



## Japan: The Continuing Military Shift

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### Summary

Japan will join the United States in a joint research effort to improve the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense Program. This military cooperation is in line with Japan's desire to turn its self-defense forces into a full-fledged military. While constitutional changes to formally allow for this to happen remain years off, it appears the Japanese are getting as much of a head start as possible.

### Analysis

Japanese officials revealed Sept. 1 that Japan would join with the United States to research and develop improvements to the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense Program. The surface-to-air missiles are carried on U.S. Arleigh Burke class destroyers and are capable of shooting down incoming missiles. The Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force already has four Aegis-equipped vessels.

The announcement that the sophisticated weaponry's future developments would have Japanese input is in line with the path Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has set for military reform. The Japanese have made great strides under Koizumi toward shedding the [constitutional restraints](#) preventing them from having a full-fledged military. This Aegis missile system announcement suggests that the Japanese military is not only on its way to becoming an expeditionary force but is determined to get as much of a head start as possible.

Tokyo recently has taken a number of steps in this direction:

- On Aug. 23, U.S. and Japanese defense officials said the two countries were exploring the possibility of expanding joint basing within Japan. Having U.S. and Japanese troops on the same facilities formalizes the command relationship between them and allows for the kind of cooperation and interoperability that would be needed in actual military operations.
- On Aug. 31, defense officials requested a 1.2 percent increase in overall defense spending. The request included 35 percent boosts to missile defense and counterterrorism spending -- both keys to U.S. military strategy.
- On Sept. 1, the Japanese Defense Agency announced cooperation with the U.S. military in improving missile-detection and information processing capabilities for the Aegis missile. The agency requested \$50 million for the project.

The change from a pacifist self-defense force to a bona fide military is all but inevitable. Until it is formalized by the Japanese legislature, however, the military is forced to conform to guidelines that do not allow any offensive operations; this is why Japanese troops in Iraq were given orders not to engage Iraqis unless they were in direct danger and not to conduct any counterinsurgency operations. The Japanese military leadership likely chafes under these restrictions -- especially with the knowledge that they will be lifted eventually -- and appears to be preparing the military to become a genuine fighting force.

These changes are evidenced by Japan's increased cooperation with the United States, a vital ally. Given the relationship between the two countries, any preparations and improvements by Japan's military will have to involve the United States. Joint naval and other exercises conducted over the past

few years have improved interoperability and built the countries' mutual confidence. Deploying self-defense forces to Iraq when Washington was scrambling for allies only brought Tokyo closer to the United States by aligning its foreign and security policy with Washington's.

[Counterterrorism](#), the intended focus of Japan's budgetary increases, allows the self-defense forces to operate against enemies both within Japan and abroad while remaining under the auspices of a pacifist constitution. Working under the banner of counterterrorism also strengthens Tokyo's bonds with Washington regarding the war on terrorism.

By placing specific emphasis on U.S.-led missile defense, participation in the U.S.-led war against terrorism and close cooperation -- including joint basing and military exercises -- Tokyo seems well aware of where its military future lies. Eventually, Japan will revise its pacifist constitution and when that happens, it appears the military will be ready -- probably before the legislators are.

The only question is one of timing. Japan wants a permanent spot on the U.N. Security Council, preparing for a major strategic competition with China and, more broadly, seeking greater influence across East Asia. All these factors point to a constitutional change sooner rather than later, but Japan has faced its military limitations since 1946, and the pacifist Article IX -- even if it has been interpreted loosely -- remains in the constitution.

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