

US, Japan sign joint missile defence deal

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JAPAN AND the United States signed an agreement on Friday to expand their cooperation on a joint ballistic missile defence shield, moving to protect themselves amid signs that North Korea could test a ballistic missile.

The pact, signed by foreign minister Taro Aso and US Ambassador Thomas Schieffer, commits them to joint production of missiles to intercept incoming missiles, the Japanese foreign ministry said in a statement.

The agreement had been previously negotiated and was not triggered by emerging fears that North Korea is preparing to test a long-range missile, officials said. There has been speculation that the US could try to intercept the missile if it is fired.

But the timing of the agreement — part of a programme in the works for years — symbolised the determined cooperation between the United States and its top Asian ally to protect themselves against the threat posed by Pyongyang's missile programme.

The announcement of the signing came only hours after Japanese officials said a high-resolution radar that can detect incoming missiles had been deployed at a base in northern Japan.

The so-called X-Band radar was transferred to Japanese Air Self-Defence Force's Shariki base in Tsugaru in northern Japan from the US military's Misawa Air Base in Misawa, the Defence Agency said. Tsugaru is 360 miles northeast of Tokyo.

The radar is expected to begin monitoring airspace this summer for ballistic missiles, the official said on condition of anonymity, citing policy. The radar is solely to monitor missiles and not fitted with a missile interceptor, she said.