



Japan's Hidden Arms Trade

By Robin Ballantyne

The 2004 government announcement that it was considering joining the US in the production of a missile defence system was deeply troubling to Japanese and Asians concerned about Japan's expansive military posture in tandem with the US. Over the years, Japan has created a high tech non-nuclear military force. But it has steadfastly maintained an official ban on weapons exports. Many feared that the move heralded the end of Japan's nearly 40-year-old ban on arms exports.

Since 1976, the Japanese government has proclaimed that "Japan shall not promote 'arms' exports, regardless of the destinations."^[1] This stance has been advanced by ministers and officials in the domestic and international arena, who stress that Japan does not participate in the global arms trade. For example, in 2000 Sugiura Seiken, the Senior Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs informed a UN conference that: "Japan has been actively pursuing arms control and disarmament. We do not permit the export of arms to any country."^[2]



Japan's Link Missile

However, in December of 2004 it became clear that Japan's position as a weapons manufacturer and weapons exporter were under review. Not only was the Japanese Government considering taking part in the Missile Defence Programme, but the Chief Cabinet Secretary also announced that Japan may consider other opportunities for joint development and production with the US, as well as projects with other countries "related to support of counter-terrorism and counter-piracy."^[3] In addition, Prime Minister Koizumi confirmed the possibility that Japan may sell arms to Southeast Asian nations to fight piracy.^[4]

These statements, and particularly the Missile Defence project, are being undertaken both in response to rising Japan-North Korea tensions, and in the wish to strengthen the capacity of Southeast Asian countries to protect Japanese shipping through the Malacca straits.

However, the truth of the matter is that these plans do not indicate a dramatic change in policy. Far from having a record of no arms transfers, Japan has been and continues to be, actively involved in the sale of small arms and dual-use goods to other nations. Due to a lack of transparency in the reporting system, however, important questions remain concerning the precise nature of various military exports.

Small Arms

Japan has been one of the lead actors in the 2001 UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA). It has donated substantial sums of money for various weapons collection programmes worldwide, most notably, over \$10 million for programmes in Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Sierra Leone.^[5] Furthermore, Japan continues to campaign for the establishment of an international system to mark and trace small arms.^[6]

As the former Japanese ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament stated, Japan has assumed this lead role on the PoA because "...many countries felt that Japan is the standard-bearer of multilateral disarmament affairs because Japan enjoys the high moral ground of not exporting small arms."^[7] However the fact is that Japan actually conducts a thriving small arms export trade. The international annual publication, the Small Arms Survey, for example, reported that in 2002 Japan exported \$65 million worth of small arms which, in monetary terms, ranks Japan amongst the top eight exporters of small arms world-wide for that year.^[8]

The Japanese government evades this issue by contending that 'hunting guns and sport guns are not regarded as "arms"'^[9] and therefore the self-imposed ban on arms exports only applies to guns of a military specification. This raises the question of what differentiates a military specification gun from a sporting or hunting weapon. However, the Japanese Ministry for Export, Trade and Industry (METI) provides no comprehensive definition. Instead it decides on a case-by-case basis whether or not a weapon should be defined as being of military specification.

The finessing of the definition of "arms" to exclude sporting and hunting weapons may ensure that Japan adheres to its ban on arms in the eyes of the policy makers but in reality this is a cynical interpretation. While METI claims that there is a distinction between a sporting weapon and a military weapon, the fact of the matter is that almost all tactical shotguns – the type of weapon used by military and police forces throughout the world – are modified civilian guns.^[10]

Each year small arms kill approximately 500,000 people around the world. So great is their impact on human security that Kofi Annan observed: "In terms of the carnage they cause, small arms, indeed, could well be described as 'weapons of mass destruction'."^[11] The small arms used in these deaths are not restricted to those of a military specification. In armed conflicts around the world hunting and sporting weapons are routinely used to commit violent acts and abuse human rights. In recent years Amnesty International has reported the use of such weapons by death squads in Algeria and armed political groups in the Solomon Islands.^[12] Clearly, when one is looking down the barrel of a gun it matters little whether the weapon in question is deemed to be of the sporting or hunting, or military variety.

Questionable Exports

Further questions about Japan's dedication to a ban on arms exports are raised by an examination of data submitted to the UN Commodity Trade Statistics database (Comtrade) which records the import and export details voluntarily submitted by the customs departments of countries world-wide.^[13] According to information submitted by the Japanese customs department to this database, in 2001 Japan exported US\$55.7 million worth of "Bombs, Grenades, Ammunition, Mines, & Others." The vast majority of this total went to the US. However, according to the import data submitted by other countries, other recipients of this equipment from Japan included Denmark, Germany, South Korea, Malaysia and Thailand.

Furthermore, according to information that Japan submitted to the Comtrade database in 1999 Japan exported "Military Weapons" to Indonesia and Malaysia and in 2000 Japan exported "Military Weapons" to Israel. Also according to the data submitted by Japan, it has exported "Parts & accessories of Military

Weapons” to a large number of countries over several years. And in 2003 Japan reported that it had exported “military rifles, machine guns and other” to the Philippines.

Japanese Customs use the same system of classification for registering exports as does the UN. This means that the Japanese definition of an export will be consistent with the UN definition. So when, for example, Japanese Customs report that “military rifles, machine guns and other” have been exported, according to the UN definition that means that the export must have contained one of the following: Self-propelled Artillery weapons; Rocket launchers; Flame-throwers; Grenade launchers; Torpedo; Torpedo tubes and similar or Other. Of course a note of caution must be added in that the “other” at the end of the list may refer to a number of different items ranging from military rifles to optical devices for use on firearms. Although the Japanese Customs choose to sub-divide the categories when they submit information to Comtrade, thus providing a greater level of detail, even this information does not give a sufficiently detailed breakdown of exactly what items were in the export.

Since there is no domestic report of arms exports, and the information submitted to Comtrade is sufficiently vague as to prevent any meaningful analysis, it is impossible to verify the exact nature of the equipment in these transfers. Until the Japanese government reveals details of these exports, questions will remain as to whether they complied with the “no arms trade” policy.

Dual-Use Goods

A bright light is shone on Japan’s involvement in the arms trade when one examines exports of defence electronics and dual-use equipment. Ever since its inception, a gaping hole has existed in the ban on arms exports, specifically products that have both military and civilian applications may escape the ban on military exports. In the 1980s Japanese companies began taking advantage of this loophole by making inroads mainly into the U.S. defence market, providing semiconductor chips for guided missiles and camera lenses used in reconnaissance systems. Since then Japanese components have found their way into a large number of security and defence products across the globe, such as silicon sensors, which are at the core of BAE Systems Inertial Measurement Units used for missile guidance systems,[14] or the Sony Exwave-HAD 800 Line TV camera incorporated in the Denel military and paramilitary turrets.[15]

It seems that even certain vehicles used by the military are able to evade the export ban by using the dual-use window of opportunity. Military forces throughout the world can be seen riding Toyotas, Suzukis and Mitsubishis. In March of this year the Omani Engine Engineering Company announced that it would be basing its Nimer 1 light armoured personnel carrier on a Toyota Land Cruiser 4x4 chassis.[16] The vehicle, which will have firing ports and the possibility of mounted machine guns, is clearly for military use, yet because the Land Cruiser chassis can also be exported for civilian use, it escapes the ban on arms exports. In August 2004 ShinMaywa promoted its US-1A amphibious aircraft designed for search and rescue but also for maritime patrol and anti-submarine warfare roles. While the assistant manager of defence systems at the company acknowledged that Japan is prohibited from exporting defence systems he insisted that the craft was available for purchase and could be used for “multipurpose missions.”[17]

Transparency and Truth

The essential problem when analysing Japan’s adherence to its “no arms trade” policy is the lack of transparency in the reporting of the export licences that have been granted for goods used in the defence industry. Although Japan makes annual submissions to UN databases regarding its exports, these submissions are voluntary and, as can be seen from the Comtrade data above, do not always tally with what other countries claim to be receiving from Japan. More importantly, unlike many other countries such as Germany, Finland, UK or USA the Japanese government provides no annual report detailing the licences that it has granted for arms or goods used in the defence industry. This means that the Japanese public and press has no access to information concerning what defence goods may have been exported and whether these exports comply with the spirit or the letter of a policy banning arms exports.

It is nevertheless clear from the number of small arms and dual-use goods openly exported, that Japan has, for a number of years, had a fairly active arms trade, despite its declaration to the contrary. Japan’s claim that it has no arms trade leaves it open to the charge of duplicity and deceit.

With the Japanese government proposing major changes related to weapons production and exports, now would surely be a time to provide an open and honest account of the nation’s actual involvement in the arms trade, and to establish a formal system of reporting that lays to rest doubts about the military content of exports. Such information would end the hypocrisy and denial that currently reigns.

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[1] Japan’s Policies on the Control of Arms Exports <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/policy/> accessed 22 November 2005

[2] Sugiura Seikin, Senior Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan

Speech to the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, 9 July 2000

[3] [Statement](#) by the Chief Cabinet Secretary 10 December 2004

[4] Japan Signals Key Military Shift www.dailytimes.com.pk 11 December 2004

[5] [Japan to enforce arms reduction policy](#), accessed 7 March 2005

& Government of Japan’s [National Report](#) on the Implementation of Programme of Action (PoA) to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects accessed 17 July 2003

[6] [Speech](#) by Ambassador Amano Yukiya, Director-General for Arms Control and Scientific Affairs accessed 17 July 2003

[7] Inoguchi Kuniko, former Japanese ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament, Asahi Shimbun, 20 September 2004

[8] Weapons at War: Small Arms Survey 2005 (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), p102-105

[9] [National Report](#) on the Implementation of Programme of Action (PoA) to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects 22 November 2005

[10] Information from article Kalashnikov Saiga-12S shotgun is tailored for tactical requirements, Jane’s International Defence Review, 1 May 2002

[11] War on Terror Fuels Small Arms Trade, The Guardian, 10 October 2003

[12] A [Catalogue](#) of Failures: G8 Arms Exports and Human Rights Violations,

[13] Figures used in this article all come from the [Comtrade data](#) available on the website of the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers (NISAT)

[14] Saab Bofors to lead NLAW Jane’s Defence Industry, 1 July 2002

[15] The ever-clearer view from above International Defense Review 1 September 2004

[16] The ever-clearer view from above International Defense Review 1 September 2004

[17] Assistant Manager, Godo Tadoroko quoted in Jane’s Defence Weekly, 25 August 2004.