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U.S. seeking TNT in Japan for Ukraine artillery shells, sources say

Джерела повідомляють, що США вимагають від Японії тротил для українських артилерійських снарядів

Сполучені Штати прагнуть забезпечити поставки тротилу в Японію для 155-мм артилерійських снарядів, оскільки Вашингтон поспішає доставляти зброю та боєприпаси в Україну для контрнаступу проти російських військ. Для Японії, яка відмовилася від участі у війни, будь-яка закупівля перевірить її готовність до судових суперечок, щоб допомогти Києву, тому що правила експорту забороняють японським компаніям продавати смертоносні товари за кордоном. Тим не менш, союзники, схоже, знайшли обхідний шлях, щоб дозволити продаж тротилу в умовах глобальної нестачі боєприпасів. Сполучені Штати хочуть підключити японську компанію до ланцюга постачання тротилу для доставки вибухових речовин на заводи з виробництва боєприпасів, що належать армії США, які пакуватимуть їх у 155-міліметрові гільзи. Агентство закупівель, технологій і логістики міністерства оборони Японії відмовилося від коментарів.

<https://japantoday.com/category/politics/exclusive-u.s.-seeking-explosives-in-japan-for-ukraine-artillery-shells-sources>

The United States is seeking to secure supplies of TNT in Japan for 155-mm artillery shells, as Washington rushes weapons and ammunition to Ukraine for a counteroffensive against Russian forces, two people familiar with the matter told Reuters.

For war-renouncing Japan, any procurement would test its willingness to court controversy to help Kyiv because export rules ban Japanese companies from selling lethal items overseas, such as the howitzer shells that Ukraine fires daily at Russian units occupying its southeastern regions.

Nonetheless, the allies appear to have found a workaround to enable the TNT sale amid global shortages of munitions.

"There is a way for the United States to buy explosives from Japan," one of the people with knowledge of discussions on the matter in Japan told Reuters on the condition of anonymity, citing the issue's sensitivity.

Export restrictions for dual-use products or equipment sold commercially are less stringent than for items with a purely military purpose, which is why the U.S. can buy Panasonic Toughbook laptops for its military.

Tokyo, which hosted U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin this week, has told the U.S. government it will allow the sale of industrial TNT because the explosive is not a military-use-only product, the other source said.

The U.S. wants to plug a Japanese company into a TNT supply chain to deliver explosives to U.S. army-owned munitions plants that would pack them into 155-mm shell cases, the person added.

Japan's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Economy declined to say whether any Japanese company had approached it about exporting TNT. It added in an email that items not subject to military restrictions would be assessed under regular export rules that consider the buyer's intent, including whether their use would impede international security.

The Japanese defense ministry's Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency declined to comment.

The U.S. State Department did not directly address questions from Reuters about whether the U.S. planned to buy TNT in Japan but said Washington was working with allies and partners

"to provide Ukraine with the support it needs" to defend itself. Japan, it added, "has demonstrated leadership in supporting Ukraine's defense".

EAGER TO HELP

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida wants to help Ukraine because his administration fears a Russian victory would embolden China to attack Taiwan and embroil his country in a regional war. Last year, he warned that Ukraine may be "East Asia tomorrow", and his administration announced Japan's biggest military build-up since World War Two.

That retreat from the state pacifism that has dominated Japan's foreign policy for decades has not so far extended to lethal military aid, limiting Tokyo's offerings to Kyiv to kit such as flak jackets, helmets and food rations.

Following Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's visit to Japan during the Hiroshima G-7 leaders summit last month, Kishida agreed to donate jeeps and trucks.

There appears to be growing acceptance in Japan about providing military aid to Ukraine, but the degree of lethality is contentious, said Tsuneo Watanabe, a senior fellow at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation.

"The fact that Japan has decided to give trucks to Ukraine shows that things are changing. However, there doesn't yet appear to be any political consensus around the issue of sending lethal aid," he said.

Japan is one of dozens of friends and allies that Washington is asking to help arm Ukraine as it wrestles with stretched military supply chains.

South Korea, which also uses 155-mm shells, is among those the U.S. has approached. A South Korean defense official told Reuters that Seoul's stance against providing lethal aid to Kyiv had not changed.

Asked in Tokyo this week about the possibility of a shift in Japanese policy on lethal aid, Austin said at a press briefing that any change would be a matter for Japan but "any bit of support" for Ukraine was "always welcome".

The sources who spoke to Reuters declined to identify the Japanese company that would supply explosives to the U.S. government and did not say how much TNT Washington wanted to buy.

Reuters contacted 22 explosives makers listed on the Japan Explosives Industry Association's website. The only one that said it made industrial TNT was Chugoku Kayaku, an Hiroshima-based firm that supplies Japan's military.

"We have not received any direct inquiry from the U.S. government or U.S. military," the company said in an email.

Asked if it was discussing any TNT sales through an intermediary, the firm, which lists an industrial TNT product on its website, said it did not disclose the identity of customers or potential buyers.

JAPAN'S NEXT MOVE

Supplying commercial TNT to the U.S. may only be a stop-gap measure because many lawmakers of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) want to ease or eliminate the export restrictions.

In December, when Kishida announced Japan's five-year military build-up, he pledged to revise the export rules, opening up the possibility that Japan could supply lethal weapons not only to Ukraine, but to other nations that Tokyo and Washington see as potential allies against Russia and China.

Akihisa Nagashima, a former deputy defense minister and a ranking LDP member of the parliamentary committee on national security, said the military build-up would take Japan four-fifths of the way to becoming a "normal country" unencumbered by the legacy of its World War Two defeat.

"Tackling the export restrictions is the remaining 20%," he said.