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Japan's steps to exporting Mogami frigates to Australia

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Abstract

The sale of Japan's next-generation, general-purpose Mogami frigates to Australia is a significant new security step for Japan in a number of respects. It exemplifies the substantial technological capabilities of Japan's defence industry as well as the realisation of longstanding government efforts to relax arms export restrictions to partner countries, culminating in the lifting of the ban on exporting lethal weapons under the Sanae Takaichi administration. The contract between the two countries will facilitate Japan's largest military export deal in its postwar history and represent a major breakthrough for its defence industry, which is expanding in response to greater demand as Japan's security environment becomes more challenging. The Mogami deal between Japan and Australia is emblematic of the two countries' 'special strategic partnership', which is strong, broad-ranging and now encompasses Japanese cooperation with the Royal Australian Navy and across the defence-industrial bases of the two countries. The Mogami deal is emblematic of Japan's deepening defence ties, security partnerships and closer security cooperation with countries such as Australia. Japan is 'biting the bullet' by augmenting its defence capabilities and forming a wealth of new and expanding security relations with other countries.

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1 Introduction

For almost a decade, Japan's defence exports were governed by the Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology, which were adopted in early 2014 under the leadership of former prime minister Shinzo Abe. This policy reform replaced the 1967 Three Principles on Arms Exports. The new policy permitted non-lethal weapons to be exported to security partners and laid down the conditions under which the transfer of defence equipment could take place. In short, it lifted the total ban on arms exports but retained the ban on exports of lethal weapons. Under the 2014 Three Principles policy, exports to partner countries of equipment for rescue, transport, warning, surveillance and minesweeping missions were permitted (Nikkei Asia, 2022). Then, in April 2026, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi announced that Japan would lift the ban on exporting lethal weapons. While the Takaichi administration executed the lifting of the ban, the process of relaxing arms export restrictions began in earnest in 2022. In May 2022, a Japanese media report revealed that the government was planning to allow exports of fighter jet, missile and other arms to 12 countries (Nikkei Asia, 2022).

Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy subsequently positioned the export of defence equipment as a way of creating a desirable security environment for the country and called for a revision of the implementation guidelines for the 2014 Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology (Ichioka, 2023: 3). As the Japanese press reported in February 2023, the transfer of defence equipment and technology was 'a way to bolster security cooperation with partner countries' (Nemoto, 2023). In the government's 2022 five-year Defense Buildup Program, the Ministry of Defense (2022: 40) stated that overseas military sales would be 'effective in ensuring the growth of the defense industry through the expansion of a defense equipment market'. As with one of the key objectives of the National Security Strategy, defence exports could then function as a tool for strengthening security relationships between Japan and other countries (Obe, 2023).

The Ministry of Defense also continually encouraged the domestic defence industry to expand its market overseas, with the National Diet passing the Bill on Enhancing Defense Production and Technology Bases in June 2023, which included new funding for domestic companies to convert their defence equipment for export. Under the previous guidelines, only components of defence equipment manufactured in Japan under license from foreign firms

could be exported back to that foreign country. This had limited Japan's arms exports to components of guidance equipment for the PAC-2 surface-to-air guided missile system and parts for F-15 fighter engines to the United States (Nakamura and Koyama, 2023). The Ministry of Defense's objective with the new Bill was to revitalise the domestic arms industry, reasoning that finding new customers abroad would generate business incentives as well as 'deepening security ties with like-minded countries' (Dominguez and Ninivaggi, 2023).

Draft guidelines for the domestic development and production of defence equipment released earlier in June 2023 had revealed that the government's main objective was to harmonise Japan's standards for domestically produced equipment with those of the United States and Europe in order to reduce maintenance costs, increase operational efficiency and expand business opportunities for Japanese defence companies. The new guidelines called for Japanese companies to develop and produce equipment compatible with that used by NATO countries, Australia and other allies in order to standardise equipment amongst militaries with which Japan conducted joint exercises (Takeuchi, 2023b).

In October 2023, for example, Australia's Department of Defence signed an agreement with Mitsubishi Electric Australia for the development of laser systems for protecting defence platforms. Mitsubishi Electric Australia 'was needed to get the basic technology developed in Australia into actual production' (Perrett, 2023: 51). This was the first time a Japanese company had signed a contract with a foreign government in the defence sector (Nikkei Asia, 2023). Japan's then-defence minister Minoru Kihara (2023) described arms exports as 'an important policy tool for Japan... [because] they help create a desirable security environment for our country and provide assistance to countries facing invasions that violate international law'. In 2023, the government also created a fund to assist Japanese defence contractors to customise defence equipment exports to other countries, such as India, Vietnam and the Philippines.

In another important step in December 2023, the Japanese government revised the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology. Under the revised Three Principles, the export of defence equipment to partner countries that were co-developing weapons systems with Japan became permitted, along with equipment for rescue, transportation, warning, surveillance and minesweeping. The revision applied to 'dozens of weapon types and other military systems produced locally under license from U.S. or

European defense companies’ (Dominguez and Ninivaggi, 2023). Government decisions about which country would receive what defence equipment would be made on a case-by-case basis.

In short, the Japanese government completely lifted the ban on the export of arms and ammunition manufactured under license from foreign companies to their own countries and conditionally lifted the ban on exports to third countries. As Sasaki (2024) observed, the reform enabled the equipment produced in Japan under license from a non-Japanese company to be “provided upon request from the licensing country” for export to the licensor’s country. With Japan’s permission, the equipment...[could] then be re-exported but not to countries currently at war’. Exporting defence technology to other countries was also later reported as a means to ‘help build stronger security and diplomatic ties’ (Takeuchi, 2024).

2 Understanding the motivations behind defence export revisions

The revision of the rules governing Japan’s defence exports was primarily driven by the US request for Japan to supply Patriot surface-to-air guided missiles (SAMs) to the US military in order to replenish its stocks, particularly as the United States had been providing the missiles to Ukraine to assist in its war with Russia (The Mainichi, 2023). In December 2023, Japan’s National Security Council made the decision to export domestically produced SDF PAC-2 (Patriot) missiles to the United States. This marked ‘the first export of finished lethal military equipment since the three principles of defense equipment transfers were established in 2014’ (Takeuchi, 2023a). As Tajima (2023) elaborated, the revisions ‘enable[d] Japan to ship all defense equipment including finished goods, making the export of Patriot missiles permissible’. Moreover, ‘Japan could similarly refill U.S. supplies of Patriots, MIM-23 Hawk surface-to-air missiles, M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems and other equipment’ for Taiwan (Sasaki, 2024). At the same time, Kihara made the point that the government had to ensure that the export of Patriot missiles did not ‘leave holes’ in Japan’s own defences (Oreanda News, 2023). In 2022, the Ministry of Defense, for example, had already made it clear that Japan only possessed around 60 per cent of the number of interceptor missiles required to defend the country (Moriyasu, 2023).

Nevertheless, the revised rules reflected the government’s objective to deepen security cooperation with the United States and other allied countries. Allowing exports of critical weapons assists the United States in maintaining its credible deterrence and response

capability, thereby bolstering Japan's security. At the same time, the Japanese government wanted to grow the domestic defence industry in order to expand its purchase options away from the United States, whose weapons systems were proving too expensive. Japan's acquisitions of weapons via the US Foreign Military Sales program increased in cost from 471.3 billion yen (US\$4.3 billion) in fiscal year 2020 to 910.8 billion yen (US\$5.7 billion) in the fiscal year 2025 budget request (Nagatomi and Miki, 2024).

The Japanese government had also planned to relax arms export rules further, looking in particular to export the next-generation fighter jets that Japan was jointly developing with the United Kingdom and Italy under the Global Combat Air Programme (The Mainichi, 2023). However, the Liberal Democratic Party was unable to incorporate this in the new revisions. While the new revisions permitted the transfer of components and technology that were the product of joint military development projects, they did not sanction the export of the finished product itself — the next-generation fighter jet. This was because the Liberal Democratic Party's then-coalition partner, Komeito, remained resistant to any further easing of restrictions on defence exports. This disagreement between the two ruling parties continued to block any possible joint sales of the next-generation fighter jets (Dominguez and Ninivaggi, 2023).

