December 2023. Japan's defence industry

In an unusual move, Japan has announced that it is selling Patriot missiles, a highly advanced air defence system, to the US. To be clear, the Patriot missile was developed and is made by US defence companies Raytheon and Lockheed Martin.

This is partly explained by the rapidly diminishing stockpile of US Patriot missiles, due to the supply the US is providing Ukraine with in its war with Russia. This would give the US the option of sending additional weaponry to Ukraine in the future, if required and its Congress agreed. However, to date, Mitsubishi, under license from the two US defence companies, manufactures Patriot missiles exclusively for the Japanese military because Japanese regulations prohibited the export of such weapons. This was lifted on the same day the Japanese government announced the shipping of the Patriot systems to the US.

This sea-change in the Japanese defence industry, which has remained necessarily pedestrian post-WW2, has been long overdue, given the increased geopolitical dangers for Japan locally and globally. By sending military equipment directly/indirectly supporting US contributions to the war in Ukraine, this signals that Japan is adopting an even tougher stance on Russia, its perennial geopolitical foe.

The previous restrictions on Japan's defence industry had stymied innovative companies, meaning that the country's ultra-pacifist stance on anything military, including weapons exports, became a self-fulfilling prophecy. That has all changed now, particularly with the perceived threat from Chinese military activities and ambitions in the East China Sea, North Korea's ballistic missile program and the renewal of the Cold War polemic in Ukraine.

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