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HEADLINE: China ready for talks with Japan on demarcation in gas-rich East China Sea

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China said Thursday it was prepared to enter into consultations with Japan on boundary demarcations in the gas-rich East China Sea dividing the two nations.

"China stands ready to start a new round of consultations on the East China Sea as soon as possible," foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang told a regular briefing.

"The two countries could discuss all the questions they are concerned about during the consultation," he said.

Japan and China, two of the world's biggest energy importers, have seen relations persistently deteriorate over a range of issues, with the Chinese public staging sometimes violent rallies against Japan this month.

Japan on April 13 said it would let Japanese companies drill in the disputed gas fields, ending decades of hesitation over upsetting China.

Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan said after the Japanese action that he hoped the two countries could narrow their differences on the issue through dialogue and consultations.

"China and Japan have disputes on boundary demarcations in the East China Sea, and this is an objective reality," he said.

"Shelving the disputes and engaging in joint development is the sole correct choice for the two countries," he said.

China proposed joint development of the gas fields last June. In 2003, China began drilling unilaterally, infuriating Japan, which had called for a clear delineation between the two sides.

Japan accuses China of extracting gas from its side of the fields, which a 1999 Japanese survey estimated held a massive 200 billion cubic meters (seven trillion cubic feet) of gas.

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