Despite the Fumio Kishida administration's inability to relax arms exports as much as it had hoped, government policy nevertheless aimed to incentivise defence contractors to expand their workforce and capital investment in the defence sector (The Japan News, 2024c). Indeed, in early 2024 the Ministry of Defense hosted a trade exhibition to promote new entrants into the defence industry. The trade exhibition was an opportunity for the Ministry of Defense to find ways to utilise cutting-edge technology developed by the private sector for defence purposes. Approximately 40 small and medium-sized businesses that specialised in the development of unmanned drones and satellite communications showcased their technologies (Nikkei, 2024).

Another political motive for further revising Japan's arms export policy was the government's desire to strengthen security cooperation with the United States, NATO countries and so-called 'like-minded nations' in the Indo-Pacific that were aligned against China. The Japanese government was aiming to increase exports to those Indo-Pacific countries that were expanding their security cooperation with Japan, such as India, Australia, the Philippines and Vietnam. The Ministry of Defense featured prominently at the 2024

Singapore Airshow in a bid to boost the exports of Japanese arms as well as to encourage Japan's small and medium-sized businesses in the arms export industry. As Clark (2024b) commented, 'In a clear sign that Japan is trying to build an arms export business after decades during which such sales were banned, the Japanese Defense Ministry is displaying at a foreign airshow for the first time'.

In February 2024, the ruling coalition began to discuss the possibility of a limited exception to restrictions on defence equipment sales that would 'carve out an exception for the fighter jet' (Nikkei Asia, 2024). This exception would be in the interest of not only enhancing shared deterrence but also expanding the scale of production of the jets and thus lowering procurement costs. It would also enhance Japan's reputation as a weapons development and manufacturing hub. The Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito finally reached an agreement on 26 March 2024. The revised export rules stipulated that Japan could export the Global Combat Air Programme fighter jets to a third nation, provided that the jets would never be transferred to a country with active conflict. However, the third-country destination of the exported fighter jets would be restricted to countries that had signed agreements with Japan on defence equipment and technology transfers. The Cabinet's approval would be needed prior to the sale of any Global Combat Air Programme jets. The government argued that allowing the export of fighter jets to third countries would 'ensure efficient spending on the warplanes' development' (Kyodo News, 2024). Then-prime minister Fumio Kishida argued that exporting the jet would help create a 'favourable security environment' for Japan (Dominguez, 2024).

In March 2024, Japan also participated in AsterX — an annual space defence exercise hosted by France (Kitamatsu and Takeuchi, 2024). Earlier, in December 2023, Japan attended the Combined Space Operations Initiative Principals' Board meeting. The Combined Space Operations Initiative is of considerable importance for Japan's space defence capabilities 'given that it is impossible for Japan to monitor threats in space on its own' (The Japan Times, 2023).

In April 2024, Kishida met with then-US president Joe Biden. The joint statement from the meeting noted that Japan and the United States intended 'to work together toward our vision to cooperate on a networked air defense architecture, incorporating future capabilities with Australia' (Mehta, 2024). Japan, the United States and Australia would create a networked system of air, missile and defence architecture in order 'to counter

growing air and missile threats’ (Wood, 2024). According to a Japanese defence official, ‘in a potential Taiwan contingency, the U.S., Japan and Australia would have to face more advanced missiles...including hypersonic missiles’ (Moriyasu, 2024a).

At an AUKUS summit also in April 2024, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom announced that they were considering working with Japan on advanced technology projects under the AUKUS framework. Kihara (2024) also commented on the significance of AUKUS for Japan, stating ‘It is important for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region to strengthen defence cooperation between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia by promoting AUKUS ties. Japan will steadfastly support these efforts’. Moreover, having been driven out of the South China Sea, the possibility that China might attempt to seek sanctuary for its nuclear ballistic missile submarines targeting the United States in the Sea of Japan raises the prospects of greater cooperation between Japan and AUKUS.

