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Japan revises its military plans for space

TOKYO

Japan's ruling party is poised to revolutionize the country's space programme by allowing it to expand into military applications. In a country constitutionally wedded to peace, the move could cause public uproar. Scientists are also worried that they might lose out.

On 28 March, a committee of the Liberal Democratic Party proposed that Japan should revise a 1969 policy limiting the use of space to "peaceful" objectives. Under the current pacifist constitution, Japan has shied away from developing high-tech military satellites even for defence.

The committee suggests that Japan should lift its self-imposed limit on the imaging resolution of military satellites. It plans to submit a bill to the Diet next year to change the way space development is defined, which is likely to pass.

"Space development should be a source of national pride, but Japan doesn't have a diplomatic strategy to take advantage of it," says

Kenichi Kawamura, a spokesman for committee head Takeo Kawamura.

The government is concerned about possible attacks from terrorists and from North Korea, which fired ballistic missiles into Japanese water in 1998. Since then, Japan has launched two spy satellites, but their resolution is a quarter of that of other countries' reconnaissance satellites, and Japan has relied on the United States for high-resolution images and communications. The new law would enable Japan's defence agency to have spy satellites with a resolution that could detect a missile launch by another country.

The move is being welcomed by Japan's space industry, which hopes that new investment will make satellite manufacturers more competitive internationally. But there are worries abroad. "US government officials are likely to have great concern about Japan's development of its own

military satellites because they are nervous of the spread of understanding of technology," says Howard McCurdy, a space-policy expert at the American University in Washington DC.

Japanese researchers are also worried. They fear that although the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) might enjoy a budget boom in defence-related technologies, smaller-scale science missions could be cut back if government money was funnelled into the space industry. "Research areas that can be applied to defensive use would be in the spotlight,"

says Yasunori Matogawa, JAXA's associate executive director, adding that even areas where Japan has traditionally been strong, such as X-ray astronomy and infrared technologies, may be affected. "Those technologies look close to military ones but they are not the same." ■

Ichiko Fuyuno

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