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UK-Japan Defense Cooperation: Britain Pivots and Japan Branches Out

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During his recent visit to Japan, British Prime Minister David Cameron signed a landmark defense cooperation agreement with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda making the United Kingdom Japan's only defense technology partner after the United States. The agreement comes just months after Japan relaxed its post-World War II restrictions on its participation in international research, development and trade in defense equipment. There are few publicly-available specifics on the deal, but official statements from Tokyo suggest the plan is to start small and slowly increase cooperation. Artillery and tank technology has been mentioned; along with helicopters, mine detection and chemical protection suits.

Philip Shetler-Jones, Security Consultant based in Brussels, explains that “the old Cold War allies of the United States are adapting to a more multipolar world order. Japan’s decision to branch out and trade arms beyond its alliance partner is one aspect of this, as is the UK’s apparent determination to show that it too can be an actor in the emerging Asian balance of power.”

Looking at the wider context, there is evidence that this is not just a continuation of the UK's traditional trading policy, but part of a strategic shift to reassert British and perhaps wider European security interests into the Asia-Pacific. Speaking in Singapore after Cameron's Asia tour, British Foreign Secretary William Hague explained that “Today Britain is looking East as never before” and that “We are not a significant military power in Asia, but our role in NATO, in the Five Power Defense Arrangements and our defense expertise as a nation mean that we have a role to play.” Although Hague's speech was aptly titled “Britain in Asia” he also played up the advantages of Britain's membership of the European Union, which he mentioned twelve times, and expressed a desire “to see the European Union take a more active role.”

The Significance for Japan

The ban on the export of defense related products implemented by Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato in 1967 was partly to allay fears that Japan's increased arms exports from the mid-1960s in support of the Vietnam War could drag it into the conflict. That same year Sato also enunciated the principle that Japan would never develop, use, or allow for the trans-shipment of nuclear weapons on its territory. These principles reinforced the “war renouncing” Article 9 of Japan's constitution and institutionalized the building blocks of Japan's pacifist identity. Judging from the near-total absence of domestic and foreign opposition to the 2011 announcement that Japan was relaxing its arms exports policy along with the just announced UK-Japan deal, distrust of “normal” defense behavior by Japan—bolstering its own defenses and engaging in arms diplomacy—seems to have declined significantly.

Japan also stands to gain economically. Not only can it make savings in its own defense spending—it can also profit from sales opportunities in the United Kingdom and, allowing for restrictions about third party use, beyond. The Cameron-Noda agreement was wrapped up in a broader UK initiative on other forms of trade, which might also mutually reinforce UK-Japan security links.



On a more strategic level, by broadening its international security links, Japan is taking a significant step to reduce sole dependence upon the United States and the possibility of isolation. International isolation has long been a concern in Japanese security policy. Grudges and mistrust dating back to World War II linger in the region, and have recently been joined by doubts about the durability of US security dominance throughout the Asia-Pacific. Japan's broadening of strategic ties therefore has significance for countries who might seek to intimidate Japan, but also for the United States.

The Significance for the United Kingdom

The Cameron-Noda agreement is consistent with the established patterns of the UK's trade and diplomatic policy; the UK is among the world's top arms exporters, and this deal represents a bold stroke to capitalize on this strength. The United Kingdom gets kudos for being the first partner for Japan after the United States—where recent military technology exchanges have tended to focus on missile defense.

It says something unequivocally positive about the UK defense industry that high-tech Japan would choose Britain as its partner in research and development. The advantages for competitiveness are clear. UK manufacturers stand to gain rewarding sales opportunities in Japan, but also a technological edge that could make their products more attractive to other customers.

From the UK standpoint, the political-strategic aspects of this coup are highlighted by the fact that Cameron's agreement with Noda comes in the context of his wider tour to other Asian democracies—Indonesia and Malaysia—with a stop to encourage reform in Myanmar. The United Kingdom opposes lifting the EU arms embargo on China, but seems keen to encourage and benefit from the desire of China's neighbors to raise their military capability.

Executives from UK defense companies accompanied Cameron from Japan to Indonesia and Malaysia. Prior to Cameron's Asia tour, the United Kingdom agreed with Vietnam on a defense cooperation action plan and strategic dialogue pursuant to a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2011.

All this suggests that the old Cold War allies of the United States are adapting to a more multipolar world order. Japan's decision to branch out and trade arms beyond its alliance partner is one aspect of this, as is the UK's apparent determination to show that it too can be an actor in the emerging Asian balance of power. Cameron's message to Asia was that Britain is back. Hague reinforced that by making the wider strategic case, as well as a nuanced point that this time Britain is coming to Asia from the vantage point of being a leader within Europe and NATO. Interestingly, the reference to NATO—and Japan's status as a NATO "partner"—was also made by Noda's spokesperson before the Hague speech.

It is hard to judge whether this development is more significant for Japan, for Britain, or for what it says about the emerging world order. For the United Kingdom it is aligned with its long held trading policy, but also signals that there is "life in the old dog yet," even if this "Britain in Asia" policy is probably driven more by economics than by a re-awakening of an Edwardian era grand strategy.

Perhaps the agreement also says something about the things that Japan and Britain have in common. Both are shedding the "baggage" from their imperial history. Both have enjoyed the security of an alliance with the United States, but quietly nurse a wounded pride as a result. However, the fact that both countries are US allies has no doubt facilitated their cooperation. Indeed, absent evidence to the contrary one may assume Washington approves. Meanwhile, both the United Kingdom and Japan seem to enjoy an opportunity to assert their sovereign independence in a moment when the big stories on Asia are all about a rising China and the US "Pivot."

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