Japan from selling arms to Europe put a question mark over the supplies of these units to Europe. That is why the Japanese government has decided to lift the ban, which will enable Tokyo to cooperate on the development of military technologies with European and other countries.

Are the motives behind Tokyo's decision mainly political or mainly economic? Japanese defense companies have been lobbying the government to ease the ban as they are hoping to find their niche on the global market. So the economic motives have played their role, the head of the Center for Political studies Vladimir Yevseev says:

"The economic reasons for lifting the ban have made a serious impact. Now the country is going through an extremely difficult period, which was first of all caused by the tragedy at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. So, an opportunity to sell its military developments as part of the plan to create an anti-missile defense in Europe would benefit Tokyo economically."

At the same time the political motives should be also taken into account.

Japan is currently looking for new allies and is trying to strengthen ties with the old ones, the head of the Center for Japanese Studies Valery Kistanov says:

"Above all Japan wants to strengthen its military alliance with the US. Japan needs it amid the current instability in the Asian Pacific region. It is concerned about the so-called Chinese military threat and the situation on the Korean peninsula after the death of Kim Jong-il. The

government's recent move is probably intended to show that Tokyo is loyal and committed to its alliance with the US."

In all this experts can also see another tendency – Japan's rapprochement with NATO. A close cooperation between Tokyo and Brussels would contribute to NATO's expansion into the Asian Pacific region.

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