

Japan presses Russia to prioritize Pacific-bound pipeline

By Maya Kaneko

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Japan pressed Russia on Thursday to give priority to constructing a pipeline linking eastern Siberia with near Nakhodka in the Russian Far East to ship oil to Japan, in a move to counter Moscow's possible plan to build a branch line to China first, a Japanese government official said. Japanese Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Shoichi Nakagawa told Russian Industry and Energy Minister Viktor Khristenko at their meeting that Japan will not offer financial aid for the project if the likelihood of Russia's building the pipeline to near Nakhodka diminishes, the official said. Before his departure for Japan, Khristenko indicated in a meeting with members of the Japanese press in Moscow that Russia will give priority to building the China-bound branch pipeline. The official at the Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry said if Russia constructs the China-bound branch line first, it would be difficult for Japan to believe that the country will definitely build the main pipeline to near Nakhodka. Last December, Russia announced it will build a 4,180-kilometer oil pipeline linking Taishet near Lake Baikal with Perevoznaya close to Nakhodka, via Skovorodino near the Russian-Chinese border, on a Japanese-proposed Sea of Japan route. The Russian side explained at the meeting that the Industry and Energy Ministry is scheduled to present a plan detailing the pipeline construction project May 1 and the Russian government is expected to decide on the building plan after that, according to the official. Khristenko told the Japanese media in Moscow that Russia will build a pipeline between Taishet and Skovorodino in the initial phase of the project, and then build the China-bound branch line. Skovorodino is at the middle point of the main pipeline. Japan has offered financial assistance for the project, which would make Japan the nearest overseas market for the Siberian oil. The two ministers agreed that Japan and Russia will continue to discuss the pipeline project through meetings of experts and other frameworks, according to the official. Meanwhile, Nakagawa backed Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization at the meeting and hoped the two countries will soon finish bilateral negotiations needed for Russia's entry into the global trade watchdog, the official said. The meeting between the two ministers was held ahead of a Japan-Russia intergovernmental trade and economic meeting Friday to be co-chaired by Japanese Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura and Khristenko. Khristenko is currently in Tokyo for a three-day visit to Japan through Saturday.