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Japan Adopts Major Defense Changes

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Japan has taken another step towards freeing itself from military restrictions in place since the end of World War II. The changes are a significant retreat from the pacifist policies that have kept the role of Japan's Self Defense Forces limited in scope.

Japan's cabinet on Friday eased a 1976 ban on exporting arms and approved joint development of a missile defense system with the United States. Although limited in scope, the actions are part of a steady move away from the country's self defense-only military policy.

Defense Agency Director General Yoshinori Ono says sweeping changes are needed because the nature of the threat to the country has changed. Mr. Ono says Japan has to be able to respond effectively to such new threats as terrorism and large-scale natural disasters. He adds the country also has to be more involved in international peacekeeping activities.

Despite the changes, the Defense Agency failed to avoid a reduction in military personnel. The powerful Finance Ministry, which has final say over government budgets, insisted on cuts of five-thousand ground troops from the total force of 160,000.

Spending was also cut by about 3.25 percent, to \$233 billion over the next five years.

The approval of the new defense guidelines comes a day after the government extended the controversial deployment of non-combat troops to Iraq for another year.

The dispatch of the 550 troops marked the first time Japan has sent its forces to a country at war in more than 50 years.

The defense report for the first time names China and North Korea as security concerns, although government officials were quick to say that does not mean Japan considers those Asian neighbors a military threat. However, the government on Friday filed a protest with Beijing over a Chinese vessel allegedly intruding on Japan's exclusive economic zone earlier in the day.

Analysts say the military changes will greatly increase security cooperation with U.S. forces. The new budget allocates nearly \$5 billion over five years to develop the new missile defense system.

Japan began joint research on missile defense with the United States in 1998. The move was prompted by North Korea's launching of a ballistic missile over Japan that year.

Japan's always tenuous relations with North Korea took a step backward Friday when a parliamentary task force of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party approved a non-binding resolution calling for a cutoff of aid to the communist state.

Japanese are furious that human remains handed over by Pyongyang, supposedly those of two Japanese kidnapped by North Korea during the Cold War, were determined this week to be those of other people.

Friday's resolution demands a suspension of all food and humanitarian aid to the impoverished North until Pyongyang provides a full and honest accounting of the fate of all Japanese abductees.

Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura on Friday told a special committee of Japan's lower house of parliament that the country will not give further food aid to North Korea, even if asked to do so by the World Food Program.