3 The Mogami frigates

In 2024, it also became increasingly apparent that Japan and its allies would explore the possibility of developing common platforms for military hardware. One such instance was Australia choosing Japan’s Mogami-class frigate as its next-generation, general-purpose frigate. In February 2024, the Japanese government authorised the dispatch of a Mogami-class frigate to Australia with a view to market it as a candidate for Canberra’s next-generation frigate. Sales of the Mogami frigate to Australia would help to promote further cooperation between the two countries in defence equipment and technology, as well as strengthening Japan’s own defence industry.

The potential deal with Australia was formally approved by Japan’s National Security Council in December 2024. Its implementation would represent the first major weapons system that Japan had ever sold to another country. Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Australia would ‘establish a close cooperation relationship second only to Japan-US defense cooperation as a “special strategic partner” in the Indo-Pacific region’ (Clark, 2024a). Securing the deal with Australia would ‘be the largest military export deal in Japan’s postwar history and a major breakthrough for the country’s defense industry’ (Dominguez, 2025).

Backing Japan’s bid to export Mogami frigates was the newly established Joint Public–Private Promotion Committee designed to support Japan’s defence export projects.

The committee's members comprised representatives from several ministries as well as several companies, including Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Hitachi, Mitsubishi Electric and Nippon Electric Company (Dominguez, 2025). Japan's National Security Council had also explicitly permitted the joint development and production of the frigates in the event that Japan's bid was successful.

The co-development and supply of the new class of frigates based on the Mogami-class cruiser to the Australian navy was to remain on the Japanese government's agenda. The government also made commitments to supply the Philippines with coastal surveillance radars produced by Mitsubishi Electric and transport vehicles used by the Japan Ground Self-Defence Forces to Vietnam (Nagatomi and Miki, 2024). Japan's then-minister of defense Gen Nakatani confidently stated that Japan's proposal would represent 'the best choice for Australia', with the project costed at 1 trillion yen (US\$635.4 million) (The Japan News, 2024b). Japan proposed that the 'countries jointly develop the frigate based on the design of the Mogami class', manufactured by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (The Japan News, 2024b). It was also speculated that the United States, Japan and Australia might build the same-design surface ships (Moriyasu, 2024b). In February 2025, Nakatani revealed that Japan would dispatch a Mogami-class warship to Australia as one of the finalists amongst the candidates for Australia's next-generation frigate. He told the chief of the Australian Defence Force that Japan hoped to 'further promote cooperation in defense equipment and technology', reflecting the 2022 National Security Strategy (Nagatomi, 2025c).

The Japanese government pledged to deliver the first of the Mogami frigates to Australia in 2029. The prime contractor — Mitsubishi Heavy Industries — is already 'in the process of delivering an initial batch of 12 Mogamis to the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force' (Bergmann, 2024). Construction on a second batch of 12 upgraded Mogami frigates also begun in 2024. Australia is expected to receive the third ship from this second batch — or the 15th Mogami overall — which will be launched in mid-2028. Key technological advancements incorporated into the second batch of the Mogami series relate to anti-air warfare and anti-submarine warfare capabilities, including more vertical-launch systems and a reduced crew requirement, as well as increased survivability (Lies, 2025). The Japanese government had also planned to release a strategy in 2025 in order 'to boost the exports of defence equipment by enhancing the international competitiveness of its defense industry' (The Japan Times, 2025).

In April 2025, Nakatani reportedly stated that ‘Japan plan[ned] to deepen partnerships by viewing Japan, the United States, Australia, the Philippines, South Korea and others as a single theater’, although he did not elaborate on the operational scope of the strategy (Glosserman, 2025). In May 2025, Japanese media reported that the government was considering exporting the Global Combat Air Programme fighter jets to Australia with a view to ‘deepen security relations through the use of common equipment’ and with Australia’s participation in AUKUS facilitating such an agreement (Nagatomi, 2025a). The Defense of Japan 2025 white paper was also notable for its detailed plans for security cooperation with a wider range of allies, including Australia, India, Europe and others. The Japanese government looked to ‘like-minded countries to supplement its alliance with the U.S. in deterring China’s maritime expansion’ (Nagatomi, 2025b). The report detailed the possibility that China could use grey zone tactics ‘to invade Taiwan while avoiding intervention by the U.S. military’ (Nagatomi, 2025b).

