

Japan creates new agency to boost arms exports

Ben McGrath
5 October 2015

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government in Japan has established a specialized agency to facilitate the overseas sale and acquisition of weaponry. The decision is designed to deepen Tokyo's military ties with other countries following the easing of a ban on arms exports last year, while also providing an economic boost to Japanese corporations that have long demanded the removal of restrictions.

The new body, the Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency (ATLA), was established on October 1 and will operate under the Defense Ministry. It has five main directives: as well as managing the acquisition and export of weaponry, ATLA will conduct research and development, strengthen Japan's own military technological base, and cut costs. The government has allocated an annual budget of two trillion yen (\$16.68 billion) for the agency.

ATLA will allow closer cooperation between the US and Japan on weapons technology as part of the military alliance between the two countries. Washington has been pushing Tokyo to take a more aggressive posture in Asia, and the decision to export weaponry is meant to expand Japan's military stance throughout the region.

ATLA's creation came one day after the official announcement of the country's security legislation, following its approval by the upper house of parliament on September 19. The new laws will expand the role of Japan's military, the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), to allow for "collective self-defense"—that is, to take part in US-led wars of aggression. Tokyo will now be able to dispatch the SDF anywhere overseas without the enactment of a special law and provide logistical support to an ally engaged in military action.

The security laws give legal force to the Abe government's "reinterpretation" of the country's

constitution last year to allow for "collective self-defense." The "reinterpretation" directly contradicts Article 9 of the constitution, which formally renounced war and barred the maintenance of land, air and sea forces. The security laws are part of Abe's broader agenda of remilitarizing Japan.

A comment in the *Financial Times* in August entitled, "A pacifist's plan to arm the world," declared that there were signs "Tokyo has come to regard defense exports not just as a matter of industrial policy, but also as an important element of its diplomatic strategy in the region unsettled by the rise of China. With such high stakes, Japan appears determined to overcome any obstacles."

The new heavily-funded government agency is clearly designed to give force to this strategy.

US strategic analyst Richard Samuels told the *Financial Times* that "a coalition of Japanese industrial firms [had been] working very hard over a long period of time" to overturn the export ban. "Of course, there was a sensitivity for companies reluctant to be seen as merchants of death, but they seemed prepared to get over that and show the world what they have," he said.

Keidanren, the Japan Business Federation, released a statement with proposals for ATLA on September 15, calling for "a mid- and-long term strategy including the viewpoint of securing of international competitiveness." It continued, "The government should promote overseas transfer of defense equipment as a national strategy," while also securing "an appropriate profit for private companies to be involved in projects."

In April 2014, the Abe government effectively lifted the ban on weapons exports by announcing new guidelines for the transfer of defense equipment and technologies to replace the previous "three principles"

first laid out in 1967, then strengthened in 1976. The old guidelines virtually banned Japanese corporations from overseas arms sales or participating in international joint development and production of weaponry.

The “three principles” had been undermined since 1983, when the government created an exception to ease the transfer of military technology to the US, but Japanese corporations were still hampered. In 2012, for instance, Mitsubishi Heavy, the largest of Japan’s arms manufacturers, obtained just \$3 billion from military sales, only a twelfth of that of Lockheed Martin, the biggest US arms supply company.

Japanese companies are already looking at lucrative export contracts. Japan is competing with France and Germany to build a next-generation submarine for the Australian navy. Japan recently announced that it would be willing to have much of the construction done in Australia, something it had been hesitant to permit.

Underscoring the strategic significance of the contract, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga declared that it had to be seen “in light of the importance of defense cooperation between Japan and Australia.” The construction of 12 submarines based on Japan’s Soryu-class design would involve a contract estimated to be worth \$A20 billion (\$US14.1 billion).

Japan and India are also in discussions over the possible sale of Japan’s US-2 aircraft, while in July 2014, Japan and Britain concluded an agreement to jointly develop air-to-air missiles for fighter jets.

The Japanese ruling class has always chafed at the restrictions imposed by its post-war constitution, particularly Article 9. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, successive governments have increasingly sought to ease the arms export ban as part of a broader agenda of becoming a “normal nation,” i.e., one capable of waging war in order to achieve its geopolitical and economic goals. More than 20 exemptions were created under the old “three principles” to allow for the transfer of military technology.

In December 2011, the previous Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda took a major step by creating a general exemption for Japanese arms manufacturers to take part in joint development and production projects with foreign companies, as well as to export equipment for so-called

humanitarian purposes.

The decision, which was backed by Washington, also reflected the sentiment in the Japanese political establishment that local weapons makers had to become more competitive. “Because Japan had to be self-sufficient in producing arms, Japanese tanks cost three times more than the U.S.-made ones. It was a huge economic burden to the Japanese,” Narushige Michishita of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies commented at the time.

Japan’s remilitarization drive is currently taking place under the umbrella of Washington’s “pivot to Asia,” aimed at militarily encircling China and undercutting Beijing’s economic interests in the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, the Japanese ruling class is intent on asserting its own interests, not simply playing junior partner to the US, all of which raises geopolitical tensions throughout Asia and the risk of conflict.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact