

US foreign policy**US warns Japan of severe delays in Tomahawk deliveries due to Iran war**

Missiles could come two years late as Pentagon works to replenish stocks depleted in Middle East military campaign



Washington has already told European allies to expect significant delays in the delivery of US weapons systems © Reuters/Kenneth moll

Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington

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The US has warned Japan to expect serious delays in the delivery of 400 Tomahawk missiles as the Pentagon prioritises rebuilding weapons stockpiles that have been severely depleted during its military campaign against Iran.

US defence secretary Pete Hegseth told Shinjiro Koizumi, his Japanese counterpart, about the delay in a call earlier this month, according to several people familiar with the discussions.

The interruption is a big blow to Japan, which ordered Tomahawks for the first time in 2024 to enhance deterrence against China. The missiles have a 1,600km range, giving Japan a “counterstrike” capability to hit coastal China. The \$2.35bn deal came after Washington had increasingly urged its Asian ally to increase its defence spending.

The Pentagon decision comes as the US military scrambles to replenish stockpiles of missiles that were used in large numbers during Operation Epic Fury. The FT reported last month that Washington had already warned several European allies, including the UK and Poland, to expect significant delays in the delivery of weapons systems they have ordered from the US.

The Tomahawk delays have repercussions for the Indo-Pacific where Japan is the most important US ally. Regional allies were already concerned about the Pentagon being forced to move weapons from Asia to the Middle East — which critics say undermines statements that Asia was the priority theatre after the western hemisphere.

“Despite repeated promises from top administration officials that they would prioritise Asia, the Pentagon is now giving precedence to the Middle East,” said Zack Cooper, an Asia security expert at the American Enterprise Institute. “Given the lengthy timelines for munitions production, Asian allies and partners will continue to feel the impact of the Iran War long after it ends.”

Japan had expected to receive two batches of 200 missiles each by April 2028. One person familiar with the situation said Washington had warned that the delays could add as much as two years to the current delivery schedule.

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the US fired more than 1,000 Tomahawks out of an estimated prewar inventory of 3,100 during the five weeks of military operations against Iran. CSIS said that it took roughly four years to deliver Tomahawks to the US military from the time Congress has provided funding.

The high volume of missiles used against Iran coupled with the relocation of weapons — particularly interceptor missiles for the US-supplied Thaad system in South Korea — from Asia to the Middle East have intensified alarm about whether the US military has enough weapons to help Taiwan in a conflict with China.

Yuki Tatsumi, a Japanese defence expert at the Institute for Indo-Pacific Security, said the delays would cause a “considerable complication” for Japan as it prepares to update its national security and defence strategies this year.

“The current plan has been built on the assumption that Japan receives this delivery on time, with the ongoing revision [of the strategies] looking to potentially boost the acquisition of Tomahawk even further,” she said. “It is an integral part of Japan’s effort to enhance its deterrence capability.”

Kenji Minemura, an Asia defence expert at The Canon Institute for Global Studies, stressed that the Tomahawks were critical because Tokyo has almost no equivalent for China’s 2,000-plus long-range missiles that can hit targets in Japan.

“Closing this ‘missile gap’ is the purpose behind the counterstrike capability the Japanese government is now building, and the Tomahawk is its centrepiece,” said Minemura. “A delay in US deliveries of Tomahawks . . . will almost inevitably erode the joint US-Japan deterrent against China still further.”

Tatsumi and Minemura both said the Tomahawk delivery delays would force Japan to accelerate the development and mass production of domestic missiles, including the extended-range Type 12 and Hyper Velocity Gliding Projectile.

The Pentagon declined to comment. Japan’s embassy in the US said the two allies engage in frequent talks but declined to comment on the specifics of any issues discussed.

Additional reporting by Leo Lewis in Tokyo

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