

Japan and Australia tout progress on high-energy laser and missile range tests

The defense chiefs of Japan and Australia said Tuesday that the quasi-allies had made major progress on a co-developed high-energy laser project and a deal to test advanced missiles on Australian soil, as the two sought to take defense cooperation beyond Canberra's historic decision last year to buy warships from Tokyo.

Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi and his Australian counterpart, Richard Marles, said the partners had marked a "significant milestone" in defense collaboration with successful field trials of the high-energy laser for the Boobook project.

The laser capability can be used on land and sea-based platforms, according to Marles, and offers "greater protection and situational awareness by using laser to optically detect incoming threats."

The Australian government said that the Boobook — named after an owl indigenous to Australia that is able to see in the dark — will be built by Mitsubishi Electric's local subsidiary at a 70 million Australian dollar (\$49.7 million) factory in Sydney.

Koizumi touted the plan as a breakthrough not only for bilateral ties but also for Japan's own defense industry.

"This project is not only the first co-development between Japan and Australia, but also the first case in which Japan's defense industrial technologies have attracted the interest of a foreign government and progressed to international co-development in the defense field," he said.

"Its success represents another important step forward in deepening Japan-Australia defense equipment, technology and industrial cooperation," he added.

The two ministers announced that they were also working toward giving Japan improved access to Australia's missile testing ranges.

Such a move would give Tokyo access to vital longer-range test sites, a necessity as it develops powerful new missiles to deter Chinese military

adventurism near Japan's periphery and respond to North Korea's increasingly advanced missile arsenal.

Japan test-fired an anti-ship missile during military exercises for the first time in Australia in 2023 and did so again last year in a more complex launch.

“If the Japan Self-Defense Forces are able to conduct test launches of standoff missiles, such as hypersonic missiles in Australia, it will be a groundbreaking development, second only to similar cooperation with the United States,” Koizumi said, adding that the two sides planned to “accelerate” discussions on the matter.

Marles said the talks were focused on an “enhanced arrangement” that could cover the sites’ usage “over the course of the next decade across a range of missile capabilities.”

The pair also discussed progress on the joint development of an upgraded version of Japan's advanced Mogami-class frigate, with Marles noting that plans “remain on course” to see the first of those vessels in service with the Australian Navy this decade.

The two ministers — who have now met seven times over the last year — have overseen a blossoming of defense ties. In April, Japan officially signed an agreement to supply the first three of a planned fleet of 11 of the upgraded Mogami-class vessels to the Australian Navy — the largest defense export contract in Tokyo's postwar history.

Canberra selected in August last year an upgraded version of the vessel proposed by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries following a competitive bidding process for the AU\$10 billion project.

Experts have urged both countries to seize momentum from the Mogami deal “as a catalyst for cooperation.”

Tuesday's meeting comes amid concerns over what Japan says is an increasingly fraught security environment in the Indo-Pacific region, with China's military activities in the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China seas prompting unease in both Tokyo and Canberra.

But the two countries — both U.S. allies — are also wary of the U.S. as its war against Iran, as well as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, occupy much of Washington's bandwidth.

This wariness came to the forefront Tuesday, when Koizumi emphasized the importance of U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral ties after being asked about U.S. President Donald Trump's order to scale back joint military exercises with

Seoul a day earlier — a move that has raised concerns about the U.S. commitment to the region.

“As Japan faces the most severe and complicated security environment in the postwar era, the cooperation among Japan, the United States and South Korea is critical to the peace and stability of the region,” Koizumi said.

New Zealand’s defense chief had initially been expected to join Koizumi and Marles for their meeting, with Tokyo aiming to continue to pitch Wellington on also purchasing its Mogami frigate. However, those plans were put on ice after New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon sacked his defense chief, Chris Penk, following a failed leadership challenge by Penk.

On Wednesday, Koizumi is scheduled to head to New Delhi for a visit to an Indian naval base, followed by a meeting with Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday.

Discussions in New Delhi are expected to focus on the joint development of artificial intelligence-equipped drones for maritime security, as well as arrangements for a “two-plus-two” meeting of the partners’ foreign and defense ministers by the end of the year.

Japanese plans to send Air Self-Defense Force F-2 fighter jets to India for the first time to participate in a joint exercise could also be broached. The SDF and the Indian military conducted their first joint exercise involving fighter aircraft in Japan in 2023.

* * * * *