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JAPAN MAKES FRESH PROTEST TO CHINA OVER DISPUTED GAS FIELD

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Japan on Wednesday made a fresh protest against China over a disputed energy field in the East China Sea, warning that Beijing may be set to pump gas out of the area.

"We found that possibilities are high that the Chinese side has placed a pipeline and is ready to put it to practical use at any time," Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Shoichi Nakagawa told a news conference.

"We have protested to the Chinese government through diplomatic channels but we have not received any satisfactory reply," Nakagawa said.

Relations between the nations have seriously deteriorated this year over both the gas field and memories of Japan's bloody wartime occupation of China.

Last month, China protested against Japan's decision to give permission to Tokyo-based Teikoku Oil to explore the disputed area. It was the first company to be granted a permit since Japan decided in April to open the area to drilling, ending decades of hesitation.

A series of high-level meetings on the dispute between Japan and China led to no agreement other than to continue dialogue.

China began test-drilling unilaterally in 2003 and Japan accuses it of extracting gas that is rightfully Tokyo's.

A Japanese survey in 1999 estimated the disputed fields had a massive 200 billion cubic meters (seven trillion cubic feet) of gas.

Japan and China are two of the world's biggest energy importers and have also clashed over getting priority to an oil pipeline being built in Russia.

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