It was in August 2025 that Japan finally won the US\$10 billion contract to supply Australia with three Mogami-class frigates as the ‘preferred platform for the Royal Australian Navy’s future fleet of general purpose frigates’ (Department of Defence, Australia, 2025). In total, Australia would purchase 11 of the Japanese general purpose frigates. Nakatani commented that Australia’s selection of the Japanese frigates was testament to the ‘outstanding technological capabilities of Japan’s defense industry’ (Yeo, 2025). Also in August 2025, the Ministry of Defense submitted its largest ever budget request for fiscal year 2026, which called for US\$59.9 billion in expenditure. This included a request for funds for building upgraded Mogami-class multirole frigates, with ‘plans to construct a total of 12 New FFMs to be delivered by fiscal year 2032’ including those under order by Australia (Kosuke, 2025).

4 Final steps in the Mogami deal

On a visit to Australia in April 2026, Japan’s Minister of Defense Shinjiro Koizumi met with Australia’s Minister for Defence Richard Marles in Melbourne. The ministers discussed not only their countries’ common security interests but also the possibility of expanding their bilateral security cooperation to include other countries in addition to the United States in order to increase deterrence against China. The two ministers reiterated their determination to work together with their ‘shared ally, the United States, and key partners including India, Indonesia, New Zealand, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea, and with

regional institutions such as ASEAN, to strengthen regional resilience and uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific' (Department of Defence, Australia, 2026).

Most importantly, the two defence ministers signed a memorandum on the upgraded Mogami-class frigate deal for supply to the Australian Navy. The first frigate would be delivered in December 2029. Out of a planned fleet of 11 frigates, the first three vessels will to be built in Japan while the rest will be built in Australia. Japanese manufacturers would construct the frigates in Japan and Austal, an Australian shipbuilder, would construct the frigates in Australia. In this sense, Japan's supply of Mogami frigates to Australia would be a 'joint development project [which] will help develop the country's defense industry significantly' (The Japan News, 2024a).

The total cost of the Mogami deal will be AU\$20 billion over the decade. The project was 'framed as bringing broader economic benefits by embedding major Japanese companies in Australia's defense supply chain' (Tami and Turton, 2026). Koizumi also elaborated that 'The fact that Japan and Australia will operate a common type of vessel and maintain shipbuilding at a sustainment basis in both countries means that the interoperability and the resilience of the two nations will be strengthened' (Tami and Turton, 2026). In Koizumi's view, Japan and Australia would pursue cooperation 'with an open mindset, not only [on] frigates but also in areas such as unmanned systems, cyber and space, as well as joint production of defense equipment' (Tami and Turton, 2026).

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi also visited Australia in May 2026 in order to strengthen the bilateral relationship and for discussions that included defence ties. The bilateral statement on security from the meeting said that Japan and Australia were 'increasingly important to each other's strategic depth' (Tami and Turton, 2026).

5 Conclusion

Japan's military power projection and capabilities remain strongly defensive, not offensive. However, its capabilities are expanding exponentially not only in qualitative terms but also in terms of the pace of change. Japan is enhancing both its own military deterrence through a substantial upgrading of its combat capabilities as well as building collective deterrence with allies. Japan is augmenting its defence capabilities at the same time as forming a wealth of new and expanded security relations. Stronger defence ties, security partnerships and closer cooperation are being established with countries such as Australia.

Sales of the Mogami frigates to Australia will not only help to strengthen the bilateral security relationship between the two countries but also promote direct Japanese defence cooperation with the Australian Navy. Indeed, the frigates will assist in promoting cooperation between the two countries in terms of defence policy, equipment and technology more broadly. These developments demonstrate how Japan's operational horizons have expanded. Japan has undergone a total rethink of its regional security role and is now displaying more strategic autonomy by independently pursuing and promoting new bilateral security and defence relationships and partnerships, thus 'becoming a defence power in its own right' (Sahashi, 2024).

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